Guidelines for Writing a 575-Word Case Analysis

Many strategy professors and business-case authors advocate fairly detailed, analytical written case analyses running to five or more single-spaced pages. So why do I ask for this to be done in two double-spaced pages (575 words)? For three reasons: (1) to train you to say more in less space, and (2) to foster critical thinking. The written case assignment has a twin challenge: to analyze the case, and then communicate your arguments and recommendations clearly, concisely, and persuasively. Doing only one of these things well is insufficient. (3) Executives tend to read first anything that is one page long (two pages double-spaced is one page single-spaced), and less likely if the document is longer.

You know how many things go into a complete strategic analysis. So how to convey all that convincingly in only two pages double-spaced? Use the following guidelines to structure your paper:

Devote one paragraph to the topic in each of the following bullets:

- A strong opening sentence and key aspects of the external situation analysis, including something key about the industry, competition, market, and environmental trends. If the company name is long, use a shortened form immediately and then consistently use the shortened form subsequently (e.g., Azalea Seafood Gumbo Shoppe (“Azalea”)…)
- The financial analysis starting with the conclusion statement and followed with supporting data (using numbers, just like the presentation conclusion slide); for some reason, beginning with the conclusion works better in a written report, the other way round in a presentation
- The company’s strengths, weaknesses, and threats, and core competence or competitive advantage, if any (no need to use the labels “strengths,” “weaknesses,” and “threats”—it should be obvious from the contents)
- The key strategic issues or challenges facing the company, phrased as questions and combined into one or two “list” sentences (with an “or” before the last item and a “?” at the very end)—aim for at least ten
- The 2-4 strategic-alternative bundles, fully described in a fairly long sentence each, with the various components of each bundle separated by commas. By all means include, as a final sentence in the paragraph, the elements common to each bundle to avoid duplicating them in each bundle. Aim for each bundle to comprise a total of about eight elements to fully describe it
- A compelling argument as to why your chosen bundle is preferred over the other(s) (use criteria from your Criteria Matrix in your arguments). An argument consists of two parts: (a) why your chosen bundle is the best or better than the others, and (b) why you rejected the bundles you did not choose. The Criteria Matrix should not be part of your paper, but I am asking you to include one after the end of your paper

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1 Opportunities are intentionally omitted here because most of them will show up when you outline the key strategic issues facing the company; no sense in duplicating the information; but they are far from unimportant.
• The company’s short-term (next year) revenue and NIAT objectives, strategic intent, six programs to achieve them, and one trigger/contingency pair (put the year at the very beginning, e.g., “In 2005, …”)
• Long-term (third-year) objectives, strategic intent, 5-6 programs, and one different trigger/contingency pair (also start out with the year, e.g., “By 2007, …”)

The last two paragraphs are the most important and should be edited first. Next edit the three paragraphs on strategic issues, bundles, and argument for your chosen bundle. Next edit the SWT and financial-analysis paragraphs. Whatever space (words) you have left has to suffice for the entire external analysis. Keep checking your word count as you edit, and rewrite or remove words accordingly (hyphenate some words and use accepted abbreviations as discussed in class). After editing, read through the paper again to make sure it flows nicely. Check also for grammar and spelling, typos, and consistency. Do not exceed the word count of 575 words—I will check it.

Imagine you are a consultant advising the president or CEO as to what to do strategically, and that you want him or her to agree with you. Check your recommendations for appropriateness, feasibility, and consistency, and for whether your arguments and evidence support them. Be specific (i.e., use data or numbers) wherever and whenever you can, rather than generalities. Check also that your bundles address all your strategic issues (delete ones that remain unaddressed or add others that you want to include in your winning bundle that were missing before).

When you receive the model papers for Callaway Golf and Ocean Spray Cranberries (OSC), compare it to these instructions and see how well they comply.

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