

FEATURE



When Business Intelligence Just Shows Up ... Grab It!

Business intelligence that just washes up on an organization's shores is too often undervalued or overlooked. Information provided by the offhand observations of staff members, suggestions from customers, and even recurring mix-ups can afford substantial benefits if only the organization is sensitive to it. **Ulla de Stricker**

The act of fishing for business intelligence – doing active research in all its many forms – is familiar enough, as are the myriad tracking mechanisms that monitor and measure our behaviours; think bar code scans and website clickpaths. But let's not underestimate the opportunities inherent in snagging business intelligence that isn't as easily collected: the stray customer comment, the "Hmm, that's odd" or "I've been noticing lately" observations on the part of sales personnel, the snafus in business processes.

Seemingly trivial incidents may point to areas of an enterprise's activities that need attention – attention that could potentially bring about adjustments with significant downstream benefits in the aggregate. Let me illustrate through two real situations in which business intelligence emerged out of customer interactions.

RECURRING REVENUE LOST

When the digital cable receiver unit failed for the third time and technical support pronounced that the power supply was

shot, the subscriber inquired when she could expect to receive a new one. "You'll have to come to our store located at Unless you want to wait a week for a technician to be dispatched." In as restrained a manner as she could muster, she let the technical support representative know what she thought of *that* level of customer service and ended the conversation in order to turn her attention to the task of disconnecting the cable from the receiver unit and connecting it directly to the TV. She lost the specialty music channels, but so be it. Several days later, she took time out of her day to return the shot receiver unit to the store. After all, the reduction of nine dollars a month in cable fees would begin to add up once it had paid for the trip to the store.

Here is the question: Aside from the paper copy of the receipt issued and the electronic record of the change in subscriber account status, what intelligence did the cable company gain from the event?

Here's how things *should* have unfolded. (1) Technical support employee alerts client relations employee, who immediately calls the subscriber to ask questions: What happened the other two times the unit failed? What would be an acceptable time frame for a technician to be dispatched with a new unit? Would she accept two weeks of free service in compensation for the inconvenience? (2) Client relations employee summarizes the subscriber's input and adds it to a pool of other customer commentary for analysis by the business development strategists. (3) Store employee, able to view, in a database, a summary of the subscriber's input, makes one last attempt to retain her digital business: Are you *sure* you don't want to reconsider? How about a full month's discount? May we call you in three months to ask if you'd like those music channels back?

Granted, retaining the nine dollars in monthly revenue may not be a huge inducement for the cable company to go to such effort. Then again, that's nine dollars each and every month (for doing nothing) during the subscriber's remaining lifetime as a resident in the cable company's geographic area. What if there are many customers like her? And what if she tells everybody who will listen about her experience?

The missed opportunity may mean that the cable company does not look into options for speedy replacements of failed receiver units for those customers who do not meekly accept the instruction to come to the store. It may mean that the cable company does not look into the possibility of developing or purchasing more reliable receiver units so as to reduce the number of failures. We won't know, but it certainly means that the cable company has lost out on a chance to have a subscriber telling everyone, "You'll never believe the fantastic service I got."

THE COST OF CONFUSING THE CUSTOMER

Days before leaving for a month-long overseas trip, I received the annual account statement for my health insurance. "Oh goody, I won't miss the deadline while I'm away," I thought as I madly wrote a cheque and got it out the door. The next day, I was going through my credit card files and ... "Rats, now it's coming back to me. That payment is made automatically every June!" With a sinking feeling, I extracted the statement from the insurance file and, indeed, there in tiny type was the statement: "Your payment will be automatically processed through VISA. Do not pay." D'oh!

I got on the phone and talked to a representative who promised to have the appropriate group look out for my cheque and return it to me. You guessed

it ... by the time I returned from my trip, the cheque had been cashed. I got on the phone again, this time to receive assurance that a refund would be sent. Sure enough, a cheque arrived a few days later. Problem solved, I thought ... until I noticed two small words on the stub: "Coverage cancelled." Yikes! On the phone a third time now, I received verification that "no, the coverage isn't cancelled. You are paid up through June 2009." I could have sworn I knew what *cancelled* meant.

Let's see ... Cost to the company, all in all, for dealing with my mistake: three phone calls adding up to maybe twenty minutes total. That's time that (a) did nothing to increase the company's revenue and (b) could have been devoted to productive work. More importantly, the business intelligence that *we are confusing the customers* could have driven two five-minute programming adjustments that would, in all likelihood, reduce to almost zero my type of customer mistake, thus realizing that twenty-minute savings many times over.

Surely, a customer before me had missed the tiny type? Didn't someone *then* stumble on the idea of featuring the do-not-pay comment on the annual statement in large, bold, impossible-to-miss type? And surely, another customer must have made a slightly panicked call to inquire about the "cancelled" coverage? Didn't someone then suggest a change in stub wording so that it read "refund," for example? Apparently not.

My confident prediction is that the scenario will play itself out time and again, each time costing the company in lost employee productivity. In my conversations, I made the above suggestions to the company representatives. How confident do I feel that the suggestions went anywhere? Not very. But I'll be watching the statement next June.



NOT ROCKET SCIENCE

Market research is, in many ways, rocket science. Capturing the business intelligence that washes up on the organization's shore isn't. Here are some questions business managers could ask themselves to supplement their market research efforts.

Are there black holes where business intelligence information disappears? How could we capture and retain that information instead of losing it?

What mechanisms are in place for customer-originated input to be recorded and forwarded to those who are in a position to assess its significance, interpret it, and act on it?

Is there a repository where we could "go exploring" for trends and for inspiration from customer ideas?

Do we have a process for being alerted when supposedly unique, one-off customer interactions become sufficiently frequent that we must pay attention?

How are we rewarding our employees for capturing and forwarding verbal

customer input so that they will feel an incentive to send it on? (Compensation schemes emphasizing call volume or sales could deter such behaviour.)

Are we taking the opportunity to leverage customer input for marketing purposes? (An inexpensive ad on a customer appreciation web page saying, "Thank you to Ulla de Stricker for pointing out how a simple formatting change could help us avoid confusing other customers" would reflect the company's attention to customer care.)

Are we seizing loyalty opportunities by following up with customers who have had occasion to interact with us due to a problem and offering them a benefit or a discount? (There is evidence that disgruntled customers turn into fans if they receive such extra attention.)

INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS ON THE LOOKOUT

If you're wondering how to find the answers to these questions, you can't go wrong putting an information professional on the project. Such professionals are skilled in detective work because

they are experts in secondary research, and they recognize business intelligence when they see it. Early in their careers, they develop a radar sensitive to information that might get lost: Is anyone capturing that event? Where will that insight be stored for future use? How many more times did something similar occur, and what is the implication? In a similar vein, they have a knack for spotting missed opportunities – occasions when information that could potentially be helpful to business strategists and planners simply never reaches them. Finally, their training in information storage and retrieval enables them to devise mechanisms to capture and index information for subsequent mining.

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