



## In the Dark of the Night, Every Cat's a Leopard



This old Indian saying provides great insight into enterprise selling, because it reminds us how important it is to identify and understand the information that matters most about our key competitors.

**W**e must not only know them and understand them, but we must truly account for them as well. This means having the organizational capability to conduct effective, customized, competitive analyses. Unfortunately, most competitive analysis and research efforts miss the mark.

Why? Because competitive analysis usually comes in one of two popular flavors. First, there's the broad-horizon competitive outlook often undertaken in business planning processes, typically to validate the viability of strategic initiatives. The information gained is certainly of value, but, by design, the analysis investigates competition at a general, somewhat superficial level as the objective is simply to build a business case.

The other common theme involves extensive

research and the collection of mounds of data – basically, anything and everything that can be tracked down about a specific competitor. This yields a deep and wide view but lacks the focus to provide the critical, targeted ammunition needed by sales teams in specific situations. Even if an organization has the time, energy and resources for comprehensive competitive dives, much of what is uncovered will go unused as it lacks the relevance needed to deliver strategic value to sales teams facing off in deals against specific competitors. And if these types of intense analytical investigations are conducted on every potential competitor, there won't be much time left for the sales teams to do anything else.

So, what can you do? How can you turn on the lights to see if the cat that's lurking in the shadows is a leopard or only a Siamese kitten?

The answer: choose a third flavor. Start with a targeted framework, identifying ten critical focus areas connected to a specific competitor you face in a pursuit:

- Facts
- Products/Services
- Performance
- Markets

- People
- Positioning
- Value Proposition/Pricing
- Accounts
- Strengths/Weaknesses
- Plans

In this focused framework, what matters is only the information that is particularly relevant regarding the connections to the specific competitor in a particular deal. Information that is, in a word, impactful. In an enterprise account pursuit, there is a tremendous amount of activity and a great deal of information in the air. You have to be laser-focused in cutting through the irrelevant information to touch and feel that which is truly pertinent. That's not to say that details about a competitor that are irrelevant in one specific deal are irrelevant overall. Information that has little or no impact in one scenario involving a competitor may be extremely valuable in another situation involving the same adversary. And given the frequency with which we see the same competitors across many deals in the enterprise selling world, it's highly likely that all competitive information will be valuable at some point in our battles. But it's the understanding that certain competitive details have no bearing on a specific deal that earns you the right to decide to simply not focus on them, targeting, instead the truly impactful information. For you can't afford to squander precious resources on unnecessary education. Wasted energy and effort can cripple a pursuit, to say nothing of the significant opportunity costs that result. As such, your focus must be on the impactful information, the information that makes a real difference, the information that that helps win deals!

Consider, for example, the "People" section in the competitive framework. Some data-driven analyses dictate deep dives into organization charts and extensive research into a competitor's top executives. If it's true that the competitor's C-levels are really relevant to a specific pursuit and can directly impact success, then this focus is spot on

and absolutely appropriate. But how often is that actually the case? In reality, a specific pursuit may dictate that the real focus be on other competitive players: perhaps the sales rep you frequently face or the vertical expert with deep experience in your prospect's industry. Your ability to understand and strategize against these key players may well be the difference between success or failure. Impactful? For sure.

Only you know who is most impactful. Identify them and learn about them but don't try to learn about everyone. And this same mindset of gathering only the truly relevant information applies to the other sections in the framework in exactly the same way.

The ten detail areas cover a wide landscape. Some, of course, will be more relevant than others, dictating the amount of focus needed. What's critical, though, is that the focus be completely deal-specific. And your evaluation of the ten areas dictates your next steps – specific, date-bound actions with defined responsibility designations. This provides the clarity that's mandatory in team selling initiatives, where assembling people from across the organization can often cause confusion. And taking these actions will greatly increase your chances of success against a specific competitor in a specific deal. Or, they'll earn you the right to make the conscious business decision to exit a pursuit based on what you've learned. Knowing whether to continue or to exit, dictated by meaningful information, is a real gift.

In enterprise selling, you face sophisticated adversaries who come prepared. Learn what's truly important, account for it and make the proper adjustments. And remember - it's not the research you conduct that matters, but the impact arising from the actions you take! ■

**Brian Sullivan is VicePresident of Sandler Enterprise Selling at Sandler Training.**  
Find out more [here](#)