

CUSTOMER INTELLIGENCE MEETS TRADE SHOW AND EVENT INTELLIGENCE

Jonathan Calof, PhD.

Peter Drucker once said, “the purpose of business is to create and keep a customer” (Stern 2011). Drucker advocated this in 1954 in his seminal book, *Practice of Management*. Yet, I have seen and read much that suggests that many companies still do not fully understand this. For example, in reporting on why Monitor Corporation (founded by Michael Porter) filed for bankruptcy protection, *Forbes* reported that “Monitor was crushed by the single dominant force in today’s marketplace, the customer” (Denning, 2012). In looking at what caused the failure of Nortel, one of the largest telecommunication companies in the world, it was noted that a lack of “true” customer understanding played a significant role in its demise and that, in the end, customers decide whether you succeed or die (Calof et al 2014). On the other hand, Apple certainly understood the importance of Drucker’s philosophy, and in 1997, Steve Job discussed his “customer first” strategy stating, “you got to start with the customer experience and work backwards to the technology” (Purcell 2011). This all speaks to the importance of, and the need for, a customer intelligence program which is the topic for this issues column. As readers will learn, there really is no better place than a trade show to engage in customer intelligence.



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What is customer intelligence? Kelly in his book, *Customer Intelligence* (a good read for those interested in the area), describes the field as, “the knowledge that an organization has concerning the likely future intentions or prospective customers.” Wikipedia put a more process-based definition around it (something more akin to SCIP’s definition of intelligence): “Customer intelligence (CI) is the process of gathering and analyzing information regarding customers, their details, and their activities in order to build deeper and more effective customer relationships and improve strategic decision making” (Wikipedia).

Why are trade show’s great places for customer intelligence? The simple answer is because customers, existing and potential, are there. But so too are others that can help you better understand these customers including association personnel. Government, consultants, suppliers, and even your competitors. The following provides some more depth in terms of how each of these groups can be used to help you develop customer intelligence.

Customers: If you want to know what customers want they will tell you – both directly and indirectly, at your booth and at theirs. Every time they ask your booth staff about product or service attributes (“does your product/service do....”), they are signaling factors that may be important to them. Noting all these product/service questions and analysing them using word-mapping software (or other analytic packages) will help you understand what they want. Booth personnel and others at the show can either passively write down what customers say they want, or they can proactively ask customers what product/service attributes they want. Further, as I have learned from studying best practices of leading companies, asking the customer (existing or potential) and why they are asking for these attributes/functions, will help you better understand what is driving the customer.

Want to test for the strength of your company’s brand or customers attitudes towards your company/products/services? Consider running sentiment analysis software over the comments you and your organizations booth personnel gather at the event. One of my past columns dealt with analytics at trade shows and will provide you with ideas on



how to better analyze the wealth of customer information that can be collected at events to turn it into valuable customer intelligence (Calof and Richards 2015). Davenport et al also wrote a great article on customer analytics in an article called “Know what your customers want before they do” which provides more information for those interested in this area.

One big piece of advice, if you are going to try to do this at a show (gather customer information such as the types mentioned above), is that you will need to ensure that all booth personnel gather and “record” the information consistently. Coding procedures, forms development, perhaps an app for booth personnel tablets or phones, will need to be used to gather this information consistently and accurately.

But let’s be even more proactive for your customer intelligence efforts than simply noting their comments and concerns. Why not try and find out more about what their future plans are, what the customers are developing. Why? So that you can start looking at ways you can feed into these future plans. Depending on the industry that you are in, lengthy R&D, testing and so forth may be required, and this takes time.

Here are a few examples of what you can learn from customers at events:

What are they looking for in products/services?

What are their needs?

What changes are they planning to their product/services/strategies?

How do they view the future of the industry, and how do they plan to deal with it?

*What problems are they having?
What are their pain points?*

What opportunities do they see in the industry? What help do they need going after it?

What am I seeing at the event that I can use or develop to make my customers more competitive?

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Competitors: Competitor related KIT's are popular amongst SCIP members at events according to research studies, and certainly trade shows are great places to conduct them. But, under the customer intelligence concept, I am asking you to also look at the competitors from the standpoint of what their perspective is on their customers? What do they know about them that you don't? Each competitor strategy reflects an assumption about how best to compete based on their understanding of the customer. In terms of who to specifically target for this type of customer intelligence type or intelligence topic, listen carefully at your booth and around the show regarding which competitor(s) customers and others talk most positively about. For this KIT, note not only the name of the competitors that are being mentioned but also what specific attributes are being mentioned most often about them, as this will help you learn, once again, what customers are looking for and which competitors may best recognize this. Word-mapping and sentiment analysis type software will help with this intelligence task as well.

Consultants, association personnel, government, academics, and others:

There are many other people at a trade shows that you can talk to about customers that interact with them, study them, and understand them. For example, associations that represent your customers (existing and potential) are responsible for understanding them and their needs. Government agencies/departments that also may be at the show are responsible for developing programs and policies to help these customers and also should be able to provide valuable information for your customer intelligence program. These groups (government and association) interact with your customers on a regular basis and no doubt have studies about them. In fact, when looking over the show guide at who has exhibits, who is giving talks/seminars, and hosting events, you should be asking yourself what knowledge does each have about customers? How can they help my customer intelligence program? There is a wealth of information at the show about customers when you look at it from this perspective.

To wrap up the first of several articles I will be writing about customer intelligence, I want SCIP members and others to take the Drucker challenge. As mentioned at the beginning, it was Drucker who, so many years ago said that the "purpose of a company is to create and keep a customer." In this sense, everything else that a company does, marketing, R&D, product development, and even competitive intelligence is in reality designed to support a company in Drucker's mission. Those companies that best understand the customer, that have the ability to develop the products and services that meet these customer's true needs and make them more competitive, can win in the market place. Developing the capability to develop this understanding is clearly associated with many of the more successful companies and, as this article has described, trade shows are probably one of the better places to develop customer intelligence. Time to start developing your world class customer intelligence program!

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Jonathan Calof is a professor of International Business and Strategy at the Telfer School of Management at the University of Ottawa, and co-director of the Telfers Business analytics and Performance management area. He combines research and consulting in competitive intelligence, technical foresight and business analytics to help organizations develop key insights on their competitive environment. Jonathan received the fellows award from SCIP and the lifetime achievement award in competitive intelligence from Frost and Sullivan. He has close to 200 publications to his credit including co-editing the Competitive Intelligence Foundations Conference and Trade Show Intelligence book.

Jonathan has given over 1000 speeches, seminars and keynote addresses around the world on intelligence, foresight and analytics and has helped several companies and government agencies around the world enhance their capabilities on these areas. He can be reached at calof@telfer.uottawa.ca