

## What Makes a Great Case

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### The Case

As writers who have made numerous attempts to create cases (some more successful than others) we are often asked, "how do you find a topic?" or "what topics make good cases?" These questions are not easily answered, and there is no "one size fits all" answer.

Many times our teaching responsibilities may lead us to a topic for a case. If we are teaching in an area with few cases available for classroom use, we have a prime opportunity to fill the void. If our teaching schedule allows the time, this can be the impetus to not only develop the case and teaching note, but also to class test it immediately and refine it accordingly before taking it further.

Other times thinking about the material we are covering in class gives us a new perspective on everyday situations -- those situations then become fodder for a case. Think about the course content of your teaching. Maybe you have searched for a case in a particular area or subject without finding anything appropriate. A case offers the opportunity to include many factors and subtleties that can affect a business and the decision-making environment -- factors and subtleties that cannot be easily covered in a lecture format, and the same factors and subtleties that will confront students once they graduate and begin working.

Events in our everyday workplace offer subjects for cases. In this issue Payne, Krueger and Bartles examine the importance of strategic planning and food service expansion in "Salsa Dog, "Where the Dog Bite Back." Phipps, O'Connor and Stellern focus on the ethical considerations a person in authority may address as he makes policy decisions in "Faith in the Budget." Mull, Takano, and Owings present the case of "Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory International" as the corporate leader must decide whether to pursue international expansion. Sasse, Tocco, and Dockins describe the changing healthcare industry in the United States as it affects physicians in a clinical practice. Each case is different, yet all involve key people that must make decisions that will have consequence.

An important consideration regarding case material is that the more timely the topic, the better for training our students to face situations they may encounter after graduation. With that said, there are some topics that will not lose value due to the passage of time. For instance, human resources cases dealing with employees' behavior remain relevant. Do not dismiss a topic simply because the incident took place several years ago. Having access to subsequent events can add much to the attractiveness of the case in the form of a surprising or more complete epilogue in the teaching note. As an example, a case may be about accounting fraud and refer to a situation that occurred in 2001. However, there is accumulating evidence that financial fraud occurs, or at

the very least is exposed, in cycles tied to the economic cycle (Gong, et al, 2011, Parramore, 2013). We are likely to encounter financial fraud attempts repeatedly in our careers.

One way to avoid the case appearing out-of-date is to remove the dates. Rather than referring to an event taking place in 2012, for example, talk about the event as taking place two years earlier. Be sure to maintain the timeline to avoid confusing the reader.

Choosing subject matter that will engage students may appear to be a tricky proposition, but it need not be. The company or topic does not have to be one about which students have direct knowledge, but perhaps one they hope to experience some day, or a topic that is different enough from their past experiences that they will be intrigued by it.

To elaborate, consider the reader and a potential case that involves the recreational vehicle (RV) industry in a class of international students. The students, primarily from other countries than the United States, may have never even seen an RV or understand its popularity in the United States. Hence, a discussion regarding RVs enhances the value of the case precisely because it is different and potentially intriguing.

Also, cases based on local topics may be of interest intriguing for students (Naumes and Naumes 2012). If these cases are from secondary sources, the possible identification of the exact company and exact individuals is of no concern. But if the case is based on the author's own field research, the author must be very careful to get permissions from the company and the interviewees to share the facts of the case with the students. Even if the case is disguised, a student may be able to discern which company is involved.

Journal editors have reported that cases about issues unique to college administration, while perhaps fascinating to the professor, do not seem to be well utilized in the classroom. However, cases about colleges and universities have wider appeal when the issues addressed are common to all not-for-profit entities. Likewise, cases concerned with college life issues may be very easy for students at traditional residential colleges and universities to "get" but more difficult for nontraditional students or those at commuter campuses.

Developing an effective hook is important. We advise authors to pull the reader in with the first paragraph of the case, and then to return to the hook at the end of the text of the case. Davis, Peters and Cellucci (2014) suggest including a protagonist -- a true character involved in the company, even one about which information comes from secondary sources. Details about such a person can be found in public documents which interviewed the person or included details about the person. Look to the popular press, annual reports, financial announcements, websites or even blogs for information about people within the company. You may find quotes by the person which can be included in the case. Another possibility is to find someone that had been affected by the events, even if that person was not directly employed by the entity involved, but is willing to speak about the effects of those events on his/her environment.

The text of the case should be written in a conversational tone, as if you are telling a story rather than just reciting facts. You will also want to be sure to include everything of import to the decision to be made or the description of the situation. One way to make it easier to ensure

completeness is to list your reasons for writing the case at the very beginning. What do you want the students to be able to do after completing the case? That is, what are the learning outcomes? Often, writing down the learning outcomes leads to writing down the questions you will ask the students to answer. Once those are delineated, it becomes much easier to make sure that the case is complete with all of the information the students will need to make a decision and justify their choices, or to analyze a situation in a descriptive case.

Be vigilant about not allowing your own opinion to bleed into the case itself. It can be very easy to allow yourself to write the case with a slant toward your opinion of the characters in the case or of the alternatives available to the protagonist. Keep the case factual without a hint of bias. Maintain your objectivity.

The case should be written in past tense! Even if it involves an emergent situation or topic, the author needs to think about the case as if it is ten, twenty, or fifty years into the future. Current theory or even the company's product may be a matter of history at that point, but the case could live on IF it is written in past tense.

Perhaps most important, the case must be factual—no fiction—no embellishment. The case must relate a situation that actually happened. It cannot be fictional nor can it be an amalgam of situations, even if all of them really happened.

To summarize, a great case will detail an innovative, unique and timely topic with intriguing subject matter and a hook that is effective in drawing the reader into the story and causing her to want more information. It will be well written in a conversational tone, tell a story that includes all information needed to analyze the issues within while remaining objective. It will be in past tense. It will be true; the events will really have happened.

### **The Teaching Note**

The teaching note begins with the case overview that includes a summary of the case, including courses for which the case is intended. This section will also state the type of case -- descriptive or decision. This is followed with a section titled "Research Methods" which includes whether the case has been disguised, and if so, to what extent, as well as a description of fieldwork, if any, or if the case was developed from secondary sources.

The next section is perhaps one of the most important -- Learning Outcomes. Consider what this case will accomplish for the student, including identifying what the student will be able to understand or do or analyze after completing this case. The Society for Case Research recommends use of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom 1984) as a guide. Be sure to include learning outcomes from the higher levels requiring students to perform higher level analysis or another activity that requires synthesis of the material and application of the theory to the case situation. Remember to keep these general -- that is, these should not reference the specific company in the case.

Now you are ready to formulate specific questions. Provide a list of the questions without the answers to help instructors decide if the case meets their classroom needs and helps reviewers evaluate the usefulness of the case. Most authors indicate in parentheses next to the questions the exact learning outcomes to which the questions apply. This is helpful to readers and reviewers. You may have already noted both preliminary learning outcomes and questions before beginning the development of the case to help with completeness of the case information. If so, now you can refine or polish those questions that need it, or perhaps add a question or two that became obvious during the writing of the case.

Ideally, your questions will require the students to apply theory to the case situation. As much as possible, tie the questions to course content and make the questions rigorous enough to require students to thoroughly understand the relevant theory in order to formulate an acceptable answer. These questions should also be designed to stimulate in-class discussion.

In the next section, the questions are repeated but with answers. For some types of questions, there is only one answer. But for many questions the answers can cover a wide range -- some students with extensive experience in the workplace may be able to bring additional material to answer the question, but students who have never worked may not. For questions of this nature, one technique that is often used in the teaching note is to provide sample answers from both sets of students. If the case has not been class tested in front of both audiences, then you may provide two (or more) sets of answers based on what you would expect. Offer references where appropriate.

Think of the teaching note as an instructor's manual. The answers to the questions should be so complete that a non-expert in the area may understand how the answers are derived. Include theory, be sure to reference and perhaps add an appendix to the teaching note that summarizes the relevant theory so that an instructor who is not familiar with the area can easily understand. The additional pedagogical materials section This is also a useful tool for instructors who want to use the case but may not have that same theory included in the class text. The instructor can then use the case as a vehicle for exposing the students to this theory, or may choose to photocopy the appendix and provide it to the students before assigning the case.

Naumes and Naumes (2012) suggest that for questions requiring extensive calculations, an appendix that provides the complete calculations may be useful for grading and classroom purposes. This provides the instructor with a means of finding small errors early in the student's work that get multiplied or "blown up" as the calculations progress. It also provides the instructor with the option of distributing the appendix and using the results in discussion of the other issues within the case.

Classroom applications may vary. Many times this will be dependent on the nature and topic of the case. Some traditional uses for cases are as a basis for in-class discussion, as individual take-home assignments, or as group assignments. Guidance on the amount of time spent on each question during a class, or the amount of time necessary to cover the case in class as well as an outline of coverage (in some cases this includes a "layout" of what the blackboard will look like) is most helpful to the instructor wanting to use the case. The amount of time allotted varies

depending on the format of the class -- some classes that meet once a week will have three hours available but others may meet three times a week for 50 minutes.

In the process of developing the case, you may find other ways to use the case in class such as role-playing, presentations by students or panels on particular questions. Include these alternative uses in the teaching note with detailed guidance for the instructor.

An epilogue is not required, but if the information is available, instructors report that they prefer teaching notes that include an epilogue. For a decision case, if the case is finished long enough after the decision, including the results (e.g., profits increased by \$X, or the product line was introduced and was quite successful) are fascinating to students. For a descriptive case, a summary of where the company or the participants are now is always of interest.

### **Application: An Award Winning Case**

Now that we have covered the points that help to make a great case, let us apply them to Butcher and Wilson (2014) "Theo Chocolate—Doing Well By Doing Good." the recipient of the most recent best case award. A review from instructor and student perspectives regarding how that case implemented the criteria for "What Makes a Great Case" follows.

From an instructor perspective, Theo Chocolate was a case written about a company that produced chocolate products, made from organic, Fair Trade certified beans. Cases about organic products and services are less prevalent in the literature and yet they are of significant interest to professors who want to provide interesting and timely cases to their students. Social and environmental responsibility is a continually growing topic in university courses. Furthermore, Theo Chocolate operates in a global context and international companies, and the journal receives fewer international submissions than cases set in a local or regional environment. Thus, the Theo Chocolate case focuses on an innovative and timely topic that is of interest to many professors across the country.

From a student perspective, let us consider the millennial cohort--persons born between 1979 and 2001 and their interest in corporate social and environmental responsibility (McGlone, Spain, McGlone, 2011). Most college students in 2014 are millennials and interest in corporate social and environmental responsibility is especially prevalent among this cohort (Rayapura, 2014). To elaborate, a 2006 Cone Millennial Cause Study (online survey conducted among a national probability sample of 1,800 respondents, 895 males and 905 females between the ages of 13 and 25) found that 61% of Millennials personally consider themselves responsible for making a difference in the world and believe that companies have a responsibility to join them in this effort (The 2006 millennial cause study 2008). Furthermore, applying social and environmental issues to chocolate, which is a product that all students have most likely purchased or tasted at some points in their life, also makes the case a context with which students can easily relate. So, the product being easy to understand, but within the complexities of corporate social and environmental responsibility, makes this case something of great interest to the students.

A third aspect of the Theo Chocolate case that made it great was that it had a superior hook (Peters, Cellucci, Kerrigan, 2012). The Theo Chocolate hook began with a creative quote from the entrepreneur who started the company, Joe Whinney, and then introduced him and his company. Joe Whinney is a real person; Theo Chocolate was a real company; and nothing in the case was disguised. Thus, the hook drew in the student with a quote from the protagonist and then proceeded to introduce him/her to the story line.

The historical information provided about the growing and harvesting of Cocoa beans and their usage in the chocolate industry provided another interesting aspect of the Theo Chocolate case. Again, the reader was drawn to the story because the history of the industry began with slave labor and the case explains that slavery in the industry continues to exist today, especially for children. The history of the industry is also one of environmental degradation, which is another interesting topic for the reader of the case.

A fifth reason that the Theo Chocolate case was also an award winner was because of its effective writing style. The case was clear and well-written. As bibliographer and scholar R.B. McKerrow is quoted to have said (Day 2012, 3):

State your facts as simply as possible. No one wants flowers of eloquence or literary ornaments in a research article.

Theo Chocolate case study was very effective at stating the facts as simply as possible. They explained each aspect of the chocolate history and process. An example follows (Butcher Wilson, 2014, 19):

However, an essential factor in Joe Whinney's vision was that Theo not only created economic value by producing the finest artisan chocolate, it also created societal value by addressing social and environmental needs.

This statement is effective because it gives the reader an all-around understanding of the company owner's goal in creating Theo Chocolate. The reader gets knowledge about the company's principles as well as what the paper is going to be about. But the writing was more than just well done. The writing was conversational in tone and yet sophisticated enough to still have an academic spin. The case is peppered with interesting quotes from the company owner (Joe Whinney) that help tell the story. Joe is quoted to have said (Butcher, Wilson, 2014, 21):

Nobody else here had any experience with chocolate...I knew the equipment, and I selected the beans as well. But all of a sudden it hit me – what if we can't make any good chocolate?

The language utilized throughout was objective, despite the potential for a case about social and environmental business practices to be somewhat judgmental in nature. And finally, the case was written in the ever important past tense.

The teaching note for the Theo Chocolate case was also very well done. The teaching note had learning objectives that progressed through the higher order dimensions of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Moreover, the teaching note contained a whole section that discussed the application of Porter and Kramer's (2006, 2011) theory of shared value. Thus, the reader could clearly see the applicable theory and understand how it was applied to the Theo Chocolate case.

A point to be made about the teaching note was that it contained a breadth of different questions for potential adoption by the user. It had numerous questions that were generally divided into three topical areas: industry analysis, company and stakeholder analysis, and application of shared value theory. Furthermore, for many of the questions, the authors of the case provided additional resources, such as readings and interesting videos to share with the students and help provide support for their answers.

The Theo Chocolate teaching note also contributed to the case award because the authors also provided a detailed plan for how a professor could teach the case. The detailed plan not only provided useful pedagogical suggestions, but it also gave creative ideas for how to introduce the case to the students via a chocolate taste test. And finally, the teaching note also provided a useful and lengthy epilogue for the professor as well.

In conclusion, the Theo Chocolate case published in JCS (Vol. 32, No. 1) exemplified "What Makes a Great Case." We hope the work by Butcher and Wilson will help other case researchers.

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### **Addendum**

The editors report that "It's All About Beliefs and Deeds," by Ed Leonard, Kelly Trusty, and Roy Cook, published in the *Journal of Case Studies*, 30 (1), 2012, p. 16, p. 109-118 has been removed from publication at the request of the authors. The abstract and case are no longer available through the *Journal of Case Studies*.