

Competitive Intelligence in Challenging Times

04/27/09

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We're seeing lots of changes and I'm wondering what the impact will be on my competitors and how to put that to my company's advantage. Any ideas?

Positioning your company to thrive in challenging times is your job as owner of the business. Focusing on the best course of action is a challenge for any small-business owner. Gathering competitive intelligence can help you to decide on actions to take to move your business forward.

Information on competitors is all around us, we just have to look. You'll want to decide on what kinds of information to go after and get everyone in the company involved in intelligence gathering. Then comes filtering that information into a useful strategy for your business.

Many times business owners will say, "If only I had known . . .

- that vendor was going out of business."
- our best customer was on such shaky ground."
- such well-trained employees looking for their next job."
- my competitor was charging more (less, different) than I was."

You get the idea. You need good information to make well-informed decisions and take positive actions. All of this falls under the category of competitive intelligence.

You'd be amazed at the places, and ways, you can uncover useful intelligence that will further your competitive position in the marketplace. Start simply. Make a list of competitors you want to keep track of, along with a list of customers and prospects.

Share your list with your employees. Make them aware that any tidbits of information about anyone on the list - competitor, customer or prospect - will be useful. Set a goal for each employee to bring 1 bit of information to the meeting each week. Ask employees to share and discuss what they find out at weekly meetings.

Ask employees to do research on the Internet. Look up everything they can find out about companies on the list. Don't forget to look on Facebook, Linked-In and even Twitter. It's amazing how much information is buzzing around on the Internet, just waiting to be caught in your competitive intelligence net.

Keep eyes open when out driving around. Know where competitor, prospect and customer offices are located. As you drive by, check the parking lot and the condition of the building. Is the parking lot full or half empty? Is the building in good repair? Are people leaving early or staying late? If they ship products, are there lots of trucks coming and going, or do things seem pretty quiet? All of these puzzle parts, when added to other bits of information you and your staff gather, can help put together a full picture of what's going on.

Ask customers you trust for information on competitors. Have they seen a proposal recently? Would they share competitive literature and proposals with you?

Ask prospects about what they've seen that they liked, and didn't like, from your competitors. Here are some questions to ask, that might help you gather useful information.

- What kinds of pricing have been put in front of them?
- How does your offer compare to what they have now, to what they want?
- What are three things they like best about their current supplier?
- What would cause them to consider making a change?

You'd be surprised how many prospects are willing to fill you in, as they seek to get the best service and/or cost mix for their own company.

Interview job candidates, from reception, to production to sales and administration. Why are they considering leaving? Is the business up or down? Has their current employer hired or let any employees go? Have they recently cut out or expanded any products or services?

Build your relationships with vendors and key suppliers. Ask about who they're keeping an eye on. Who's expanding? Who's stopped ordering? Who's on credit watch?

Check with trade associations. Often they have benchmark data you can use to compare how you're doing. You may be up only slightly, but if your industry as a whole is down, that may be good news. Ask for information on trends in the industry and with the industries supply chain.

Talk with your bankers and financial advisors. What do they see happening in your industry? Is it up, down or moving sideways? Ask your accountant to pull credit reports on key customers and competitors to find out how they're doing.

Consider every piece of information, no matter how small. Add up pieces of information to get a whole picture. Using competitive intelligence will help you to make wiser decisions as you steer your company through challenging financial times.

Looking for a good book? Try *Competitive Intelligence, Fast, Cheap and Ethical*, by Rob Duncan.

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