

Letter from the Editor

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Does this case smell funny? The perishability of cases

We have all done it. At some time or another, we have pulled a carton of milk from the refrigerator and wondered whether it was still fresh enough to drink. We open it, smell it, look at it and if nobody is looking, take a swig straight from the carton to confirm that the milk is still okay to consume. Do you do the same thing with cases? Are the cases you are using in classes past their “sell by” date or are you using “fresh” cases?

There are two trains of thought on the perishability of cases. Some consider certain cases as “classics” – covering important issues that are timeless and delivering learning opportunities that are essential for any student. Others believe that cases set in time periods more than five years ago are outdated and should not even be published in current issues of *TCJ*. Do cases have an expiration date – a point at which they no longer should be used?

The “classic” case

Many instructors have favorite cases that they use over and over in their classes. These are the cases that generate good discussions, provide excellent learning opportunities for students and focus on topics that the instructor likes to talk about. They serve as the backbone for the course syllabus, with other perhaps newer cases sprinkled among them. Sometimes these cases are from the instructor’s own educational experience or their own publications.

Garry Emmons (2005) wrote about five Harvard Business cases that were still being used in the classroom despite being written more than 20 years earlier. These cases included “Benihana of Tokyo,” “Lincoln Electric Company,” “Sealed Air Corporation,” “Cumberland Metal Industries,” and “Shouldice Hospital Limited.”

Emmons asked the original case authors and the instructors that continued to teach the cases – what made them so enduring? Some felt the durability of the cases came from the generalizability of the learning, the focus on basic management issues, the timelessness of the business issues and a focus on issues that were teachable in the classroom. While providing an illustration of concepts that were still critical and relevant in the classroom, “classic” cases were proven winners – effective and useful in generating student learning of important course concepts. The age of the case did not diminish or deter student learning.

Although instructors may view certain cases as classic and enduring, that is not always the way they are viewed by students. “Why do we have to read about the past,” they may ask. “This case was written about something that happened before I was born,” they may complain. “How is this relevant in the digital world that represents business today?” If millennial tastes for classic movies are any indication of their preferences for classic cases, surveys show that 30 percent of millennials (today’s undergraduate students) have never watched a black and white film all the way through (SWNS, 2017). Only a third of millennials have watched a movie from the 1960s, while even fewer have seen any movie made in the “golden age” of Hollywood (1940s–1950s). These films are considered to be “boring” (SWNS, 2017) in much the same way that students react to “classic” cases.

Millennials seem to understand what it takes to make a film a “classic” – “a great plot, staying relatable over time and containing memorable scenes or quotes (SWNS, 2017).” These qualities seem to also apply to cases. The “classic” case must present a great timeless story that contains memorable characters or scenes. Cases that are tied to a specific time period in the past, focus on issues that are no longer relevant in contemporary



business practice or where the outcome is well known, generate little student interest. These cases are seen by students as irrelevant, forgettable and tedious. Never mind that the learning objectives of dated cases may still be relevant to the modern student, the lack of student engagement in the case scenario may make achieving these objectives very difficult if not impossible.

The “fresh” case

In a short essay on the McGraw-Hill website, strategic management textbook author Frank Rothaermel recounted an exchange he recently had with one of his students (Rothaermel, 2018). “Professor Rothaermel,” the student said, “I don’t think the strategy concepts and frameworks we are studying are relevant for today’s economy and companies. I’m worried that I’m not learning what I need to succeed.” Rothaermel thought about the student’s concern and the cases he had selected for class. “When I was a business school student in the mid-1990s, we studied “classic cases” such as Crown Cork and Seal Company,” Rothaermel said[1]. “Today’s students think about Apple, Tesla, Snapchat, Spotify, Netflix, WeChat, Uber, Google, or Baidu.” As he thought more about the student’s question, Rothaermel came to the conclusion that the key to teaching strategy to millennials was to “apply concepts and frameworks that have stood the test of time to today’s organizations and their challenges.” So, for him, the case situation was not the aspect that made it classic, the analytical frameworks and concepts that were applied were the enduring components in case research and writing.

But how “fresh” or recent does a case have to be to be relevant to the millennial student? There are many different opinions on this question. My students tell me that they consider any case set more than two years ago to be ancient history. One student told me that this was because she was still in high school two years ago. She perceived that the business environment had changed significantly since then and it was difficult for her to go back in time to address issues that were current when she was more worried about whether her team would make the state playoffs than what was happening in a particular business. Millennial students do not remember a time without emojis, books that could be ordered online through Amazon or Justin Timberlake as a solo act (Beloit College, 2018). As digital natives, millennial students have grown up in a world without floppy disks, a divided Germany, or a Montgomery Ward’s catalog.

Real Time Cases was founded by three Lehigh graduates in 2016 to provide students with multi-media cases presenting real challenges in the moment they are happening in existing tech companies. For the entrepreneurs at Real Time Cases, a “classic” case might be about something that happened less than six months ago. The company believes that students are more engaged in real world cases featuring real challenges that are happening in real time. The challenge for Real Time Cases is to produce case content as quickly and efficiently as possible so that the case issues remain relevant.

The production time line for cases often presents challenges to the time relevance of many cases. After conducting research on the case situation, it takes time to craft the case and instructor’s manual (IM), to try the case out in the classroom, to submit it to a suitable conference, to revise the case based on conference feedback and ultimately to submit it to a case journal. Authors then must wait for the peer review process. Theoretically, *TCJ* promises a quick turnaround of 45 days for the first feedback from the review process. In reality, due to unresponsive reviewers or other delays, the review process may be much longer. Authors then must complete the revisions specified by the reviewers whilst teaching their classes, advising students and enduring an endless round of meetings. The revision is submitted and the review process begins again. It is not uncommon for cases to require two to three rounds of review before a final acceptance can be issued. The case is then assigned to an upcoming issue of the journal and more time unavoidably passes as the issue is produced. Another 18 months to 2 years have now passed since the initiation of the case. While efforts are constantly

being made to reduce this time line to bring more current cases to the case catalog, there does not seem to be a way to speed up the review and publication process (but we will still try our best to do so).

What is *TCJ's* editorial policy on the age of cases?

If you are writing about a case situation that happened more than three years ago, consider the following:

- Are the issues of the case dependent upon a particular time period? If so, your case may be too old to be published. For example, it would be difficult to see the relevance in 2018 of an information technology case about a company's efforts to address the Y2K bug.
- Is the analysis of the case dependent on student's knowledge of business conditions of more than three years ago? Cases set during the global recession of 2008–2009 may not remain relevant for today's students – until the next global recession takes place.
- Does the case address a unique situation that is timeless or at least still relevant? Human resource management cases addressing discriminatory hiring, evaluation or promotion issues may unfortunately remain relevant although the actual events happened more than five years ago.
- Are the theories, concepts and analytical frameworks of the case still relevant in the current business climate or have newer theories supplanted them? Caution should be taken here. The case must make an important contribution to the literature in a particular discipline. One could argue that no one needs yet another strategy case that allows students to only do a SWOT analysis – the case must do something more than that to be published.
- Are the case learning objectives still relevant in the academic discipline? Using dated references in the theoretical sections of the IM triggers many questions in the reviewers' minds about case relevancy. Make sure that you are current in your theoretical references and in the application of theory in answers to discussion questions.

TCJ will not set an arbitrary rule that prohibits publication of cases that are set in the past, but our preference will be for cases that are engaging and provide excellent learning opportunities for students. This may mean that some cases will not be accepted for publication because the editor and reviewers believe the case has passed its expiration date and is no longer fit for student consumption. The onus is on the author to demonstrate that the historical case makes an important contribution to student learning and can be considered a "classic."

In this issue

This issue includes six cases (see Table I) focused on a wide variety of companies, locations and issues. Each case has a strong IM providing effective teaching strategies, theoretical linkages and complete answers and analysis to all discussion questions. *TCJ* IMs have been rigorously peer reviewed to ensure that adopting faculty can teach these cases as well as the authors. Will one of these cases become a "classic?" Read them for yourselves and decide whether the case will withstand the test of time.

Table 1 Cases in this issue

<i>Case title and target audience</i>	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Synopsis</i>
Rapid Reel Lawn Master Company: cutting the target down to size Audience: undergraduate students in upper-level marketing classes, management courses, such as strategic management	Al Lowvorn and John Timmerman	Paula Hendricks, Director of Marketing for Rapid Reel Lawn Master Company tasked with developing a plan to exploit the current trend in lawn mower purchasing patterns must craft a strategic proposal for the executive planning committee. Rapid Reel Lawn Master Company, a manufacturer of reel mowers, experienced an increase in sales due to a confluence of factors: high gasoline prices, increased concern with the environment, the trend toward smaller yards and a focus on health and exercise. Paula needed to develop a plan for the company to sustain the bonanza and determine whether this trend offered new opportunities for marketing
Decision time for ACEES Group LLC: to buy or to lease? Audience: undergraduate students in entrepreneurship, real estate investments of financial management	Raminder Luther, Sanjay Kudrimoti, and Sanjay Jain	As the move from the business incubator loomed, Abdul Khan had to decide where his business should relocate. ACEES Group LLC, a small consulting firm had grown from three friends working out of Abdul Khan's house to a 20-person firm generating more than a million dollars in revenue within five years. This growth had necessitated the need for a larger and more prominent place. Although Abdul knew he did not want to renew the lease at the incubator, and he did not want to move his business too far from its current location, but the decision he had to make was whether ACEES Group should lease a commercial place or buy its own property. He was particularly torn because the real estate prices had fallen considerably, and were now on the mend and interest rates were still low
Pebble Technology Corporation: from dorm room dream to high tech pioneer Audience: graduate and undergraduate strategic management courses	William Schnepfer and Colin Martin	Pebble Technology Corporation (Pebble) was an early entrant into the smartwatch industry. Pebble's founder, Eric Migicovsky, began thinking about creating a smartwatch in 2008 while still an undergraduate engineering student. After selling about 1,500 prototype watches, he was accepted into Silicon Valley's prestigious Y Combinator business start-up program. Finding it difficult to attract investors, Migicovsky launched a crowdfunding campaign that raised a record-breaking \$10.27m on Kickstarter. The case concludes shortly after Apple's unveiling of its soon-to-be-released Apple Watch. The case provides an opportunity to evaluate Pebble's various strategic options at the time of Apple's announcement
The job search dilemma: good vs right Audience: graduate and undergraduate courses in organizational behavior (decision making), human resources management (employee recruitment), and business ethics (ethical decision making)	Noel Palmer, Kyle Luthans and Jeffrey Olson	Desai, a college student, faced a job search dilemma. Desai applied for two internships – one with a company known for a good culture, strategic carrier logistics (SCL), the other with Thijs Marketing, a company in an industry more familiar and desirable to Desai. After a number of recruitment interactions with both companies, Desai received an offer from SCL and was given two days to decide. Unsure whether Thijs Marketing would make an offer, Desai considered accepting the offer from SCL, but reneging if Thijs eventually offered a job
Killing 'em softly: terminating projects in a video game studio Audience: graduate and undergraduate courses in human resource management, project management and creativity management	Louis-Etienne Dubois	As a case study on human resource management (HRM) and project management in a creative setting, this disguised case is based on a real situation that was documented through individual and group interviews at a major video game studio. Several HRM and project management concepts can be discussed through this case including employee retention, planning and staffing, and intra-company communication. It seeks to help students develop a multi-level, interdisciplinary and critical analysis of a common HRM situation in project-based creative sectors and invites them to devise action and communication plans to handle the termination of a project
Turnaround at Carpets International Audience: undergraduate strategic management/business policy courses	Marilyn Helms and Ralph Boe	This case presents turnaround alternatives for a UK-based company, Carpets International (CI), a manufacturer focused on woven carpets and suffering from the ageing equipment and resulting product quality issues during the late 1990s. The case profiles Carpets International's position in the UK marketplace as well as highlights the growing international competition from Europe and Mexico. Comparisons between customer's preferences for carpeting in the USA vs the UK are included. Additionally, the case introduces first-mover advantages in the application of innovational ideas applied to a mature industry in another country

Note

1. I studied the same “classic case” during my own MBA program in the late 1970s. Truly a “classic.”

References

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SWNS (2017), “Millennials don’t really care about classic movies”, *New York Post*, August 16, available at: <https://nypost.com/2017/08/16/millennials-don-t-really-care-about-classic-movies/> (accessed July 2, 2018).