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A Primer on Developing Cases

The prospect of writing a case study for use in a classroom may seem overwhelming at first, but having a road map and following each turn along the way may make the voyage easier and perhaps even enjoyable. Every case, every writer, and every topic deserves a slightly different approach. This primer is offered as a starting point.

A case is not a monolithic creation that stands on its own. It only comes to life within the context of a classroom discussion, much as a painting comes to life only when viewed or a novel when read. So throughout the entire development process, always to bear in mind the audience, the classroom discussion, and ultimately the learning experience.

This primer addresses the development of cases which depict actual managerial situations and which are based on field research. While cases can be written purely from published sources, it is difficult to capture the subtle substance of a managerial situation which allows students to place themselves in the position of the decision maker. The best cases are derived from a combination of thorough research of published information and thoughtful interviews.

The Case Development Process

Although every case is different, this primer suggests a fairly standard process that can be used for researching and writing cases, and ultimately for writing teaching notes. Do not treat it as gospel, however, since case writing is always an adventure with unexpected twists and turns. Often, the essence of a case emerges from the unexpected.

How long it takes to write a case? The answer depends on the complexity of the subject, the depth of research, the availability of data, the cooperativeness and response time of the target company, previous knowledge of the company or industry, and the severity of writer's block which is encountered along the way. On average, however, it should take about a day per page following the first interview, so that a typical ten-page case might take about ten days of actual work. The total elapsed time, however, may be up to three times that amount.

The Genesis of a Case

The target of a case study usually comes from the convergence of a pedagogical need and a manager who is likely to be confronting or has confronted a situation similar to that required

David Wylie prepared this note as an aid in the development of case materials.

for class discussion. It is also imperative that a target company be totally "sold" on having a case written. Developing a good case, therefore, is a multi-stage selling process.

Background Work

It is important to have a good general knowledge of the company before going in for the first interview. Usually time with the senior manager is a scarce resource, so don't waste this opportunity getting information that is readily available from annual reports or other SEC filings, news articles, trade journals, analysts' reports, or other case studies. Good preparation can lay the groundwork for a much deeper discussion of the most relevant issues.

How much preparatory research should you do? Certainly as much as you would need as a prudent investor, and probably more. Find the product, talk to customers, visit stores or find out a little about the competitive climate. Explore the web site. Look through trade journals and see what the editorials are about and what the advertisers are listing as benefits to their products. Basically do as much as you must to avoid asking stupid questions (you'll know what those are just after you have asked them and you are sagging in your seat). While doing the research, put yourself in the position of the decision-maker. What questions would you be asking if you were suddenly thrust into his or her shoes? Jot down those questions. They may be useful reference points during an interview.

The Initial Meeting

The initial meeting with the company manager is critical. It should produce a mutual understanding of the case subject and the development process and a promise by the manager to open all relevant people and subjects for interviews.

Sometimes, managers have little idea of what a case is or how it will be used. Often it is useful to introduce the initial meeting with the question of: "are you familiar with case studies and how they are used?" Carry several copies of cases in your briefcase to offer as examples.

Managers usually need to be reassured that the case will not be published in any form without their express written consent. They should be told that ultimately the release of the case is entirely within their hands. The case may be disguised or changed to make it palatable, but the manager has every right to refuse to release it at all.

Sometimes, in order to test the climate, ask for the financials when setting up initial interviews, since at the very least you would need to have a perspective on the financial status of the company, even though it might not be quoted in detail in the case. Offer the manager a brief description of the kind of information needed, the consent process, and a copy of the release form s/he will be ultimately asked to sign. Also ask if s/he would like a confidentiality agreement signed.

Sample Release Form

I have read the case entitled ____________________________ submitted by _________________________.

I hereby authorize the use of this material at xxxxx College, in other educational programs, in published case collections, and for distribution to other schools, companies, and organizations. This permission includes foreign language translation for teaching use.

Signature ____

Position ____

Organization ____

Date ____________________

I once spent over a year writing a case on a Fortune 500 retailer with multiple field trips, travel with a film crew, time with video editors, and a number of outlines and drafts approved by the company. I had the initial approval of the CEO to write the case. In the end, release was denied, with almost no explanation other than it might adversely affect the company's stock price if the case were released. Four years later, we finally obtained a release after heavy editing. In another instance, I was invited to Italy to write a case on Gucci. When I asked to see their financial statements, they balked and I walked. I would clearly be unable to get the freedom needed for adequate research, even though the case promised to be intriguing.

Usually, the manager will be concerned about the amount of time that will be required of him or her and employees. It is important to address this out front to demonstrate a sensitivity to this concern. At the very least, you will need about an hour from each of the key managers who are important players in the case topic, with perhaps several return visits for clarification. Then the company will need to have someone review the outline to make sure that the case is on target, the finished draft to make any required revisions for accuracy or to soften sensitive topics, and the finished work for release. Often, it is useful to ask for a key contact person to offer guidance, answer questions, and set up interviews. This may be someone in investor relations, human resources, or strategic planning. In a sense, it only matters that the person be able to convey the senior executive's commitment to the project to those you must interview, has a broad grasp of the case topic, and knows who's who in the company.

Sometimes, managers will ask what's in it for them, their "WIIFM." Some find that having a case written satisfies their ego with attention or approval. Some managers like to use cases in their own planning or training programs. Others find that the process holds key decisions up to objective scrutiny and fosters employee buy-in to the ultimate decisions.

I once wrote a case on a company that had both stores and a catalog operation. The day after it was first taught the attending president called his office and set the machinery in motion to close the entire catalog operation. While it will be different for each manager, the case-writer should realize that in every successful case, the executive sees the benefits to be greater than the cost. As a salesperson, you should do what is needed to sustain that inequality.

Since the best cases usually reflect issues that are of critical importance to the company, suggest why the company is being considered as a case site and then ask what problems keep the executive awake at night. These may indeed be hot spots and stimulate discussion on the wider perspective on the issue and what options are being considered. In the best case, the executive will offer an internal report outlining the problem in detail and you might receive a report to the board of directors detailing the issue, the strengths and weaknesses of each option, and supporting exhibits. Much of the work is done! In the worst case, the manager's problem will be way off base and will not fit the pedagogical objectives. Be prepared either to walk away from the case or to adapt to those issues that are important.

Once the key issues have been identified, ask the executive what resources he or she relies on to make the decision. Since the role of the case-writer is that of reporter, the answer to this question will dictate the course of your research. Usually it is a list of key managers, reports, or other sources of information. It will be your job to capture this decision-making environment. Therefore enter initial interviews with fairly specific questions and expectations but avoid being stuck on them. You must be open-minded and follow the discussion where it goes.

A word on note taking: some case-writers like to tape every interview. Tape-recording may, however, unnecessarily put people always "on the record" and can be inhibiting in a process that relies heavily on trust and confidentiality. Also, it just delays the inevitable, since you must ultimately listen to the tapes and make notes anyway. You might as well listen the first time. Also use note-taking to pace and direct the conversation. If the discussion is going the right direction, take notes furiously, even asking that certain important points be repeated. This has the effect of reinforcing the direction of the conversation and of forcing a pace which encourages some hesitation and added thought. On the other hand, if the executive starts going off on some irrelevant tangent, put your pen down on the table, and, if you wear reading glasses, take them off and continue to listen. The message, however subtle, is clear.

In order to stress the sensitivity to time and to keep the discussion directed, you may choose to take off your watch at the beginning of a session and place it on the table. It is amazing the effect this has on keeping an interview to the point and placing a discipline on the discussion. It also loosens the conversation and offers you more control over the interview. If an interviewee knows that the researcher will manage the time, and implicitly the subject and pace of conversation, then he or she can relax and enjoy the ride!

Planning the Case

Once the first interview is over, it is important to dive right into writing within the first day or two while your memory is fresh and gaps left by your own insufficient note-taking or bad hand-writing can still be filled.

Start with an outline. You may find that the outlining feature of MS Word is particularly useful. You can simply do a complete data dump into Word and then start to create categories and headers with Word/Outline, and finally sort your notes until a pattern starts to emerge.

Then return to a more global overview and write a short paragraph that captures the essence of the entire case. This technique forces you to separate the wheat from the chaff and to focus on the most important issues. Generally the issues crystallize into a single sentence which may ultimately become the first sentence of the case and a basic road map to follow in writing the case. Every word in the case should have a thread back to this single thesis.

Once the outline is completed and the beginning of the case started with the first sentence, it is important to run it by the manager of the target company to make sure you are capturing the essence of the situation. Obtaining early oversight can spare a lot of grief later on. You want to avoid spending valuable research time going down the wrong track.

Don't be a consultant. You're there as a reporter to document the decision making process. You shouldn't give advice or include information in the case that the manager is not even considering. You can ask if s/he is considering a particular area that you might consider to be relevant, but don't do anything more than write how they respond. It should be left up to the student to point out that deficiency. Remember that you are only documenting the real world, not recreating it.

Exploration

The outline will now be a preliminary road map for your research. Let the fun begin! In theory you have open license to explore and can talk to any one you would like. Certainly there will be constraints in terms of time and confidentiality, but you should have enough latitude to do what you have to do.

You should familiarize yourself with material you may have gathered along the way, but don't try to do all the background research before you make appointments for interviews. Often arranging times can be challenging and you can use the waiting time to do the background work.

Structure an influence diagram as a research guide. (See **Exhibit 1**). The senior executive, likely to be the protagonist of the case, relies on past experience, certain individuals, and other sources of information to make decisions. Try to map out these sources as first generation targets of research. Be sure to include the past experience and character of the executive. It is here that you can build depth to the case and provide enough texture so students can insert themselves into the situation. This writer once wrote a case on a chain of very successful department stores in Japan. I asked students years afterwards what they remember about the case. Almost invariably, they remembered one key phrase: "Mrs. Ichikawa had a grand-motherly demeanor and a rather glorious set of gold teeth." It's funny how even a single image can make such a big impression.

As you continue your research, ask everyone what he or she relies on for making decisions or for offering opinions. Then keep burrowing down along these data-tracks until the issue becomes clear in my mind. How far should you go? It really depends on the level of detail wanted for the classroom discussion. The senior executive in the Japanese department store case, when asked how he made decisions, said that he just asked his employees: "why, why, why?" until the answer became clear. Case writing is not much different. It is just asking "why, why, why" until the case crystallizes. Sometimes cases may be based purely on conversations with the senior executive while at the other extreme, research may extend to interviews with managers at every level of an organization and with customers and key suppliers. You may find that the key decision that dictates the company's direction lies not in the hands of the senior executive, but in those of a junior level manager. You may thus need to refocus the case.

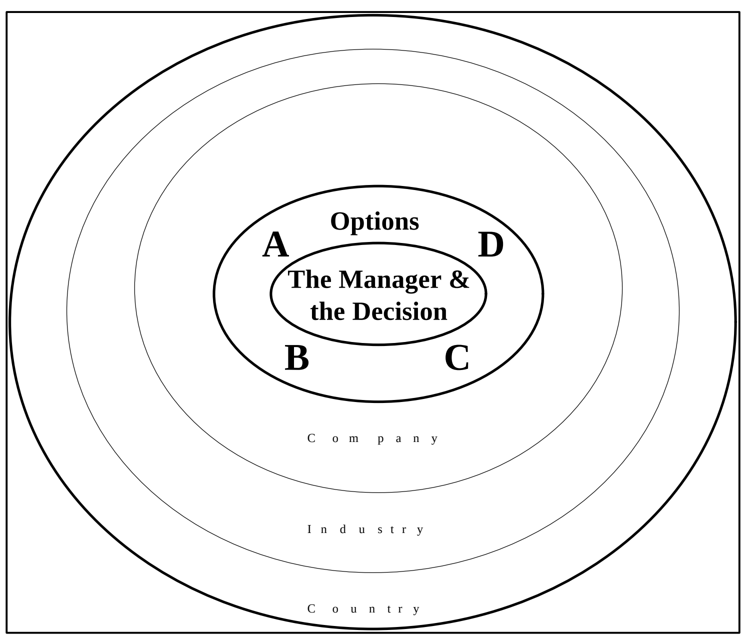
After each successive interview, map out another layer of influence. You can stop at the point where the customer, a supplier, or outside "facts" overlap or when everyone seems to be relying on the same data. At this point, usually the case should have crystallized. As a case-writer (the reporter), try to document this influence or decision environment. Raw background data can then be added as exhibits.

Writing

Writing is very different kind of activity from outlining or interviewing. It has to be structured and methodical in contrast to the more freewheeling exploration of research. Plan your attack, block out some extended time to enter into a reclusive writing mode, and sit down and get started.

Use the outline and influence diagram to plan the case. If you want the case to be about twelve pages, for example, allocate a certain number of pages to each part of the outline. Then tackle one section at a time. The whole project seems less onerous if you have single day assignments.

Ten or twelve single spaced pages plus exhibits is about the optimal length for a case. Any more and students won't study it adequately, and any shorter it lacks enough "meat" for a meaningful discussion. Cases should also be straightforward and to the point. There is seldom room for "red-herrings," and a good issue should have enough facets so that discussion revolving around the relevancy of case facts is counter-productive.



What facts are relevant? Your chore is to condense a tremendous amount of information into a short document. Don't try to condense all the information. Be judicious, follow the influence diagram, and remember the one sentence summary you wrote. Be brutal, throwing out any trivia or irrelevant information. You will be surprised how much you have and still have discarded reams of notes.

Start by writing a very specific introduction, being careful to include enough detail to identify the industry, the company, the setting, the decision-maker, the situation, the consequences, and the alternatives under consideration. Then move right into very general background information about the industry and company. Often analysts' reports and SEC filings are very useful here. Then progress into the specifics of the company, noting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of each element of its operation. Finally, repeat the decision focal point of the case, highlighting inflection points from the influence diagram and the critical facets of each option.

The writing process is like making maple syrup. It usually takes about 40 gallons of sap to make a single gallon of syrup. First you have to make sure you have only the right sap and then start boiling. It may indeed take 40 drafts before a case is completed!

"Writer's block," that seemingly uncontrollable force which may tempt you to stop writing and perhaps change your career altogether, deserves mention. Usually, you can push your way through it, but there are several tools you may use to overcome writer's block. Print out the draft and read it away from the computer. Give it to someone else to read: a colleague, friend, or student. Put it aside and give it some time to rest. Often distance and perspective are the perfect antidotes to writer's block.

The Finish

Plan on at least several rounds of editing with the subject company. Some sensitive information will inevitably need to be disguised or excluded. Some case facts will need to be corrected or added. At the point where you may think that the case is just about perfect, someone will inevitably swamp you with suggestions! Expect it and don't get thrown off.

Make sure that your English is impeccable: bad grammar or spelling errors distract from case preparation. Looking for flaws in the case should not distract students. They have enough to worry about without that challenge. Besides, it is embarrassing to present a case that does not meet the basic hurdle of being well written. Even if you are an accomplished writer, have someone edit the case for grammar and spelling mistakes.

Make sure that the case is formatted so that it is easy to read and consistent with other cases being used. Respect for presentation reflects respect for the case, and having it branded with a familiar format carries with it a cachet of quality.

Then comes the acid test: the classroom. This is really where it all comes together. Be ready, however, for having the benefit of up to several hundred nit-picky editors. Students are certain to find spelling mistakes which eluded your spell-checker, case facts which don't agree, or columns of numbers which don't add up. Thank your new editors, make the changes, and move on.

When reflecting on the first case discussion, try to identify places that threw off the students into counter-productive discussion or places that needed a few more facts. See if you can fix the case in a quick edit just following class.

Teaching Note

A good teaching note is important for several reasons. First, it is a good discipline to follow in preparation for teaching and indeed can make teaching in future sessions. Secondly, it is the key to having a case used by others. Even if the case is not used in the same way as it was designed, a professor does not want to have to completely reinvent the wheel. Indeed, most case publishers will not even accept or review a case unless it is accompanied by a teaching note.

First, the author should make detailed class preparation notes and review them after the class. Particular attention should be paid to the flow of discussion. Then structure the note with a brief summary of the case from the case introduction, a set of suggested questions for case preparation, a statement of intended use and pedagogical purpose, a description of discussion flow for each of the questions, and a general board strategy to use in class. The board strategy should reflect the discussion flow and the questions, serving as an outline for the rest of the note. Generally, teaching notes should answer the questions as they are posed for preparation.

Remember that when a professor chooses a new case to use, s/he will want to be convinced that it will work smoothly in the classroom without major flaws. The teaching note is the vehicle that is used most often to reinforce this perception.

Usually, it is best to wait until the case is first taught to write a detailed teaching note. Almost invariably some elements of the discussion will come as a surprise and will either have to be incorporated into the note or changed in the case. Don’t wait too long, however. The effort only becomes more difficult as time goes by.

Finally, a good case will have layers of depth and new twists and turns that can be added in each teaching of the case. So if you can muster the discipline, make appropriate changes to the teaching note every time you teach the case. Most notes are thus fluid and evolutionary, improving over time like a good cheese.

Go Forth…

This primer is not meant to be a prescription for everyone, since every case situation and every researcher demands a unique approach. It should offer a starting point, however, particularly for those who are embarking on writing their first cases. So go forth, have fun, explore, and enjoy the journey.

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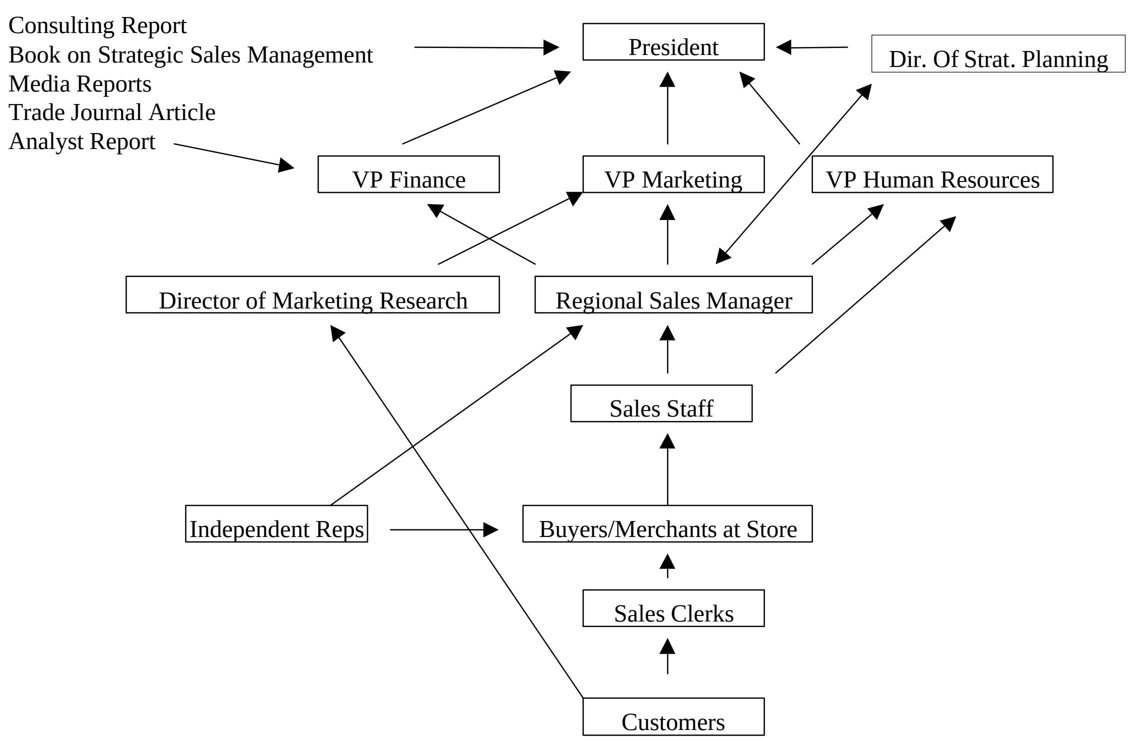
Exhibit 1

A Word on Influence Diagramming

Influence diagramming originated as an aid in developing negotiating strategies and mapping organizational processes, but is also useful in charting research objectives for case research. The process starts with identifying what information the decisions-maker uses to make a choice. Who does he rely on for advice? What does he read? Then the researcher reads all the written sources and interviews all the people noted in the first generation chart to unearth what, in turn, influences them.

While in theory, the chart can be built infinitely, certain repeat sources generally emerge which suggest a natural stopping point for research.

Take, for example, a case on a company that is considering how to reorganize its sales force to serve its customers better. Start by asking the president, who will ultimately have to make the final decision, how she will make the decision. She may say that a book on strategic sales management inspired her and that she has read a number of relevant trade journals, news articles, and analyst reports on the issue. She will also rely on a recent consulting report and the advice of the VP of finance, the VP of marketing, and the VP of Human Resources. She has also asked her director of strategic planning to offer some alternatives and to assess their viability. After reading the written sources and speaking to several generations of influencers, an influence diagram might emerge something like the following.



Background on the Author:

David Wylie received his BA from Harvard in 1969 and his MBA from the Harvard Business School in 1984. For four years, he was a research associate at Harvard Business School. He then wrote cases for several consulting firms, some as best-practice documents, some as classroom training tools. In 1996, he joined the Institute for Management Development in Lausanne, Switzerland as a research associate to write cases on international retailing. He joined Babson College in 1997 as director of case development and is currently the director of Babson College Case Publishing where he coordinates case development and publication. He has offered courses in case writing to corporate clients, to the faculty at the University of Saint Petersburg in Russia, and to various student and faculty groups at Babson College.

He has written over 45 cases and teaching notes, and has co-authored, edited, or supervised the development of another 65 cases. His field research has taken him across the United States and to Chile, China, the Czech Republic, Hong Kong, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, and Russia.