Interview with Mark Asher – Competitive Intelligence Manager – Adobe

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Interviewee: Mark Asher – Adobe

Interviewers:Sean Campbell and Scott Swigart of Cascade Insights

- Examples of how CI can fit into a larger organization
- Responding to corporate threats with CI planning
- Interacting positively with other parts of the business
- Ferretting out information about competitors' activities
- The roles of primary and secondary intelligence sources
- Tips and tricks for the CI practitioner
- Tactical versus strategic roles for the CI practice

Sean Campbell: Mark, tell us about yourself, your role at Adobe, and your experience with CI.

Mark: Sure; I have been at Adobe just under eight years, and I have held a number of different roles in product management, business operations, and now in competitive intelligence through the corporate development organization for about two years.

Our competitive intelligence practice has two main charters. The first of those is primarily to keep our management team aware of competitive developments across all of Adobe's business thrusts and interests, as well as providing them with thoughtful implications and recommendations about how to react to those events as they occur.

In this context, events can be anything from earnings or product releases to acquisitions or major management shifts–pretty much any activity that impacts our interests. Most of that is backward looking, as you might expect. Something happens, and we provide thoughtful insight about it.

The other part of our charter is to provide forward-looking information about competitive events that haven't occurred yet, in terms of predicting what those might be and the probability that they will occur. We work with the various senior leaders across the company to try to understand how the potential for those events might impact their planning about where they are taking their businesses.

That interaction can be very structured and take the form of scenario planning or gaming. At other times, it will be very unstructured, but in either case, the ultimate goal is to come up with playbooks of tactics that we can put in place ahead of these events occurring so that we can just pull triggers in order to effectively blunt or reflect the impact of those events.

Sean: So to take an easy example, you may see software as a service coming up and decide to offer Photoshop as a service, to get ahead of the curve.

Mark: Right, although I would say it's probably less broad than that. More specifically, Competitor X has the potential to release an Application Y, and what would that look like? Or the potential to acquire Company B. What would the landscape look like if that were to occur and how should we react?

Sean: People are pretty interested in getting a handle on where CI departments fit into an organization. In some companies, it seems like every product marketing manager has a sub bullet for competitive planning in their job title.

In others, there's sort of a shadow organization that does competitive analysis, but they have a hard time getting the job done because they don't really have the authority they need. In still others, there's a market research organization that answers questions from the rest of the company.

Of course, those are just examples, and there are any number of other possibilities, but how does Adobe lay it out, broadly speaking?

Mark: I have experienced all three of those organizational models in my career

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here, actually. Every product manager on staff has some bandwidth devoted to competitive activity, but their focus is usually concerned with product/feature level competitive activity.

When a competing product gets released, they will review its capabilities and how they compare against ours. Then they provide insight about technological advantages, the positioning advantages, etc. That′s not what our role is, however.

I have also seen competitive intelligence at the market-research level at Adobe, and that tended also to be very tactical and mostly the reporting of the news.

Both of those roles are useful, because part of having competitive intelligence is informing others who don′t have bandwidth in their role to keep abreast of what′s going on in the marketplace. That is especially true in a big company like Adobe where our interests are so broad.

Having CI as part of corporate development creates a more strategic imperative for the work that we provide, and that was really the premise that led us to create this role in corporate development. The management team desires a high-level perspective about competitive activity.

They also prefer a focus on strategic impact; in addition to recounting a competitive event, they are interested in the long-term implications of competitive developments and recommendations on how to act. And so creating a competitive intelligence role in corporate development broadens our perspective so we can see the bigger picture.

Sean: Before we get into some tactical stuff, what got you into CI? It′s not the kind of role that people graduate from school and go into.

Mark: Some of it is structural, and some of it is self-motivated. The structural part is that before my work at Adobe, I had a career in management consulting, so I was used to doing a lot of primary research in order to formulate a client strategy.

I also worked across a lot of virtual teams. A lot of the work that I do on the response-planning and scenario-planning side involves pulling together various stakeholders across the company. Their day job is not competitive intelligence, obviously, and trying to influence their thinking as we drive toward a response plan is very similar to the role I played as a consultant.

The self-motivation part was that I wanted exposure to more of the various interests across Adobe that I had only seen glimpses of while working as a product manger in one business unit.

A corporate development role was a great opportunity to do that, because here I became responsible for competitive activity across all of our interests. That means I had to learn everything that we were doing, which gives me the chance to look at the broad landscape of what Adobe does.

In the future, if I choose to go back into an operational role, I will have a much better perspective about where I would like to go next and where I could have the biggest impact.

Scott Swigart: You′ve mentioned response planning, which is pretty sophisticated as a CI role. How did that idea come about, and did you encounter barriers from people who were concerned that you were going to spend a lot of time developing contingency plans for things that mostly won′t actually happen?

Mark: There was a major threat on the horizon, probably about 24 months out, and the management team recognized that this threat might coalesce into something significant.

We decided to take a scenario-planning approach to the problem, to come up with a continuum of scenarios between the extremes of it having no impact on Adobe as a whole to having a significant impact on our ability to generate revenue in the future. Within that framework, we determined that by bringing together the right stakeholders, we could put together a series of contingent response plans.

The last part was to set up an early-warning-signal radar mesh, if you will, to identify precursors to these events, and to monitor them. The thought was that as we saw momentum building, we could adjust both our scenarios and our responses.

From those efforts a number of tactical response plans were developed and deployed as the warning signals came to pass. This is today an ongoing effort, and that monitoring system has proved extremely valuable because it has streamlined our response time and helped us to blunt the impact of the competitive activity being tracked.

Scott: In other words, the risk of inaction was too high to do nothing, so it was worth spending some time to develop a response plan and to set aside some budget to implement it.

Mark: That′s right.

Scott: There′s an old saying something like "The first casualty of war is the battle plan," so if you were advising someone about this sort of contingency planning, how would you advise them in terms of how detailed of a plan they should make and what reasonable expectations are?

Mark: You′ve got to have really clear, well defined scenarios first of all. You can′t just say, "Company X is going acquire Company Y," or "Product A is going to come out in 2009." It needs to be much more detailed than that, and it also needs to have buy-in among all the stakeholders.

You have to spend a lot of time working with those stakeholders about what various scenarios are going to look like and what they are really going to mean. There is likely to be a lot of denial at first, which is an appropriate human response, but an inappropriate business response.

The second expectation is to be prepared for a lot of negotiation and debate, because oftentimes you are going to be dealing with content that people don′t want to acknowledge. I frequently have to help stakeholders come to terms with the real possibility of a negative outcome. Considering possible negative events in advance and creating a contingency plan can be very productive only after stakeholders get past the emotional component.

Sean: How do you present it as positive when someone is doing their standard direct marketing, increasing share and perception, and you need to step up and tell them that they′re missing something important and possibly dangerous?

Mark: You always have to talk about competitive threats in terms of the opportunity they present. For example, if there is the potential for a bigger competitor to come out with a cheaper substitute for one of our products, would there be case for us to re-think our pricing strategy?

Or, in light of this development, should we consider packaging multiple products together at the same price, or reposition ourselves as more technologically advanced, for example? We could certainly sound the alarm and create a panic, or ignore the development and assume our current strategy is optimal. Neither of these approaches is appropriate, because the former lacks substance and the latter doesn′t acknowledge that the environment has changed.

I′m here to influence others. I don′t make or sell products right now, and my currency is how well I can influence others to change the direction of product roadmaps, marketing programs, and other tactics, in order to adjust to the competitive environment.

The best way to do that is to be optimistic, provide a fact-based analysis and case for change, and let stakeholders know how they can be successful in spite of the competitive threat.

An important part of my being able to cut through a lot of the barriers that people might otherwise raise is that fact that I have been in the trenches as a product manager. People find it reassuring that I′ve done their job and that I′m familiar with the day-to-day challenges they face, and they know I am not just some new-hire MBA without real experience, trying to tell them how to do their job.

Scott: If people in a product group have a certain amount of denial about a threat or are fairly dismissive of it, are there certain techniques that you use to help them objectively look at the threat and understand your perspective?

Mark: It varies depending on individual personalities. Some people need a very direct conversation about the fact that there is a serious threat to their business, and others would totally close you out if you approached them that way, instead responding better to a softer and more positive approach.

In general, though, everyone reacts well to fact-based analysis. If you come to people and say that you have read a few blog posts and decided that there is a threat that will undermine their business objectives in the next 12 months, they are likely to say that's not good enough.

On the other hand, if you can tell them the history of the pieces that you are putting together, how the situation has changed, and show them for example that a competitor has hired people and invested a bunch of money into something, you can build a more compelling case for them.

That kind of approach breaks through a lot of the emotional part of denial. It works better and faster in some cases than others, but I would liken it to a lawyer arguing in front a judge, making sure they have a fact-based case. There's a lot of misdirection and unsubstantiated information out there that is often used to justify direction, but you can't build a sturdy case that way.

Scott: You're also alluding there to the fact that a competitor can't do something really major without leaving some sort of a trail. Evidence shows up somewhere, whether it's session abstracts, job postings, blogs, or wherever. And when you lay that paper trail out in front of somebody, it's more than just a hunch.

One of our colleagues who does a lot of war gaming likes to point out the value of asking somebody what they think the competitor will do. That effectively eliminates a lot of weak assumptions about how smart and effective the competitor might be. Sometimes, weaknesses in your own position become very obvious at that point.

Mark: A basic technique we use in scenario planning is to switch roles and pretend to be a competitor, saying, "How are we going to compete against Adobe?"

Sean: What are some of the tools of the trade that you use? Are there particular sites you use to extract information about the industry? Do you have particular sources of secondary information you've found of value?

Mark: Sure. First of all, I thank goodness every day that we have the Internet, because doing this role 10 or 20 years ago must have been a whole different ball of wax. There's a lot of public record information available, and over time I've assembled an RSS feed that must include 90-plus blogs now, that I've identified as credible and timely that I can extract information about our competitors from.

I run through that several times a day, and it spans the gamut of individual bloggers like business development folks blogging on behalf of the company, as well as third parties from all sorts of trade magazines and similar publications that provide information. Obviously, you take everything with the appropriate grain of salt.

I certainly look at analyst reports on a regular basis, including post-earnings releases, as well as in between earnings releases when they might do a sector analysis or a channel analysis or some other broader piece that involves the competitors that I monitor. Those tend to be good sources of information, too.

I'm a regular attendee at competitive trade shows and conferences, and the good news is that nobody's kicked me out yet, even though in a lot of cases they know who I am, now.

Sean: We know what a chilling impact it has for us to walk up to a booth and tell people we're doing competitive intelligence. We usually follow that up with, "Well, you weren't going to tell me anything under NDA anyway, so whatever you were telling the last five people, why don't you just tell me that?"

Normally that gets a laugh, and the funny thing is they end up saying a lot, then.

Scott: It's almost like they want to prove you wrong, like, "Oh, no. I'm not afraid of you."

Mark: I agree. Still, it's sometimes amazing what people are willing to talk about. Ethically, though, acting on proprietary information that might be disclosed even in an informal conversation is out-of-bounds as far as I'm concerned, and I will not use it in developing CI deliverables.

Sean: What do you think the balance is between primary intel and secondary intel? I have heard it said that CI is one part analytical and one part intuitive. Even if I am willing to sit and research something for three hours, I also need to know when to pull up, pick up the phone, and call somebody.

Where is the line from your perspective regarding where to use a primary intelligence method versus a secondary research effort?

Mark: Generally, for things like high-level strategic direction, a combination of primary resources are probably best. In this case, I 'm defining "primary" as sitting through the entire eight-hour analyst day for a competitor, which they tend to webcast these days.

If I just read a transcript or somebody else's assessment of that day, they're not going to be thinking from the same frame of reference as me. It's really important for me to be able to experience it myself, so that the questions that I have are getting answered by listening through the presentation.

I might still benchmark that again, using secondary research and the perspectives added by various analysts, but I think experiencing that type of content directly is vital.

For things like comparative product analysis or other really detailed stuff, a secondary resource is a good start, and then I tend to benchmark with our own folks here, just to make sure that I'm not missing something at the detail level.

We do a number of deep dives each year on specific companies, and we've established a body of that content over time. As we've matured we have concentrated on fine-tuning that knowledge base.

We'll look at the body of content that's been developed over a six month period for a competitor and adjust our deep dive perspective and implications based on that.

In addition to public record resources, I have also developed a broad network of people at different companies over time that I can reach out to for clarification and general direction. Obviously, I would never violate any ethical standard or go down any path that could violate proprietary interests, but clarification is important.

I mentioned that I read a lot of blogs from folks that publish for trade publications, and so on. I have established working relationships with some of those folks, and it's great to have them to bounce ideas off of, because they obviously follow these companies very closely and often have additional insight.

Scott: You mentioned a few things that roll up under your role of competitive intelligence at a strategic level, such as contingency planning, war gaming, and data collection like reading through blogs, sitting through webcasts, and going to trade shows.

Do you have other tips and tricks for the CI professional? Everybody kind of starts at Google, but more often than not, a lot of very important data comes from starting points other than that. What advice can you offer to another CI professional about places that can be a goldmine in terms of the quality and quantity of data?

Mark: First of all, don't dismiss Google, because even though I have found some more advanced techniques, document searches are important.

Using the "search by filetype" option of Google's Advanced Search often yields a lot of sales materials. There are often details in these documents that you wouldn't normally find in a straightforward Google search, such as pricing or timelines.

The right combination of keywords is also a powerful tool. Typing in a competitor's name usually gives you this ridiculous firehose of stuff, but mentioning a particular executive's name or a combination of a technology and a product might give you far more targeted results.

Learning how to use the right keywords along with specific filetypes is a really powerful way to get insights about competitive activity.

Blog searches and automated alerts (which can be set up to target specific keywords and push new developments directly to email) are other tools which have proved useful.

Scott: Date ranges are sometimes useful as well.

Mark: Right. And beyond all of that, I subscribe to Thomson ONE for analyst reports. As I mentioned before, analyst reports are a great source of information, especially what you can learn from long-term trends around key financial information, like OpEx or R&D spending over time. It takes a little bit of effort and an affinity for financials, but there is a lot to be learned.

Any CI practice should have someone with the skills to analyze long-term trends in financial information. I also have access to most of the products that compete with what we're interested in and try to understand them as best I can.

That's a big effort, and obviously, I can't do it all, but I think it's an important element to being credible about talking about a competing solution. I also sign up for a lot of pre-beta, pre-alpha, and closed-beta experiences with new products and services.

Even though I am fully disclosed about who I am and what I do, I often end up being invited to these private betas, which is great because that means we get exposure to things that haven't hit the commercial market yet and we can respond in a much more timely way as a result.

Sean: Using virtualization, you can set up on your average garden variety laptop, essentially as many competing products as you want. That lets you fairly quickly clear some of the fog around a beta or an alpha release, in terms of claims about scalability, enterprise capability, or whatever the claims are in a particular industry segment.

I think the other thing that people miss is the ability to tap their own resources internally; product managers work with customers who are buying competing products all the time. Listening to them comment about competing products can be a very valuable resource.

Scott: Organizations that have a centralized CI practice sometimes tend to use that practice as a sort of magic encyclopedia where they can feed in questions or needs and get answers out. That makes the CI practitioners feel a little bit like wizards and the other people in the company don't really know how CI works.

The danger there is that people in the organization may not realize how they might be leaking information, because they don't really know industry CI practices. If they don't really know the tactics and techniques that a CI professional in a competing company would be using, they could potentially leak information without realizing it.

How much is it the responsibility of the CI practice to educate the organization at large? For example, to tell them that while they may want to put good descriptive information in a job posting, that there may a downside to that as well?

Mark: In Adobe's case, we have a Corporate Communications group who is responsible for managing our public-facing engagements. They provide training to speakers about where the appropriate boundaries are for disclosure for all kinds of public events, conferences, press and analyst meetings, and so on.

Sean: In the name of transparency, lots of companies feel pressed to fully disclose their road maps, bug databases, and the rest of it. Of course, that can be a great aid to your competitors.

Have you ever been in those types of conversations where the community or an evangelist who urges you to be open as a means of moving above and beyond your competitors, and how do you deal with that?

Mark: I think every company has to assess this separately and make their own choices about the level of disclosure that is appropriate. In high tech there is some benefit to being open about one's business direction … customers can plan upgrade cycles more efficiently, analysts can model financial expectations more accurately, and developers can evaluate platform choices more effectively, for instance. Of course, as you said, competitors are watching too, and this must be taken into account.

It's also true that, in spite of the fact that there are companies that don't provide road maps and that say very little about what their product development cycle is, somebody out there has often already figured it out. If you can't get it directly from the company, there is often somebody who's modeled it, thought about it, and forecast it.

Especially in high tech, there is a huge industry of just watching the industry itself.

Sean: We're drawing near the end of our time, so is there anything you want to return to or that we have missed?

Mark: I'd be interested in hearing your thoughts on something. I told you that our approach is more strategic than tactical. Do you find that a lot of SCIP folks are being positioned as more strategic, or is the majority still working at the more tactical level of, say, market research or product comparisons?

Sean: I think there is a little battle going, and there is a general trend upward, with people trying either to attach themselves to the CMO way high up and essentially give guidance downward or building out organizations that have equal weight with the existing ones.

We've also talked to a fair number of people that tell us they are more or less asked to be the librarians for CI. My own two cents is that I think there are a lot of people interested in building the overall legitimacy of CI as a discipline that is, for instance, taught in college programs.

Of course, there are a lot of factors that don't lend themselves to being taught in a college setting, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. That just means that there is a life-skill component as well. Overall, I think there is a bit of a tendency to over-classify it, in terms of how CI should fit into the larger organization, and I think it's important not to let that eclipse the need for an overall strategy.

Mark: Thanks.

Sean: You bet, and thanks for your time today.

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