

TOOLS FOR AUTOMATING CI COLLECTION

TONI WILSON, *MarketSmart Research Services*



We are all experiencing the ever-increasing availability of information – much of which we endeavor to analyze and use to produce intelligence – and it can often be overwhelming. In fact, this column’s primary focus is to regularly educate you about the myriad of information sources available to the competitive intelligence (CI) researcher. By continually developing your knowledge of these sources, you can increase the breadth and depth of the competitor details you collect for competitive intelligence.

This time, however, let’s take a break from understanding what published sources are available and answer a question I’m often asked:

How can I collect information from all of these useful sources more efficiently and effectively?

Although content continues to be king, search tools are becoming increasingly critical for the successful CI researcher.

SIDEBAR 1: SEARCH TOOLS FOR CI USE

- “More like this” search query
- New information clipping tools
- RSS web feed format
- Web content change monitoring

FEATURES AND FUNCTIONALITY

Some of these search tools are accessible through the features and functionality offered by the commercial database providers, web search engines, and others. Here are some of them:

The *more like this* feature was originally (and, at one point, exclusively) offered by LexisNexis. It automatically collects relevant information that could be as useful as the initial set of results, without your having to identify the additional sources or develop the necessary search criteria.

Alert features and alerting tools allow you to automatically stay current regarding particular topics or the content within specific sources. The database providers have been offering the ability to “clip” relevant new information and have it delivered to you online or via e-mail for some time. Now the web search engines – Google and Yahoo! in particular – are offering such features as well.

Likely the most well-known alerting tool, **RSS** (known most commonly as “Really Simple Syndication”) is a web feed format used to publish regularly updated content such as news headlines or blog entries from particular websites and deliver the information to interested subscribers. Using RSS feeds is somewhat more complicated than the traditional alerting tools because they require a special RSS “reader,” but using the feeds can be very effective in automating the CI collection process.

Additional specialized search tools include those that *monitor changes in specific web site content* (such as particular pages of a competitor’s

web site, for example) and alert users automatically of the respective changes. See Sidebars 1 and 2 for a list of such tools.

AUTOMATED COLLECTION

While most available databases and web sites offer useful and productive content, some services require you to rely on your own expertise in this regard and instead focus on providing you with tools to automate the CI collection process. Generally described in broad terms as “knowledge management” tools, the most impressive of these services not only help you manage knowledge – in the form of the competitor information you collect – but also help you collect it more effectively and efficiently in the first place.

SIDEBAR 2: WEB SITE MONITORING TOOLS

- **WebSite-Watcher** (www.aignes.com) – software-based, small cost
- **WatchThatPage** (www.watchthatpage.com) – web-based, free
- **TrackEngine** (www.trackengine.com) – web-based, free for individuals, small cost for businesses
- **InfoMinder** (www.infominder.com) – web-based, small cost

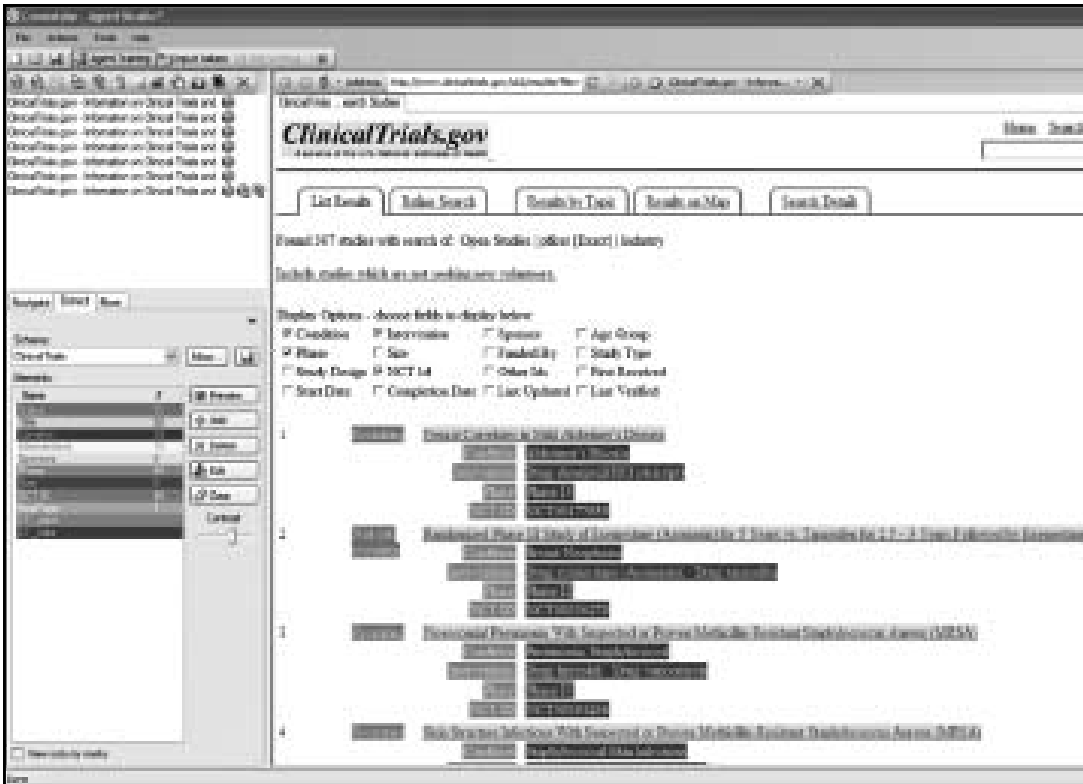


Figure 1: Information and format from Connotate's agents from the Clinical Trials web site

One example is *Connotate's Agent Community GEN2* (www.connotate.com), which recently came to my attention as a solution for CI professionals, offering simple and productive methods and technologies for automated CI collection. Connotate allows you to set up machine-intelligent agents built into its software that collect customized information about your competitors, their respective products and services, relationships, finances, etc. – depending upon your specific needs, on-demand, and as quickly as each research situation requires. A great deal of sophistication is built into Connotate's software, which requires no programming beyond a quick point-and-click setup process.

Connotate's software agents – your own personal staff of automated researchers, if you will – collect information and intelligence from various internal and external sources in a wide assortment of formats. In

addition to collecting information on-demand, the agents can also monitor specific sources, including fee-based and free databases and web sites. They detect changes and capture and report the relevant information automatically.

See Figure 1 for a sample of information gathered by Connotate's agents from the Clinical Trials web site (www.clinicaltrials.gov) and the format in which it can be delivered.

SOURCES AND TOOLS

The key to gathering the greatest possible amount of intelligence about your competitors and accommodate sustainable competitive advantage is being aware of the relevant information sources. However, using the most efficient and productive collection processes most directly leads to the long-term success of your CI efforts.

Therefore, you must not only be aware of the useful sources of

competitor information, but also take advantage of the CI collection tools available as they offer such benefits as time and cost savings. For example, Connotate claims to provide 10 to 100 times productivity gains and cost savings.

Who among us wouldn't want to realize such efficiencies, so we can focus our resources on higher-level CI activities?

Toni Wilson is founder and principal consultant at MarketSmart Research Services. She was formerly an intelligence practitioner at LexisNexis for 15 years, where she developed unparalleled expertise regarding intelligence sources, tools, techniques and CI collection processes. She can be reached at twilson@marketsmartresearch.com.