

COMMUNICATING COOPERATIVELY: THE BEGINNING

ELLEN NAYLOR, *The Business Intelligence Source (TBIS)*



One of your goals as a competitive intelligence professional is to become a trusted advisor for your clients. There is nothing like developing clear communications to build respect and trust from the beginning.

You have only one chance to make a first impression. It takes only seven seconds or less to make a first impression! If your client's first impression is negative, you will find it difficult to change. Knowing your client's motivation before your initial needs assessment meeting can help build a positive first impression and make it easier to effectively market the value of competitive intelligence to them in their terms and their language.

This is the first article in a series about cooperative communication, a skill that will help you build respect and trust from the beginning.

BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Never in the history of mankind has it been so easy to communicate. Never have we had so many choices about how or when to communicate. Yet this seems to be a major shortcoming in competitive intelligence (CI) operations.

On a very basic level, many people in our client companies — at least initially — don't really know what competitive intelligence is. They are unsure how we can contribute to their decisions. Everyone suffers from information overload, and many individuals confuse information and competitive intelligence, which does not make our job easier. With the continuous reorganization in many companies today, CI practitioners must

invest the time to educate the revolving management team on the value of CI in decision-making.

The person asking for our help may not be the end user of the intelligence. So the real request is often filtered. Without the proper communication mechanisms in place, we produce just what they asked for, which may not be what the original requester really needed.

TECHNOLOGY MASKS COMMUNICATION

Another pervasive troubling trend is the depersonalization of today's workforce. Witness the replacement of face-to-face meetings with teleconferencing and webinars, or telephone conversations with electronic communication. Modern technology opens up a whole host of miscommunication issues. At one extreme, some competitive intelligence managers tell me that their customers expect them to understand their CI requests solely through e-mail communication!

Reliance on electronic communication is partly a reflection of too few people doing too much work. But electronic communication is an ineffective way to satisfy all but the most basic competitive intelligence requests. How can you satisfy a customer's question when you don't even understand the context of their need, which requires at least a telephone conversation? In a face-to-face meeting, we have the benefit of reading people's body language and listening to their tone of voice. During face-to-face meetings, 55 percent of communication is body language, 38 percent is vocal

(tone), and only 7 percent is verbal. The nonverbal clues are mostly absent in electronic communication.

We have a generation of young people in the workforce who have soaring IQs, yet many of them don't know how to communicate well outside of electronic communication. Their written grammar can be atrocious. Baby boomers and older members of the workforce have historically used written communication as a follow-up to a face-to-face meeting or telephone call. So when connecting with your key users and sources of competitive intelligence, not only must you be knowledgeable about their personality and style, but you must also be clear on their competence and preference in communicating.

Electronic communication can be challenging for those who were not brought up with it. A wide disparity in the quality of electronic communication leads to much misunderstanding when we are just relying on the written word. In addition, many CI managers are under pressure to cram as much communication as possible through electronic channels because it transmits information almost instantaneously and we can respond more quickly.

Let's face it, most of us are stretched too thin to accomplish our many assignments. A common perception (misperception in my opinion) says that oral communication such as telephone calls, meetings, or in-person presentations takes too much time. With increased use of electronic communication, we get less practice participating in face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations. And when we lead or attend face-to-face meetings, we face more pressure from co-workers

and managers to be at the top of our form because of the value of their time.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

In this increasingly impersonal electronic environment, we must start and maintain our competitive intelligence operation. Yet a successful CI assignment depends on people and relationship building to fuel the fire. During the first phase of developing a competitive intelligence operation (needs analysis), you have two objectives:

- To find out how CI can help individuals in your company meet their business objectives.
- To educate and persuade key individuals on the necessity of CI.

It is far easier to make this sale if you understand their specific needs and what really motivates your clients. If you already know them from prior projects, it's pretty easy. You can think about this as investigating the four P's:

- Profession
- Politics
- Predisposition
- Personal issues

Understanding the four P's is the first step in communicating cooperatively. Put yourself in your CI client's position. Learn who they are, which is influenced by what they do and how their company rewards their efforts. You also need to dig deeper and find out what motivates them personally — and recognize that this changes over time.

While competitive intelligence education can be supplemented with electronic communication, the most effective way to initially connect with your key clients is to meet them face to face. If that's not possible, a telephone conversation is the next best thing. This also gives you an opportunity to listen to your key client's understanding of and need for CI, as well as the

opportunity to establish a personal relationship.

PROFESSION AND POLITICS

Acquaint yourself with your key CI clients' work situations. If you know how they are compensated, what their primary concerns are, and the political climates they operate under, you are better armed to serve them — the basis for cooperative communication. The pre-interview process helps you anticipate their questions and concerns, which also helps make a good first impression. (See sidebar.) I also find it's useful to find out where people worked before they joined the company and if they have used competitive intelligence in the past.

You may not have all this information for each client. But you can use your investigative and elicitation skills to gather most of it before the initial meeting if you don't know the individual already. Co-workers and administrative support can help provide the missing information. You might ask co-workers to join you during this first interview, especially if they have a good relationship with the client.

PREDISPOSITION

I think of predisposition as a person's behavioral style and the motivations that drive this. Understanding how other people relate to you based on your own personality style can help you modify your behavior to more closely match theirs. You can assess a person's behavioral style in several ways. My favorite is DISC (dominance, influence, steadiness, and conscientiousness), which measures four dimensions of behavioral response.

Dominant styles are often confident and are very driven and direct. People with a dominant style are often risk takers and are more apt to cause ulcers than to have them. The best way to communicate with this type is directly. Don't tell a lot of stories,

SIDEBAR: BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

Specific questions you want answered before you conduct your needs analysis interview are:

- What is their job role and how is the company compensating them?
- What political situations are they involved in?
- What excites them about the company's future?
- What are their key goals and the obstacles to accomplishing them?
- What keeps them up at night?
- Is there an existing or emerging competitor, market, or technology that worries them?
- How have they used CI to help them in their job either at this company or at a previous company?

and get right to the point. Provide brief, direct answers and ask "what" questions.

Influencers are natural networkers and can be quite expressive in style. Supply testimonials and give them examples about who is using competitive intelligence effectively and how it has improved performance. Focus on building a relationship as you communicate with an influencer.

Steady people are amicable, are good listeners, and are uncomfortable with conflict. They are team players and loyal and sincere in relationships. Focus on the personal touch with this personality type, and make sure that you get back to them personally. They want to know how competitive intelligence will help improve performance without raising any conflict.

Conscientious people tend to be very analytical. They have the tendency to micromanage and are often very bright. Present the case for competitive intelligence to them by giving them the pro's and con's. Use logic to explain why

CI should be used in decision-making. This personality type is intelligent and detailed oriented, so be prepared for extensive questioning. However, don't include stories or small talk in your answers.

Obviously no person fits exactly into one of these four personality behaviors. Don't fall into the trap of categorizing a person into such a simplistic behavior pattern for everything. These four descriptions simply indicate a predisposition. Think about how each of your key clients will react to your CI message and questions about their operation. Then you can present in a way that will make them more receptive to your initial needs interview. Make it easy for them to communicate with you.

PERSONAL ISSUES

I like to learn about relevant personal issues that I can fold into the needs analysis process without making my client feel uncomfortable that I know too much about their personal life. Examples of relevant personal issues include age, culture, education, family situation, other work experience,

relationships outside of work, a cause they support, life style, or a hobby. Learning some personal issues can give you insight into their behavioral style and motivation, and provide an icebreaker to open your needs assessment interview.

CONCLUSION

Since I have become attuned to the four P's behind motivation, I naturally think about them when I first meet someone. When preparing for the initial needs assessment interview, remember that most people operate in WIIFM (What's in it for me) and MMFIAM (Make me feel important about myself) mode.

Be an active listener. Take full advantage of everything the other person shares with you. Use what you have learned to develop even more insightful questions. Active listening is multi-sensory: listen with your eyes, ears, and emotions. Observe body language, and tune into the tone of voice as well as feelings and intent. Don't judge the person you're interviewing, but listen with an open mind.

Good listening will differentiate you from almost any other person your key competitive intelligence clients communicate with. When people realize that you are really listening to them without bias — regardless of behavior style and motivation — they will respect you and open up with you.

Ellen Naylor, founder of The Business Intelligence Source (TBIS), has been a competitive intelligence practitioner and consultant for more than twenty years and an active SCIP member since 1990. TBIS offerings include developing CI processes, conducting win/loss or trade show analysis, and customized training workshops. Its latest practice, cooperative intelligence, helps CI professionals build the right people skills to run a dynamic CI operation: connecting, leading, and communicating. Ellen is a member of SCIP's Women's Leadership Council. She is a SCIP Fellow and Catalyst award winner. If you have any comments on this column, please contact Ellen at answers@thebisource.com.

