

THE FABRIC OF FOCUS

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*Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts. . .they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun, but their exists no loom
To weave it into fabric.*

— Edna St. Vincent Millay
Huntsman, What Quarry?

Decision-makers, including CEOs, CFOs, product managers, and others, all face a very confusing and undefined world each and every day. Those in intelligence must recognize their challenge and help expedite what executives do best: make decisions. What a CEO or CFO does not need are more facts, or a large pack of computer-generated slides. They need focus; they need answers.

More data, as Ms. Millay states, is not the solution. More facts, more graphs contain “Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill.” Instead, the poet urges all of us to “weave it into a fabric,” a particularly strong, cogent message for those formulating and delivering intelligence.

FOCUS, BUT NOT ISOLATION

Ironically, some in the intelligence game believe that providing focus means they have to draw all the conclusions for the executive. Often, quite the opposite is true. Most senior executives want focus, but not at the expense of isolation. Focus represents the critical threads by which they weave together their competitive fabric.

Alex Mandl wants data and more data. He is a senior executive in the telecommunications industry, first as the executive to succeed AT&T CEO, Bob Allen, now CEO of Luxembourg-

based Glempus International, the world’s leading producer of smart card technology. In an interview published in *USA Today* (July 10, 1997), he revealed that he felt isolated from the marketplace at AT&T. When asked about his experience at AT&T versus working for a smaller company, he commented: “It’s very refreshing to have information coming to you in a raw, unmitigated way.”

“In a large company,” Mandl said, “information tends to get filtered and massaged.” At AT&T, he could never be sure of the information he received. Was it accurate in any way? Or had he received it only after it passed through so many political and interpretive hands that what arrived at his desk no longer contained a semblance of reality? In a much smaller company, Mandl had no choice but to confront the data in raw form every day. He loved it. He now felt he could figuratively see the market and competition directly. This manager wanted to interpret and develop his own insight, while at the same time receiving advice from others.

DIRECT CONTACT ADVANTAGES

Nothing succeeds in intelligence like direct contact between executive and data. In the thousands of assignments my firm has undertaken over the years, the most successful ones occur when we complete our presentation, deliver our conclusions, then take a breath and sit down with the client to review the conclusions.

The second-wind discussion usually unfolds like this: “I very much understand your ideas,” the client says to us, “but I would like to see how you

came to those conclusions.” At this point, we usually start tearing into the appendix, which includes transcripts, or summary narratives of our discussions with many individuals. Once the decision-maker dives into the transcripts, he or she often will *read* signals from these documents that we may have missed or seen another way.

The decision-maker is looking for clues. Clues can become lost in truncated slide presentations. After all, one person’s clue is another person’s trash.

IT’S ALL FOCUS

You have to realize that most successful decision-makers are highly focused. They will tell you what is on their minds each and every day. It’s no mystery. They have already completed a needs assessment for themselves and know what they want. You only have to deliver on that need. No one-size-fits-all template here. The executive may not want the same type of information as the rest of the organization.

Robert Crandall, former CEO of American Airlines, turned American into one of the world’s premier airlines, because he maintained a laser-sharp focus on the customer. In an interview I conducted with him several years ago, Crandall stated: “In the long run, the most important metric in any business is customer satisfaction. So in the airline business, if you worry about customer satisfaction, you worry about on-time arrivals, you worry about customer complaints, you worry about baggage delivery times, etc.... In every business one of the keys jobs of management is to identify those key

metrics and having done so, to use all the available information resources to get those metrics on yourself and on all your competitors.”

Crandall ate, slept, and breathed customer metrics at American. He also remained close to his market, so close that his customers felt no compunction about talking with him directly about anything, no matter how small. This is focus. Crandall devoured these metrics, not necessarily top-line graphs, but nearly every detail regarding American's customer behavior and customer satisfaction, as well as those of rivals.

GETTING CLOSE

How do you get close enough to the decision-maker to determine what is on his or her mind? I often hear this question from my own clients or from our students at the Academy of Competitive Intelligence. Close is a relative term: it implies that you have access to the decision-maker's thinking and concerns. It may or may not mean physical proximity.

David Sheehan, a product director and head of competitive intelligence at Pergo, a leader in flooring products, managed to stay very close to his CEO, Lars von Kantzow. Sheehan made sure his office was located down the hall from Mr. Von Kantzow, but more important he was constantly bouncing

information or ideas off his company's senior executive. At times, Sheehan conducted strategy sessions with the CEO and his staff. These strategy sessions tended to focus management's attention on the critical issues and the arguments and debates further cemented the areas of CI focus.

SHAPING AN INTELLECTUAL BOXING RING

Strategy sessions are an excellent way to draw out almost subliminal critical issues. Presenting a rigorous model to your management and forcing them to consider various options allow them to admit or concede areas of high interest where the firm lacks particular knowledge.

I recently conducted a strategic workshop for two very different types of companies: one a consumer products company, the other a services firm. Senior managers were collected from a wide variety of functions and geographic locations. We created the boxes, the rules they had to follow. In a figurative sense, we shaped an intellectual boxing ring.

The managers in the room had to face each other in this ring. Each had to either win an argument or concede an insightful issue presented by another. By the end of both sessions, they identified dozens of critical issues

that were not being addressed by the company or its support staff. This strategic game allowed the unexpressed, unmet areas of focus to surface.

However you accomplish the tagging of important issues, you must deliver the conclusions in a timely manner to your intelligence customer. Stay focused; understand the critical issues for which management needs answers. Try to design ways to look at the competitive landscape from the decision-maker's perspective. Avoid just presenting the charts, graphs and Internet downloads that “lie unquestioned, uncombined.” You, the locator of critical facts, of sometimes politically charged conclusions, are the loom by which the decision-maker weaves the decision.

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