



NEW BOOKS IN REVIEW

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WEB-BASED ANALYSIS FOR COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE, Conor Vibert, Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 2000, 218 pages, \$65.00.

Competitive intelligence (CI), as a distinct subject and practice, has been around for more than two decades. Although the Society for Competitive Intelligence Professionals, an association geared toward CI practitioners, was founded in 1986, it was only with the advent of the Web and easy availability of information online that the interest in CI increased dramatically. Not surprisingly, in the past five years, there has been a deluge of books published in the area of CI and online secondary research. I have reviewed several titles and texts for some of my classes, and I have been singularly struck by their similarity in style and content. Most of them are shallow, hyped-up, and sensationalistic, with little substantive content and long appendixes containing laundry lists of Web sites, a majority of them inaccessible—all indicative of projects finished in a hurry to meet the increasing demand in the market.

So it was with some trepidation that I approached this review task, but as I started reading Vibert's book, I discovered that my fears were unfounded. The book is a refreshing change from the run-of-the-mill publications and a pleasant surprise. It is a how-to book that focuses on how analysts, researchers, and CI professionals can efficiently manage the breadth of information and online resources that is available and how they can make effective, realistic inferences based on them. Reading a book that presents a wealth of information such as information sources, Web sites, and links can be exhausting. It is to Vibert's credit that he has presented the content in a manner that is easy to read without being journalistic and is informative without being tedious.

The book presents both a framework for conducting CI and a series of examples that focuses on the variety of questions a CI professional may come across in his or her daily activities. These examples effectively illustrate how the proposed framework can be put into practice. Most of the chapters in the book were written by Vibert; three chapters were contributed by other professionals and academics. Compared with other popular how-to titles, Vibert's book has the following positive aspects: (1) a clear overall framework for CI analysis; (2) chapters focusing on specific CI questions and clear guidance on how an analyst could start answering them by using the proposed framework; (3) useful illustrations using hypothetical cases and chapter appendixes with

real-life cases; and (4) a writing style that is informative, precise, and devoid of sensationalism.

The book is organized somewhat haphazardly, and one of the contributed chapters (Chapter 3) pops up in an unexpected sequence. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the whole book. Chapter 2 lays out the challenge or problem that faces the CI analyst—developing actionable intelligence, adhering to ethical principles, and “mastering the art of integrative and intuitive thinking” (p. 16). The key chapter in the book is Chapter 4, which provides the theory behind the analytical framework. This chapter starts by categorizing the critical sources of information on the Web into portals that provide legal information, regulatory information, news and journalism information, educational information, general information, corporate information, and so on. Under each category, Web site details are provided as illustrative examples. These portals are then ranked from high levels of information correctness (legal portals) to low levels of information correctness (personal, interactive portals), which is quite useful for a starting analyst. This treatment helps the book remain general while providing useful, specific Web site information to analysts.

The framework for analysis that the book proposes in Chapter 4 is based on a game of hide-and-seek that analysts and their targets, corporations, play. Corporations disseminate information either actively or to meet legal and regulatory obligations. They actively promote positive information they want others to know. They provide active justification for negative information if it is news they believe others should know (e.g., to lower expectations or inoculate recipients against reports of the news from other sources). Information they do not want others to know (such as bad news or positive information about a star performer whom other companies may want to recruit away from the organization) tends to be buried in legal, regulatory briefs. The task of the analyst is therefore to understand what kinds of information he or she is seeking and what sources to investigate to obtain reliable information and inferences. Using this framework, the rest of the book focuses on how to obtain reliable answers to specific questions that encompass a variety of situations the analyst might face.

Chapter 5 focuses on identifying the true corporate powerholders—the people who matter the most in an organization and who make important decisions that affect the organization's well being. The chapter provides illustrations (both hypothetical and real, with disguised names), using

the framework to examine the nature of corporate power and demonstrate how to recognize and assess its contenders. Chapter 6 focuses on conducting a social responsibility audit using Internet sources, addressing such questions as, Is a company behaving in a socially responsible manner? Does it respect its physical environment? Does it treat its workforce with dignity and compassion? Is it supportive of local community needs? Figure 6.2 illustrates the usefulness of this analysis. It presents issues that are important for assessing a firm's level of socially responsible behavior, an evaluation of each issue, a summary of evidence to support the assessment, and the Web addresses of pertinent sources used in the illustrative case. It also makes the reader wonder why this helpful format was not followed in the previous chapter.

Chapter 7 examines how another company could be judged for collaboration, commitment, or acquisition. The focus is on conducting due diligence of a potential alliance partner or supplier. There is some fuzziness in this analysis, as it is not entirely clear why certain assessments were made when equally justifiable alternative assessments also existed in the case. Also, the analysis assumes that all organizations fit the profile assumed in the framework (i.e., with respect to the promotion or concealment of positive and negative news). Analysts must be sensitive to potential cultural and regulatory differences that may exist when studying foreign or foreign-owned organizations.

Chapter 8 focuses on profiling a competitor's communication style and understanding its signaling behavior. The real-life illustration provided in this chapter is useful for understanding how the framework can be put to work to answer seemingly difficult questions. Chapter 9 examines how an analyst can use online resources to spot an organization in distress, long before this information is well known. Vibert uses the example of BuyFromUs (in real life, Amazon.com) to illustrate this analysis. As in the examples in Chapters 5 through 9, Vibert makes inferences regarding the predictive accuracy of his framework for the BuyFromUs illustration. However, it is not clear how this could be done without any validation from external sources. At the least, some kind of holdout analysis is needed to predict how well the framework performs in leading to valid inferences.

Chapter 10 focuses on identifying current and potential competitors through an examination of market boundaries. Here, Vibert uses organization theory—specifically, population ecology theory and institutional theory—to examine the potential of the competitive environment of a firm to lead to new products, services, and markets. This is the only one of Vibert's chapters in the book that is more abstract than applied, partly because of the nature of the topic but also because of the absence of illustrations such as those found in the preceding chapters.

The contributed chapters are the weaker sections of the book and do not add much value. The discussion of search engines in Chapter 3, though relevant in the context of the book, is a little dated. For example, there is no mention of Google.com, currently one of the most efficient and popular search engines for research analysis. The relevance of the chapter on literacy development, technology, and the workplace (Chapter 11) is questionable, and there does not seem to be a concerted effort to link the chapter to the rest of the book. Chapter 12, on agent-based CI, is too general for any specific use.

The book concludes with an Appendix and a set of recommended readings. The Appendix provides a list of information portals and links, about 25% of which either do not exist any more or have moved to new addresses. However, these changes do not detract substantially from the book's value, because Vibert focuses more on the type of information portals to be used in the analysis than on specific Web sites. Resourceful readers can readily find alternative Web sites that provide similar information to the ones listed in the book.

Practicing CI professionals and analysts should find the book a good reference source. Although the book is not designed as a textbook, it may also be useful to teachers and students. In particular, the framework of Chapter 4 and the illustrative examples in Chapters 5 through 9 should be useful for teaching undergraduate and MBA students about secondary research and the use of library resources. In summary, Vibert must be complimented for providing the serious treatment of CI that it has long deserved. The book offers a compelling framework, examples of precise analysis, and a down-to-earth style. It certainly raises the bar for future publications in this area.

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QUALITATIVE METHODS FOR MARKETPLACE RESEARCH, Shay Sayre, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001, 255 pages, \$72.00 (hardback) or \$36.95 (paperback).

In this book, Shay Sayre, a communications professor with many years of marketing experience, describes a large variety of qualitative research methods and provides examples of how these methods have been used to gain marketing insights. The book is intended to be an introduction to qualitative methods, not a description of how a person untrained in these techniques would go about conducting such research. The major goal of the author is to familiarize the reader with diverse types of qualitative methods (beyond the well-known focus group method) and increase appreciation of the usefulness of these methods for marketing practice, thereby counterbalancing the overemphasis of marketing research on quantitative methods.

The book is divided into five sections. The first section, "Approaching Qualitative Methods," discusses strengths and weaknesses of qualitative versus quantitative research, provides an overview of five models of qualitative research, and describes several applications of these methods for marketing. The second section, "Getting Ready to Research," discusses some of the logistical and ethical issues related to obtaining participants, selecting research settings, and conducting valid research and briefly describes the steps involved in designing a study and writing a proposal. The third section, "Choosing A Research Model," describes five models of qualitative research: biographical life history, the case method, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography. The fourth section, "Data Collection: Techniques and Tools," describes observation and fieldwork, field interviews, structured interviews, and projective techniques. The fifth section, "Text Analysis and Reporting," provides brief

descriptions of how to analyze visual and material text and verbal data and how to write the research report.

Each chapter includes a summary, "stretching exercises," recommended readings, and complete references. In addition, most chapters include a several-page case study that illustrates how the method has been used, and the chapters have many examples within them as well. The stretching exercises are designed to give students practice in thinking about and using the methods, and these should provide excellent ideas for faculty members who teach qualitative methods. The recommended readings are intended to be the next step when the reader wants to learn how to conduct the research being described.

Given the topic, this is a very readable book. Sayre has managed to describe complex topics (e.g., grounded theory, hermeneutics, semiotics) in a simple way. The downside of this is that many readers will find these descriptions oversimplified and less meaningful as a result. In an effort to be complete, Sayre sometimes becomes encyclopedic, listing types of methods and techniques in a way that bogs down the reading. There is also a fine line between providing enough of a description of the methods for the reader to understand and appreciate them and not providing so much information that an untrained reader will assume that he or she knows enough to go out and conduct this kind of research solely on the basis of this book. It is extremely difficult to tread this line, and Sayre does it well. Still, I sometimes found myself wanting more (e.g., with the mere two pages describing coding), and at other times (e.g., on using the case method or ethnography), I feared that so much detail was given that the untrained reader might assume that this was sufficient guidance to begin a research project. It is not difficult to learn to appreciate the insights that can be gained from good qualitative research, but it is difficult to

conduct good qualitative research. I believe that Sayre should have emphasized the difficulty of applying these methods several times throughout the text.

One of the strongest features of this book is the wealth of examples Sayre provides. Throughout the text, she gives examples of various lengths that describe how the methods have been applied in conducting research for companies, nonprofit organizations, or governmental agencies. The examples also include descriptions of some of the insights and marketing changes that resulted from the research. These examples give the reader a much richer understanding of what the methods are and an even greater appreciation of the usefulness of the methods. An interesting inclusion is the description of qualitative methods that can be used to analyze computer communications (e.g., cybertools, cyber-speak, chat rooms).

This book is intended as a text for both students and faculty members. I think it would be a good introductory text for a course on qualitative methods, but it would certainly need to be supplemented by materials providing more in-depth coverage of some of the topics. (Readings worth considering are suggested throughout the book and can also be found online in various syllabi for qualitative methods courses; see, e.g., <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/syllabi.html> or <http://kerlins.net/bobbi/research/qualresearch/syllabi.html>.) Perhaps more important, this book would be a valuable addition to the personal libraries of faculty members who teach general marketing research classes. The examples, cases, and student exercises should provide excellent ideas for ways to help students understand and appreciate the usefulness of qualitative methods for marketing practice.

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