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Branding and marketing GI services in Shell and beyond: Towards a common strategy?

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Abstract

In Shell, GI professionals provide a wide range of services to all levels of responsibility, from mapping out remote areas in support of local exploration teams to delivering geospatial information portals to senior decision makers. They are part of the Geomatics group which comprises some 200 staff, plus many contractors, based in many operating companies and business ventures around the world. These all have their own requirements on how GI is managed and reported for the benefit of local customers, stakeholders and governments.

Branding and marketing GI services with a common and recognisable standard can add value in multiple ways. Internally, it facilitates the penetration of GI-related products and processes in Shell's many businesses – helping to identify new commercial opportunities, protect company assets, or reduce exposures to geo-reference integrity risks (which refers to controlling co-ordinate information throughout the business lifecycle such that, for example, a rig ends up drilling in the correct location). Externally, supporting initiatives to brand Geomatics as a profession will attract more young people to this field and feed the increasing demand for GI professionals in the commercial and public sector.

This paper shares some of the experiences gained in trying to strengthen the GI brand in Shell, discussing various technical and strategic angles from standardising the software portfolio to the effect of branding GI as a geoscience or IT related service. It also raises wider issues in the hope of stimulating the discussion about how the public and commercial sector could orchestrate common branding initiatives at the national and international level.

As the live conference presentation is intended to stimulate open dialogue and debate, this paper merely aims to help set the scene and provide a summary of topics to be discussed during the presentation. It is therefore deliberately open ended.

Prologue

"I'm very sorry," said a friendly voice with a French accent at the other end of the line, "but 'geomatics consultant' is not a recognised profession. We will have to fill in something else for you."

The lady from the British Consulate in Amsterdam – apparently a French diplomat – had just told me that my profession did not exist. I would have to call myself engineer or scientist, otherwise my newborn daughter could not be issued with a British birth certificate. Not that she really needed one; she had dual citizenship anyway. But somehow I had managed to get the same certificate for my newborn son two years earlier. Had I called myself something else at that time? IT consultant? Geographer? Surveyor? Geodesist? I couldn't quite remember – that was at least 4000 nappies prior to this episode. Now the whole conversation was threatening to turn quite surreal when this lady – effectively representing the Queen – switched to her native French as she had spotted on the form that I was from Luxembourg. To cut a somewhat confused Gallic exchange short, we simply agreed to call my current occupation 'ingénieur-géomètre'. Later I realised I had forgotten to ask her how she would translate this back into English for the application form, but it probably ended up as 'engineer.'

'Employee' would have been just as accurate, but then again I have got used to this kind of trivialisation. None of my friends and family seem to have this problem whether they are bicycle shop owners, psychologists, economists, geophysicists, lawyers, full time parents, doctors, IT specialists, airline pilots, artists, pipeline engineers, radio producers, career advisors or yoga teachers. These are all well understood professions and need no further explanation. Even 'unemployed' is a recognised profession; in some countries it pays more than getting out of bed in the morning.

If you're a GI professional, apparently nobody knows what you do, even though this profession has evolved over thousands of years. Some people confuse it with IT, surveying, geography, cartography or geophysics. Others don't even know what to confuse it with. I recall adding to the confusion in a Newcastle bar a few years ago, calling myself an earthquake scientist just because I happened to be doing some GI work in that area back then, analysing and visualising GPS data. Naturally that did not impress either but I was just curious to see the reaction. Somehow it is no wonder I ended up marrying a fellow GI professional, anybody else would probably have been too suspicious as they couldn't quite figure out what I was up to during the day.

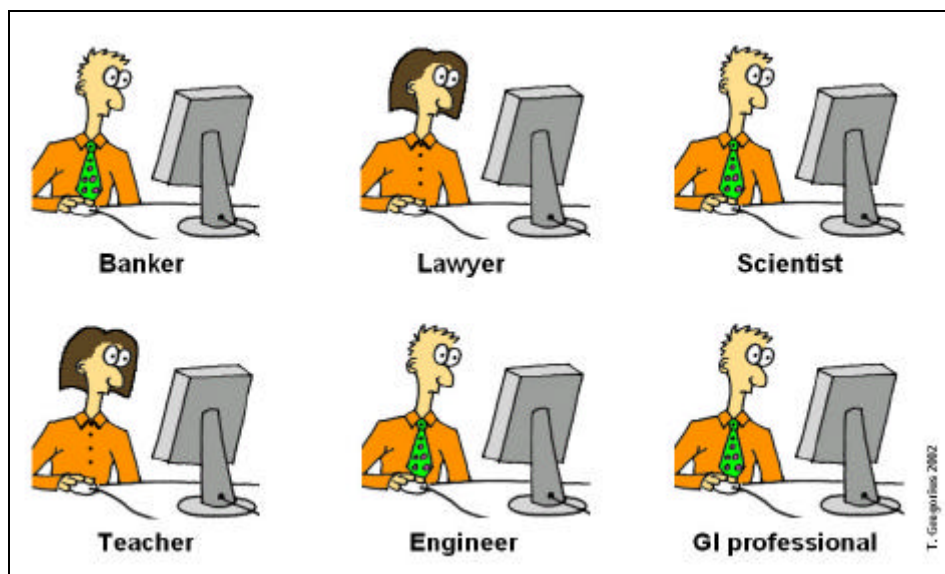


Figure 1. The need to be able to differentiate ourselves with domain knowledge as GI professionals... Why do some people confuse us with IT people – because we know how to use a computer?

In truth most GI professionals are a combination of many things, only that there is not one universally recognised word for it. Some call it geomatics, others geo-ICT, GI, geography or something else, usually prefixed with 'geo'. In fact no profession holds the exclusive rights to geographic information as it is so vastly ubiquitous. Nobody can claim that GI belongs to profession X like bread is baked by bakers or aeroplanes are piloted by pilots. In order to explain GI to people on the street, it is very tempting to get straight down to technology and indeed this is what many of us seem to do. All that state of the art wizardry that we so expertly create or manage, surely that should suitably impress people and make them understand the value of GI?

If, however, we look at what comes out at the end of the GI value chain, from the customer's point of view, it is usually a map. It may be a simple wall chart to hang up in the office, or a web-enabled GIS to drill down the corporate memory tree. It could even be a cool 3D virtual reality marvel. But analog or digital, 2D or multi-D, at the end of the day they are all maps – abstractions of the world. And their power lies in their simplicity. If the final map is too complex to be understood or too uncertain to be reliable, then the value chain has failed.

One day soon, my children will be old enough to wonder why Pappi has to wear shoes in the office but not at home, so they might want to know what Pappi actually does at work whilst they chase butterflies and tip sand down each others necks. I have decided I will not talk about technology. I will certainly not mention 'hi-tech' computers, they don't even impress grandma anymore. I will tell them, Pappi makes maps. Maps for geology explorers in Brazil, Norway or the Philippines; maps for environmental planners in Brunei, Holland or the US; maps for pipeline engineers in Oman, Nigeria or China; maps for project managers in Gabon, Australia or Russia; maps for windmill builders in California, Scotland or Holland; maps for important people in suits sitting in leather chairs.

These people value maps because it helps them understand the world around them and make better decisions in their business units. These people also understand the commercial concept that you get what you pay for; quality mapping does not come for free.

Many people on the street, however, still seem to think that maps grow on trees. Why don't they know what skill is required to make those maps? Why don't they know how much effort goes into them? Why don't they know that the world as it is today couldn't exist without maps? Why don't they know that if we get it wrong, pipelines get laid off track, boats capsize, offshore platforms blow up, flora and fauna are endangered, or people get killed? Why don't they know that map making is a growing industry with guaranteed job prospects?

Because we've never really told them, that's why.

Branding and marketing GI services in Shell

In Shell, almost every new business venture starts out with a map, especially in the Exploration and Production (EP) group, which is responsible for the discovery of new oil and gas reserves and bringing them on stream. Shell's new petrol stations and wind farms are also planned with mapping. Major investment decisions in all of these businesses are highly dependent on geographic factors. Branding GI services internally in Shell is very important as our critical mass is small – some 200 GI professionals versus 30,000 employees in EP alone. Since we found that about 80% of all our corporate information has a geographic element to it, almost every employee is a potential customer of our services. In order for us to market ourselves, that is, to reach those customers where we can add most value to the business, we need a strong visual identity – a brand. Ours is called Geomatics, as it includes the data acquisition side as well (hydrography, land survey, geodesy and remote sensing).

With brand comes reputation. Shell generally manages both of these as one as they are closely interlinked. The same holds true for GI: we find that people have learned to value 'those Geomatics guys' and have spread the word in the business. This has in part been made easier by the fact that they have a universal name for us – virtually every Shell EP venture now knows and uses the term Geomatics.

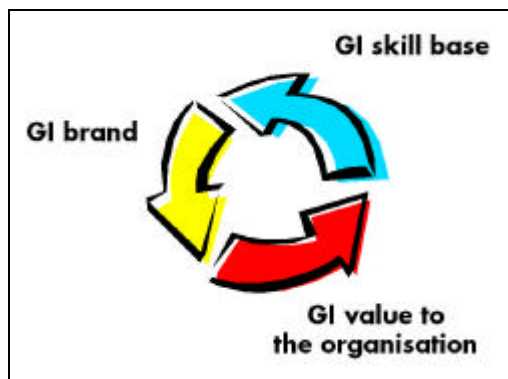


Figure 2. The mutually positive effects of GI brand, skill base and value.

This may seem trivial, but in a global business comprising many companies with various degrees of autonomy this has not been straightforward to achieve. We found that it pays for GI professionals to work globally as one virtual team across organisational boundaries, because this way we can manage our skill base most effectively. We can share best practice, accelerate learning, remove expensive duplication, balance recruiting needs, and standardise GI-related business processes and competency development. The latter enables staff to be put on any project around the world at short notice, allocating valuable resources to be put where they are needed most. Thanks to recent advances in IT network and communications technology they might not even have to travel there. It enables us to bring the work to the people rather than the other way round.

Ultimately, managing GI staff under one brand name also helps to minimise business risks. As far as we are concerned, those are mostly related to what we term 'geo-reference integrity'. In EP Geomatics, we see this as our core purpose: assets must appear in the right place, both on the map and in the real world, at all times in the project lifecycle. In the conference presentation, this is highlighted by the author's so-called 'geomatics striptease' which tries to answer the question of what skill it is that is truly unique to GI professionals. It also shares some examples from the petroleum industry where failures in geo-reference integrity have led to multi-million dollar losses or, even much worse, injury and loss of life. Oil and gas wells have been drilled in the wrong place finding nothing but water, economic development proposals made uneconomic or vice-versa, pipelines planned and wrongly budgeted for on map projections greatly distorting length, rigs blown up or vessels capsized. To put things into perspective, one simple blunder in geo-reference integrity in a global business can write off the equivalent of a national mapping agency's budget many times over. In this sense we see GI professionals very much as an insurance policy against damage to people, corporate assets and reputation. But GI of course is still much more than that. Rather than just protect against damage, it also facilitates the identification and realisation of commercial opportunities, the value of which is very difficult to quantify but almost certainly higher still.

To strengthen our brand further, we have implemented or are still in the process of implementing

- a standard GI software portfolio (global procurement through single vendors)
- a standard Shell cartographic symbology set for all mapping worldwide
- standardised business processes, maintained in the Corporate Management System, for the creation, storage and dissemination of GI and value-added services
- standard geomatics slide packs for central training and external representation
- a global Spatial Data Infrastructure (SDI) – a geospatial one stop portal modelled after emerging national SDIs with focus on the company's worldwide operations and environments

In branding geomatics we have also decided to make the switch from geoscience to information management (IM), effectively becoming part of the wider IT organisation. Historically we have always been co-located with the geoscientists, as oil and gas explorers have been our biggest single customer group. This proximity has been very effective in serving this particular 'market segment' and helped us build up our profile, not least because the geoscientists are part of core oil and gas business and enjoy a solid reputation for technical excellence (coupled with relatively generous budgets to pay for services like GI). At the same time it prevented us from reaching customers in other areas of the business lifecycle, as we were seen to be geoscientists only looking for new opportunities in the ground, not on the surface.

With the IM label, we are pursuing a stronger influence on information strategy development (e.g. to include GIS mapping in all online portals as a standard), as well as closer proximity to all expertise domains. The grand prize should be a more diverse and targeted customer base for the benefit of the company. Being part of the wider IT organisation we will also be closer to hardware and software support centres on which we are highly dependent to deliver our own services.

Most interestingly, it is worth noting that the IT organisation was only too happy to welcome us aboard. They had identified a shortage of IM skills and were hoping that Geomatics could help fill this gap. Our reputation (brand?) had thrown the door open before even knocking on it – perhaps a lesson for GI professionals in any industry. We were not only valued for our skills in managing corporate information, which we had admittedly learned somewhat ad-hoc through building Enterprise GIS systems and workflows, but also for the way we developed people and looked after our skill base.

The only peculiar consequence of this move from geoscience to IM is that our data acquisition people now report to the wider IT organisation: hydrographers, land surveyors, geodesists and remote sensors. We felt we needed them onboard to keep the geomatics concept alive and remain in control of the entire GI value chain. Operations people in the field also help GI staff back in the office with constant reality checks.

Food for thought: Towards a common strategy in society at large

During the live conference presentation, the author would like to stimulate debate and discussion on the question how the public and commercial sector could orchestrate common GI branding initiatives at the national and international level.

We all need the continued influx of GI talent into our organisations, and we all need to maximise the value of GI within them. If we work together on the societal GI 'skill base', from primary school children to university graduates and experienced professionals, we could achieve significant benefits for our organisations. If we work together on branding and advertising we will have more critical mass and have greater impact. Some excellent national elements are already in place, especially in the UK (for example Geomatics.org.uk [1] or the distribution of free maps to all 11-year olds by the Ordnance Survey [2]). The next challenge is to go international as more and more businesses are globalising.



Figure 3. Two examples of geomatics advertising devised by the author for internal purposes last year. After the Shuttle Columbia disaster the example on the right is no longer appropriate but at the time it was a good way to draw attention and interest.

Could we devise standards for industry-wide GI certifications similar to those in Health, Safety and Environment? Could the distribution of free maps to school children be co-sponsored by industry? Could people one day see adverts in bus shelters, newspapers and TV clips about getting young people into GI and mapping jobs? Could spatial data infrastructures be used as vehicles or justification for such advertising? The list goes on...

Conclusion

Shoppers value clearly labelled goods in a supermarket. Similarly, the GI profession needs to provide clearer labelling and stronger branding to reach the right customers and deliver maximum value. In the past this has always been hampered by a limited critical mass and fragmented approach to marketing the GI profession, nationally and internationally. In Shell we have recognised this and taken steps to achieve a stronger GI brand through Geomatics, with some success. We realised that there can be too much focus on technology and have put more effort into developing GI people and anchoring GI business processes in the corporate management system. In society at large, some excellent individual initiatives are beginning to take shape which, if coordinated nationally and globally, could provide even more value to the private and public sector. At the end of the day, it is all about people – developing GI professionals to serve GI customers. How can we all work together towards this common goal?

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group of Companies (generally referred to as 'Shell').

References & further reading

[1] Geomatics.org.uk is promoting the UK surveying industry at www.geomatics.org.uk

[2] "Pointing out the Joy of Map Work", by Vanessa Lawrence of Ordnance Survey, page 81, GIM International Magazine, September 2002.

The cartoon and figures are by the author and can be freely copied.

Biography

Thierry Gregorius created his first map at the age of seven, to sketch out favourite roaming grounds in his native Luxembourg. Via Germany and Australia he later gained a PhD –and marriage certificate –from the Geomatics group at Newcastle, UK. Originally a geodesist, Thierry joined Shell five years ago and has recently become its global GI coordinator.

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