

By Kirk Richardson

Elicitation

Applying the Art and Science of HUMINT to Business

While the Internet long ago surpassed human minds in terms of stored information, strategic and competitive intelligence professionals should not overlook the 7.28 billion brains they have access to via primary intelligence. Even with access zetabytes of information and 4.35 billion indexed pages (and counting), it's not always possible for even the cleverest of collectors to find all of the answers on the web or Internet databases. The wise researcher realizes that there is a whole world's worth of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) waiting to be tapped by those able to apply the art and science of elicitation.

None other than the Federal Bureau of Investigation defines elicitation as a technique used to discreetly gather information. According to the FBI, "Conducted by a skilled collector, elicitation will appear to be

normal social or professional conversation. A person may never realize she was the target of elicitation or that she provided meaningful information."

"Elicitation is the bread and butter of human intelligence – it's the act of obtaining information," according to J. C. Carleson, a former CIA Clandestine Service Officer and author of *Work Like a Spy* (Penguin Group, 2013). "This can mean that you're collecting information about a possible target's suitability and access to information, or it can mean that you're collecting actual data. In either case, the goal is to systematically obtain actionable information."

Although government agencies have made a science of the art, elicitation has probably been around as long as envy and fear. Sun Zhu's spies

elicited actionable information from his enemies (interrogation was another option), and it's likely that ancient merchants used its techniques to compete, long before the Chinese General ever applied those strokes of strategic brilliance in his treatise *The Art of War*.

Roughly 2500 years later, elicitation has become as much the science of modern communication as it is the art of conversation. Journalists use its principles daily as they mine LinkedIn, conduct interviews, Skype, and use other tools to help unearth hidden information or verify facts to share with the world. The savviest business professionals employ it, from interviewing prospective employees to working trade show floors, gathering facts that propel game-changing decisions. Elicitation is alive, well, and working for those who know how to use it.

"Elicitation is a surprisingly universal tool, and the basics are the same whether you're talking about using it for the public or the private sector," explains Carleson. "What can and should vary, however, is how aggressive an approach you take. An intelligence officer with a limited-window, one-shot opportunity with a denied area target is going to be much more aggressive (even to the point of near transparency) than someone in the private sector who wants to subtly obtain information from someone with whom he or she also needs to maintain an ongoing business relationship."



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The former CIA agent suggests staying grounded and focused on the business objectives rather than getting too carried away about working like a spy. "People are sometimes disappointed to learn just how rudimentary elicitation is," she continues. "It's highly effective, but it isn't exactly the stuff that James Bond movies are made of. The bottom line is that people like talking about themselves. The tricky part is that you need to do enough homework in advance so that you ask the right questions and the appropriately specific questions when you do get time on target."

In a perfect world, the source would supply all of the

pieces to finish the puzzle during one visit. "A lot of people complicate elicitation," believes Joe Navarro, FBI Special Agent (Retired) and author of *What Every Body is Saying, An Ex-FBI Agent's Guide to Speed-Reading People* (HarperCollins, 2008). Navarro recommends reducing it down to making sure that you understand what bar you're setting, going in there with a purpose, as well as communicating and observing effectively. "We have a saying in law enforcement: 20 small admissions equals one large confession," he shares. "A lot of times, we set the bar for the confession, and we never get it, when if we had just sat there and gotten 20 little admissions, we'd have the same thing. But we set the bar so high that we defeat ourselves."

MAKING THE IDEAL ELICITOR

It doesn't take a background in Government Intelligence to use elicitation in the business world, but it does help to have some of the same capacities. "Not only does he have to understand whether he can speak to other people or not, he needs to understand himself from a psychological profiling perspective," says John Nolan, author of *Confidential* (HarperCollins, 1999) and former intelligence collector in the Government and private sectors. "For example, an elicitor who is highly extroverted has probably forgotten how to abide by the standard that God gave us two ears and one mouth, and we should

use them proportionally. The extrovert tends to talk far too much and doesn't let anybody else finish their sentences. He fills in all of the blanks and is talking to himself. Probably 50% of the time, somebody who falls in that category ends up getting bad information because he guesses wrong or misunderstands what the other guy is going to say. It shuts down the other guy when he throws in his opinion of what the other guy is going to be saying. The extroverted elicitor invalidates the quality of the information he gets by filling in the blanks when maybe somebody is just thinking about what he is going to say next."

On the other hand, "an introvert is often going to be



a magnificent elicitor because he knows he has to be thinking before he says anything,” adds Nolan. “He is going to be comfortable with periods of silence that the extrovert is not going to be comfortable with.” Of course, elicitors come in all shapes, sizes, and Myers Briggs types. There are as many who are extroverted market researchers as there are introverted librarians. Stereotypes aside, getting elicitation right requires homework, from learning the basics of the craft and its intricacies to fine tuning one’s memory, so that information isn’t lost between an important conversation and an executive briefing. It also helps to have a touch of charm and the capacity to form relationships that transcend a single encounter.

“Many times, people who are lazy look at an interaction as an isolated and one-off event,” notices Nolan. “That is to say, ‘I’m never going to see this guy again, and I’m going to go balls to the wall in interrogating him. And there is no real value in developing a relationship with somebody.’” He says that is the wrong approach. “The best collector is a connector. As soon as he meets somebody, he starts filling in the boxes on his Rolodex about that particular guy. ‘What kind of job does he have? How long has he had it? Where did he go to school? All kinds of things.’ That is what a connector does naturally. Most people aren’t natural connectors.” Those aspiring to morph from natural connector to ideal elicitor might consider developing other handy skills, including the abilities to role play when necessary, apply practical psychological insights on the fly, and leverage product, market, and competitive environment knowledge to their advantage during the course of a conversation.

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PREPARING TO BE PROFICIENT

With a mind capable of stacking elicitation techniques and capturing the most miniscule details, Sherlock Holmes is the model of the perfect elicitor. In the real world, the best in the business rely on proper preparation to be merely proficient. Nolan recommends preparing for a conversation by learning about the source. “Before you go off to a trade show or to meet with the guy, you review what you know about him and reduce it to a bio. If you haven’t seen him in two years, if you go up to him and say, ‘Hey, how is that boy of yours doing? Is he still the greatest goal keeper in the state of Michigan?’ he is going to go right back to the conversation that you had with him two years ago. You don’t need to spend 45 minutes getting to know him again. He may very well have forgotten you, but you haven’t forgotten him. That sends the message that ‘You are an important guy, friend, because I remember all of the important stuff about you.’ You update the file every time that you meet with him. That’s not something that lazy people do, but it pays bodacious dividends.”

Earning big dividends requires an initial investment. Getting good enough at elicitation to make the effort pay off takes time. “It’s largely a matter of practice,” explains Carleson, “but a surprising number of people feel almost captive when it comes to conversational direction. It’s work (and depending on the personality of the person you’re engaging, it’s sometimes very hard work), but any conversation can be nudged and routed. Just watch how skilled television interviewers direct, redirect, and even blatantly cut off their guests, all while appearing perfectly pleasant and professional.”

The very best interviewers have spent years perfecting the process. Seena Sharp, Principal of Sharp Market Intelligence, SCIP Fellow and author of *Competitive Intelligence Advantage* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), suggests that novices adopt their best practices. Sharp recommends following journalistic techniques, standards, and characteristics, an approach that she says starts by being curious, open-minded, and objective, and ends by providing a sufficient supply of accurate, relevant intelligence. “Don’t expect just anyone to be able to do this,” she notes. “Good results require a good understanding of the business world and how it operates. Just knowing the industry is not sufficient, especially for ferreting out those nuggets of insight and change that help the company gain an advantage and grow.”

While practice might not make the perfect elicitor, it’s a step in the right direction, according to Ellen Naylor, a longtime competitive intelligence professional and elicitation expert. “I often teach these techniques at a seminar in a hotel, and I’ll say, ‘Why don’t you try out some of these ideas and ways of engaging with people with the hotel staff here and come back tomorrow and let me know how it goes. Practice with a waitress. Practice with the bell boy.’ There is a better practice target than your spouse or kids,” she laughs.

“After a while, it becomes second nature to you,” says Nolan. But even when elicitation becomes more comfortable, he points out that there is still room for improvement. Nolan emphasizes the importance of learning observation skills. “If you are a big picture guy, you need to find a way to throttle it back and move mentally from the big picture down into the details or else the quality of the information that you gather suffers dramatically.”

When competitive intelligence professionals are finally ready to use elicitation in the business world, they need to start by identifying subject matter experts (SMEs) willing to share information.

“Finding sources is the essence of traditional espionage work,” reports Peter Earnest, Former CIA National Clandestine Service Officer and Co-Author of *Business Confidential, Lessons for Corporate Success from Inside the CIA* (AMACOM, 2011). Earnest, who is currently Executive Director of the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C. believes that any good investigative journalist, lobbyist, or salesman, or any active ‘networker’ can describe the methodology. “And let’s face it, some intelligence officers and businessmen are naturals, blessed with charm or highly effective at socializing purposefully and directing conversations,” he says. “Many times, the operations officer must be careful not to tip his hand, which may also apply in some cases to the businessman.”

Not all business intelligence projects require primary research, but when they do, some of the best sources of information may be nearby. “If you are just feeling out what the market is like and you don’t need precise information, secondary is just fine to just get yourself started,” according to Naylor. “But if you are really hanging your hat on it and making a pretty important decision that is worth a lot of money, it’s probably a good idea to get somebody to talk to experts. A lot of times you have expertise within your own company if you are working for a large enough firm. With all of the job hopping, sometimes people have come from the competition.”

Once an SME is identified inside or outside of the elicitor’s network, Nolan suggests pre-determining what techniques to use with that source. “Most people do not prepare themselves very well to deal with the guy who has the information,” he says. “They think, ‘I’m going to ask a lot of questions, and hopefully the questions aren’t going to be off-putting to him. If they are, then I guess we just didn’t get the information. Unfortunately, most people don’t go into the business of planning conversations.”

APPLYING ELICITATION TECHNIQUES

Whether you are making a presentation or participating in a conversation, most experts advise understanding a little bit about the audience before attempting to communicate with it. Sources share information for a variety of reasons. Many people just want to be recognized and appreciated. They covet sincere recognition from colleagues and acquaintances. Others are compulsive complainers – simply lending a sympathetic ear and listening to those who are dissatisfied can yield information gems. Chronic gossipers and know-it-alls find it hard to resist sharing their knowledge with others. Some

simply enjoy correcting others misstatements of the facts. When they hear an erroneous statement, they are quick to correct. There are also those individuals who feel the need to reinforce that they are in-the-know, further securing their place in the inner circle. Advisors, teachers, seminar instructors, and mentor types are almost always eager to give their best advice. It becomes so second nature to them that they just can't resist the urge to teach knowledge seekers who show even the slightest interest in their area of expertise.

The list of factors that motivate people to divulge valuable information stretches on and on, dead-ending with an outright lack of loyalty to a company or other organization. The most successful intelligence professionals are able to choose from a toolbox full of elicitation techniques that best match their sources' unique personalities and quirks. Nolan learned to gauge his targets' vulnerabilities prior to selecting a particular technique. "For example, if it's someone who is boastful, I'm going to want to get him involved in one-upsmanship," he says. "I will say something about myself or my company, so that he says, 'Well let me tell you about mine!'" Nolan has enough experience to know that a braggart can't resist the urge to show him up. "I might offer a quid pro quo with the expectation that he is going offer something bigger, better, faster or stronger," he laughs.

The same technique would result in a blank stare from others. "If I'm dealing with an introverted chemist, I'm probably going to use one of the many tools that allow me to say something wrong with the

expectation that he is going to correct me," continues Nolan. "I know that he is going to be the kind of guy who lives in the world of accuracy and precision. He will be most offended by inaccuracy and imprecision and will correct me, thereby giving me the information that I want. Of course, you have prepared yourself beforehand by knowing some of the information and parameters around that information. You are going to have some understanding of the real framework, so that the guy doesn't hear you say something so outrageous that he won't bother talking to you because he thinks you are a fool." That embarrassing outcome is a distinct possibility for those who choose to skip their homework.

Those who have taken time to study and practice elicitation gain access to a variety of creative tools that unlock the mouths of nearly any personality type. An abbreviated list of the most commonly used techniques includes (1) catching a source off guard by making a provocative statement; (2) acting naïve and inviting an expert to shed a little light on the subject of interest; (3) giving a source the silent treatment to create awkward pauses that he fills with valuable information; (4) taking the opposite stance on a point of interest, inciting her to defend her point of view; and (5) exchanging information using quid pro quo. In the last example, the objective is to receive much more than one gives away. Wise collectors are able to achieve that lopsided goal, while steering clear of competitors and avoiding the possibility of violating antitrust laws.




Still savvier elicitors, like Holmes, outthink their adversaries by bracketing them into submission. They often move them toward a reliable number by starting with a realistic range of possibilities, then gradually narrow those to zero in on a reliable answer. This popular technique has been used to research nearly anything that is quantifiable, including production rates, personnel turnover, product roll out dates, and rejection rates.

There are dozens of ways to extract information from a source, and Nolan knows some of the more obscure methods. One lesser-known technique that he likes to use with someone who is competitive or a gambler, is betting. "This is different than making an erroneous statement," he says. "This is a challenge to a competitive guy who might be interested in betting. I might say, 'I'll bet you that nobody in this industry could produce more than 5000 widgets a month.' That raises the bar. That is much more than just an erroneous statement. When you tie the statement together with betting and use it on a guy who is competitive, it's powerful stuff."

Competitive personality types are abundant in trade show settings. "What kind of people are the booth mavens?" asks Nolan. "Shy, retiring people who sit back in the corner? No! The booth maven is going to be a competitive, aggressive guy. That's who you want there, but he's got a push-to-talk button painted on his chest, as far as I'm concerned."

No matter whether the source is in sales or purchasing, developing rapport and reducing the SME's level of suspicion are important. "A lot of people get in the intelligence business and think it's all about being this discreet shadow kind of a figure that nobody really knows and they have to be really opaque to anybody they talk to," observes Nolan. But he believes that just being transparent can get people to open up: "What you are doing is opening yourself up to be somebody who is an open book. So clearly, your purposes cannot be nefarious. The more open that you are in terms of establishing rapport with somebody, the more beneficial the conversation will be in terms of achieving your collection objectives."

Patience is a virtue as far as Sharp is concerned. It's important to establish lasting relationships and not always expect interactions to yield immediate results. She emphasizes the necessity of taking enough time to get answers that you can rely on. "Occasionally you'll get what you need quickly," says Sharp. "More often, it requires far more effort and time than anyone acknowledges, especially in today's 'immediate results' world. The quote, 'garbage in, garbage out' indirectly applies to the value of the input. The less



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input, the less likely it will be sufficient."

Sometimes key insights surface long after a conversation ends, when pieces of information combine with intelligence gathered from other sources. "It takes time, patience, and a willingness to not dismiss input that doesn't immediately make sense," recommends Sharp. "Don't dismiss anything until you have sufficient input and then can judge what's worthy."

When Nolan was in the intelligence gathering

business, he often captured the most valuable insights just before concluding a conversation. He suggests, "The last questions that you ask somebody are: 'What else can you tell me about this? What else do you know about this?' Those kinds of 'What else?' questions. The person who is a rigorous 'Let's get it all done'-type is going to come up well short of all the information that a source has to offer because he may have only allocated 8.7 minutes to the conversation. He is going to miss out on a lot of things because he isn't interested in getting any more. He is going to be a Joe Friday, 'Just the facts'-type of guy."

GETTING TO THE TRUTH

Television character Joe Friday was good at one thing: detecting deception. Navarro has applied the science of reading body language in the nonfiction world of the FBI, where picking up non-verbal clues has significant potential to influence an investigation. "Society teaches us that words have primacy, and what people don't realize is that non-verbals have primacy, that words are secondary," explains Navarro. There's so much emphasis on words, and yet what do we say? Actions speak louder than words. Babies are born without speaking, and we seem to be able to take care of them. Well, why is that? Because of non-verbals."

Effectively applying the lessons Navarro teaches while carrying on a meaningful conversation is not easy. "There's no laying on of hands and you're healed," he reveals. "I wish when I had started in the bureau that I knew as much about body language as I knew 30 years later, but that takes time. It takes time to learn the behavior, and then it takes time to validate them. Once you validate them and you see them yourself, you realize, 'Oh, when I asked that question and the guy ventilated his collar, there's an issue there.' You learn from things like that."

There are other tell-tale signs that elicitors should watch out for during their discussions. For instance, "all the person needs to do is be able to exaggerate, and some people are very good at it," observes Navarro. "It's not so much a non-verbal, but it's the people who are trying too hard to convince you. We say trying to convince rather than convey. Most honest people convey things once and that's it. Adding 1%, 2%, 10% to a statement is really very difficult.

"If there's too much drama, they've gone from this sort of steady state to now they're being sort of over-emphatic, I think one would need to be cautious." He remembers dealing with bad sources. "They'd make stuff up," he recalls. "It was always interesting to see

just how much they would embellish and the extra drama that was added when no drama was needed."

It's not always a case of too much information. Sometimes the flow of information slows or stops altogether. "Usually with the stories that are cut short, you feel like they were headed in this direction, and now they are cutting their own story short," notes Navarro. "You get a sense that it was flowing and now maybe they realized, 'I've said too much.' The head is tilted, and they're looking at you with wider eyes, because all of a sudden they realize, 'Oh crap, I'm saying things that I shouldn't.' The neck snaps hard, so that now it's rigid and you see the eyes tensing up, the orbits become narrower. You can almost see it in the face that maybe they're doing the self-evaluation, and you realize, 'Okay, this guy is masticating this in his own brain. He's there chewing on it, and there's some issue here, and it's no longer flowing.' Then there's a good chance that there's something wrong."

Over the years, Navarro has had plenty of opportunities to verify his assumptions. "I once did a 12-hour interview, and I couldn't take notes," he recalls. "I had to keep notes in my head and remember the body language. Well, the first thing is you really have to know body language, and not on a superficial level, but so that it's like software running in the background. When you ask a question, you notice that there's a sudden squint or you notice the person all of a sudden pulls up their belt or the space between the fingers narrows when they have their hands on the table. If you know what those things mean, you don't have to think about them. So now you just marry up that behavior with what the person said or their reaction to your question." Simple, right? Maybe not, but learning to read body language could mean the difference between success and failure in the field.

"You can get good enough at it to where you don't even think about it," states Navarro. "It's like those tests where you say, 'Okay, match the face with the emotion,' but more sophisticated, where you're matching up the question that you asked with the reaction and then with what it means. If you get good at it, you're going to be able to observe it and remember it."



REMEMBERING CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

While reporters often ask to record interviews, asking to tape a casual business conversation has the potential to lead to a very short and content-poor discussion. “Taking notes has a chilling effect,” adds Navarro, referring to face-to-face conversations. “Elicitation is about flow. The minute it begins to look like an interview, then it’s no longer elicitation.” Instead, he listens carefully and uses imagery to retain important information. For example, “‘He said it was on Brown Street, so one brown penny,’” Navarro shares. “‘Got it. Move on.’ If you make these associations to help you, then you’re surprised what you’re able to put together.”

Since Naylor gathers most of her primary intelligence over the phone, extensive note taking is rarely an issue. When she does face a source in person, and it looks like it might be a long conversation, she often asks permission to take a few notes. “I’ll pull out a piece of paper and take just enough notes to jog my memory later,” she says. “When I’m done talking to them, I write everything up on my iPad as fast as I can.”

Nolan notes that using the hour glass model can help when it’s time to recall an important in-person discussion. “You start off the conversation that is not germane to your real interest, and you close with something that’s not germane,” he explains. “You talk about the things that you are really interested in in the middle of the conversation. If you’ve already structured the conversation with them in your head prior to the meeting, you can use that to your advantage in understanding and remembering what it is a guy has said to you, without having to take a bunch of notes. It gives you a roadmap through your conversation,” one that you can refer back to hours or days later.

Earnest breaks the process down to simply revisiting the initial objectives. “Keep in mind, a purposeful conversation aims at getting responses to key points, so you’re going to remember those since they were the whole point of having the conversation,” he stresses. For the memory-challenged who have trouble connecting those pre-meeting objectives with ‘misfiled’ post-meeting findings, there are any number of resources, including Nolan’s own favorite, *The Memory Book* by Harry Lorayne and Jerry Lucas.

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HEIGHTENING AWARENESS

When it comes to elicitation, protection can be as important as collection. Many companies don't train or brief their employees on what information should be protected from competitors let alone prepare them to recognize elicitation. "We, as Americans, are far too interested in being recognized and accepted in our culturally extroverted world," observes Nolan. "We don't always pay attention to what we've actually said." It's critical to know what information cannot be discussed (not just shared) outside of the office. He advocates situation awareness training for staff members who could be targeted for elicitation. "Ask them, 'How would you respond to this set of circumstances?'" suggests Nolan. "Ask, 'Now what would be your response to this?'" Use whatever techniques you have been exposed to. Walk through it as part of the preparation – just presenting them with 'this is what elicitation is' and getting into little role plays. Those role plays can be very defining. Seventy two hours later when you are in the middle of a show and somebody is talking to you and doing some of the exact same things that you rehearsed with somebody else on your team, you know exactly what is happening."

A heightened sense of awareness can protect an organization from leaking valuable information. That includes being able to spot and sidestep elicitation before it leads to a problem. "A collector is going to be a chameleon," predicts Nolan. "He is going to be an extrovert when dealing with an introvert, and he is going to be an introvert when dealing with an extrovert. If I see somebody who exudes that kind of chameleol behavior, I'm going to stay away from him. Knowing what the techniques are, if I hear those being used by somebody, I'm going to say, 'He's somebody that I want to tell my guys to watch out for.'"

Sometimes you have to watch out for yourself. "People don't replay a conversation," points out Nolan. "Even if they do, they remember the beginning and the end of it. When they're in the middle of a conversation do they ask, 'How did we get to this point by having started talking about football and now we're talking about the differentiating elements of our product that's coming out in three months?'" Most people don't try to follow that conversational path that led to the part of the conversation that is of interest to the elicitor. If you can, just stop and ask, 'Why are we talking about this now?' Then you can backward chain that conversation and say, 'This is how it started, and this how he led me down the path to get me here. This is the time to say, 'You know, I had some really bad sushi last night, I've got to go.

Can we just continue this on the way to the men's room?"

The bottom line is that it's vital to know exactly who you are speaking with and why he or she is taking the time to ask you questions. Once that is clear, be sure to think before you speak. It may be tempting to share your expertise with an industry colleague or a consultant with connections, but only engage in those potentially critical conversations knowing and respecting your organization's pre-defined boundaries.

ADHERING TO ETHICS AND THE LAW

Never compromise ethical boundaries to obtain information. "Be aware of your conversational target's reaction to your approach, and be prepared to adjust accordingly," suggests Carleson. "You may think you're being subtle and conversational, but the second you see that you've put your target on edge, whether because of overly invasive questions or because of an overly aggressive manner of elicitation, it's time to dial it way back, if not cease and desist. It's a fine line, and once you've crossed it, it's hard to go back, so learn not to cross it in the first place."

There is a right way to elicit, and a wrong way to elicit. "I've known plenty of people who actually delight in provoking or inflaming their conversational partners into reaction," says Carleson. "None of them have been good intelligence officers."

Learning to use elicitation effectively but ethically requires finesse. "You really have to be very careful," points out Navarro. "Most things fall under the plain view doctrine. If you go to a tradeshow, and somebody decides to mention something in public that maybe they shouldn't have mentioned, or you ask them, 'Are you meeting deadlines?' and somebody says, 'Well, we're having problems hiring engineers;' maybe that's not a direct answer to the question, but you can extrapolate from that, 'Oh, they're going to miss their mark because of this sort of thing,' is that unethical? I would argue you're there, and you have a right to be there. Everybody has a responsibility to protect their own information, and in fact, that's a requirement of the law. You can't broadcast information, then expect the public to ignore the broadcast of that information."

All too often employees assume that no one is listening in or that they just don't care. "I've sat on airplanes, and I can tell you where people have been discussing things, and I just shake my head," he continues. "I just can't believe that the guys in front of me are discussing clients and issues and so forth with such openness." Does that mean the guy

across the aisle is ethically bound to put on his sound cancellation headphones?

“Let’s face it,” says Navarro, “somebody in your business, somebody in my business, what are we? We’re paid observers. Whether we see it visually or through one of our other senses, or if it comes to our attention, are we going to ignore it? No.”

But elicitation is not the same passive approach as overhearing or eavesdropping on a conversation. “Now we get into the area of are we allowed to probe?” notes Navarro. “Well, I think we’re allowed to go up to somebody and ask them straight out, ‘What do you think of your product? Are there issues?’ and so forth.” For example, is it legitimate to ask individuals whether a new product has any issues, capture the information, and watch for non-verbal cues to determine whether there is more to the story? “My argument is yes,” he contends. “You have a right to be there. The fact that they answered everything is okay. But they’re sitting there hiding their thumb or picking at the skin on their finger, and they’re showing that they’re stressed, which tells me that their answer has all sorts of issues written around it. There’s no way I’m going to ignore that.”

It’s more aggressive approaches and misrepresentation that most often lead to trouble. “I think where historically there’s been some issues is where somebody kept probing and created an

intense environment where the other person felt like they had to produce information or so forth. Or they ended up using something really misleading, like they presented themselves as a medical health professional, when in fact they were working for an insurance company,” says Navarro. “I’ve heard of these things happening where it’s highly unethical.” He suggests reviewing and adhering to SCIP’s ethics and warns against crossing legal lines that could lead to civil action or even criminal trials.

Many people don’t fully understand the limits of the law. If you think what you are doing might be wrong, you might be right. Avoid crossing the line into corporate espionage. Familiarize yourself with the Espionage Act of 1996. There is an industry full of competitive intelligence professionals gathering information ethically. Make sure that you belong to that group. For renegade outlier types who fancy being a spy over an average, everyday elicitor, there is a Career Opportunities section just waiting to be explored at cia.gov.

SCIP member Kirk Richardson owns and operates RMC, which offers market research and competitive intelligence services. He is a frequent contributor to various magazines and trade publications. Kirk can be reached at kirk@rmc-strategic.com.

