

MAKING (THE) CASES FOR BASE-OF-THE-PYRAMID CONSUMERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an innovative, semester-long, student case writing assignment in which students are required to write both a case narrative and a teaching note for marketing a product to base-of-the-pyramid consumers. The paper describes the assignment's design and includes student perception data as to the assignment's overall value.

INTRODUCTION

The marketing classroom has always presented faculty with opportunities for pedagogical innovation and experimentation. The *Marketing Education Review's* frequent special issues devoted to teaching innovations, along with several iterations of *Great Ideas for Teaching Marketing* (Hair, Lamb, & McDaniel, 1992, 1996, 1998), are outlets for such creative teaching endeavors. This article extends that discussion through its explanation of an innovative undergraduate student case writing exercise. An additional innovative aspect of the assignment is its focus on marketing to base-of-the-pyramid, or very low income, consumers. Student perception data is also included, giving insight into the perceived learning value of this assignment.

Cases are nothing new to marketing faculty. Their use as an important pedagogical tool in the marketing curriculum is longstanding and well documented (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994; Christensen & Hansen, 1987). Case analysis, common wisdom posits, sharpens students' real world, analytic problem-solving skills in ways that other pedagogical techniques do not. Student critical thinking skills are refined because, as Leedners et al. (2001, p. 2) state, a decision-focused case requires the reader/learner "to figuratively step into the position of a particular decision maker and to make a decision, solve a problem, analyze a process or confront a situation." Student learners cannot be disinterested observers in such situations because they are being asked to literally "step into the shoes" of the case's protagonist (or antagonist) who *must* make a marketing decision.

Traditionally, faculty have written cases not only because faculty have the research skills needed to develop case content, but also because faculty have the clearest, most intimate understanding of learning

theory and disciplinary course content. To support faculty interested in case writing, several "core" books exist (Christensen & Hansen, 1987; Hunger & Wheelen, 2004; Leenders et al., 2001; Mockler, 2001; Naumes & Naumes, 2006). Also for faculty, several organizations exist which specialize in case studies: North America Case Research Association (NACRA); Society for Case Research, and World Association for Case Research and Application (WACRA). These conferences provide faculty with presentation and publication outlets for their case research. There is, though, a growing interest in having students, particularly undergraduate students, write their own cases and teaching notes. It is to this topic that the paper now turns.

STUDENT AUTHORED CASE WRITING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Bengtsson and Asplund (2004) have summarized much of the relatively scarce published literature on student case writing. They found that student case writing has occurred where there were few "indigenous" cases, such as developing countries (Hornaday, 1995; Linowes, 1999), small business (Whitt et al., 1991), and business development and entrepreneurship (Nelson, 1995). They also emphasized that the preparation of the teaching note was a critical aspect in determining student grades. Rosenbloom (2005) has noted that as faculty find significant gaps in the world's collection of business cases, they can respond by writing a case to "fill the gap," by partnering with students (a standard MBA-level approach), or by shifting the challenge to the students themselves. And Swiercz (2004) provides for student case writers the kind of outline and checklist that Leenders et al. (2001) and Naumes (2006) set out for faculty.

Ciccotello and Green (1997) utilized student-written cases in the area of finance in undergraduate and graduate classes. Graduate students found it more demanding in terms of outside research and analysis and a more useful professional experience. Undergraduates, however, preferred traditional case analysis and felt that that provided both a more complete synthesis of material and a better basis for career advancement. Ashamalla and Crocitto (2001) described the use of student-written cases in management and organization behavior classes. In a five-step process, they required students to build

cases from the students' own experience, which they claim resulted in "realism" and "student engagement."

More recently, Ross, Zufan, and Rosenbloom (2008) have extended the student case writing concept through both cross-country and cross-discipline exchanges. They report on a complicated case exchange in which student teams from the United States and the Czech Republic exchanged their own cases and teaching notes on strategic management and international business topics. Student perception data indicated that while many students found great learning value in the assignment, there was significant dissatisfaction with the cross-discipline exchange. Ross, Zufan and Rosenbloom (2008) strongly recommend single subject case writing activities when peer feedback is part of the assignment design.

Lincoln (2006) provides one example of student authored case writing in marketing. Adapting Sweircz's (2004) approach noted above, Lincoln positions his approach midway between traditional case analysis and live case analysis. Student teams must research, write and analyze a live case, but do so in a process that emphasizes finding "an ending to their story" and not just "focus[ing] on finding a solution for their client as is done in many live projects" (Lincoln, 2006, p. 2). Lincoln's method mirrors traditional case research in its requirement to collect primary data.

Motivations to try this student case writing exercise in my international marketing classes were two fold. First, I wanted to create a class project that would encourage a deeper and hopefully more complete synthesis of international marketing course concepts. The decision to have all cases focus on marketing to base-of-the-pyramid (i.e., very low income) consumers was made with this goal in mind. Marketing to base-of-the-pyramid (BOP) segments seemed to provide a degree of "mental stretch" that marketing products within westernized and fully-developed economies did not. Second, I wanted to engage students in a final class project that was creative and perhaps a bit "different." I wanted to break the tradition at my school of having students write an international marketing plan as their final project. Unlike Lincoln's (2006) approach, all student research was secondary. Finally, I heeded Bengtsson and Asplund's (2004) insight that the teaching note was pivotal in determining student grades. The teaching note became *the* major assessment mechanism, and it is to the details of the assignment that the paper now turns.

ASSIGNMENT STRUCTURE

I supported the Student Case Writing Assignment for BOP consumers with a multipage handout. The handout was divided into four parts. Part 1 asked and answered the question: What is a case? I gave standard definitions of a case and included as well brief discussions of traditional case components (action trigger, country profile, company profile, case situation). Part 2 asked and answered a similar question: What is a Teaching Note? I stressed the importance of the teaching note in defining learning objectives and that the types of discussion questions asked, along with the depth of answers given to each discussion question, would contribute disproportionately to the assignment's final grade. Part 3 was a list of "Tips and Hints" for success. This drew on blind peer review feedback I had received relative to my own published cases along with some common suggestions for clear, accurate and coherent writing. Among the 11 tips and hints for writing a good case narrative were these:

1. Segmentation is a central marketing process. Make sure the case's target market(s) are clearly defined.
2. Write objectively about your case situation and descriptively about your country profile. Eliminate judgment words that look down on or demean BOP consumers.
3. Footnote and/or cite all sources for economic, demographic and sales data.
4. Include a country map in the country profile.

I made parallel suggestions for writing a meaningful Teaching Note. Part 3 concluded with this statement: "This assignment is really about how well your team understands international marketing. The case situation is BOP consumers, but the real focus is on international marketing. As such, I will be evaluating both the *kind* of questions your team asks and the *depth and insight* that answers give into international marketing." This handout concluded with Part 4, a timetable for completion. The overall assignment was divided into three phases, with each phase being separated by four weeks. Phase 1 required student teams to submit a preliminary research report during the fourth week of class. The preliminary team reports summarized the company chosen, a proposed product or service to be marketed, the country in which the marketing would occur and which base-of-the-pyramid segment(s) the marketing might target. I gave feedback on the initial ideas. Phase 2 was a first draft of the team case narrative that included three learning objectives, three case discussion questions and the case synopsis for the teaching note. I reviewed each narrative and teaching note, providing feedback and

guidance for further development. Student teams were encouraged to use my feedback to improve their narrative. I also encouraged some teams to conduct additional secondary research on poverty levels in the targeted country and on relevant competition. Phase 3 was to submit a final case narrative and teaching note for grading. The final submission now included a complete teaching note, with detailed responses to each discussion question. Teams were also required to state which chapters in the textbook discussion questions were related to.

Two articles, Prahalad and Hart (2002) and Prahalad and Hammond (2002), formed the core reading for understanding BOP consumers. Two class sessions were devoted to a detailed discussion of Prahalad and Hart's (2002) seminal article that established the rationale for business to work with BOP consumers. Prahalad and Hart state that most multinational companies suffer from strategic marketing myopia – firm consistently fail to see low income and impoverished consumers as viable, profitable markets. Prahalad and Hammond's (2002) article was similarly discussed. This article gave students examples of BOP marketing efforts. Further it allowed for discussion of sachet marketing, one of the well-known examples of innovative marketing with BOP consumers. Class discussion helped shape the specific marketing challenges that companies face when targeting BOP consumers. Table 1 provides a selective list of topics, countries and issues dealt with in some of the student-written cases.

TABLE 1
Sample of Base-of-the-Pyramid Case Foci

Company	Country	Base-of-the-Pyramid Marketing Issue
Safe Water Systems	Angola	Community-based safe water drinking system
Wyeth	Ethiopia	Reformulation and repackaging of vitamins
Johnson & Johnson	Iran	Introduction of Purpose skin care products in Iran
Gerber Baby Foods	Chad	Innovative packaging
Casas Bahia	India	Adaptation of Brazilian retail strategy to BOP consumers in India

STUDENT PERCEPTION DATA

At semester's end, all 28 students in the class were asked to complete an anonymous, online questionnaire to evaluate this semester-long student case writing assignment. The survey included questions on time spent preparing the teaching note and case narrative, the learning (if any) that occurred while working on specific assignment components, whether the assignment's BOP focus deepened understanding of core international marketing activities and finally, whether the assignment should be kept.

TABLE 2
Learning From Each Step in Case Writing Assignment

Activity	Mean*
Learning from Answering Case Discussion Questions	4.36
Learning from Writing the Case Narrative Overall	4.21
Learning from Writing Teaching Note Overall	4.18
Learning from Writing Case Discussion Questions	4.11
Learning from Writing Case Learning Objectives	4.07
Learning from Writing about BOP Consumers	3.96
Learning from Writing Country Profile	3.57
Learning from Writing the Company Profile	3.39
Learning from Developing Action Trigger	3.32

* Measured on A 5 point scale where 1 = no learning and 5 = significant learning

Table 2 presents mean scores for teaching steps in the case writing assignment and suggests that meaningful learning occurred across all nine activities. Students reported, though, that their greatest learning occurred in answering the case discussion questions. This finding supports the generally accepted faculty understandings about the value of case-based inquiry – working through an analysis of the issues and then working towards a solution prompt the most learning. Since discussion questions are prompts for either written analyses and/or class discussion, it is not surprising that these undergraduates found significant learning value even in their own questions. Proposed responses to the case discussion questions are integral to the pedagogical value of any case. This finding suggests that students heeded the admonition that it would be the teaching note, and the quality of their responses to the discussion questions, which would

earn them their grade. Students reported their second most meaningful learning came from writing the overall case narrative. This, too, seems reasonable, since the case narrative is the means that the greater pedagogical end – the Teaching Note.

TABLE 3
Reported Changes in Understanding of Marketing Topics and Concepts

International Marketing Concept	Mean*
Change in understanding market entry issues	3.93
Change in understanding of target marketing issues	3.84
Change in understanding country selection (microsegmentation)	3.79
Change in understanding of distribution issues	3.78
Change in understanding of packaging design issues	3.74
Change in understanding of market segmentation issues	3.69
Change in understanding of positioning issues	3.69
Change in understanding of product design issues	3.67
Change in Understanding of new product development issues	3.64
Change in understanding of advertising issues	3.64
Change in understanding of market research issues	3.62
Change in understanding of promotion issues (non-advertising)	3.61
Change in understanding of pricing issues	3.48

* Four point scale in which 1 = understanding became less clear to 4 = understanding increased a lot.

Table 3 presents student self-perception data on the degree to which their understanding of key course concepts changed as a result of the overall case writing activity. Table 3 suggests significant increases in understanding across all major topic areas in the class. As would be expected in situations where companies are targeting a new target market, in this case BOP consumers, market entry strategy and target market decisions were reported as producing the most change in understanding.

Table 4 presents mean responses to a series of attitudinal questions relative to summative evaluation. Overwhelmingly, students found this assignment challenging (mean = 4.39) and thought that it fairly well reflected key course concepts (mean=4.32). Students similarly thought the assignment was realistic, in that it enabled them to understand the real world relevance of course topics (mean = 4.07).

TABLE 4
Summative Evaluation of Case Writing Assignment

Statement	Mean*
Case writing assignment was challenging	4.39
Case writing assignment reviewed key course concepts	4.32
Project helped me understand "real world" relevance of course concepts	4.07
Case writing assignment reflected what I learned in class	4.04
Case writing assignment is excellent way to assess overall performance	3.57
Case writing assignment is best way to assess my overall class performance	3.32

* Measured on a 5 point call with 1 = lowest and 5 = highest

Lastly, the online survey asked an open-ended question about the overall value of this case writing assignment and its focus on base-of-the-pyramid consumers. I will leave the final words about the value of this assignment to my students:

- “It makes the students think outside their everyday lives and create a situation they might not understand initially, but come to know well in the end.”
- “I think that bottom-of-the-pyramid is a very important topic that is overlooked by companies and by other instructors. I know that none of my other friends who are at other schools have even heard of BOP consumers, which gives us an edge in understanding countries and issues that surround a demographic that is consistently overlooked.”
- “I learned a lot! The assignment put the entire class into perspective International Marketing.”
- “It was both challenging and incorporating of all that we had learned. It was fun and made me look at things through a little different viewpoint.”

References Available on Request