



November



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The Global BI/CI Corner: "Six Degrees of Separation," Camp David, and Tom Sawyer

What do the famous play, "Six Degrees of Separation," the US president's famous retreat at Camp David, Maryland, and the quintessential American fictional character Tom Sawyer have in common? Lessons for finding and leveraging key human sources of intelligence, that's what.

How's that? Okay, you've been handed a challenging business and competitive intelligence project; one which could have significant impact on your business unit's bottom line over the next two years. You're pumped...after all, you're a key member of the new product launch team and you've been arguing for weeks that the team needs to know more about the competitors' potential responses in order to fine tune the launch strategy. So, you got your way. Now what?

Identifying Key Sources...

You know that much of the information and insight you need on the competition lies in the heads of people who work there and in the companies in their supply chain. You even know a few sources who you can tap. But, other than that, you're stumped. How am I going to access the right people?

Here's where "Six Degrees of Separation" (or the 90's parlor game version called, "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon") comes in. The play's central conceit is that everyone is connected to everyone else through, at the most, six other people. Try adapting that to your search for sources of intelligence. For example, ask yourself, who do you know who might know someone in the competitor company? Who do you know who might know someone who might know someone in one its key suppliers? And so on down the line. Furthermore, get your team members to do the same thing.

Want to see Six Degrees at work? On a project looking at mining risk in central Africa, we were hoping to access a multinational mining company's key leadership. Requests for interviews got turned down. Then, we remembered a contact we had whose brother was a leading military figure in a key African country. We called him; he called his brother; his brother made a call, and a day later, we were speaking to the company's president in his private aircraft. We got 20 minutes of key access from three degrees of separation.

...Making Sure You Think of All of Them...

Moving on to Camp David, it was rumored that Jimmy Carter kept Israeli Prime Minister Begin and Egyptian President Sadat closeted with no bathroom privileges until they worked out the historic 1978 peace treaty. Surely not true, but a good story nonetheless. How's this matter? When you and your team are developing your list of sources based on six degrees, don't let anyone out until they have filled a page with names. Full bladders can have a way of forcing efficiency.



And Getting Them to Work for You

Okay, now on to Tom Sawyer. Of the many famous episodes within the book, one that always stands out as indicative of American pluckiness was when his Aunt decided to punish poor Tom by making him paint the picket fence. Tom turned things around completely by persuading his curious friends that the onerous task was actually fun, and soon they were doing the painting while he sat and “supervised.” What’s the lesson here?

Well, once you’ve begun your primary source contacts, don’t overlook the potential that some of them will want to help you “paint the fence, too.” “Just tell me more about what you need to know. I’ve still got some friends in that company and *I* can get *that*. Let *me* make a few calls for you.”

Pretty soon, the fence is getting painted for you. For example, on a time-sensitive engagement for a major telecom, we first dug down into the client’s ranks to leverage the knowledge of former employees of the targeted competitor. Turned out that there were several and that not only did they have some key intelligence, but a few got so excited that they offered to contact friends and colleagues in the competitor for us. That effort alone probably filled half the glass of the project’s objectives.

So, remember, the next time you face the task of finding and leveraging good sources of intelligence, think “six degrees of separation,” Camp David, and Tom Sawyer.

Want to read more about “Six Degrees” in action? Click here for how it was used to leverage sources half a world away in pursuit of key supply chain intelligence for a global consumer products manufacturer.



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