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KM World Magazine: Blogging the competition—Weblogs take center stage in CI

PR1255: November 13, 2003 8:57 PM, Posted by Jordan Frank

By **Kim Ann Zimmerman**, Blogging—the free-form sharing of information on the Web in a diary-like format—has gained popularity as a way for individuals to post information about their personal triumphs and struggles. But that same technique is now being used for salespeople, marketers and others in an organization to quickly and easily share competitive intelligence (CI).

While most competitive intelligence efforts require some structure and software, the appeal of blogging is that it can be done with minimal software intervention from the IT department. The information can be fed into more structured knowledge management systems, providing the freedom and ease of sharing ideas with the need to keep close tabs on the competition.

“What we’re seeing is the Web become an information clearinghouse for competitive intelligence, and the Weblog is just an extension of that phenomenon,” says Arik R. Johnson, managing director of [Aurora Worldwide Development Corp.](#) “We’ve been seeing this really take off.”

Johnson says companies are using Weblogging software such as [Movable Type](#) to facilitate sharing information about competitors and industry news that they can capitalize on to get ahead. He points to a semiconductor company that started blogging about a year ago as a way for sales and marketing staffers to share information about the competition. “This was all built around the same technology that anyone can use to set up their own blog and post to the Web,” Johnson says.

Then there are blogging applications, such as [Traction Software](#), that are built with the business user in mind. Traction handles the collection, organization, sharing, linking and retrieval of competitive intelligence information from multiple sources, including e-mail, Web content, external news feeds, business analytic systems and customer contact reports.

Cobbling & outsourcing CI

While blogging is a relatively new phenomenon, most competitive intelligence efforts have tended to be unstructured and driven by such occurrences as a proposal or a news event.

“Most of the competitive intelligence efforts are, in fact, pretty cobbled together,” Johnson says. “Most successful implementations have nothing to do with off-the-shelf software. It has primarily been database systems and Web portals.”

Interest in outsourcing competitive intelligence initiatives is growing, according to Johnson. “In the past, companies may have had a dozen people on the competitive intelligence team. However, 10 of those people were essentially librarians, looking at news items and other sources and filing that information,” he explains. “Today, companies have slimmed down and there are two analysts who are making strategic decisions, while leaving the heavy lifting to someone else.”

Companies have certainly been trimming their competitive intelligence teams, agrees Nancy Elizabeth Shaw, CEO of [WisdomBuilder](#). This means that the process has to become more automated and more accessible to everyone in the organization—both from a standpoint of accessing the data and contributing to the company’s collective knowledge about the industry and its key business competitors.

“Many competitive intelligence efforts are dependent on a few professionals,” she says. “But competitive intelligence really needs to be everyone’s job, and the technology is evolving to make the process of sharing this information easier.”

Because competitive intelligence resources are stretched, Shaw says companies are looking for ways to integrate information from a variety of sources as they conduct research in support of a new business proposal or a product rollout.

“Companies are looking to bring together competitive information gathered from content providers such as [Hoover's](#) or [Dun & Bradstreet](#) and combine that with data from the company's CRM system, for example. They're looking at integrating intelligence activity from outside sources with their own primary research. Basically, users need to see relationships between the people, company, products and customers to get a clear view of the competitive landscape,” Shaw says.

It can't be cumbersome

One way that competitive intelligence software is becoming more accessible is through easier-to-use interfaces. According to Shaw, WisdomBuilder recently enhanced the import capability of its software by adding a wizard to walk users through the steps of importing and processing flat file data from other databases. “The key is that while people want this information available when they're working on a project, it can't be cumbersome to add something to the competitive intelligence database,” she says.

It also has to be easy to get information out of the system. Shaw notes that WisdomBuilder enables users to create PowerPoint presentations from the information in the system. An ad hoc report generator takes users through the process of creating reports based on the competitive data.

Disseminating competitive intelligence in the organization is also a challenge that is being addressed, according to Brian Napper, global partner in charge of Intellectual Property Services for [Deloitte & Touche](#).

“A movie studio has a tool that monitors when the movies of its competitors will be released,” he says. The key to making the most of the competitive intelligence is being able to provide specialized reports to individual managers. Someone who is working on setting the release date for a horror movie, for example, wants to know when competing studios are releasing their horror movies. That same person may or may not want to know when a competing studio is releasing a romantic comedy.

“The ability to customize the delivery of the competitive information based on the individual's needs at that time makes the information much more valuable in the decision-making process,” Napper says.

Making sure that the information gets to the right person in a timely manner is extremely important when responding to an urgent need, according to Clare Hart, president and CEO of [Factiva](#). That company recently announced an agreement to co-develop text analytics solutions built on the [IBM WebFountain](#) platform. IBM's WebFountain is a Web-scale mining and discovery platform that extracts trends, patterns and relationships from unstructured and semi-structured text.

"This is the next logical step toward giving people intelligence that they can act upon," Hart says.

"Companies that can assimilate vast amounts of information and quickly determine market opportunities will emerge as leaders in today's extremely competitive environment. We expect this type of service to become a key business asset and a must-have for the most ambitious enterprises."

While reading daily press reports can be a good place to start for gathering information about competitors and market trends, a sophisticated CI tool can mine the Web for nuggets of information that can help a company spot trends before they are widely reported, providing a leg up on a rival company.

“Trolling association Web sites and chat boards can help a company spot trends before they happen,” Hart says. “Uncovering that information first is the best kind of competitive intelligence.”

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