

ABSTRACT

CASE ANALYSIS: LEARNING FALLACIES THAT CAN BE ADDRESSED

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

For decades the case method of teaching has been an accepted and important component of marketing and management education. Case study encourages learning through discovery and the development of conceptual, contrast, and comparison skills. The development of these abilities defines and sharpens the decision-making ability of a manager.

It is disconcerting, therefore, to recognize that for many students, case analysis falls short of its intended goal due to the high-volume and detail of the information presented or to the lack of realism associated with limited case information.

Although case analysis intends to foster the analytical and decision-making process, individual psychological forces might lead to a limited problem analysis that can impede the learning process and decrease the quality of the solution.

The array of facts and information presented in a case can easily overwhelm a student and require refinement. Gradually and with concerted analytical effort, certain points of information in the case take on lesser/greater significance according to the student's experience and knowledge base. Some facts are disregarded, others emphasized or interpreted in ways that are consistent with the student's views.

The refinement of case information is guided by powerful psychological processes. Subtly but inevitably the need for information reduction, the selective perception process, and the need for closure operate in case analysis. Many students are experts at information reduction, but they "simplify" the case at the expense of pertinent or key information. However, decision-making research indicates that the quality of the problem solution is positively related to the amount of information used by the problem-solver (Newell 1972, Nickerson 1985, Weisberg 1986).

RECOMMENDATION

To overcome the shortcomings associated with limited problems analysis, students should be able to 1) consider as much of the stated case information as possible, and 2) logically expand the case information to include relevant, but unmentioned alternatives/information. The author suggests a technique that encourages students to consider each point of case information as an information space. All qualitatively different topics become a case information space (CIS). Typical marketing information spaces would include topics related to consumers, price, promotion, product, industry, etc.

When the case information spaces are established, each can be logically expanded in a structured way by considering: 1) degrees of action possible (e.g., spend \$20 million, \$10 million, \$0 on advertising), 2) logical alternatives (e.g., heavy, moderate, light, and nonusers of a product), and/or 3) related information (e.g., product line information would logically remind one of product mix information and of competitor product lines).

An heuristic procedure is recommended to structure the analysis as follows: 1) identify each piece of information (CIS) that is qualitatively different from other information; 2) logically expand each information space into alternatives, degrees of action, related information; 3) evaluate the case situation in terms of each information space.

The benefits of a structured problem analysis are recognized by educators (Hughes 1978, Van Gundy). When combined with an heuristic, the concept of the CIS expands the relevant information for analysis in a structured, logical, yet flexible manner. It requires knowledge, logic, and creative thinking to expand an information space--valuable tools for all students.

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