

# Competitor Role Play: An Appropriate and Effective Application of the Theory in Practice

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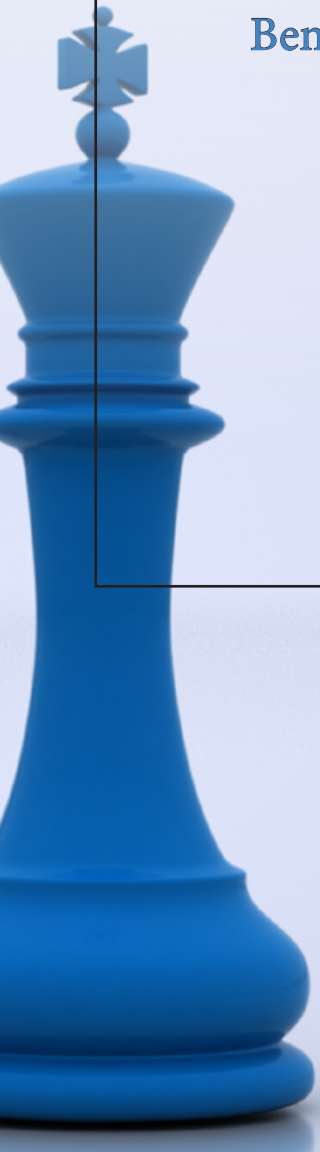
tSpecifically, the event focused on [EE](#) and how they looked to address these issues ahead of one of the biggest changes in the UK mobile market at that time. Competitor role play is one of those tools in the practitioner's toolbox that offers the highest reward possible. If it goes well, the role play creates the opportunity to co-create insights and actions to fine tune plans before they are hatched in order to drive commercial success in a fun, engaging way. If it goes wrong, it ends up being one of those humbling, tumbleweed moments experienced by the practitioner. That can be avoided entirely.



**Table 1:** What is Competitor Role Play, aka War Gaming?

	Dr. Craig Fleisher and Babette Bensoussan	Ben Gilad
<b>What is it?</b>	“a role playing simulation of a competitive market place”	“A structured forum to assess competitors’ likely moves...neither a war, nor a game”
<b>When is it used?</b>	“general management training and team building” or as “a tool to explore and test competitive strategies”	“Every time there is a management change in the business minimum to see extent the management team believes in the plan, stress test what has been inherited”
<b>Benefits?</b>	“to discover any weaknesses in a plan” “to identify possible consequences of adopting such a plan” “to gain a perspective of the marketplace from outside their own firm”	“to gain a better and shared understanding of the competitor arena” “to sensitize delegates to competitor moves” “to identify blindspots” “to provide the starting point to monitoring competitors’ intent and capabilities and improving assumptions” “team building” “better counter intelligence capabilities”

*Source: Gilad, Bensoussan and Fleisher*



**ONE SHAPE DOES NOT FIT ALL**

This article does not recommend that all competitor role plays adopt the steps taken towards this abbreviated approach from the best-in-class methodology (Table 2) available through book titles or classes. It just best reflects the context, the culture, and the ingredients at the time. If the task at hand was different, if the context was different, and as importantly, the culture, then a different approach would have to be brought to consideration.

According to the excellently facilitated session at SCIP Dublin 2012, Liam Fahey outlined to the car-based competitor role play participants that there are eight ingredients to a successful role play:

1. The right time
2. With a receptive stakeholder group
3. With a clear objective
4. With an appropriate briefing book
5. Understood benefits of the right logistics, e.g. min 2-day duration, outsourced facilitation, off site
6. The event itself – rules of the game, realistic timetable for the time, and simplicity of templates
7. Timely follow up
8. Feedback

**Table 2:** Eight Core Ingredients to a Successful Competitor Role Play

*Source: Fahey*

**TIMING IS EVERYTHING**

Timing is everything. It is a lot better to position the competitor role play as an integrated feature/gate of an existing go-to-market process than as a standalone event without context. Strategically, it can be positioned to stress test against an event in the market with a high likelihood to take place and deliver a high business impact. I was able to shoehorn the collaborative exercise, and my team stress-tested the go-to-market plans within the existing timetable of the process.

The proposal was founded on appealing to the emotion at the time, promising to align to the CEO's mindset, and then, outlining the process to deliver and how the objective of the role play would be achieved. The proposal even identified the EE employees required to participate by team, clear objective and timetable to achieve, and both in terms of overall process and individual stages – briefing, event, and follow up. So far, so good with regards to aligning to the best-in-class approach outlined in Table 2.

**NEED TO EDUCATE TO CREATE A RECEPTIVE STAKEHOLDER GROUP**

The above captures the sentiment of the required effort that I made to ensure that the stakeholder understood the competitor role play's benefit and that it was able to take place. There was no ready line of senior management with mandates to make decisions around the go-to-market activity that changed the landscape of the UK mobile market requesting a competitor role play! I identified my sponsoring stakeholder and sold the idea to him.

**CLEAR OBJECTIVE IS CRITICAL**

As part of the proposal, it was paramount to clearly identify the objective of the role play in an active language. Again, the tone of the objective was couched within the vocabulary used by the company's CEO at the time. The objective was brought to life through the statement by the teams, the event, an outline of the time together, the rules for the game to ensure that the objective would be reached and the stages and the deliverables at each stage. Again, so far so good with regards to aligning to the best-in-class approach outlined in Table 2.

## THE TONE OF THE BRIEFING BOOK CAN KILL OR SET UP A ROLE PLAY TO SUCCEED BEFORE IT BEGINS

The next important stage post agreement is establishing an agreed date. You must provide sufficient time to draft the briefing book. You must also build in the time to distribute the briefing book with individual team members prior to the event itself. A poor quality briefing book results in poor event outcome more likely, driven by the lack of serious application from the invited people to participate! The three briefing books drafted, one per team, captured the comments shared in the public domain by the competitor's management team at the time to the prelude to EE's market move. The rest of the briefing book focused on the pertinent areas to be leveraged as part of the exercises for the event itself. Each of the briefing books needed to ensure that the team player understood how the competitor would behave and therefore be able to role play that behaviour as part of the event, with the appropriate level of detail to understand why that behaviour is thus. The headlines are outlined in Table 3.

1. <b>Why we are here?</b> - Stated objective
2. <b>What is a competitor role play and benefits?</b> - Remember it is likely participants have not engaged in this type of facilitated workshop before
3. <b>Rules &amp; Expectations</b> - Stated ground rules for the event, e.g. state that one must talk in 1st person singular or plural "I" or "we" - Others included that participates should be active, creative, honest, plausible...
4. <b>Bring the game element into it</b> - Teams will be scored against the rules of the game; prizes will be awarded
5. <b>Team Members</b> - Your team, other teams
6. <b>Agenda</b> - Stages and duration for each stage
7. <b>Capture in one sentence what that competitor is all about</b>
8. <b>Summary position leveraged through Four Corners' Analysis</b>
9. <b>Where am I heading? Strategy and strategic direction for that player</b>
10. <b>A little about me, the MD</b>
11. <b>Recent announcements</b>
12. <b>What are we about? Financial performance and customer-base make up</b>
13. <b>What does our base look like compared to the others? Via EE's segmentation</b>
14. <b>Proposition levers</b>
15. <b>What does success look like for me?</b>

**Table 3:** Headlines in Each of the Briefing Books

## LOGISTICS! LOGISTICS! LOGISTICS!

This was the most blatant part of the best-in-class methodology that was abbreviated. Best-in-class recommends a minimum of 2 days off site and externally facilitated. The first exercise is for each of the teams to understand their adopted company and there should always be a client team present e.g. EE. I had a few hours, it was facilitated in house (having practiced with safer audiences previously) and took place in decorated EE office space. The Four Corners' Analysis for me as a player had already been drafted as part of the briefing book.

The rationale behind the abbreviated version was driven by the conditions under which my team and I were asked to deliver the role play, given its position on the critical path associated with the go-to-market timetable. Remember, if the role play is to identify actions, depending on what they are, time would be needed to implement it. This would need to take place within the existing timetable of the go-to-market timetable rather than extend it. Culture also plays a large role in defining the circumstances under which the role play can be delivered.

My team and I dressed each of the team’s tables with placards, competitors’ literature, and where possible, products to accompany the briefing book in case participants needed to refer to the insight drafted to ‘enable’ the role play to reach its objective.

**SIMPLE TEMPLATES, TIMETABLED AND FUN**

Andrew and his team were mindful that many of the participants had not experienced this type of event before. They ensured that the template outputs required per team were simple to complete, were available on USB sticks to ensure they were easy to read post event and allowed each of the teams to quickly present their team’s position to the rest of the wider group at each stage and task.

The overall timetable ensured that the tasks could be achieved in the time but then were sufficiently spaced to ensure that quality was achieved under pressure. The rules were made available in each of the briefing books as well as at the start of the event’s briefing stage post the address by the sponsoring stakeholder and participant. The rules allowed Andrew’s team, who acted as both facilitator for the overall event as well as aligned to each team to keep each team honest, to have a rough and ready criteria to award the prize for the winning team. The winning team was not the one who won the game, but who more consistently played by the pre-agreed rules.

**TIMELY FOLLOW UP**

The third and final stage is the timely write-up of the core output from the event itself as well as the insights that caused participants the most cause for concern.

The event took place on a Friday, and the event briefing to stakeholders was held on the Monday afterwards. These briefings were written in an inductive rather than deductive style. Again this was important given the culture in Andrew’s employer at the time.

**FEEDBACK**

At the event’s conclusion, and before the final post event deliverable had been drafted, Andrew asked the high-risk reward question for immediate gut-feel feedback: Are we better off at this event’s conclusion than we were before we started? Given the preparation prior to the event, the high energy during the event as well as the success of Andrew’s facilitators, the right answer came back, a resounding “yes”! This was further echoed when the final debrief was presented to the wider stakeholder group, some of whom had participated in the event itself, who repeated their endorsement for the event and what it had established. No tumbleweed moment! Table 4 outlines the critical success factors to an abbreviated competitor role play.

Best in Class	Abbreviated Version
At the right time	Timing is everything
With a receptive stakeholder	Sell and educate stakeholders, appeal to the “Hidden Agenda”
With a clear objective	Crystal clear objective
With an appropriate briefing book	Briefing book sets the tone for the ‘brilliant’ role play
Understood benefits of the right logistics – min 2 days, outsourced facilitation, off site	Fit logistics to task and audience make up
Event itself – rules of the game, realistic timetable and simplicity of templates	Tasks in the event itself to be simple and to time
Timely follow-up	Follow up needs to be swift, core message, workshop output as to why that is the message
Feedback	Gut reaction feedback is high risk/ high reward

**Table 4:** Lessons Learned from an Abbreviated Competitor Role Play

Attendees left this networking meeting with some candid advice to explore competitor role plays within their own businesses. Audience take-a-ways included:

- The most important thing with war gaming/competitor role play is timing
- It is possible to achieve a good outcome without the expense
- Application scenario: when to use the technique
- War gaming requires (a) preparation, (b) stakeholder buy in (c) good timing (d) and clarity of objective
- When to run a competitor role play: specific major event
- Achievable timeframe.

## NETWORKING EVENT SERIES

The SCIP UK Chapter hosts a series of networking events throughout the year. These events bring together practitioners from all corners of the discipline: service providers, consultants, academics, and practitioners to address topics as identified from the events' feedback forms.

The series aims to increase the understanding and awareness of desired themes among SCIP members and non-members as well as take the discipline to different business practices through co-hosting opportunities with other professional organizations and membership bodies. It is about creating an environment to discover, enhance, exchange, and problem solve. To understand the previous networking events' discussion themes, go to the SCIP UK chapter page for a complete running order as well as the link for the SCIP Competitive Intelligence Magazine article, helping to form SCIP's body of knowledge.

The SCIP UK Chapter is grateful to all speakers typified by their passion, without whom there would be neither a networking event nor the creation of a rich exchange of ideas and learnings. The opportunity to speak at these networking events is open to anyone, United Kingdom-based or just passing through, subject to meeting the growing list of event topics. Engagement with attendees is around five themes, centred on case studies: innovative integration of CI within the business, professional growth in CI, analysis in action, managing

information overload, and communicating with impact.

We encourage others to come forward to introduce the group to new perspectives, experiences, and learning. What links all the prospective speakers and panellists, irrespective of their background or role within the competitive intelligence profession, is a passion for the discipline. Along with all the volunteer speakers to date and those that have yet to take advantage of the opportunity, they are all unique examples of characters continuing to fix the discipline more firmly on the map! What is the next step? Register your interest and details with Michelle Winters at [mwinters@scip.org](mailto:mwinters@scip.org) to explore speaking opportunities and/ or to be proactively abreast of forthcoming events in the UK.

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### Further Reading:

*“Business and Competitive Analysis: Effective Application of New and Classic Methods”* Craig Fleisher and Babette Bensoussan, 2007

*“Business War Games: How Large, Small, and New companies Can Vastly Improve Their Strategies and Outmanoeuvre the Competition”* Ben Gilad, 2008

### About the Author:

*Andrew Beurschgens is the Head of Market Intelligence at the UK mobile network operator, EE, the JV between Orange and T-Mobile. In cooperation with other volunteers from both the practitioner and supply side of the competitive intelligence discipline, Andrew is acting Volunteer of the UK Chapter. He is a Catalyst Award winner, individually recognised for his volunteer services to the profession and its members, and has served on the SCIP Board and now volunteers for the SCIP Global Advisory Board, focusing on the European region.*