

Agribusiness Case Study Competitions – Educational, Practical, Challenging, and Rewarding

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Abstract

Case studies are a useful tool in agribusiness management education. They attempt to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result. A number of professional associations have developed case study competitions as a way to get students engaged with their association and support future professionals. Typically a case study competition will allow students to compete in teams – pitting them against other teams – with the teams subsequently judged for their analysis of the case and presentation of their recommendations through both written and oral communication means. This article describes the benefits to students, faculty and industry of a case study competition, and provides pointers, notes and suggestions to consider when organizing such a competition.

Introduction

Why Case Competitions?

Case studies that carefully present a company's situation and the challenges the company faces have a long history as effective teaching tools. These cases highlight economic, marketing, business, and/or other principles that require the students to apply what they have learned about selected principles. They are received well by students "because they serve as an interesting way to learn how to apply analytical tools in true-to-life agribusiness settings," (Seperich et al., 1996). Because of the desire among students to compete and win, it is no surprise that this teaching tool has also been adopted for the basis of competition between students. Often times case study competitions can be a team from one university pitted against teams from other universities. However, such a competition has also been used within a class to promote a fun way to engage students, such as in a graduate agribusiness class at Purdue University (Wang, 2009). In both cases, bragging rights are at stake, and on occasion cash awards. This competitive environment and valuable learning opportunity affords students many immediate and long term benefits. Our paper presents the

fundamentals of cases and case competitions, complete with examples from current case competitions and the authors' firsthand experience with these competitions.

Definitions

Although some may consider it remedial, it is important to explicitly explain what is meant by case study and case competition within this paper so as to avoid confusion. According to Schramm (1971, p. 6), "the essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result." In research, a case study is a way to empirically explore through observation and assessment phenomena that do not conform to statistical analysis. With respect to pedagogy, given the context of the challenges faced by the firm, students need to study the situation, assess the economic consequences and come up with the best decisions to solve the problem. Having students interject themselves as the decision maker helps "foster(s) critical thinking and reflection so that students learn how to learn on their own." (McDade, 1995, p. 9). In the agribusiness sense, these decisions are generally within the context of a food or agribusiness firm and present a situation faced by management. The case is then utilized as an example of a "hands-on" situation for students to apply their analytical and managerial skills, generally in developing strategies to address the circumstances outlined in the case.

Initial development of business oriented teaching case studies is generally attributed to the Harvard Business School. When the School was started, the faculty discovered that there were no textbooks suitable for a graduate program in business. Their first solution to this problem was to interview leading practitioners of business and to write detailed accounts of what these managers were doing. The professors could not present these cases as practices to be emulated because there were no criteria available for determining what would succeed and what would not succeed. Thus, the faculty instructed their students to read the cases and come to class

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prepared to discuss the cases and offer recommendations for appropriate courses of action.

Teaching cases are generally written with particular learning objectives in mind and are refined in the classroom before publication. Additional relevant documentation (such as financial statements, time-lines, and short biographies, often referred to in the case as "exhibits"), multimedia supplements (such as video-recordings of interviews with the case protagonist), and a carefully crafted teaching note often accompany a case study. If they are not formally part of the publication, items like teaching notes can often be obtained through the author(s).

Colorado State University has developed a good resource for information on writing and utilizing case studies. More information on case studies can be obtained from the World Association for Case Method Research and Application (WACRA). Another good source is "Case Study Research: Design and Methods," by Yin (2003).

Competition

With the growth of case study utilization as an instructional tool, there have been a number of professional associations that have developed case study competitions as a way to get students engaged with their association and support future professionals. Typically a case study competition will allow students to compete in teams – pitting them against other teams – with the teams subsequently judged for their analysis of the case and presentation of their recommendations through both written and oral communication means.

Although there are a number of competitions, a small set of examples are presented in Table 1 to highlight some concepts of case competitions. The Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA) organized their first graduate student case

study competition in 1998 at their annual meetings in Salt Lake City, Utah, and the competition has been held annually since then (Graduate Student Section 2009). The Food Distribution Research Society (FDRS) organized their first case study competition in 2000, and moved to a live case competition format in 2004 (Student Food Marketing Challenge 2009). The International Food and Agribusiness Management Association also offers a case competition – but with an international focus (IAMA, 2009). The last example in Table 1 is that of the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington, where they have corporate sponsorships and use the program as a recruiting tool for their MBA program (Foster School of Business, 2010). Additional details listed in Table 1 are discussed further in the rest of this document.

Broad Benefits

Both students and faculty gain from well-structured and administered case study competitions. We discuss each group in more detail below.

Benefits to Students

Agribusiness case studies are typically a description of a real situation faced by a food or agribusiness firm. As such, they force students to practice their analytical and managerial skills and pit their thoughts and presentation skills against other teams. As with in-class use of case studies, an argument can be made that there are no "right" answers to "solve" a case study. Although true, there are definitely answers that are "more" correct and make better sense given the parameters of the case study and what we know about economics, management, finance, marketing and the rest of the managerial sciences. Additionally, how the students support their decisions is very important. Their decisions must be based on good data, sound analysis, and critical thinking.

Table 1. Examples of Case Study Competitions in the U.S.

Organization	Competition	Lead Time	Case Format*	Presentation / Q&A Time	Students Targeted (max)		
					Undergrad	Grad	Maximum
Agricultural and Applied Economics Association*	Graduate Student Section Case Study Competition	2 weeks	Paper	15/5	Not allowed	3	3
Food Distribution Research Society**	Student Food Marketing Challenge	30 Days	Live Case	15/5	5	2	5
International Food and Agribusiness Management Association***	Student Case Competition	< 1 week	Paper	15/5	4	4	4
Foster School of Business, University of Washington****	Global Business Case Competition	48 hours	Paper	15/15	4	NA [†]	4

*see: <http://www.aaea.org/sections/gssnew/?p=284> and

<http://www.aaea.org/sections/aemnew/2010CaseStudyCompetitionRegForm.pdf>

** <http://fdrs.ag.utk.edu/casestudy.html> and <http://fdrs.tamu.edu/FDRS/Welcome.html>

*** <https://www.ifama.org>

**** <http://www.foster.washington.edu/centers/gbc/globalbusinesscasecompetition/Pages/GBCC.aspx>

[†]NA = Not applicable

Agribusiness Case

Students are required to apply many skills and knowledge in case competitions. These settings provide an exceptional environment for students to practice critical thinking, teamwork, division of labor, research, decision making – all occurring with a definitive deadline. These are all activities which they will face when they become employed by an agribusiness firm. Thus, students gain knowledge, solve problems, practice making presentations, and learn to use tools, which will help to hone their skills and talents. For example, students that participate in the FDRS Student Food Marketing Challenge are required to efficiently assess a situation, come up with a sound method to approach the problem, and pitch their approach playing the role of consultants bidding a job. All this work is done between 9:00am when the live case starts and 7:00pm when the first round of presentations begin. That situation is a fairly real scenario and the added time constraint really forces the students to focus on the task at hand.

Going through these types of competitions provide lasting benefits for students as they begin their careers. Whether it is the time crunch of the FDRS competition, the month long analysis in the AAEA competition, or the international exposure in the IFAMR case, students can take lessons learned into pressure situations, like interviews. In addition, during job interviews, when many college students have minimal experiences and limited topics to talk about, students who participated in case competitions have a wealth of thoughts to share about their experience. Our own students have credited their experience in case study competitions for better performance in job interviews and employers have viewed such participation and knowledge as positive. Other collegiate activities provide similar benefits, but these competitions are central to the students' career field as well as all the other life skills.

An additional benefit of participating in a case study competition is that the students can interact with executives from agribusiness firms and other industry experts (if they are utilized as judges). This interaction provides the benefit of allowing students to learn from and be guided by real life practitioners, as well as give them the opportunity for networking which may lead to internship or full-time job opportunities.

Benefits to Faculty

The benefits from competitions go beyond the students. Faculty also gain from participating in the competition. There are many ways faculty can be involved: program coordinator, case writer, coach, and judge. Program coordinator, especially for young faculty, offers leadership opportunities as well as exposure to industry. Writing the case offers the same exposure to industry as well as the potential for a published case study. There are great advantages to refining a case through a competition where many people offer feedback. That process certainly helped

Gunderson et al. (2009) publish their case which was originally developed for the Food Distribution Research Society's Student Food Marketing Challenge. In addition to writing cases, coaching a team can offer great insight into a program's effectiveness. Coaching, a very humbling experience, allows one to really assess how well students have mastered topics taught in the classroom. This realization can ultimately lead to better program curriculum and better teaching skills. Finally, judging the students' presentations offers faculty the opportunity to evaluate students from other universities, and by proxy, allowing the faculty the opportunity to benchmark their university's program.

Benefits to Industry

Case studies benefit the profession of agribusiness management in a variety of ways. At the outset, the development of a case study results in a scholarly product which requires research and insight into challenges faced by management. The sponsoring of a case study competition validates the format as a method of good teaching. In addition, it heightens the awareness of the agribusiness industry to the value of the subject matter taught in our universities and the expertise and competence of our students. For the company that is the case subject, they have the opportunity to wrestle with their challenge with the case writer and potentially with the students and judges participating in the competition, depending on their involvement. One year, a company president, acting as a judge for the final round of the AAEA Graduate Student Case Competition, walked away with a strategic thought that opened up valuable opportunities for their business. Admittedly, this level of benefit is rare, but the possibility of the company thinking about their situation with fresh eyes is very real. The final benefit for industry is the opportunity to interact with students, a pre-interview screening if you will.

Case selection / Preparation

There are a number of good sources for case studies. There are books on general case studies (e.g. Drucker, 2008; Harvard Business Press, 2009) and some specific to agribusiness management (e.g. Boland and Gallo, 2009). In recent years, a number of journals have published agribusiness management case studies. Two in particular are the *Journal of Agribusiness* (published by the Agricultural Economics Association of Georgia) and the *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review* (published by the International Food and Agribusiness Association). Until recently, agricultural economists could submit cases for publication in *Review of Agricultural Economics*; however, the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association recently redirected and renamed the publication and is now offering opportunities to publish select cases in the proceedings issue of the *American Journal of*

Agricultural Economics. In addition, the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association is encouraging case submissions to the *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education*.

Characteristics of a Good Case

A good case study competition should be comprised of the following components:

1. A good case study. Key features of a good case study include: a reasonably current topic; an interesting and realistic problem faced by an agribusiness firm; a situation/opportunity that requires the students to do both industry and firm level research; good supplements to the case study (the relevant documentation described above), and a situation that involves a bit of complexity (i.e., not just a case that focuses on human resource management or finance for example). It should be noted however, that more narrowly focused cases are important and useful for classroom use, so as to zero in on a particular area of management.

2. Recommendations/requirements for team composition. As can be seen in Table 1, case competitions can be for graduates only, undergraduates only, or a mix. The level of a case study competition is entirely the choice of the sponsoring organization. Some considerations include: if the case competition is for undergraduate students, there is obviously a larger potential target audience who might participate. Graduate students can be expected to perhaps give a more in-depth analysis and presentation – and time available for the competition may help to focus this choice. The focus of the case study competition will tend to dictate team size. Undergraduate competitions often have teams of three to four students, while graduate student competitions usually have two to three students per team. The difference is to allow for a bit more input and “hybrid vigor” in the case of undergraduates, who typically do not have as much background or experience.

3. Knowledgeable and prepared judges – these can be authors of the case study, professors or individuals from the firm involved in the case study. Whoever is recruited, they should possess some expertise that allows them to make a judgment call on student performances. These judges will have to be briefed on the case, and ideally actually have an opportunity to read the case. Finally, they will have to be instructed on how the presentations are to be graded.

4. Reasonable physical facilities for teams to make their presentations. Almost any room that can be set up lecture style will work. One key piece is to be able to shut out student teams that have yet to present. It is not fair to allow the last place team to learn from all the others that go before them.

Marketing/Recruiting

Often an overlooked aspect to hosting/conducting a case competition is marketing of the

program. Without an effort to get the word out, both faculty and students will find it difficult to commit their time and resources toward the competition. Marketing is a step that pays great dividends. There are several options to consider. If the competition is taking place in conjunction with a professional conference, coordinating with the professional organization to highlight the competition in the conference brochure is a must. Most everyone planning to attend the conference will at least browse the brochure affording this spot great exposure. However, most faculty looking at the brochure will do so quickly. That means it is important to make sure the segment on the competition is very recognizable.

In addition to the conference brochure, one can work his/her professional networks. Everyone knows someone that can have an influence. By working relationships, one can recruit several teams by simple word of mouth. Professors who teach agribusiness classes should also be informed about the competition. However, no matter how good networking is, it is still limited in scope. Therefore, it is a good idea to couple the networking with advertising by either blast or targeted emails. Many times associations will be willing to email your announcement to their members as a service to the profession.

Information Sharing

There are many different formats that competitions use with respect to the information shared with teams. As seen in Table 1, it can range from sharing the case within 48 hours of the competition to having the full case for the better part of a month. The appropriate level of information shared depends on the competition's objectives. For the AAEEA competition, students are expected to come in with answers to the case's challenge and thus the students need the 30 day lead time. For FDRS's competition, students are expected to only propose a method of approach to conduct the research necessary to make the case's decision. As a result, only a general topic area is revealed to the student prior to the competition, allowing students to become familiar with industries and concepts. For example, one year students competing in the Student Food Marketing Challenge were informed that the case dealt with private labeling and processed dairy products. Regardless of the format, it is important to provide the appropriate information needed for each team to prepare in such a way as to do their best work.

It is also helpful to give the students the judging guidelines. This assists them in knowing what the competition will be based on. Additionally, this also helps to focus the work of the judges – so that they know what they are looking for, and tends to level the playing field.

Judging

Criteria: Obviously, different competitions will focus on different goals and objectives and may be

Table 2. AAEA* Case Study Competition Judging Guidelines and Scoring Sheet

Category	Description	Point Value	Team Score
Description of the Case Situation	A brief overview of the situation found in the case should be provided. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An accurate summary of the case study firm's industry position, market environment, and business situation. 	5	_____
SWOT** Analysis & Industry Assessment	In order to evaluate the case study firm's product lines and make strategic recommendations students should conduct a SWOT analysis on the two products and assess the attractiveness of each industry.	15	_____
Strategic Direction	Recommend and justify the strategic direction the case study firm should pursue in order to sustain itself in the short-term and position itself for long-term success.	25	_____
Strategy Recommendations	Recommend specific business strategies to accomplish the direction/objectives identified above. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify strategic alternatives and support the recommended choice(s). Take into account implementation issues, including organizational and financial constraints. 	25	_____
Ability to Address Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How well did students support their recommendation? Were they able to adequately address judges' questions? 	20	_____
Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presentation Clarity & Style, Evidence of Teamwork, Poise answering questions. 	10	_____

Any Comments to Team:

*AAEA = Agricultural and Applied Economics Association

** SWOT = Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats – a business environment analysis technique attributed to Albert Humphrey from Stanford University.

looking for different things. Tables 2 and 3 contain examples of scoring criteria for the AAEA and FDRS case study competitions.

People to serve as judges: It can be difficult to find judges for the competition, especially if the competition happens before a conference starts or if the competition is not part of a conference. It is important to start the recruitment process early, especially when travel arrangements must be made. Judges can be chosen from a variety of areas. Often a good potential judge is a manager or owner associated with the case study firm, or people from that same industry who will have specific insight into the case study situation. Professors in academia with experience in agribusiness management and/or the writing of case studies are also good choices as judges, especially if they work with industry.

Costs: In any situation, and especially in the current economic times, it is important to keep costs in mind. When putting on a competition, there are many things (conference room rental, meals, equipment) that are needed, and if one has to pay for or rent them all, they will be paying a hefty sum out of their pocket. Instead of offering a budget, we want to highlight the various requirements for running a case competition and provide some ideas of how to minimize costs.

One of the largest possible expenses can be room rentals. If the competition is part of a convention, the organizer of the convention will likely take care of reserving the rooms. Depending on the accounting procedures and policies of that organization, these rooms could be charged to the competition. Oftentimes, that cost is simply rolled into the overall cost of the conference.

Along with rooms, comes the need for audiovisual equipment and supporting furniture. In each

Table 3. FDRS* Food Marketing Challenge Judging Guidelines and Worksheet

Category	Description	Possible Points	Team Score
Case background	Provide a short overview of the situation, describing what are the factors leading to the food marketing challenge	5	_____
What is the food marketing challenge in the case?	Identify the major issue(s) or problem(s) that the team plans to answer in their research proposal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has a true problem been identified? Is the problem clearly and concisely defined? 	10	_____
General industry knowledge	Present evidence that the research team has the general knowledge about the industry sector (e.g., market structure, market trends, consumer behavior/attitudes, competitors, etc.) to be credible analysts.	10	_____
Proposed plan of research	Describe the research approach that the team proposes to use to answer the research question <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What type of data will be collected? How will the data be analyzed? How much will it cost to collect and analyze the data? 	15	_____
Justify the proposal	Provide supporting evidence as to how the team's proposed research plan will address the marketing challenge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You've now told us what you plan to learn, how will that information help us make a decision? 	15	_____
Provide a budget	What will it cost to complete the project? How long will it take to complete the project?	5	_____
Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presentation clarity & style Evidence of teamwork in the presentation Quality of PowerPoint slides Speak clearly and can be heard 	25	_____
Acted as consultants	Did they play the role of marketing research consultants bidding on a project addressing a management team	5	_____
Q&A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poise in answering questions Able to think on their feet 	15	_____
- PENALTY POINTS FOR TIME			
TOTAL POINTS			

Judges comments:

*FDRS = Food Distribution Research Society

room, there will need to be a computer, data projector, screen, and table to put the projector and computer on. These all add up, and in many cases, the AV system is expensive to rent from facilities like convention centers and hotels. Many conferences usually work with their members or host institution to provide this type of equipment, at least the computers and projectors. If the cost appears to be too prohibitive, perhaps one of the organizers can bring a computer and projector – a bit of an inconvenience, but may save significant cost.

Finally, the administrator of a competition has to consider refreshments. If the structure of the program is such that students simply show up for their presentations, perhaps there is no need for food or beverages. However, sometimes there may be a need to feed students (and judges). For example, early on, the Student Food Marketing Challenge provided lunch for students (originally a sit-down lunch and subsequently a boxed to-go lunch) during that Saturday of the program. This was eventually dropped due to time and budget constraints.

Summary

Case studies are a very functional educational tool in the classroom, but as we have outlined case study competitions can be utilized as a focal point for student competition on a regional or national level. In this role, they can get members of your organization involved, provide a service to students and introduce your group to them. In addition, case study competitions are a valuable way to involve industry and expose agribusiness managers to students. The resulting interaction is good for all concerned.

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