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LEADERSHIP

## Your Social Media Superstar is Giving Away the Company Farm

I've been mulling over this description of a U.S. businessman's experiences in China with corporate espionage ever since it [ran](#) in the NYTimes.

“ There's no question that American companies today are under surveillance: I've learned that the F.B.I. has obtained a video taken inside a hotel in China that shows Chinese agents rifling through an American businessman's room, according to two sources familiar with the tape, which the F.B.I. has been playing as a warning for corporate security experts.



LinkedInAnswers (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Why am I still thinking about this, past Superstorm Sandy, the presidential election and the (depending on your favorite media outlet) celebratory or soul-searching post-analysis? Couple of reasons: incidents like the one described happens, I believe, more often than people realize and in many different forms. I remember some ten years ago interviewing a businessman who travelled extensively to Asia and he would tell of roughhouse tactics used by companies with whom he was trying to do business—in short, they were not competitors, they were just looking for the best advantage. (Hi Paul, wherever you are).

But back to the businessman whose hotel room was tossed: It has also stuck in my head because while it is the most egregious example of corporate espionage it only hints at what happens at the low-level.

Corporate espionage is not just the stuff of high-profile, high-intrigue cross border spying. It can also be as simple and mundane as monitoring your competition to see if the top sales staff are attending a new trade show or if the top executives are all putting their houses on the market. (The former being a sign that a new product line may launch, the latter, that an acquisition is in the works.) Such clues have always been there for the taking, of course—but social media makes them so much easier to track.

At the same time, people—meaning businesspeople—are increasingly posting their thoughts and activities and so on online for the express purpose of developing their own following, or brand. Indeed, many companies actively encourage employees to do so.

### **Tipping Your Hand**

After all, if you are, for example, the founder of a mobile app start up and one of your developers likes to post about recent developments in the trade, why not hitch the firm's wagon to his star when his post about how to get an app quickly approved by [Apple](#) goes viral? Why not indeed—everyone wins, including any competitors you might want to beat to market.

“Social media has definitely become a go-to source of information regarding competitors,” says Ryan Holmes, CEO of HootSuite. “Lots of companies follow their competitors' social media feeds and those of their employees.”

Holmes points to a recent survey by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India, which found over 35% of companies operating in various sectors across India are engaged in corporate espionage to gain advantage over their competitors and are even spying on their employees via social networking websites.

“Many employees do not realize the seemingly innocent bits of information they share about a project they're working on, a cutback within the office, or even someone they're meeting for lunch, could serve as valuable intel for a competitor,” Holmes says.

### **Panning for Gold**

To be sure, shifting through the social media morass is like panning for gold, but every now and then you hit on a tidbit that makes it worthwhile, says [Sam Richter](#), author of *Take the Cold Out of Cold Calling*. Richter came across a

[Facebook](#) post a few years ago, as one example, by a [Best Buy](#) employee who let loose the information that the retailer was planning layoffs.

But the information available can be a lot more mundane and still equally as telling, Richter says. “A key employee is going to a trade show outside of the company’s normal business line, and says so on her Facebook page. As a competitor you have to wonder why she is going there. Is it to pave the way for a new product line?”

Or here’s another possibility, Richter says. You spot a Tweet from a competitor’s employee along the lines of “my idiot boss has finally been fired!” The ‘idiot boss’ is the head of the sales operation and now you know that there is likely to be a lot of disgruntled customers, either because the manager truly was an idiot or the sales operation becomes dysfunctional after he leaves.

“That is an opportunity for me to be calling on my competitor’s accounts. That tells me there is turmoil and now is the time to swoop in,” Richter says.

On a similar vein, following company hires on LinkedIn is often a great indicator of a company’s expansion and the direction they are headed, says Hootsuite’s Holmes. “FourSquare could be used to find out where that expansion might take place.”

“The information is out there, you just need to know how and where to look.”