

WAITING FOR GODOT: A DEFINITELY DIFFERENT AND TOTALLY POLITICALLY INCORRECT VIEW OF SCIP EUROPEAN SUMMIT 2006

BEN GILAD, *Academy of Competitive Intelligence*



Have you ever read a candid review of any conference? As public relations goes, summaries of conferences by the organizers must be upbeat and start with the phrase “The latest meeting at _____ was a smashing success, with _____ participants enjoying both the excellent presentations and the beautiful _____.” Can you imagine reading a review of a conference that starts with “it was rather a sad meeting...?”

SCIP EUROPEAN KEYNOTE

I was a keynote speaker at the SCIP European Summit in 2006, and I thought it was a sad meeting. Yes, this is *my* view, not the organizers’, and I have no idea how the participants felt about it. Maybe they all thought it was a smashing success, and maybe they all enjoyed beautiful London where a bottle of mineral water costs \$8 and every hotel smells of 500 years of royal mold.

I sincerely don’t know why SCIP tapped me to be a keynote speaker. I am flattering myself thinking perhaps it was because my SCIP sessions always draw a full house. It also might be that my presentations are truly relevant to the careers of competitive intelligence managers. In all likelihood, though, it was because I agreed to do it for free.

AN INTIMATE MEETING

When I went up to the stage to speak, I realized two things: the meeting was intimate, and the average age of the crowd was twelve. We say “intimate meeting” when we don’t want to admit

the unpleasant fact that the European meetings of SCIP draw a small number of people. SCIP reported 120 paid attendants for this meeting, but it is not clear how many stayed for my presentation.

Why is the European meeting so small? First, Europe is clearly behind the United States in both corporate interest in competitive intelligence and the level of seniority of the competitive intelligence manager. That accounts for the average age of the participants. Yes, this is a generalization. The beauty of generalizations, or averages, is that you do not need to be very accurate, just accurate overall. In the words of a statistician, the average tendency describes no one and everyone. Keep this in mind before you send angry letters to the editor (not that I expect you really would do that).

Second, it seems to me that many Continental Europeans do not want to play in an American-sponsored sandbox. In this meeting, there were maybe two French people and three Germans, or maybe it was the other way around. I think I also encountered a Frenchman who lives in Germany, so I don’t know how to classify him.

France has its own little competitive intelligence fiefdom, which does not talk to SCIP, and Germany is still trying to translate competitive intelligence into one long German word. Or maybe they just don’t speak enough English in France and Germany, I don’t know. How about in the next meeting, SCIP provides simultaneous translation, and we can test this hypothesis? If SCIP does that,

it may actually have a chance to edit some of my more outrageous comments before the audience gets them.

WHO WAS THERE?

So who was at this meeting? There were a few Swedish competitive intelligence managers, several local English CI managers, and then some New World CI managers. The Swedish have been at the forefront of competitive intelligence since 1960, and they also speak excellent English, studying it being the second option they have during the long winter. You never know what the Swedes think about you since they are a nonconfrontational nation, so maybe they wrote down “a smashing success” on their evaluation forms.

The Brits were, well, British. Very stylish, great tailored suits, impeccable accents (oh, do I wish I had a similar one), and an attitude reflecting years of being an empire. In other words, my impression was that they still enjoy a relaxing lifestyle. None of them exhibited the neurotic, haunted look that is so typical of an American middle manager. It would be interesting to gauge their impression of the conference, but we don’t do evaluations by nationality. That is PIC. Besides, there was an open bar on Thursday and that may have skewed things a bit.

The New World competitive intelligence managers are the newcomers from Eastern Europe. They are the future of this profession in Europe. If the Western European competitive intelligence community

seems to exhibit little “CI energy” when compared with the vibrant American CI community, the Eastern Europeans are the opposite. They are desperate to advance “the cause” in their homelands. They remind me of the founding fathers of SCIP in the eighties. They are dying to get our help out there, and I wish I knew how to give it to them and still afford business-class travel.

MY KEYNOTE MESSAGE

I delivered my keynote, which met with little resistance and even less emotional response (aside perhaps from occasional shock). I am used to Americans laughing at my sarcastic view of their executives, but Europeans seem more hesitant when I called their companies “competitive intelligence incompetents” and their leaders “optimistically blind.” Maybe they were just overwhelmed by my PowerPoint slides. (I did get in some beautiful graphics, I admit.)

The message I delivered was that being pigeonholed into information delivery, especially competitor information delivery, is a dead-end job, and they must move away by changing their lingo to risk and opportunities, their focus to industry, and their training to strategy and early warning analysis. Of course I would say that, since I teach these subjects at the Academy. At the end they applauded politely, but I have a feeling they were really looking forward to lunch. (Lunch, by the way, was the only thing clearly superior to SCIP’s U.S. meetings.)

AN ANALYTICAL SESSION

Then I had a whole day to kill, so I deviated from my usual conference behavior of staying in my room and watching TV. I actually attended a session. There were two reasons for this atypical behavior. The Hilton London Metropole at \$400 a night provides an incredible 15 channels of TV, one of which is mostly snow, and 12 of which

are in languages I could only guess at (including BBC 1).

The second reason was that I wanted to hear Craig Fleisher and Sheila Wright — two academics at the forefront of competitive intelligence research today — conduct an Open Dialog Session with competitive

“analytical techniques as magic bullets”

intelligence practitioners. As a former associate professor of strategy, I envy anyone who still gets to talk in front of 200 young students who look at the speaker with adoring eyes. Besides, I really like these two people. They are so free of trying to sell you anything.

Craig and Sheila got the people to talk about their most pressing issues. Craig listed about 20 items. The first 16 or so were variations on the same question: Which analytical techniques are the best to help me do my job? The discussion was lively, mostly because Craig and Sheila refused to let the natural European reserved discourse take over. They prodded and cajoled and coaxed with an enthusiasm that I could have sustained only by heavy drinking. If I ask a question and no one answers, I get angry. They just got more enthusiastic. Man, I envy their students.

THE MAGIC BULLET

Okay, now let me get serious for a second. Throughout the whole hour or so of discussion, I got the unequivocal impression that these young competitive intelligence managers were looking desperately for a magic bullet; the magic bullet of analytical technique(s) that will deliver some unexpected results, some deep insight, and some value beyond the

data; value that will save them from their anonymous cubicle and their *information pushing tasks*.

Craig and Sheila tried to convince the audience that there is no magic bullet, and that there are many different techniques for different situations. I don’t think that was a deeply satisfying answer to these young people’s essential problems. Sitting in front of their pile of tactical data, low on the organizational totem pole, they are desperate for something that will make sense of all this and help them impress management.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

In my analytical courses at the Academy, I promote the view that a few simple frameworks can make sense of almost everything that competitive intelligence should make sense of, and the rest comes from talking to people — a lot of people inside the organization, outside the organization, from other planets as well, if possible. I teach what questions to ask and how to interpret the answers within these simple frameworks.

I believe in simplicity: simple analytical frameworks, simple questions, and simple answers. I suspect that may be because I am not that bright; I have never understood the sophisticated techniques (like game theory), and I have a feeling that neither do the executives these young competitive intelligence managers are dying to impress. My contact with executives made me a great believer in BOTEC (back-of-the-envelope calculations), not LISREL’s Structural Equation Modeling.

This is by no means a critique of Craig and Sheila’s message. *Au contraire*. As I was listening to this amazing duo, it occurred to me that competitive intelligence managers should think of hiring them to help them look at the data available to them from a *different angle*. I suspect there is a higher return on this investment than hiring vendors to provide *more* data.

ON ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

People in the room then talked about techniques they found useful. There were some interesting perspectives, two of which I remember. Donna from South Africa, a very bright Ph.D., commented on the Alternative Hypothesis method. Some know it as “devil’s advocate,” where you try to see if the evidence supports the opposing (or different) view. Another guy with a degree in history talked about spending four months researching a subject from a historical perspective to learn from similar past examples. Both were working in rather relaxed environments that afforded them the time and depth needed to follow these techniques.

And then there was one young English gentleman who was rather quiet, but when he talked I wished everyone there had paid closer attention to him. He commented that he never spends more than two weeks on any project, he does not look for overly sophisticated

techniques, and that his perspective is, at the end, mostly *commercial*. This young man will be an executive one day, no doubt in my mind.

Can we teach this commercial orientation? I’m not sure. I used to teach a course on entrepreneurship. Can we teach entrepreneurship? I am not sure of that either. A business degree has nothing to do with these innate talents, the ability to spot the “so what” from a *business* perspective (not a *business school* perspective). Some of the best CEOs and entrepreneurs I’ve met never studied in business schools, yet they had this eye for the commercial.

In Samuel Beckett’s play, *Waiting for Godot*, Godot never shows up. Competitive intelligence managers who are hunting desperately for sophisticated new analytical tools into which they can just plug the data and retrieve not just their competitors’ plans, but also hidden assumptions of rival executives, patterns and relationships in the market

undetected by the naked brain, their own management’s strategic blindspots, *and* good coffee, may have to wait a long, long time.

On my flight back, British Airways showed *Breaking Up Is Hard to Do* (with Jennifer Aniston). It was labeled a romantic comedy, but it was actually quite a sad little movie. Maybe the annual SCIP meeting in New York City will cheer me up.

Ben Gilad, Ph.D., teaches analytical techniques at the Fuld-Gilad-Herring Academy of Competitive Intelligence (www.academyci.com). He received the SCIP Meritorious Award in 1996. Ben can be reached at www.bengilad.com. ●