

THE NOT-SO-SUBTLE SINS IN CASE ANALYSIS

Gerald M. Hampton, College of Business Administration, New Mexico State University,
Las Cruces, NM 88003; ghampton@nmsu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper concerns four major sins students most often commit in case analysis. The sins are: (1) the failure to use the analytical framework of marketing, (2) the failure to define the problem correctly, (3) the failure to make a decision, and (4) the failure to be logical.

INTRODUCTION

As student demand for realism, relevance, and application continues, marketing professors will find the need to use cases and case analysis in many of their courses. Today a large number of suitable cases are available. There are marketing casebooks in such areas as marketing management, marketing research, consumer behavior, and integrated marketing communications. There has also been an increase in diversity of case type, including video cases, computer-based cases, experiential, as well as, sequential cases.

What has remained fairly constant, however, are the problems faced by all of us who now use cases and those who soon will. While opinions differ, there are at least four major problems that must be solved in some fashion if one is to use cases effectively. First, there is the need to develop and structure a course so that it allows for logical integration of case materials, the use of marketing concepts and their application in specific situations. Second, one must develop a classroom style appropriate for teaching by the case method. Third, it is necessary to demonstrate to students that the case method has content and that they are learning something. Finally, there are the difficult tasks of evaluation and grading the students' work, including class participation, presentations and written analysis.

Authors have written extensively on the first three problems. There are numerous works giving helpful hints on how to teach concepts in different disciplines, course design, preparation of class outlines and the selection of case materials. A number of teaching approaches and techniques have been suggested ranging from a structured to an unstructured format. Ways to enhance learning and methods of demonstrating to students the usefulness of the case method have also been extensively discussed.

Unfortunately, and in my opinion, the problem of how to evaluate students' work has received considerably less attention. The purpose of this article is to present a basic treatment of the four common sins students most often make in case analysis. They are: (1) the failure to use the analytical framework of marketing, (2) the failure to define the problem(s) correctly, (3) the failure to make a decision, and (4) the failure to be logical in evaluation, analysis and decision making.

While these four sins are certainly less serious than the capital vices of Pride, Avarice, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy, and Sloth, they do offer one framework that can facilitate the evaluation of a student's case work. In addition to evaluation and grading, it provides a certain focus to help students improve their problem solving and decision-making skills.

Based on my experience, I am convinced these four sins extend beyond the classroom. In fact, they are prevalent in the "real" world. Consequently, this framework can add a valuable dimension to marketing management education while demonstrating the value of the case method as a pedagogical tool.

CAVEATS

First, this paper is presented from the perspective of the typical marketing management course. This class is generally the capstone one for undergraduate marketing majors and is taken following courses in introduction to marketing, consumer behavior and marketing research. For graduate students, this class is often the second marketing class in the MBA program, following introduction to marketing. At both levels, marketing management is that course in the marketing curriculum most likely to be a case course.

Second, the marketing management course objectives are different from others in the curriculum. In the marketing management course, students are expected to use and practice the entire range of problem solving skills, including situation analysis, problem definition, decision-making and action/implementation. On the other hand, in the marketing research course, a case is often used in a more limited and specific fashion such as critiquing a

questionnaire for a marketing survey. Therefore, the four sins presented here apply more to a marketing management type of course rather than a marketing research or consumer behavior course.

Finally, the actual evaluation and grading of a student's work using this framework will depend on the instructor's style and objectives. One way, and the most obvious, would be to assign equal weight to each of the four sins (areas). Class participation could be evaluated by asking questions that fall within one of the areas. The final procedure will of course depend on the instructor's preferences and judgment. Whatever the "ground rules" are, they should be understood by all students.

SIN 1: FAILURE TO USE THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK OF MARKETING

A demanding professor of mine was known for constantly reminding students, "facts are facts and when listed or discussed, are nothing more than description, and description at best, can only be interesting." He would insist that the analytical framework for marketing was designed to give meaning to these facts. It of course consists of three basic parts: (1) segmentation and target market selection, (2) market mix development, the marketing strategy, and (3) market information and research use to assist in decision-making. When rigorously used, it helps answer those all important marketing questions. Do we have the right market? Do we have the right product? Do we have it in the right place? Do we have the right price? Do we have the right promotion? Do we have the appropriate information? Of course the analytical framework of marketing sits within the marketing environment.

In most marketing cases a situation is presented that has occurred after implementation of a marketing plan or marketing activities. The student is asked to analyze the current situation. This requires the students be analytical in the sense that they assess *each* of the elements of marketing in terms of objectives, past and present information. Information often used includes such items as sales history, market share, competition, marketing mix data, firm goals and organization structure, as well as selected aspects of the organization's business environment. During this process, it is necessary for students to establish criteria based on the situation and company objectives, so they can judge the effectiveness of the current and/or proposed marketing actions.

Students tend to commit several variations on this sin. The most obvious is the failure to use any part of the analytical framework of marketing. To a certain extent we are all captives of our models and concepts, but in a marketing management course using marketing cases, it seems reasonable to expect the student will see this as a marketing situation or issue, and use at least the 4ps framework. However, this does not always occur. Recently, a student in my marketing management class, who was finance major, tended to view cases from a financial perspective. It produced interesting results, but the student missed the point.

Another variation is what I call the "limited focus syndrome." Here the student focuses on only one or two elements of the marketing framework. What can be a most serious sin, for example, is when you have a case emphasizing price and the student completely ignores it in the analysis.

Another aspect that makes for dull reading in written assignments is where the student simply repeats the facts as presented in the case – the "description syndrome." I make it known from the start that I have read and analyzed each case assigned. Therefore, there is no need to submit a revised edition. When this occurs, it is a strong indication the student has failed to develop the criteria needed to evaluate the present or future marketing program.

In summary, facts as presented in the case must be interpreted and evaluated. The means to accomplish this is to rigorously employ the analytical framework of marketing. Failure to do so is to commit a major sin in case analysis.

SIN 2: THE FAILURE TO DEFINE THE PROBLEM CORRECTLY

Most case textbooks suggest the student define a problem as a deviation from a desired set of specific conditions or a range or acceptable conditions. The objectives or goals are considered optimal outcomes of a marketing plan or program. Thus, the difference between actual outcomes and the ones desired are indicators that a problem exists.

On the other hand, some classify this as problem recognition. However one views this step, it is one of becoming aware that a problem exists, taking note of problem symptoms that occur before an analysis of the situation. Many case developers see problem definition as a process of determining the question or questions that, if properly answered, can best provide the resolution to uncertainty facing the

decision maker. The tasks in problem definition, then, are to determine *cause* and *effect* relationships. For most marketing cases, the cause of deviations from expected results are to be found in the analytical framework of marketing. For example, declining sales, lower than expected profits, and lost market share are the effects caused by such things as improper target market selection, low product quality, too high of a price, inappropriate distribution channels, or inadequate promotion efforts.

Sorting out and determining the causes in a particular case require a through analysis using the analytical framework of marketing. Failure to do so results in several errors in problem definition. One of the most common is to simply restate certain facts as presented in the case. Many of the facts such as declining sales and profit are symptoms, not problems. For the past several terms I have assigned a case in which a university is confronted with declining enrollment. I often receive a few papers that define the problem as declining enrollment without any effort to determine the causes for the decline. The result is a lack of focus and confusion when the student gets to proposed solutions.

Another encountered sin in problem definition, one that I have a great deal of sympathy for, is to blame others. In case analysis it often means blaming the competition as the cause of company problems. If only they had not lowered their prices. Why did they have to develop a new product just now? My all time favorite, especially in international marketing cases, is to place the blame on government. After all is it not governments who are responsible for the red tape and regulations that make marketing internationally difficult at best? Of course, none of these are acceptable as problem definitions. Overall, students must be made to realize that the process of problem definition requires one to specify the underlying cause(s) that prevents goal attainment. The implications are (1) that cause and effect relationships must be established, (2) that the cause must be under the control of the firm, and (3) that a framework of analysis is necessary including knowledge of the firm's goals, values, and organizational environment.

SIN 3: FAILURE TO MAKE A DECISION

Conventional wisdom is that a problem well defined is half solved. However, we must never be lead to believe that half a solution is better than no solution at all. A decision, including plans for implementation, must be made, otherwise our analysis and problem

definition, no matter how well done, mean nothing. I ventured to guess that much of the recent criticism directed at business schools is because we continuously allow our students, who eventually enter the business world, to commit this sin.

A recent journal article on marketing quoted a CEO as saying that the B-school mentality – quantify everything, take few chances – is threatening the entrepreneurialism that companies need if they are to grow. I used to agree with this criticism. For a time I also felt the best way to ensure a person would not enter business is to have them attend a business school. The reason for my cynical view was that what we do when we place emphasis on analysis, especially in the case method, is to help students learn all the ways they can fail. No matter how comfortable we are with our tools and analysis, it is time we took them for granted and began emphasizing marketing decision making.

There are several variations on this sin. The most common, the “cop-out,” is to recommend the organization conduct a marketing research study. This may suffice, but I demand that students be specific in terms of what kinds of information is sought, what type of research is to be conducted, how much it will cost, and exactly how and what data are to be used to make what decisions to solve what problems. In addition, I attempt to select cases for the marketing management course that contain sufficient information to make a decision.

Another common technique some students use is to play the “if game” with one or more alternative solutions. Phrases such as the following that I have encountered over the past ten years are sure signs of this game: *If* the company can, *then* they should; *either or*, depending on; *perhaps* the company can; they should; which should be considered; it *might* help if they; it *might* hurt if they; its very likely; its very unlikely; and some of the all time favorites *may* find, *could* find and *may* mean. The end result is that no decision is made and should be graded as such.

The final variation of this sin presented here is what I have labeled the “shotgun” approach. It occurs when the student recommends that the organization implement all or most all of the alternative solutions. This error tends to occur early in the course and is often committed by the better students. The students' reasoning must be something like this: since the professor must have a favorite decision, and because I have to had the opportunity to learn his/her preferences, then it is best to play it safe and suggest the organization do it all.

SIN 4: THE FAILURE TO BE LOGICAL

While I occasionally go to extreme lengths not to stifle creativity in students' case analyses, I do insist that their work make sense. If their discussion, written analysis and presentations are logical, then they have a much greater chance their recommendations will be accepted and acted upon. In a sense this is marketing one's work and is perhaps the most important aspect of decision making.

An example will best serve to illustrate this often committed sin. In the case mentioned previously – a university facing declining enrollment – I have received assignments that emphasize completely different and unrelated aspects in each of the three major problem solving steps of (1) analysis, (2) problem definition and (3) the decision. Recently one student paper focused in depth on promotion in the analysis, ignoring completely the product (liberal arts education in this case). The student's analysis was detailed, lengthy and outlined clearly what was incorrect with the university's advertising, public relations and personal selling.

After this effort, I assumed the student would define the problem to be somewhere in the promotion area. However, the student defined the product as the problem – demand for liberal arts education is declining. The recommendation offered by this

student decision maker was to lower the price (tuition) for the product. This simply is not logical. It distracts from the students work and is what many would call "sloppy" thinking. Students often argue after receiving a low grade for such work pointing out they did after all make a decision acceptable to most members of the class. My response is that it is not only the correct decision (which in their case was due to chance) but the logical process of arriving at the decision.

CONCLUSION

One of the most difficult tasks in a case course is to evaluate the student's work. This paper briefly outlined one framework that can be used, not only to evaluate and grade student's work, but help them improve their problem solving skills. The framework consists of four major sins or areas in which students consistently make mistakes in case analysis. They are: (1) the failure to use the analytical framework of marketing, (2) the failure to define the problem correctly, (3) the failure to make a decision, and (4) the failure to be logical. While there are certainly other ways to conceptualize students' mistakes made in case analysis, these are offered as the most general and prevalent, therefore, providing a needed framework for evaluation of student case work.

References Available on Request