

## THE CASE BRIEF

### A Model for Case Analysis, Writing and Discussion

John Washbush  
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater  
washbusj@uww.edu

#### ABSTRACT

*The session addresses a common problem in undergraduate case discussion and writing—the tendency for students to reiterate lengthy lists and discussions of facts of the case without effectively identifying key facts while failing to adequately addressing their implications. The case brief, using the basic problem-solving model, provides a carefully structured approach for the student to more precisely define key facts, identify valid strategic problems, and more pointedly define, discuss and recommend relevant courses of action. In addition to describing the model used in the brief, the session will interactively demonstrate an exploration of a short case using the case brief format.*

#### SESSION OVERVIEW

The objectives for this session are (1) to define the structure and use of the case brief and (2) to illustrate the use of the case brief via exploring a short strategic case. The session is intended for (1) persons who instruct undergraduate and graduate business policy courses and (2) persons who use strategic cases for management training.

#### THE CASE BRIEF CONCEPTUALLY

The case brief is based on the Dewey problem-solving model (felt difficulty, investigation and diagnosis, problem identification, stating and exploring alternative responsive actions, selection, implementation, evaluation). By their very nature, case analyses cannot follow this process beyond selection and defense of proposed actions. However, the experience of the presenter is that most business students who attempt strategic case analyses are far better at documenting the facts of cases than effectively identifying and exploring the strategic implications of those facts. The case brief is specifically designed to tightly direct and restrict the student's approach to the facts of the case. Although not evident in the model that is described in detail below, I place emphasis on the problem statement, specification of alternatives and the recommendation put forward. These points of emphases are addressed when I introduce this model and in the way I grade. The model provided to students is assigned to my students and stated as follows:

Each of you will write a case brief. It should not exceed five pages (typed, singlespaced). The brief is to conform to this format:

Diagnosis (key facts)	Bullets
Statement of the problem	Sentence
Identification of alternatives	Bullets
Recommendation and rationale	Paragraph

Diagnosis is defined as a process of defining and using key case data. Analogous to the process of medical diagnosis, the objective is to determine what essential concerns are suggested by stating and analyzing these data. The Statement of the Problem requires the student to define, not what is wrong, but what is or are the significant strategic concern(s) that management must resolve.

Please CAREFULLY observe these points in preparing case briefs:

- I. Discuss the following points in the Diagnosis section consistent with the information provided in the case:
  - a. Type of business
  - b. Divisions (if applicable)
  - c. Markets and products
  - d. Current mission and strategy
  - e. Industry analysis
    - Market share data on companies in the industry
    - (1) Competitive dynamics
      - 5 Forces Model of Competition analysis
      - Competitive changes and trends
      - Key success factors in the industry
    - f. Marketing management
    - g. Operations (Production) management (technology used and degree of sophistication)
    - h. Financial management
      - 1) Capital structure (equity & debt) and trends
      - 2) Profitability analysis (surplus revenues for non-profit organizations)
        - Profit Summary (gross, operating, and net)
        - Identify divisional profitability for diversified company
        - Trends in profitability
      - 3) Cash Flow (is there evidence that a healthy portion of cash inflows is supplied by normal business operations?)
      - 4) Assessment of the company's financial situation
    - i. General economic situation and trends (macro economy) that affect the industry and the company

## **Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 31, 2004**

- j. International business factors and implications for the industry and the company
- II. The "Statement of the Problem" must be phrased in the following manner and must describe a strategic issue of obvious importance to the company or organization:

What can or should (company name) do to....? You fill in the appropriate focus of the question.

- III. Specification of Alternatives. State the alternatives clearly and as precisely as possible. For each alternative, discuss its pros and cons (i.e., the potential benefits and potential negative effects). Using a SWOT analysis (and the basic BCG Matrix, if applicable) can be very helpful in developing a list of alternatives.
- IV. Recommendation and Rationale. This should be a solidly reasoned paragraph in which you state and defend your recommendation for the strategic action(s) that you think will best address the problem you have identified. You should link this discussion to the list of alternatives so that it is clear which one(s) you believe should be followed and why and which ones should be rejected and why. Finally, you should address the means by which your recommendation(s) is (are) to be implemented.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

Students are introduced to the case brief method during a discussion of case-method mechanics. Then, one or two cases are systematically discussed in class according to this method (in conjunction with the use of Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats (SWOT) analysis (see Appendix A). Students are then required to use this method in writing cases. As is apparent in the method, the emphasis is NOT on facts of the case but on strategic implications, logical development and statement of meaningful strategic insights and implications. Additionally, the method condenses and focuses student thinking and especially writing. These outcomes make the use of the method pedagogically valuable. To help students follow the method, they use a boiler-plate document provided by the instructor (Appendix B).

### **DEMONSTRATION**

The session will illustrate the use of the case brief format through an interactive discussion of a short strategic management case. The presenter hopes for a useful dialog and discussion that will give all involved one example, however humble it may be, of Alan Cudworth's request at last year's Baltimore conference for "something to take home."

Appendix A

THE SWOT MATRIX

	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>STRENGTHS</b></p> <p>List those <b>internal</b> characteristics of the company that enable it to undertake assertive actions and enter into new projects. Strengths include (but are not limited to):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Profitability</li> <li>2. Reputation</li> <li>3. Market leadership</li> <li>4. Production efficiency</li> <li>5. Effective advertising</li> <li>6. High quality products</li> <li>7. Innovation</li> <li>8. Capable management</li> <li>9. Skilled workforce</li> <li>10. Strong financial position</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>WEAKNESSES</b></p> <p>List those <b>internal</b> characteristics of the company that restrict its ability to take assertive actions or enter into new projects. Weakness include, for example:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of profitability</li> <li>2. Poor reputation</li> <li>3. Market follower</li> <li>4. Production inefficiency</li> <li>5. Poor advertising</li> <li>6. Poor product quality</li> <li>7. Lack of innovation</li> <li>8. Mediocre/poor management</li> <li>9. Workforce problems</li> <li>10. Poor finance position</li> </ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <p>List those <b>external</b> situations that appear to offer attractive situations to the company. These are forces that attract the company. Do not list actions the company might take. For example:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lowered interest rates</li> <li>2. International markets</li> <li>3. Economic expansion</li> <li>4. Changing consumer behavior</li> <li>5. Changing demographics</li> <li>6. Rising incomes</li> <li>7. Favorable government action</li> <li>8. Companies seeking alliances</li> <li>9. Favorable cultural changes</li> <li>10. Complementary channels</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>S O STRATEGIES</b></p> <p>State here possible and realistic strategic actions that are specifically consistent with the interaction of strength and opportunity factors. These actions, which are intended to use strengths to exploit opportunities, can be expected to be extremely aggressive and optimistic.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>W O STRATEGIES</b></p> <p>State here possible and realistic strategic actions that are specifically consistent with the interaction of weakness and opportunity factors. These actions should be directed to taking advantage of opportunities that may help the company reduce its weaknesses.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>THREATS</b></p> <p>List those <b>external</b> situations that may harm the company, prevent it from being successful in its markets, or restrict actions that would seem to be desirable. For example:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Higher interest rates</li> <li>2. Barriers to markets</li> <li>3. Economic contraction</li> <li>4. Changing consumer behavior</li> <li>5. Changing demographics</li> <li>6. Shrinking incomes</li> <li>7. Unfavorable govt. actions</li> <li>8. Strong competition</li> <li>9. New competition</li> <li>10. Legal actions</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>S T STRATEGIES</b></p> <p>State here possible and realistic strategic actions that are specifically consistent with the interaction of strength and threat factors. These actions should be directed to using strengths to reduce or neutralize threats.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>W T STRATEGIES</b></p> <p>State here possible and realistic strategic actions that are specifically consistent with the interactions of weakness and threat factors. Acknowledging the presence of threats in relation to the company's weaknesses can be expected to engender a list of actions that is aversive and gloomy.</p>

# Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 31, 2004

## Appendix B

CASE BRIEF FORMAT: You can use this as boilerplate for drafting your case brief.

### I. Diagnosis

- a. Type of Business
- b. Business Units
- c. Markets and Products
- d. Current Mission and Strategy
- e. Industry Analysis
  - (1) Market Share Data
  - (2) Competitive Dynamics
    - 5 Forces Model of Competition
    - Competitive Changes and Trends
    - Key Success Factors in the Industry
- f. Marketing Management
- g. Operations (Production) Management
- h. Financial Management
  - (1) Capital Structure and Trends
  - (2) Profitability analysis
    - Profit Summary (gross, operating, and net)
    - Divisional Profitability
    - Trends in Profitability
  - (3) Cash Flow
  - (4) Assessment of the Company's Financial Situation
- i. General Economic Situation and Trends
- j. International Business Factors and Implications

### II. Statement of the Problem

What should (company name) do to....?

### III. Strategic Action Alternatives

SWOT Matrix/Basic BCG Matrix  
Alternatives and Pros and Cons

### IV. Recommendation and Rationale