

# Spying and social media

## *Dos and don'ts for guerrilla marketing in the Internet Age*

### Review

#### *Does your company spy?*

Whatever your thoughts may be on the subject, the answer is in the affirmative – and this is no bad thing. In the eighteenth century, corporations would study newspapers to find out intelligence on competitors, and employ “secret shoppers” to uncover what prices and service were available in the next town. In more recent times, firms have gone to the trouble of hiring former employees to get under the skin of the competition, and in return, those in sensitive roles have been forced to sign non-disclosure agreements to keep their secrets safe.

In the Internet Age, however, the gloves have really come off. With the advent of social media any and every public utterance can be discovered, analyzed and used to gain a competitive advantage. So rather than ask if a company is spying, we should ask whether their espionage strategy is effective enough to maintain their competitive position.

### Competitive intelligence

Bringing strategic marketing into the age of Web 2.0 and understanding how it can work optimally is the focus of the book chapter “Social media espionage – A strategic grid” by [Salminen and Degbey \(2015\)](#). In it they define two key concepts and then orchestrate a framework for the best ways for firms to operate in this new reality. While many firms are active in effectively spying on the competition, this can be easily mishandled in terms of effective strategies, lack of control and poor knowledge management practices being in play, which in turn minimizes the effectiveness of these activities.

The first concept underscoring the whole activity is of “competitive intelligence”, which is a key element in what is a more commonly used term “business intelligence”. Whereas business intelligence refers to all external information sources relevant to a firm, competitive intelligence refers to information both on direct competitors and also environmental factors that can determine how competition is affected (e.g. exchange rates with a country where a competitor is based which can affect their pricing).

### Social espionage

The second concept outlined by Salminen and Degbey is that of social espionage, which they define as the “attempt to gain competitive advantage by acquisition and application of competitive intelligence through all publicly and semi-publicly available information in the social media” (p. 265). By “semi-public”, the authors mean information that has to be uncovered through certain actions, for example by joining a LinkedIn group formed by a competitor.

This concept of social espionage has been realized by three key emerging factors in the online environment:

1. the inexorable rise in popularity and ubiquity of social media;
2. increased transparency in corporate activities driven by pressure groups; and
3. the ability to discover hitherto unavailable information between a competitor and its customers.

As with the secret shoppers of old, while social espionage activities may include some minor deception, it is entirely legal and is formed at the crossroads between a firm's uncontrollable information about itself that can be uncovered on the Web and the ability of a firm's resources to identify and use this information effectively. And this is where many firms simply fail to understand not only what they could gain from an effective social espionage strategy, but also what they could lose should any competitor be much more effective in this area.

### Social espionage framework

To help firms with this challenge, the authors used their research to create a framework that helps firms take direct action to gain a competitive advantage in this important area. First, these take place across three different types of activity:

1. Strategic activities include analyzing competitive data or an unfulfilled niche and as a result improve capabilities in detecting patterns, position differently or predict a competitor's next moves.
2. Tactical activities include attempting to intercept messages or participate in industry discussions to understand a competitor's relationship to its customers and generate leads.
3. Operational activities include the analysis of the communication styles of a customer and their complaints, which in turn should enable a firm to build more nuanced customer profiles and enable them to engage in switching behavior.

### To be or not to be

This process can then enable a firm to form a strategic grid which involves two key decisions – to spy or not spy, and to engage or to not engage. This matrix gives four strategic paths for a firm to follow in social espionage:

1. *Full Pot (Spy-Engage)*: This represents maximum activity, but also risk as while intelligence will be gained on the competition, they will also be able to spy on your social media activities as well.
2. *Machiavellian Payoff (Spy-Not Engage)*: This can be regarded as an opportunistic strategy and may only pay off once. Risk is minimized, but there are no upsides in terms of social marketing benefits.

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3. *Sucker's Payoff (Not Spy-Engage)*: The opposite tack is to ignore social espionage but engage in social media activities anyway, thus leaving the firm open to a more determined competitor who can undermine any online presence.
4. *Empty Pot (Not Spy-Not Engage)*: A passive strategy – or simple lack of awareness – will deny a firm significant competitive intelligence and in the Internet Age is pretty hard to justify as part of any marketing position.

### The flipside

It is evident that the key takeaway for any firm is that they must at least have awareness of social espionage to make the strategic decisions of whether to spy or to engage. Given that awareness, they then also have to understand that social espionage is a two-way street, and any and all competitors may be going through the same process as themselves. Once this level of corporate self-awareness is achieved, the final piece in the jigsaw is what responsive action can be effective once the “game” has begun. This can be in terms of defensive action such as increasing or decreasing information flow through social media, or offensive action such as questioning a competitor’s content. Either way, once in the game, the fun really begins and we can all pretend at being corporate James Bonds.

### Comment

The book chapter “Social media espionage – A strategic grid” by [Salminen and Degbey \(2015\)](#) is a highly effective primer for marketers seeking to understand more about social espionage, and most importantly how to put together an effective strategy. The strategic grid of social espionage choices simplifies the key decisions that need to be made, while the lists of activities offer a treasure chest to enable any marketing unit to become more involved in social espionage.

### Reference

Salminen, J. and Degbey, W.J. (2015), “Social media espionage – a strategic grid”, *New Technology-based Firms in the New Millennium*, pp. 261-274.

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