

## **Gathering Competitive Intelligence data at exhibitions and tradeshow**

© Carr Moreton Associates Ltd March 2000

Exhibitions and congresses can be very important sources of competitive data. At these events companies will typically display existing products, newly released products and even unreleased products as “works in progress”. In addition it is possible to gauge customer reaction and interest in various companies, estimate marketing spend on exhibition activities, identify the marketing messages the companies wish to associate with various products and obtain a wide range of associated competitive data.

In addition to the trade exhibition portion of most shows and congresses the actual seminars and presentations can also be a source of useful competitive, technical and application intelligence. These events can identify the technologies and applications that companies are developing and customers reactions to these developments.

As there are a large number of such exhibitions etc scattered across the world during the year it will be necessary to define the key target exhibitions that should be attended. The key exhibitions/congresses that are selected for attendance should have the following characteristics:

- a) Major regional or World Wide coverage
- b) Attended by a significant number of the targeted competitors
- c) Aimed at appropriate application areas
- d) Exhibitions/congresses that have historically been a source of good information
- e) All major application areas and target competitors should be covered at least once per year.

To effectively gather competitive data at an exhibition or congress it is vital to be effectively prepared and organised. A series of standard questions and observations should be made of every target company or organisation that is attending the event. To ensure that this is done in a consistent manner it is a good idea to use a standard predefined questionnaire that is completed for each company. The CI (Competitive intelligence) professional who is attending the exhibition or congress would complete this questionnaire. A typical such questionnaire is included as an appendix to this section (Appendix 1). This standard questionnaire would be completed remotely from each exhibitor and is intended to record only the observers impressions and observations.

As well as gathering standard observational data as described above it is also necessary to define in advance additional information that needs to be gathered for each target company exhibiting. A set of standard objectives can be defined as follows (and these can be added to the standard exhibition questionnaire).

- a) Are any new products on display? If so how are these being promoted and positioned?
- b) Are there any products described as “works in progress” on display? Why are these being displayed at an exhibition? What technologies and applications are being promoted?

- c) Obtain any brochures, data sheets, customer magazines/publications available (even if you already have these there is always a possibility of new versions or editions of these items). These should be obtained immediately or requested to be sent by post.
- d) Speak with staff manning the stand to determine information on new products, works in progress, company performance, staff morale and any other relevant issue.
- e) Take photographs of the stand and products (if possible and not specifically forbidden).

At this stage it is important to emphasise that at no time should you misrepresent yourself or your activities. Experience however shows most exhibition staff either never ask why you are making an enquiry on an exhibition stand or are satisfied with a general answer such as “ I have been asked to investigate available products for a client”.

In addition to the standard objectives listed above it is frequently necessary to define unique individual objectives for selected companies in special circumstances. In the situation where a new company has appeared in the market, where a particular product/company has been identified as a particularly dangerous competitor or has bought a company out it is frequently necessary to define in advance specific tasks that should be undertaken.

Most exhibitions and congresses offer a comprehensive program of seminars, presentations and papers. These can be a good source of competitive intelligence. If possible the program of presentations and seminars should be examined in advance and presentations of interest identified. In particular presentations and papers sponsored by targeted companies or presentations that relate to specific technologies or applications of interest should be identified. Ideally selected presentations should be attended and documented for any competitive intelligence that may be obtainable.

In summary it is important to be well prepared before attending any exhibition or congress. The following actions should be taken in advance:

- a) Identify target competitors who are attending as exhibitors
- b) Prepare standard questionnaires for each target competitor and complete this as much as possible from the advance material issued by the exhibition organiser.
- c) Identify specific objectives that may be appropriate based on current market conditions or competitive issues.
- d) The presentation and seminar program should be examined for any events that may yield competitive information.

Once at the exhibition or congress ensure that all special and general objectives are met and that the standard questionnaires are properly completed.

## **How to operate effectively at the exhibition.**

The following section illustrates how it is possible to obtain maximum competitive information at an exhibition while at the same time not misrepresenting yourself. It is important to remember that exhibitions and trade shows are essentially public events and that information openly requested and freely supplied at public events can be regarded as “public domain” unless otherwise classified by the person supplying the information. Always reply to questions honestly but limit yourself to answering only the question asked without adding details that have not been asked for. If asked: “Who are you?” identify yourself, if you are asked: “what do you want?” simply respond that you are looking for information! If you want to protect your stand at an exhibition against the sort of techniques described here, there is a section at the end of this article that describes an effective way of operating that should ensure no valuable competitive information leaves your stand!

Once you are actually at the exhibition it is important to consider how you should present yourself in order to obtain as much information as is possible. The following suggestions can help you obtain information while still operating in an ethical fashion without misrepresentation.

It can be important to make sure that you look like an average exhibition attendee. Frequently you will find that exhibitors and stand staff are smartly dressed in business suits when the average attendee is usually more casually dressed. Many stand staff with experience of exhibitions can recognise a competitor instantly simply because he or she is too well dressed!

Another useful tip is to register as a full delegate at the exhibition. Full delegates usually have badges that are different to those held by stand staff (often stand staff have badges of a different colour, design or with the word “EXHIBITOR” clearly displayed!). A delegate will frequently be presented with an exhibition bag and a large amount of printed material (guides, abstracts, invitations to special events etc). The printed material often contains much useful competitive information not to mention invitations to new product launches and other events that can be valuable sources of competitive information. A full delegate also usually has access to presentations and seminars, which can be a valuable source of competitive information.

The first task you should perform at any exhibition is to gather data on the target competitors stands by way of simple observation. A small voice recorder is a useful tool for this activity. At each stand you should record your impressions including:

- Overall impression of the stand
- How big is the stand and how well positioned is it?
- How many staff are manning the stand, what is their attitude to customers, general morale etc.
- What products are on display
- What services are being promoted.
- What is the general marketing message of the stand
- How are products/services described in stand graphics and posters
- How many people are visiting the stand
- Any special promotions or offers or free gifts

- How much money do you estimate has been spent on the stand.

It is a good idea to complete this activity for all competitors and then use the data gathered to complete the exhibition questionnaires (example in appendix 1). This helps focus your mind on the additional information that needs to be gathered and specific questions you should ask.

Be well prepared before you step onto a competitors' stand. Make sure you have clearly in your mind what you want to find out and what questions you intend to put to the stand staff. When first entering a stand, identify yourself and your company. Do not spend too much time asking questions (no more than two or three minutes) and then ask for further information and brochures to be sent to you in the post. A useful technique is to have with you a brochure about the company or product of interest or some other public domain material (SEC filings, annual report or similar) and refer to this material when you pose your questions. This identifies you as someone who is well informed, well prepared and has a genuine interest.

If you work for a direct competitor you may be asked to leave the stand. In most cases you will find that by identifying yourself clearly and honestly the stand staff will be happy to spend some time with you, often their intention will be to demonstrate the superiority of their company and products. Many stand staff can get carried away with this process and divulge more information than they should!

If you are a consultant or working for a market research company you should still identify yourself and your company. There is no need to describe in detail the work you are doing or the name of your client (this is after all confidential information between you and your client). If you are asked to explain your interest it is often sufficient to say something along the lines of "I am trying to obtain information on all the equipment currently available in the XXXXXX (Insert area of interest here!) market on behalf of a client" as a useful extra comment it sometimes also helps to say "I have visited your competitors stands (you can possibly name some) and they have been most helpful" if pressed for further information it is best to say "I'm afraid I am not able to reveal any details of my client or the projects they are working on at present" At this stage you may be refused any further information and be asked to leave the stand however this has never actually happened to me! You have disclosed everything you are prepared to reveal without at any time providing false or dishonest information.

It is possible (but in reality very unlikely) that you may be asked directly "are you working for our competitors?" or "Are you gathering competitive intelligence?" The best response is to repeat the previous answer: "I'm afraid I am not able to reveal any details of my client or the projects they are working on at present". You will probably be asked to leave the stand at this point but in reality this rarely happens.

At all times it is imperative to avoid dishonest or unethical behaviour. Pay particular attention to the following points:

- NEVER... Pick up any material left on the stand that is not available to the public (eg user manuals, price lists, software etc). If in doubt ask a member of the stand staff if OK to have a copy of the material in question.
- NEVER... Identify yourself with a false name ,false title or false company
- NEVER... Answer any questions put to you with a lie
- NEVER... Accept any information that is identified as company confidential, private or secret.

All the above are not only unethical but will inevitably result in you being “caught out” sooner rather than later. Practising such unethical methods will quickly result in you being labelled as unethical, unprofessional and can result in serious legal consequences.

Using the techniques described here you can gather an amazing amount of competitive data, you may even get invited to competitor events and presentations which can add further to the information acquired. At no time have you provided any false or dishonest data about yourself or your mission.

### **Defence against the described CI gathering techniques as an exhibitor**

Having described the above techniques of gathering CI data at an exhibition it is probably only fair to describe how to protect your own exhibition stand against such data gathering.

First you should read and fully understand the methods described above and brief your stand staff to be aware of people visiting the stand using these techniques. The stand manager should also be aware that some intelligence gatherers may be using unethical practices such as working under false identity or pretending to be a customer.

Your stand staff should be fully trained in exhibition stand manning and this training should include role playing that simulates dealing with CI data gatherers using the techniques described above. Make sure your staffs are aware that they should not disclose sensitive, private or confidential information to ANYONE at an exhibition nor should they reveal any company gossip, rumours etc. It is the stand managers responsibility to ensure that no sensitive or confidential material is left lying around on the stand (I have frequently seen operating guides, field training manuals, marketing packs and CD Roms, price lists and other sensitive material left casually on exhibition stands by stand staff , very tempting to the less ethical data gatherers!).

It is a good idea NEVER to have brochures and data sheets freely available on the stand. If requested these items can be sent in the post, which gives you an opportunity to filter out, or request further information from suspected CI data gatherers.

It is important to ask some standard questions of everyone who visits your stand. Always ask the following of everyone before imparting any information:

- 1) Can you identify yourself fully
- 2) Who do you work for?
- 3) What is the purpose of your enquiry?

If the answers you get are not satisfactory you should politely probe further (be polite and open, the visitor may still actually be a potential customer and not a CI data gatherer!). If you are still not satisfied you can ask directly: “Are you gathering data for a competitor or for competitive intelligence purposes?” If the answer is “Yes” or is evasive or not satisfactory you can assume that the person in question IS gathering CI data. If you are still in doubt remember it is still OK to provide information so long as the information you provide is genuinely public domain and cannot provide a competitive advantage to a competitor.

Finally make sure your staff do not become obsessed with identifying CI data gatherers. The main objective of any exhibition is to identify new customers, collect sales leads and sell products. If you concentrate on these objectives and avoid providing sensitive or confidential information to anyone who is not known to you it is very unlikely that the few CI data gatherers who do visit your stand will be able to obtain any data of value.

**Carr Moreton Associates Ltd can provide Competitive Intelligence gathering services at tradeshows and exhibitions. In addition we are able to provide training in both “Competitive Intelligence gathering at tradeshows & exhibitions” and training for stand staff in identifying and dealing with CI gathering (and general stand manning techniques & practice).**

Contact us via e-mail  
Web Site

[carr@moreton.com](mailto:carr@moreton.com)  
<http://www.moreton.com>

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Sample CI exhibition questionnaire**

This is an **example only** of the type of questionnaire that should be prepared for each competitor at a major exhibition. The questionnaire is intended to be completed by the CI professional. Some parts of the questionnaire should be completed in advance of the exhibition and the rest while attending the exhibition.

Congress/Exhibition Name \_\_\_\_\_

Location \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Competitor name \_\_\_\_\_

Stand size \_\_\_\_\_ Sq.Mtrs. Quality \_\_\_\_\_

Products On Display	Associated Marketing message	New

Number of staff on stand \_\_\_\_\_

Number of visitors per hour \_\_\_\_\_

Competitions/prizes/gifts etc. \_\_\_\_\_

Overall Stand Message \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Stand Photo attached YES NO

General Comments

Associated Presentation, seminar or paper	Comments	Attend?

Specific Objectives	Task	Done?

Follow Up Required	Comments	Done?

General Notes