

HOW TO WRITE A CASE STUDY

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Use this as a “help” for your final assignment, The Case Study Assignment. Students will negotiate with the Instructor during the first week of the course to determine what will be the focus of their Case Study. The Case Study assignment will not be a “team” project. Each student will accomplish their own Case Study for this class. This is a guideline and not to be used as a template.

Successful Case Analysis

A case is a reportorial study of an organization under stress. It typically sets forth events over a limited period of time as viewed from the position of a person outside the organization, the case writer. Good cases are focused upon a major threat or opportunity that faces management and contain enough data about the circumstances to permit the reader to understand and evaluate the situation. Case analysis calls for the reader to evaluate these data rigorously and reach an explicit conclusion concerning the actions that ought to be taken and the reasons for these actions. This analysis rests upon careful review of the facts and opinions presented within and seldom require additional research outside the case.

A case analysis comprises four major components:

- (1) a specification of the problem being faced
- (2) the delineation of the best alternatives available to solve this problem
- (3) an identification (and discussion) of each of the issues which bear upon the choice of alternative
- (4) a conclusion which deduces the best alternative from facts and discussion in the issues. A detail discussion on these four components is set forth below.

While students are expected to organize their case presentations according to these four components, it should be understood that such presentation are not intended to mirror those used by management or consultants. “Real World” reports of recommendations may take many forms depending upon the needs of the organization and different management styles. Such reports may also contain historical information to some degree, an inclusion obviously unnecessary in academic studies insofar as the case itself performs this function.

The Problem

The problem may be regarded as some barrier facing an organization that blocks, or threatens to block, the achievement of important goals. The key words here are goals and barrier. “Goals” refers to a set of objectives (perhaps only implicitly present in the case) that the management wishes to accomplish. Objectives may include market share, consumer attitude shifts, and extensions of distribution channel position, sales growth, image, or product positioning.

The barrier refers to a set of conditions that threaten or hinder management from achieving these objectives. It may derive from the competitor action, changes in the economic, political, or social environment, or difficulties arising from the absence of adequate coordination among members of the company and/ or its channel of distribution.

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The problem definition also serves to set the guidelines for the total report. Subsequent material that does not contribute to the solution of the problem is irrelevant and creates confusion. Alternatives that do not address the problem, issues that are unnecessary for the argument and conclusions that do not meet the treat or opportunity cause the report to fail its purpose.

In general, the student should select the most important problem(s) facing the company that can be found in the case study and where the data are sufficient to permit analysis. Problems which surface in the case and call for critical facts and considerations not available therein should be avoided and focus given to task that can be resolved with the information at hand.

In sum, the problem is a brief statement that identifies important company goals and the conditions that make the choice of means to attain these goals less than obvious.

The Alternatives

The alternatives consist of a set of competing strategies to resolve the problem. They should possess the following components:

- 1) A statement a strategic goals and aims.
- 2) A statement of total resources to be applied.
- 3) A statement of product and/or company market position.
- 4) A statement of the distribution of these resources into various elements of the marketing mix.

Your textbook has a much longer description of marketing strategy and you may choose to add or delete some of the above depending upon the circumstance. What is important, however, is that an alternative must be broader than such basic statement as 'to raise price' or 'expand the sales force' or 'reduce the advertising budget'. It is, instead, a set of proposed activities linked under the rubric of a strategic mission. This will generally include market targets and various elements of the marketing mix. Even in the most limiting of circumstances, however, the alternative should not be framed as a single element of the marketing mix, e.g. to reduce price or increase advertising. Cases sometimes appear to be written in such a way as to encourage this type of choice, but this should be resisted by the student.

Strategies may be usefully given titles that provide a quick orientation or gestalt to the character of the plan. Such titles could reflect major expansion of market share, retrenchment, or repositioning.

When explaining an alternative, this should be limited to a brief statement of the strategy and its major component elements. Arguments pro or con concerning the plan should not be included or summarized at this point. Such arguments at this point serve only to distract from the clarity and parsimony of the description and usually prove redundant as the same points are raised in other parts of the case reports.

In selecting alternatives students should seldom choose more than four for analysis and two or three is often preferable. Given limitations in report length, it is impossible to treat properly a large number of alternatives. Alternatives of lesser interest should, therefore, be abandoned. Similarly, the marketing element set forth to characterize the alternative should deal only with those to be debated in the analysis to follow. These elements should focus upon the key factors that will determine the effectiveness of the alternative. Obviously this will limit much of the detail that might be necessary before such a plan could be put into place. However, the intent in case analysis is to stress analytical content and rigor at the expense of less important detail.

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A final point here is that since the purpose of the case is to develop decision-making skills, it is seldom productive for the students to specify an alternative that calls for "more research on the problem". Such a response is all too often the basis for an "easy way out where the student has not adequately come to the grips with the facts of the case and, therefore, it should rarely be attempted. The reason for this is that, in reality, most decisions are taken under incomplete information. Always asking for more information would delay a decision indefinitely. This situation is reflected by the fact that the cases usually do not include all the information you would ideally like to have.

The Issues

The issue section is the place in the analysis where the various causal forces that affect the generation of alternatives (see previous section) and the choice of the best alternative are set forth and evaluated. Issues may be usefully conceived as explicit questions.

Issues questions may be composed, for example, from the following subject areas.

- 1) Basic consumer wants with respect to the product class and a belief concerning the ability of competitive products to serve these wants.
- 2) Total market potential / sales and the forces determining these.
- 3) The strength and direction of competitors and the effectiveness of their strategies.
- 4) Key areas of differential advantage of the company.
- 5) Potential responses by consumers to different actions by the company.
- 6) Potential responses by competitors to company actions.
- 7) Potential conflicts among members of the company or members of its distribution channel.

Possible key issues for the cosmetics case example might be the following questions:
What elements of consumer satisfaction have been the least well resolved by current products in the product class?

To what extent can advertising affect the purchasing behavior of consumers for this product?

What action would competitors take to the introduction of a new, medium priced product line?

How capable and motivated are members of the sales force in selling the new product?

Note that the issues are framed as questions. All too often, when one is faced with choices that are hard to resolve, one tends simply to describe information in the case. For example, someone might describe an issue as 'Consumer Behavior' and provide a lengthy discussion on various aspects. This temptation is to be resisted. Repetition or simple restatements of case facts seldom adds to the rationale for the choice and more often confuses the logic of the line of thought.

The use of questions to specify the concept of an issue is intended to force the writer into an analysis mold. Questions clearly raised must be questions that are clearly answered. The question technique forces the analysts to think carefully why the material is being presented. After completion of the analysis of an issue, it is often useful to step back and ask whether the question posed has been truly answered. If not, then either the question is inappropriate or the analysis is incomplete. One should also ask the value of the answer in aiding choice among the alternatives. If the question is not relevant to that choice, then the issue should not be included.

It is usually sufficient to answer the basic question in each issue without referring to specific alternatives. The explicit tie of the issue analysis to the alternatives is generally most effectively delayed until the conclusion.

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The issue section includes a careful and detailed analysis of four to six questions. In the space or time available for case analysis, the student will seldom be able to evaluate all the possible issues in the case. Therefore, only those most central to the choice should be set forth and argued. The best issues are those whose analysis shows to have major impact upon the feasibility of two or more of the alternatives generated by the students. Care in ordering issues will frequently be helpful as the logic derived from early questions aids in the analysis of those that follow.

As previously mentioned, in some instances data on some key areas in the case may be absent. The student may deal with this in a number of ways. In some instances, generalization derived from textbook material may be applied to provide the necessary evaluation. Often bits and pieces of the case can be sewn together with these generalizations to develop a useful logic.

Alternatively, the student may set forth different possible states of nature and evaluate their probable consequences. Decision theory may be applied to facilitate the choice between alternatives. In other words, the student should not allow the absence of precision in data to avoid coming to grips with the problem.

The issue section is never the place to make recommendations as to actions the company should take. This is reserved for the conclusion. Such recommendations are inappropriate because all parts of the case remain to be integrated. Any recommendation, therefore, that are placed in conjunction with issue evaluations either are too piecemeal to reflect an appropriate solution to the problem or reflect an absence of care by the student in developing the analysis.

The Conclusion

The conclusion synthesizes the answer to the issues, building one upon another to show how one alternative is superior to all others. This could be done wholly through deductive logic. Where financial data are adequate, issues analysis could be used to build different pro-forma profit and loss statements for each alternative. In this approach, however, one must take care to ensure that all the assumptions as to sales and consumer response necessary in such Profit and Loss (P & L) statement have been explicitly developed in the issues.

In addition, or possibly in place of the P & L, the specific implications of each issue with respect to each alternative may be set forth in matrix form. The columns would contain the alternative and the rows would reflect the issues. Scores would be entered into the various cells to indicate the expected effectiveness of each issue upon one or more of the alternatives. Some weighting method would then be applied to sum the scores and determine the total rating of the various alternatives.

The advantage of this approach is that it forces the analysis to consider the contribution of each issue to the choice among the alternatives. In this way, the analyst can determine those issues whose contribution is unclear and can be weeded out and where others need to be strengthened. A number of computer programs are now available to implement this form of problem solution; however, it should be obvious that the answers are only as good as the scoring and weighting system. If these are crude or if the issues are simply too complex to be amenable to this type of design, then the final scores may be misleading. In such instance, the use of qualitative logic may be superior.

In essence, the student may have to cycle through the four components of the strategic analysis several times before finding a set that is consistent in this manner. The first time through almost always produces an outline with inconsistent parts that requires editing and modification.

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Preparation of the Written Report

Each written report must be typed or printed (double spaced), on good quality white paper with a sharp ribbon. Matrix printers may be used, but correspondences quality print is desirable. The title page should contain the case name, the authors' name, and case title. Please note that the case report should be no longer than six pages, excluding title page and appendices.

Acceptable appendices are charts and numerical computations, not extensions of the text.

Some Tips On Report Preparation

Initial analysis of case materials need not follow the order set forth above. In order to get ideas flowing, the student may approach the case from any number of directions. However, the framework for all four of the components ought to be composed in the written form or arranged for oral presentation. From the instructor's perspective, it is advantageous that the four components be arranged in the report in the same order as set forth above.

Effective integration in the report calls for the following. The alternatives should all clearly relate to the identified problem, the issues should be critical to be the alternatives chosen. The conclusions should make clear and unambiguous selection among the specified options. If alternatives are set forth, but not evaluated, the report is incomplete. If issues are developed which do not aid the student in choice of alternative, then the report carries unnecessary content that the reader should be asked to examine.

In selecting the problem, an overly broad view of the case will cause the student to deal with alternatives and issues for which there are no data available to aid making the necessary judgments. While the problem selected in this way may be more interesting or critical, the analysis will be so subjective as to have little analytical integrity. The precise scope of the problem to be chosen is an important element of the entire analytical task. On the other hand, the choice of a very narrow problem may result in a failure to deal with critical problems that are analyzable from case data. The choice of problem focus is a skill that must balance the pitfalls that result from either over generalization from insufficient data or narrow focus. At the same time, one should keep in mind that upon occasions a case writer might intentionally (or inadvertently) include information of little relevance to the real problem at hand.

Generally speaking, students should endeavor to select a set of alternatives so as to span the broad range of approaches in the case. Each alternative should be a distinctive strategy and not built of components of another. The use of alternatives that are very similar to each other, although arguably such might consist of the "best" set, limits the student's ability to exercise the full analytical leverage of the data included within the case.

Students unfamiliar with the product may find it useful to look up facts in the library or visit places where the products are displayed or sold. However, such information should not be introduced as evidence into analysis. The case report is not intended as an exercise in data gathering. The case document is the common source from which all students must develop their analysis.

Within the issue section, special care should be given to an evaluation of consumer purchasing habits and needs. It is a rare case that can be answered satisfactory without consideration given to the consumer and consumer perspective of the relative important importance of difference of different product attributes, e.g. quality, style, price, functionality, etc.

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In some cases members of the firm or others may set forth their belief as to the problem. The student may or may not wish to adopt these opinions and free to formulate a different view of the circumstances that call for action.

Evaluation

Evaluation is based upon the quality of the logic, the effective use of fact and opinion from case to defend argument, and the appropriateness of the problem attacked. Skill and organization of materials in each of the four components of case analysis, the integration of these components, and effective use of the space available are also given weight in the instructor's evaluation. Quantitative assessment of cost, sales and profits for each alternative may not always be possible. However, in instances where such estimates can be constructed, break even analysis may be employed, demand forecast, present value assessed, then they will be expected. If risks are present, then decision theory may be applied to ascertain expected results from the different alternatives.

The report must represent the student's own work. This is not to say that discussion with other students (or groups) is forbidden. Indeed, it is often of considerable value. However, such discussions should not be employed to develop list of specific alternatives, issues, or recommendations. Paraphrasing among student reports may be cause for all similar papers to be given failing grades.