"ORGANISING COMPETITOR ANALYSIS SYSTEMS"

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Abstract

Based on a detailed study of the competitor analysis (CA) systems in three large companies, this paper examines the assessments of the formal CA system by its members and its major users, the uses to which CA is put, and the organizational systems by which the function attempts to improve its contribution and strengthen its role.

In his influential 1980 book, Competitive Strategy, Michael Porter asserted the need for "sophisticated competitor analysis" in the modern corporation, and hence "the need for an organized mechanism -- some sort of competitor intelligence system -- to insure that the process is efficient." (p. 72) The growing complexity of the competitive environment of many industries during the 1980s convinced many top managers that they did indeed need more systematic analysis of their competitors, and during the 1980s many large corporations set up specialized competitor analysis systems. A 1985 survey of some of the Fortune 500 companies revealed that over a third of the companies sampled were spending over $1 million a year on competitor analysis and had at least one individual devoted full time to the activity (Information Data Search, 1985). In the United States, a new professional forum called the Society of Competitor Intelligence Professionals held its first annual meeting in 1986, and its 1988 meeting attracted representatives from over 200 large corporations and over 40 specialist consulting organizations.

Many managers agreed in principle with the desirability of what one practicioner described as

"an organized competitor intelligence system [that] acts like an interlinked radar grid that constantly monitors competitor activity, filters the raw information picked up by external and internal sources, processes it for strategic significance, and efficiently communicates actionable intelligence to those who need it" (Sammon, 1984: 71).

Yet however clearly the growing number of competitor analysis (CA) specialists articulated the model of the ideal system and however sophisticated the methodologies developed for gathering and analyzing competitor information, building the organizational systems for competitor analysis proved more difficult than its advocates had anticipated (Prescott and Smith, 1987: 411; Daft et al, 1988: 136). Nevertheless, the growing literature on competitor analysis has continued to focus on methodologies, rather than on illuminating the development of the organizational systems of competitor analysis. Research into the structures and processes of competitor analysis in the corporate context has been virtually non-existent. Yet precisely such research is necessary if we are to understand where the main problems in developing a competitor analysis system lie: to what extent they are the consequence of inadequate methodologies (Amit et al, 1988: 432); inappropriate modes of dissemination (Daft et al, 1988: 136); inappropriate allocation of effort (Prescott and Smith, 1987); inadequate support from top management, as has been the case with other kinds of environmental scanning units (Lenz and Engledow, 1986a); or other kinds of structure and process problems.

This paper describes the competitor analysis systems in three large multinational corporations, how its problems and prospects are seen by those most closely involved in it and those served by it, and examines the organizational mechanisms developed to address those problems.

The Study

The study was conducted in three of the world's largest multinational companies, each in a different industry: General Motors, Eastman Kodak, and British Petroleum. These firms are neither typical, in the sense of being close to the mean of size and dispersion in their repective industries, nor longstanding exemplars of best practice in competitor analysis. However, both the high-level management commitment to developing systems to make these firms more responsive to their increasingly competitive business environments and their ability to generate the resources to develop the specialized formal competitor analysis systems recommended in the strategic literature cited above make them promising grounds for studying the development and operation of such systems.

Between January and July of 1986, we spent between four and six weeks full-time in each of these companies and conducted between 40 and 70 semi-structured interviews.[1] There were three categories of interview respondents: those who had formal responsibility for competitor analysis, either full or part time (referred to in this paper as "analysts"); staff managers to whom analysts reported, who were themselves not users of the information ("managers of analysts"); and a subset of those whom each analysts or analysis unit identified as primary internal clients and users of competitor information ("clients"). In the three companies, we interviewed in total 73 analysts, 17 managers of analysts, and 63 clients.

The interviews with the analysts focused on sources of information (external and internal); how the information was processed, analysed, and disseminated; interactions with users and perceptions of how the information was used; personal learning curves; problems encountered in the function; and anticipated future directions of development in the function. The interviews with the managers of analysts also covered perceptions of use, personal learning curves, assessments of problems, and anticipated future developments; in addition, they were asked about the evolution of the function and the criteria by which its performance was assessed. The interviews with clients focused on the array of sources to which they looked for competitor information and on the salience of the formal CA function in that array; perceived changes in the function over the preceding two years and anticipated future changes, in terms of information provided and information needs; and on how they personally used competitor information. An examination of the documents produced by the CA units supplemented the interviews and allowed us to ask clients how they evaluated specific outputs.

THE FORMAL STRUCTURE OF THE CA FUNCTION

Competitor Analysis in all three corporations involved a dispersed and interconnected system rather than a single CA unit. All three companies had a global business structure, with business group management level between the corporate and the SBU levels. Each of the companies had formal, multi-member competitor analysis units at the corporate level, and additional units or specialized individual analysts at the group and most of the strategic business unit levels. CA was also formalized in different geographic units, although there was greater variation among country subsidiaries in the extent of formalization of CA than there was among the business units. In addition, there were other CA units linked to specific functions. In all three firms, the corporate R&D organization had formalized competitor analysis in the areas of technology and product development, and in one company there were also formal CA positions in manufacturing. In all three companies, while some top managers were seen as more enthusiastic supporters of the competitor analysis function than others, there was apparently broad-based management support for the development of the function.[2]

At the corporate level, the CA unit had two mandates: to follow companies that were "corporate competitors" competing with the firm across multiple lines of business, and to function as a "center of expertise," keeping abreast of the most effective and efficient tools of competitor analysis and disseminating them to analysts elsewhere in the organization. In the first role, the major clients were top corporate management, general managers in the groups and SBUs, and corporate planning staff. In the second role, the constitutents served were other competitor analysts throughout the company. Given that the former set of clients had much more prestige and power than the latter (and much more control over the allocation of resources to support the CA activity), there was a strong tendency to concentrate on the first mandate at the expense of the second.[3]

At the group level there was considerable variation even within each company. Some groups developed an active formal CA unit, while others decided to locate competitor analysis entirely within the SBUs. The choice seemed to be influenced primarily by the amount of planning and strategic decision-making carried out by group management and by the structure of competition. Where the SBUs had a high level of autonomy, the CA function at the group level was weak or even non-existent. And where there were few competitors that the SBUs had in common, there was little reason to maintain a group-level unit to integrate and share the information gathered by the SBU analysts. Where group-level CA activity had developed, its primary clients included SBU managers and planners as well as group-level general management and planners.

At the SBU level, CA focused on the companies (or divisions of companies) that competed in that particular business. Usually one individual carried the formal responsibility for CA, either on a full-time or part-time basis, although in each company there were a few SBUs where formal CA had not yet been created. The major clients were the SBU's general manager and its business planner(s), although in a few cases the analysts defined their clients more broadly to include line managers throughout the SBU and even (in two cases) sales people in the field.

The "clients" interviewed in the course of this study were therefore similar across the three companies: top corporate management, general managers of groups and SBUs, and the top-ranking strategic planner at each level.

PERCEIVED PROBLEMS IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE COMPETITOR ANALYSIS

In all three companies an overwhelming majority of clients asserted that understanding competitors was extremely important and growing in importance. Expressions such as "absolutely vital" and "you can't imagine not using it" were common. However, a majority of both the clients and the analysts perceived a significant gap between what was needed by the organization and what was currently being delivered by the company's competitor analysis system. With very few exceptions, however, there was general agreement that a formal system was necessary and that what was called for was improvement in the current system, rather than its abandonment.

Clients and analysts put forward an array of factors to explain the gap between expectations and performance.[4] These are summarized in Table 1, which divides the factors into two categories: those internal to the competitor analysis system, and those external to it.

The similarities across the three companies in the factors cited in open-ended questions were striking. Among the client responses, twelve of the eighteen factors were cited in all three companies, three in two, and only three factors in a single company. There was less similarity among the analysts: eight of the nineteen factors were cited by respondents in all three companies, seven in two, and four in only one.

--- Table 1 about here ---

Clients and scanners agreed that there were problems to be resolved both within the scanning function and in the larger context in which it operated. But while analysts were more likely to emphasize the contextual problems they faced, for clients the balance was tilted towards problems within the function itself.

<u>Factors External to the CA Function</u>

The factors external to the CA function can be subdivided into factors within the rest of the corporation itself, and factors in the environment outside the firm. The latter, including potential legal constraints on obtaining useful competitor information and the existence of good alternative external sources (such as the business press or personal networks) were mentioned by only a small number of respondents. However, the factor cited by the largest number of analysts and the second largest number of clients concerned the organizational context of the function:

managerial culture, specifically the reluctance of managers to try to use staff-generated analysis in general or competitor analysis in particular. Included in this category were comments about traditions of ignoring competitors, because of a historical legacy of market leadership (in the words of one manager, "We believed that other firms had to pay attention to us"), and fears of anti-trust actions by the government. However, some comments were more general: for example, a tradition of "management by instinct." As one manager described it, "Some of these guys will look at the data, but it makes them uncomfortable; they like to fly by the seat of their pants." And several clients and analysts said that while there was a growing willingness to pay attention to "hard data," many managers (particularly those with an engineering or finance background) had trouble with "soft" data, by which they meant any information without numbers attached. As one client described it, "Managers need numbers they can move the organization with."

Clients and analysts shared a recognition of more specific information management problems within the organization that complicated the job of competitor analysis, although again, more analysts than clients perceived this as an important issue. More analysts than clients were concerned with information blockages in general in the organization; as one manager put it, "Information just doesn't move in this company." Information overload, a factor we expected to hear cited frequently, was mentioned by only one client and one analyst. But for the analysts, the most frequently cited general information management problem was the use of information, particularly that passed to the corporate level, to control other parts of the organization, a pattern which made it difficult for a function like CA to persuade SBUs and subunits to share information with the corporate CA unit or even with each other.

There were two additional context factors that loomed much larger for analysts than for clients: inadequate resources, and clients' failure to specify what they needed. Fifteen analysts mentioned resource constraints on their ability to develop their own skills and their capacity for meeting the diverse demands placed on them, but only two clients cited it. However, several other clients puzzled openly about what criteria should be used to allocate resources to specialized information tasks such as competitor analysis, which could absorb as many resources as the company was willing to provide ("We could set up a group as big as the Batelle Institute"). Eight analysts (but only two clients) suggested that another significant problem was that potential users of competitor analysis did not themselves know what they really needed, and therefore did not provide direction for the CA function.

The analysts added two additional context factors not mentioned by any of the clients: a lack of information synergy across levels (that is, too little similarity between what corporate managers and division managers wanted), and the wide range of information needs within the company with the consequent difficulty of focusing scarce resources.

Factors Internal to the CA Function

The factors internal to the CA function itself, when put into the context of how the analysts and their managers described their activities, can be divided into three activity clusters. One centers on information handling, or "data management:" that is, activities such as acquiring, classifying, storing, retrieving, editing, verifying, aggregating, and distributing information -- activities that involve handling the information but not attempting to derive a higher-order meaning from it. The second cluster is "analysis," which involves interpreting the data to understand or predict competitor behaviour. The third cluster or dimension, "implication," addresses the question of how the company could or should respond. Each set of activities involves distinctive but interrelated skills.

The problem cited by the highest proportion of clients belongs in the implication dimension: the lack of relevance of competitor analysis to their immediate needs. Managers put this in a variety of ways: "it has to make a difference to your bottom line;" "it has to demonstrate a real pay-off;" "it has to answer real questions." While nearly a third of the clients saw this as a major problem, fewer than 10% of the analysts mentioned it -- perhaps the biggest gap between the two groups in terms of what needs to be done to improve the CA systems of the companies. If this pattern is common in other companies as well, it is hardly surprising that some researchers have concluded that the key problem of formal competitor analysis is that it does not meet the needs of managers (e.g. Prescott and Smith, 1987: 411).

However, it is by no means the only problem, as we shall see below, and the problems lie as much in the concepts of "needs" and "use" as in the capacity of the CA function to deliver outputs.

The internal factor cited by the second largest number of clients also concerned implications: the lack of credibility of the analysts who provided the information and analysis on which the company would act if it were to draw the implications for action from the CA's outputs. The most frequently mentioned factor here was a relatively low level of line or product management experience among the analysts, so that some line managers had an a priori scepticism about their ability to understand and interpret competitor information. Two other factors were also mentioned: the fact that the analysts did not try to check their own outputs by doing post mortem analyses, and (more salient for the analysts) the high turnover in the function, which meant that clients did not have time to develop trust in individual analysts.

This lack of credibility affected analysis activities as well. It created an environment in which analysts felt it was less costly to avoid any interpretation or analysis than to risk making an incorrect interpretation. The following comment of an analyst is suggestive: "Personally, I'd rather make 25 predictions and have 20 of the right than make 3 and have them all right. But I'm not sure that attitude is shared by my company and they make it very embarrassing if you're wrong."

The need for more prediction and less description was one of three problems mentioned by more than fifteen percent of the clients. As one manager put it, "I don't want to know what the other guy did to me yesterday; I want to know what he is going to do to me tomorrow." Another was very similar: the tendency for the CA function to put out too much data and too little analysis. The third was the lack of appropriate methodologies; the most frequent example was obtaining disaggregated data on production costs, productivity, R&D efficiency, and so on. Clients often recognized that "sometimes we do not know how to generate these figures for our own company, let alone competitors," but felt that this constrained the CA function's ability to generate useful analyses. Clients wanted numbers, but they also wanted to understand (or at least trust) the analytical methodologies that produced them, and to be confident that these were consistent, systematic, and rigorous.

One further problem in analysis was the difficulty of combining "hard" and "soft" data in the corporation in general --a tendency to uncouple the two, and in so doing to take the "hard" data (the numbers) out of context, thereby creating serious problems in interpretation. One example cited by several SBU analysts in one company concerned a report from an SBU marketing unit tracking sales on a new product. Production problems had plagued the launch, and SBU marketing staff regarded the fact that they had maintained market share against a competing new product as a triumph on the part of their field sales organization (and they provided supporting information on the production problems). However, the figures on sales were taken out of the report by a member of the corporate CA unit, and later used as an example of marketing inertia by corporate analysts unaware of the context.

In addition, several respondents cited too little continuity across outputs and too little ability to see the world from the competitor's point of view -- a tendency to answer the question, "What would <u>we</u> do if we were in their position?" rather than, "What are <u>they</u> likely to do?"

Data management factors were, not surprisingly, the most important internal factors for the analysts, although the concern was shared to a considerable degree by clients. For both groups, the factor most frequently cited was the inadequacy of information systems. In particular, the analysts felt that the problem of the "bulging filing cabinet" full of clippings and notes, and the consequent difficulty of retrieving information, cried out for technological solutions in storage and retrieval. And better access to external information services and help in identifying the most useful and efficient services were also included in the perception of what Information technology could do to improve the CA function.

Three other data management factors were cited: the need to improve acquisition of information from line managers within the organization; complaints that the same information was being recycled too many times; and (exclusively an analysts' concern) the fear that inadequate quality checks on the sources of information might be diminishing the quality of analysis and interpretation.

One encouraging aspect of these data is that both clients and analysts were aware that the problems of developing a more effective CA function could not be attributed only to the function itself, and that significant contextual factors complicated its task. Indeed, competitor analysis was given support from top management precisely because it was seen as a potential change agent, helping to make the corporation more responsive to the competitive environment and changing management habits of information use. Such changes could not be expected to occur quickly or painlessly.

Perhaps the most important discrepancy between analyst and client perceptions on external factors concerned the constraints on resources. Competitor analysis has emerged at a time when most large U.S. companies are under severe pressure to "run lean" -- to reduce the scale of staff functions and cut expenditures, particularly on personnel. Analysts and their managers realize that appealing to management for more resources is simply not a realistic option, and hence they are driven to try to make the best possible use of existing resources. This in part explains the great appeal of new information technology in the function: a system that would reduce the amount of time expended on data management would free up time for the analysis which is increasingly the focus of client demands.

However, while it is not surprising that analysts should be more concerned with data management issues than clients, the analysts' focus on data management problems at the expense of analysis issues (compared to the concerns of the clients) is disturbing, although understandable. Many analysts told us that they were frustrated by spending most of their time on data management, especially gathering information. They felt that freeing up more time for analysis by finding solutions to the data problems would solve many of the function's problems in meeting the needs of its clients. But the distrust of CA methodologies exhibited by many clients suggest that the problems on analysis are more extensive than simply misallocation of time. The most problematic aspect is the gap in the perception of the relevance of CA outputs to action and use. This indicates both low levels of feedback between clients and analysts, and a lack of clarity over how far the CA function should extend its value-adding activities into the implication dimension. These issues are addressed below; the section immediately following concentrates on the problem of use.

ORGANIZATIONAL USES OF COMPETITOR ANALYSIS

Our own findings above and the existing literature on environmental scanning systems in general indicates that an ongoing challenge for those in scanning positions is to produce information that is seen as useful by managers (Lenz and Engledow, 1986). "Useful" has customarily been defined by researchers as information that is used directly in decision-making, either in the context of the strategic planning process or in operational and tactical decision-making by managers (Prescott and Smith, 1987).

We began the research with the same strong focus on the contribution of formal competitor analysis to strategic, operational, and tactical decision-making, and therefore, in all our interviews with clients, we asked the following question:

"Although clearly an increasing amount of competitor information is being gathered in this company, we are encountering some difficulty in finding out how it is actually used. Can you give us an example or two from your recent experience in which competitor analysis played a particularly important role?"

The sceptical tone of the question was designed to push respondents to think of concrete examples, particularly because of a pervasive contradiction observed in an earlier study: while managers often say that environmental intelligence is extremely important for their firms and for their own jobs, they experience considerable difficulty in identifying specific instances of their own use of such intelligence (Ghoshal and Kim, 1986).

Responses to this question yielded 63 cases of how CA had been used. Analysis of these suggested that it was inappropriate to look only to specific decisions for the use of CA. In fact, the cases pointed to six different functions served by CA in organizations. In addition to decision-making by line management and strategic planning, which have been the focus of most investigations and normative prescriptions in the literature (e.g. Fuld, 1985), we could identify four additional ways in which CA can benefit the organization: sensitization, legitimation, benchmarking, and inspiration (these are described and illustrated in the following pages). Table 2 identifies the number of cases we could classify into each of these six uses, and also shows, for each use, the number of cases where the information was obtained by the user from the formal CA function of the organization and those where the information was obtained from other sources.

--- Table 2 about here ---

<u>Sensitizing</u>

In all three companies, the CA function was set up in part because of concerns that the knowledge of the extent of the competitive threat faced by the company was not adequately shared throughout the company, even by upper management. The function therefore derived its initial visibility and legitimacy by making people aware that the company faced significant and formidable competitors to whom it must respond, and in some cases by changing the definition of the most significant competitor or of the most crucial dimensions of competition. In one company, for example, a long history of industry dominance had led to a widespread scepticism about a particular competitor who was viewed as a technologically inferior company with a strong home market position but without the capabilities to become a serious threat elsewhere. Through a powerful series of presentations, the CA unit of the company showed the remarkable progress the competitor had made in its product and process technologies, the gradual and carefully planned expansion of its share in many key markets, and hence the reality and urgency of the threat it posed to the company's long-term future. Another example from one of the other companies was a competitor analysis presentation that addressed the perception that a particular competitor was in an extremely vulnerable financial position and therefore not a significant competitor, and demonstrated how in fact it continued to be a serious threat both in the home market and abroad.

In each of these cases, the effect was to "shake up the troops" through presentations that combined data, interpretations, and conjectures imaginatively in order to challenge the organization's existing assumptions about particular competitors.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking provides a set of specific measures comparing the firm with its competitors on a set of key variables,such as capital investment, productivity, quality, and so on. Like sensitization, benchmarking challenges basic assumptions about the company and about its competitors (see Alston, 1986, for a detailed description and analysis of how benchmarking was used in one large company).

In one case, the CA unit obtained from an outside agency reliable estimates of the different components of manufacturing costs for a number of competitors' plants. These estimates were then used as benchmarks for setting cost targets for the company's own plants. In another company, the products of all major competitors were collected and each component evaluated for quality. For each component, the highest quality item was identified, regardless of producer, and was used as the basis for establishing the company's minimum quality standards. Similar benchmarking exercises with manpower strengths, wage bills, R&D expenditures, and so on were reported in each of the three firms.

Legitimation

A third use of competitor analysis is legitimation: that is, to justify certain proposals and to persuade members of the organization of the feasibility and desirability of a chosen course of action. This function becomes particularly important when the company plans to take actions that are in conflict with the interests and beliefs of influential internal members or external constituencies. In such cases opposition can be reduced by demonstrating that the action is necessary for meeting competitive challenges or by showing that a similar program has worked effectively for a competitor.

For example, in one case, CA facilitated a manufacturing rationalization program that involved closing some units and considerably reducing employment. The company prepared and widely disseminated a document that showed why the actions were essential for survival against a specific competitor who had developed a highly efficient production system. This document not only reduced employee resistance to the plan but also helped to convince external agencies, including government agencies and local politicians, of the necessity of the proposed changes. Another excellent example of CA as legitimation was provided by the general manager of a business unit in a company that was reducing personnel by an across-the-board percentage in all areas. Beliveing strongly that his sales group was already at a serious competitive disadvantage because of its small size, he ordered a careful study of the number of sales people employed by his major competitors, and proved that his field sales force was already outnumbered by major competitors by a considerable margin. This analysis helped him get an exemption from the staff cuts.

Inspiration

The general manager in the preceding example used CA to justify something of which he was already convinced. But CA can also be used to give people new ideas about how to solve problems by identifying what other firms have done in similar circumstances: that is, it can provide inspiration. One example we were given involved the methodologies of competitive benchmarking and productivity assessment in R&D. A recent in-house study undertaken by a major competitor (obtained with complete openness and impeccable legality) provided some useful guidelines on how to go about this task. The role of CA here is not necessarily to provide a model that can be copied, but to provide a demonstration that the problem is inherently solvable and to suggest some methods that can be adapted to fit one's own organizational context.

The difference between inspiration and legitimation can be summarized in two questions: how have others solved this problem (inspiration), and who has solved this problem this way (legitimation).

Planning

The use of competitor analysis to assist the formal planning process is widely advocated in the literature, and indeed in the interviews the largest number of cases of use cited (27 of 63) were contributions to the formal planning processes. These uses included contributions to estimates of market size and potential market share and assessments of potential opportunities for acquisitions (or divestments) of assets, firms, or technologies. One example from one of the three firms was the analysis of the political risk exposure of the international asset portfolio of key competitors, to ensure that the risk exposure of the firm's own asset base was not significantly greater.

Planning uses of CA were much more dependent on information from the formal CA function than any of the other uses. Indeed, for the other five categories of use, the role of information provider was approximately equally balanced between the formal CA structures and other sources. Planning was the only exception in drawing much more heavily on the outputs of the formal function.

Decision-making

The contribution of CA to operational and tactical decision-making by line managers constituted the second largest category of examples. The range of decisions affected **was considerable**, ranging from tactical decisions about event sponsorship and discounting to operating decisions about plant closures. One example of CA impact on decision-making was provided by one manager in the context of the firm's response to new environmental regulations. Because these would increase the firm's costs considerably, top management had taken an initial decision to mobilize the firm's lobbying system to oppose the regulations. However, an analysis of the potential impact on competitors by the CA unit revealed that the new regulations would raise the costs of certain key competitors by a substantially greater margin. In consequence, top management reconsidered its stance and decided not to oppose the change.

Such multiple organizational uses of external information have been predicted in organization theory. Quoting from Sabatier (1978), Huber and Daft wrote,

> "The idea that information [about the environment] is sought only for the purpose of affecting decisions is an overly simplistic view of the incentives for providing technical information to administrative agencies...A number of other incentives point to a perceived duty or responsibility to provide technical information without regard to probable instrumental effects on actual decisions." (1987: 144)

Furthermore, the same authors suggest the use of external information for legitimation:

> "In many organizational settings, decision-makers must legitimate their decisions to others. Sabatier (1978) discusses this point at some length and notes a number of field studies of organizational decision-making where information was sought for the explicit purpose of legitimating decisions reached on other grounds." (1987: 145)

Similarly, the use of external information for inspiration or learning is highlighted by Downs:

> "They do this [collect environmental information] not because they are dissatisfied, but because past experience teaches them that new developments are constantly occurring that might affect their present level of satisfaction." (1966: 169)

In contrast, the more managerial literature on strategy has been singularly focused on decision-making as the sole use of any environmental intelligence, including intelligence on competitors. The following quote from Porter is typical:

> "Sophisticated competitor analysis is needed to answer such questions as who should we pick a fight with in this industry, and with what sequence of moves?" (1980: 47)

It is this normative literature to which managers are exposed, and it leads to internal evaluation criteria and expectations that may undercut the development of an effective CA function in the company.

BUILDING LEARNING CURVES IN THE CA FUNCTION

Virtually all the clients, analysts, and managers of analysts agreed that the CA function was still developing and still "climbing a learning curve." Unlike comparable functions such as economic analysis, undergirded by the academic discipline of economics, or political risk assessment with its base in political science, there is as yet no recognized external academic and professional base of expertise on which the CA function can draw. Furthermore, the function has to face shifts over time in client needs, which become more complex and demanding over time -- less satisfied by information and more demanding of analysis -- as their sophistication about CA increases. CA must constantly struggle to stay ahead of the learning curves of its clients. And it must do so at a time when the corporation as a whole is tightening its belt, reducing the size of staff functions, and demanding well-grounded justifications for any increase in headcount. The CA function in all three companies employed the following methods to meet the challenge of improving its own capacity to meet shifting client needs in an era of constrained resources.

Interaction with Clients: Reporting Structure and Feedback

Reporting relationships are important because they define mutual responsibility: the performance of required tasks on the one hand, and clear delineation of expectations and feedback on performance on the other. In general, most analysts would have preferred to report directly to the person they regarded as their most important client, both to improve communications channels and to raise the status of the CA function (the higher the status of the person reported to, the higher one's own status). However, in all three companies, senior line managers at all levels were wary of increasing the number of staff functions reporting directly to them, and CA specialists at all levels reported to staff rather than line management.

Where CA evolved under the aegis of the planning function, it reported to the head of planning; where it had evolved under marketing intelligence, it reported to the manager of that function. In the first case, contributing to the planning process was viewed as its primary function; the other uses (operational and tactical decision-making, legitimation, inspiration, benchmarking, and sensitizing) had far less salience. Where it reported to the market intelligence function, it had a greater range of application, and often greater autonomy. At least one SBU-level analyst whose reporting relationship had recently been changed from the marketing to the planning function felt that his work was being too narrowly targeted on contributions to the development of formal plans, and that his growing success in providing a range of information to line management was being undercut.

The lack of a reporting relationship to line management, while virtually inevitable, appeared to have some unfortunate consequences for the CA function. One was the creation of a gap between the priority given to different clients and the priorities expected by the clients themselves. For example, top corporate management was usually the first client named by corporate CA specialists. However, such managers are often quite satisfied with their own personal level of competitor information. In several of the interviews with top corporate and line management, the respondent appeared to regard the formal CA function primarily as a service to managers farther down the corporate ladder who lacked their personal networks and experience.

A more serious consequence of the lack of a direct reporting relationship to line management was the difficulty of getting useful feedback on outputs and establishing clearly the nature of client needs. In all three companies, the analysts and their managers identified the lack of specific definitions of client needs as one of their most serious problems; only two clients mentioned it as a salient problem. In the absence of the interactions stimulated by a direct reporting relationship, the analysts tried to project client needs from what they perceived to be indirect signals, and these tended to have extremely high noise levels.

These dilemmas are currently being addressed in the three companies primarily through the choice of dissemination mode. In all three companies, analysts had considerable latitude in deciding on the frequency of outputs and the mode of their delivery. We found that the CA function used both written and oral delivery modes, and that there was some use of electronic modes (Table 3).

Table 3 about here

Most expressed a strong preference for oral presentations, either in tandem with written reports or instead of them, for several reasons. Oral presentations are more visible to the client community and tend to have greater impact than written documents, and they help to raise the visibility of the function, thereby extending its internal networks. They also provided the opportunity to gather as well as disseminate information.

Analysts felt greater freedom in presenting interpretations in oral presentations, because they could be presented as tentative and reactions could be elicited immediately from the audience. And this immediacy of feedback, of which the reaction to analysis was one aspect, was the major reason oral presentations were preferred. Presentations provided an opportunity to assess the extent to which CA outputs were interesting and useful to clients; they were a major mode of obtaining client feedback and gauging client needs. All too often, however, clients did not adequately recognize this last function of presentations, and focused their attention exclusively on the data and analysis presented, rather than addressing directly the issue of what they might want instead.

Analysts in general preferred the widest possible dissemination of outputs, either written or oral, in part because it enhanced their visibility and hence their collection of information from internal sources, and because most analysts felt that "shaking up the troops" (sensitization) was an important aspect of their role. Many felt frustrated with the reluctance of senior management to encourage wide circulation of competitor information, a reluctance that was especially marked when the CA outputs contained a high level of analysis, or included comparable information on their own company.

One additional aspect of dissemination should be noted. Prescott and Smith (1987) recently distinguished between a comprehensive system that produced regular CA outputs and a project-based mode that produced outputs as needed. In all three companies we studied, the CA function was engaged in both.

<u>Staffing the CA Function</u>

Finding the people to staff the function who can keep abreast of changing demands and develop the function's own learning capacity is a demanding task. There are two basic strategies for staffing an emerging information function. One is to develop a cadre of specialists who spend much of their careers within that function (for convenience, we shall call this the "analyst strategy"). The other is to recruit high potential generalists for whom the function is a development assignment, sensitizing them to certain skills and frameworks that will add to their personal portfolio of management skills (the "fast-tracker strategy"). The epitome of a staff function using the analyst strategy is probably economic analysis; the fast-tracker strategy is most common in strategic planning.

The profiles of the two types emerged clearly in response to the question, "What do you like most about your job?" "Analysts" tended to respond with statements of how much they enjoyed the challenge of putting information together, solving "puzzles," and learning. "Fast-trackers" tended to cite the interaction with top management, the excitement of understanding the competitive environment, and the opportunity to "make a real difference to this company" as the key aspects they enjoyed.

The advantages of the "analyst strategy" to the CA function itself probably outweigh those of the fast-tracker strategy. Having people build up expertise over time and holding them in the function improves CA capabilities as a whole. The fast-tracker strategy not only creates rapid turn-over in the function; it may also create an incentive structure for the individual that may be inimical to building learning curves in the function. Fast-track generalists tend to achieve personal gratification and high evaluations by initiating new programs or approaches, rather than by institutionalizing and consolidating those begun by their predecessors. The rewards in most Western companies are greater for innovation than for institutionalization.

On the other hand, for the company overall, the advantages of the fast-track strategy in this function are considerable. Of the "fast-track" analysts we interviewed, most stated that one of the things they liked best about the job was that they gained a strategic overview of the competitive environment and of their own company, an overview they could not have obtained anywhere else in such junior positions. Most said their way of thinking about the business had been permanently changed (in their opinion enhanced) by their experience. Even for the CA function, the long-term advantages of having fast-track managers sensitized to the importance of CA may well outweigh the continuing loss of expertise in rapid turnover. As one manager of the function pointed out, in analogy to marketing research, to understand the uses and limitations of any type of intelligence function, one had to have some personal experience of how the intelligence is generated. The production of managers with such an understanding may be one of the most important long-run contributions of the CA function.

Developing Synergies in a Dispersed Function

One of the ways of building individual analysts' learning curves and of dealing with the problem of limited resources in a function where the demands are varied and escalating is to coordinate and integrate the activities of the participants within the dispersed CA systems. We found an array of such mechanisms, including special project teams, ongoing competitor assessment teams, joint theme-related presentations, and CA support groups.

In all three companies, project teams were used to focus on a particular issue or a particular competitor, with the objective of producing a comprehensive report within a given time frame. The teams were composed of people from all over the company who had particular expertise in the area, predominantly but not entirely from CA positions. One such project, for example, had the mandate to produce a strategic profile of a key competitor, emphasizing its vulnerabilities and how those could be exploited. It included representatives from the SBUs who confronted that competitor directly as well as from R&D, finance, and corporate planning.

In contrast to such special teams, which produced "one-shot" outputs, the ongoing competitor teams had the mandate of tracking a single competitor over time. Like the special project teams, they drew members from all over the company, but they were much more likely to draw on the competitor analysts dispersed throughout the company, because of the more extended time commitment involved. The outputs from such teams varied, but primarily took the form of joint presentations on the competitor at planning meetings or as requested by SBUs and functional units throughout the company. One of the companies, for example, had a set of ongoing teams, each of whom followed a key competitor, and whose membership varied from about 25 for the major corporate competitors to 7-8 for firms which competed across a narrower range of SBUs. The major teams met fairly regularly, and the corporate CA unit had the responsibility for coordination and communication.

One step removed from the sustained interactions fostered by both types of teams was the joint presentation around a specified theme or competitor. This involved CA analysts from various parts of the organization, each presenting their view of a competitor or competitive issue to an audience composed of corporate, group, and SBU managers and planners, with minimal advance coordination. The aim was to stimulate debate and discussion across the presenting groups and within the audience. For example, one company held an annual forum which focused each year on a different competitor and the most salient issue at the time (such as the divestment strategy of a major competitor and the resulting opportunities for their own company).

The CA support group, in contrast, did not produce any competitor analyses; its function was to bring together CA specialists from all over the company to exchange information and expertise, to share problems, and to deal with issues of competing client definitions.

The mix of coordinating mechanisms in each company varied according to current needs and time available. The special project teams had the advantage of being highly visible and involving people from outside the CA function; they had the drawback of discontinuous outputs, a problem that tended to loom larger as CA became more established. For the ongoing competitor teams, the situation was reversed: they could provide continuity in outputs, and build learning curves on a single competitor, but they ran the risk of becoming too routinized and losing visibility. The joint presentation had the obvious disadvantage of minimizing ongoing interaction across CA units; however, coupled with a CA support group to develop shared learning in the function (as it was in one company we studied), it was well-suited to a company where information synergy across SBUs was relatively low.

Make or Buy

The boom in competitive strategy has given rise to a large number of consulting firms that specialize in some or all aspects of competitor analysis. A company can now purchase an array of CA services: competitor profiles, ongoing scanning of public information on competitors, internal "intelligence audits" to draw out the competitor information dispersed within the company itself, and strategic planning support that covers virtually the entire range of CA activities. Buying some or all of the services is a tempting way to hold down the number of full-time employees in the CA function, and all three of the companies in the study had turned to this external market, primarily for the acquisition and editing of external, public information. The external contractors may even have an advantage in surveillance, since they can reap the benefits of scale and scope in the use of on-line data bases, and in search, where they are free to approach the competitors' suppliers and customers and even in some cases the competitor itself.

Even on acquisition, however, the decision on what to make and what to buy is complex, and one manager of the function gave a succinct rationale for keeping at least some of the process in-house. His company had decided to contract out the external acquisition of information on a certain set of competitors while keeping it in-house for a small number of key corporate competitors, for two major reasons. First, the level of understanding of those key competitors was so much higher within the firm than outside, even in a specialized contractor, that more value was added by keeping the process internal. Second, having in-house acquisition enabled him to benchmark the external contractors and assess their costs and the quality and scope of their output; the external contractors in turn provided a benchmark for the internal process. In SBUs, however, where a single individual may have the sole responsibility for the entire CA value adding process, there may be little alternative to external contracting of information acquisition, and relying on the corporate CA unit for benchmarking support.

Assessing the Role of Specialized CA Units

One of the most troublesome questions both for the researcher and the manager of the CA function is assessing its effectiveness or its contribution to the bottom line. As one manager put it succinctly, "Competitor analysis is just one piece of the puzzle in any major decision." Drawing a direct line from the CA unit to the end performance of the company in the marketplace is extremely difficult. Uncertainty over how to assess the efficiency with which competitor analysis is produced and the responsibility for its effectiveness creates serious problems in allocating resources to the function -- and in identifying objectively which CA practices and organizational structures are more effective than others.

These two related problems -- the fact that CA is only one among many important information streams and the difficulties over resource allocation -- have led one of the firms in the study to consolidate competitor analysis with other environmental scanning functions at the corporate level into a single business information unit, which includes industry and economic analysis, political risk assessment, the public affairs function, and any related functions. This allows for greater interaction across the various environmental information streams and enhances economies of scope in terms of data bases, secretarial support, and management. It also provides a more neutral umbrella for a function whose formal title has often been problematic: "competitor analysis" carries unsavory implications for many people both within and outside the corporation.

The same firm has moved to ensure that client evaluations of the function are rigorous and honest by making a significant part of the corporate CA function's budget dependent on allocations from the SBUs, thereby creating an internal market to "discipline" the staff function. The advantages of this system is forcing internal clients of the function to assess very carefully the value it adds to decisions and operations are clear. The potential danger is that in the balancing act of the corporate CA function between routinized, ongoing analysis of current and potential corporate competitors and special projects, between acting as the firm's center of expertise for the dispersed function and providing CA outputs to key internal clients, between raising the general awareness of competitive issues throughout the corporation and serving the immediate needs of a small number of top managers, the broader, longer-term mandate will give way to the shorter-term, more tightly-focused activities.

1. Each interview covered a structured core of open-ended questions, plus exploratory conversations about the function that depended on the individual's experience and interest.

2. The size and sponsorship of the CA function contrast markedly with the environmental analysis units studied by Lenz and Engledow (1986). The EAUs they studied were virtually all issues management or public affairs functions, 80% of which were single-person offices. They also found that "virtually every environmental analysis unit was sponsored, or "owned" by at least one top-level executive officer" (80). While we began the study expecting to test some of the findings based on the literature of EAUs, we found the differences in size, sponsorship, and dispersion so great as to reduce considerably the relevance of comparisons.

3. When we asked the corporate units to name for us their most important clients in order to arrange interviews with them, other competitor analysts were not mentioned -- perhaps natural in this context, since we had already arranged to interview virtually all of the analysts, and the analysis of client assessments in the following section does not include as clients any competitor analysts.

4. These were elicited in the context of two questions: an explicit request to explain the gap, and a later question about what problems the competitor analysis function needed to address in future.

Table 1

Impediments to Effective Competitor Analysis:
Assessments of Analysts and Clients

FACTORS	Cited by	
EXTERNAL TO CA FUNCTION	% of clients (n = 63)	% of analysts (n = 73)
CONTEXT - ORGANIZATIONAL		
Managerial culture	23.8***	34.2***
Lack of information synergy across levels	-	12.3***
Wide range of information needs	-	5.5***
CA driven from the top, not user driven	7.9**	2.7*
General information management problems	6.3***	16.4***
Clients needs not specified	3.2*	10.9***
Resource constraint	1.6*	20.5***
CONTEXT - ENVIRONMENTAL		
Legal constraints	6.3***	5.5*
Availability of processed information from external sources	4.8*	-
INTERNAL TO CA FUNCTION		
DATA MANAGEMENT		
Inadequate systems (IT)	11.1***	19.2***
Need to improve acquisition from line	6.3***	1.4*
Redundancy of outputs	3.2**	5.5**
Inadequate quality check on sources	-	4.1**
ANALYSIS		
Lack of appropriate methodologies	17.5***	6.8**
Need to be more predictive	15.9***	8.2***
Too much data, too little analysis	15.9***	12.3***
Problems in reconciling hard/soft	9.5**	9.6**
Noncumulative: outputs discontinuous	7.9***	11.0**
Own company template	7.9***	1.4*
IMPLICATIONS		
Lack of relevance of outputs to action	31.7***	9.6**
Credibility problems	19.0***	15.1***

1. The total for "credibility problems" consists of three factors: low level of line/product expertise (mentioned by 14.3% of clients and 5.5% of analysts), lack of self checking/post mortems (1.6% clients, 1.4% analysts), and high turnover in CA positions (3.2% clients, 8.2% analysts).

Key: *** mentioned in all 3 companies; ** mentioned in 2 companies; * mentioned in 1 company.

Table 2

Use of Competitor Intelligence

	TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES	NUMBER OF CASES BY INFORMATION SOURCE	
		FORMAL CI FUNCTION IN COMPANY	OTHER
SENSITIZING	3	2	1
BENCHMARKING	6	4	2
LEGITIMATION	3	1	2
INSPIRATON	7	4	3
PLANNING	27	20	7
DECISION-MAKING	17	9	8
TOTAL	63	40	23

Table 3

Dissemination: The Different Kinds of Outputs

DELIVERY MODE	FREQUENCY	
	REGULAR	"AS NEEDED"
WRITTEN	Newsletters Annual competitor profiles Quarterly reports Planning cycle support documents	Strategic profiles of key competitors Briefing notes Special project reports
ORAL	Annual review of competitors	Briefings Responses to queries
ELECTRONIC	News broadcasts	"News flashes" Responses to electronic mail

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88/23	Sjur Didrik FLAM and Georges ZACCOUR	**"Equilibres de Nash-Cournot dans le marché européen du gaz: un cas où les solutions en boucle ouverte et en feedback coïncident"**, Mars 1988.
88/24	B. Espen ECKBO and Herwig LANGOHR	**"Information disclosure, means of payment, and takeover premia. Public and Private tender offers in France"**, July 1985, Sixth revision, April 1988.
88/25	Everette S. GARDNER and Spyros MAKRIDAKIS	**"The future of forecasting"**, April 1988.
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88/46	Yves DOZ and Amy SHUEN	"From intent to outcome: a process framework for partnerships", August 1988.
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90/48 EP	Jae WON PARK	**"The Information in the Term Structure of Interest Rates: Out-of-Sample Forecasting Performance"**, June 1990.
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90/58 FIN/EP/TM	Lars Tyge NIELSEN	**"Common Knowledge of Price and Expected Cost in an Oligopolistic Market"**, August 1990
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