So They're Writing a Case—About You! An Open Letter to the Organizational Host of a Case Writer

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Dear Case Site Host,

This note comes to you from a faculty member/case writer who believes your organization would make a great teaching experience for a course he (or she) teaches at the business college.

That's great. It's even a little flattering, to think you and your company are that interesting, and can contribute something to the educational world. There are many ways you can benefit from the case-writing process, from enlarging your pool of future recruits to gaining new ideas about your own firm's alternatives. But there can be pitfalls in the process, too. You will be sharing a lot of information with those writers. They will be documenting problems as seen by decision-makers of your organization, expecting their students to come up with solutions. Here are some things to think about with your writers, before the process begins.

Most schools of business administration rely to some extent on case studies as a teaching vehicle. Some schools use cases deliberately to immerse their students in a variety of problems, industries, and environments that would appall most operating managers. MBA candidates at Harvard typically analyze three full-scale cases per day, every day for their two-year course of studies—and test each analysis in vigorous debate with their classmates. By graduation, those students should have developed a high level of skill in identifying facts and opinion, sorting important from trivial detail, defining alternatives, deciding what to do, and working with their people to make things happen.

To be useful, a case has to be published. If your writers use the standard approach, the "Harvard model" of field research, they will treat all the data they gather inside your organization as confidential. They will use what they need to build the case, and bring the finished product to you for release. You will control its publication. Your writers should assure you that absolutely nothing will happen to the case until you sign

* This note was written 40 years ago, when a colleague in my doctoral program had invested some six months in writing a case about a major corporation in Pittsburgh, where he had several interviews with the CEO. When he asked for a publication release, using the standard Harvard form, the new CEO refused. The case died, stillborn. This note lived longer, passed hand-to-hand among case writers but never before published. The author thanks classmate Victor Faux for his inspiration. [Note from the editor: Having been the grateful recipient of one of these "passed around" copies, I requested permission to publish it as a useful companion piece to the "Notes on Case Disguises" that also appears in this issue.]

a release permitting its use. At the end of the process, your writers will ask for a letter of permission to publish. It will simply say,

"I have read the case titled (your title) and dated (your date), and give permission for its publication and use in printed or electronic form, for books, journals or data bases."

Let's imagine what your reactions might be when you first see that draft . . .

"My God! We Can't Say That in Public! Disguise the Case!"

You, the students, and your organization will all benefit most if the case identifies you. Not all cases use the real names of the sites or the characters they describe, of course. But those that do bring an air of reality into the classroom discussion which can't be reached when names are disguised.

Chances are that some student knows your operation personally or at least knows the city, the industry, or the market you compete in. Disclosure of your real name allows the students to bring their outside experience to bear on the case discussion, and even to look up published data about you, to supplement their analysis or to answer the ever-present student question, "What did the people in the company decide to do in this situation?"

Real names, too, can make your own attendance at class discussions far more profitable. An atmosphere of respect and friendliness follows almost automatically when the professor introduces you to the class by name. The students, after all, have already met you, in the case.

If the case identifies your organization, it will serve as a valuable recruiting tool for several years. Case firms are often sought out by students who like the style, the problems, and opportunities described in their cases. This benefit can hold whether or not you send recruiters to the campus; students with initiative may contact you directly, if they've been "turned on" by the case. Students never contact a disguised company.

A realistic case will almost certainly include information which is not publicly available. You should expect to see details about sales, or technology, or internal conflict, or personal opinions of your people that would never appear in the business press. Some managers—often those closer to operating levels of the firm's hierarchy—may feel this kind of information could depress the firm's stock price, or alienate the market, or reveal proprietary information to competitors. You will have to decide whether such fears are justified in your own case. Data subject to rapid changes rarely presents a risk. Other information can be disguised a little in the writing; your competitors will never know whether they are reading the real thing.

Neither you nor the writers know at the beginning of the research what the end product will look like. But, knowing what teaching goals the writers have in mind, you may help them avoid sensitive areas. The time to discuss these issues is before the writers begin work, reserving the decision to impose a disguise until you see what the final draft says.

"But We Can't Wash Our Dirty Linen in Public!"

Cases are written about decision situations, and most decisions are made when people recognize some sort of problem. Having problems is normal. Opening up a difficult situation to examination by the students is the heart of the case method, and reflects positively on the firms described. What is important to the students (and to your market and your competition) is that you survived the situation, strong enough to talk about it and let students learn from it.

All cases are written to provide a basis for class discussion. They are not intended as examples of either effective or ineffective managerial action. In a good MBA class, almost any action your people have taken will be called "great" by some students and "disastrous" by others. The writer's job is to focus that debate on the proper issues, and lead the class to consideration of what your people could do next.

Even the story of an apparent debacle can reflect credit on your organization. First National City Bank presents an example. When an ambitious program to modernize the bank's data processing systems blew up in 1971, Citibank lost control of its books for a week. Some Citibank managers, studying a case about the resulting chaos and the bank's later analysis of its change process, were shocked at the idea of publishing details of their crisis; they felt the case should be censored. John S. Reed, Executive Vice President then in charge of Citibank's Operating Group [and later CEO], demurred. "You didn't make us look bad enough," he said as he released the case with full identification. "We had to change, and we had to pay the price. But we've learned—and maybe others can, too—to pay a smaller price in future changes." Classroom debate on this case is often violent, but reflects great credit on the bank's management, its resolve, its candor, and its desirability as a potential employer. Reed said the case weeded out job applicants who would be afraid of change.

If you decide your case must be disguised, you still have a range of options available. Disguises may be "thin" or "heavy." They may simply change the organization's name, or they may portray it with a different product, in a different industry, in different locations and with slightly different financial statements. Heavy disguises are a lot of work to the writer. Retroactive heavy disguises, imposed after the original case has been finished, are among the most disheartening pieces of work the writer can do. Your visiting researchers will greatly appreciate your discussing the topic of confidentiality now, before they begin work.

A few writers prefer to gather data as an investigative journalist would, with all of your comments "on the record." These writers should clarify at the start of every interview that their work will not be subject to review and approval by the company (although they will probably give you a copy of the finished case and may ask your help in correcting any factual errors). So long as you know the rules, you will have an idea what to say. Both approaches to field research are legitimate and can produce outstanding classroom experiences for the students.

"The Case Doesn't Show a Balanced Picture of Us!"

Some managers picture a case as a public relations document intended to show the whole range of their operations, their history, their organization, their markets, and their strategies. Cases that attempt global description in detail usually fail in the classroom. They're too ponderous to be digested by the students. Good writers will present a balanced picture of the problem they are describing, as seen by the people directly involved, but not from the viewpoint of the whole company. They'll sketch in enough other material to provide a setting for the situation, but most of the words will focus on the problem at hand.

"My People <u>Couldn't</u> Have Said That!"

Opinions are the richest and most vital ingredients of the business school case. Liberal use of quotations sparks debate in the classroom, and highlights differences of opinion within your organization. Some of those quotations may surprise you: people often "open up" to a neutral outsider where they would never say the same things directly to you. Case-writers are trained to preserve confidence, so your case shouldn't identify who said what unless the people involved have agreed. But the case should give, very carefully, the essence of what was said. Chances are you should believe it.

As the subject of a case, you have a rare chance to learn about the divergent opinions and assumptions of your people. Some organizations find it useful to hold their own group discussions, debating the case issues. Most writers will be delighted to "teach" such a class, on a consulting basis. (You should be aware that site follow-up work is not normally considered part of the research process.)

"How Much Will We Spend on This Thing?"

Case research relies on interviews, and you will be investing the time of your people in the process. Neither you nor your writer can estimate accurately how much time will be needed, from whom, at the start. Perhaps one to two hours of your own time, and an hour each from three or four other managers over a two- to three-month period would suffice. For a very complex case, the demands could be much higher.

"It Contains Inaccuracies, Misleading Information, and Conflicting Data . . ."

A good case study does not try to analyze the situations it describes. That's the job of the students. The real world is crowded with conflicting data and misleading information, and the writer deliberately includes it in the case, along with clues for its resolution. It is up to the class to sort the fly-specks from the pepper; that's how students learn which is which

As you read the finished work for the first time, some of those inaccuracies may leap out at you, and tempt you to red-pencil the manuscript with acid comments: "no way," or, "that just isn't how things work here." Those are exactly the reactions the writer hopes to trigger in the classroom. Eliminating the inconsistencies might emasculate the case discussion. Your role in releasing the final draft is crucial. You want to eliminate the misstatements of fact that come from the writer's ignorance, but preserve the conflicting data they have included on purpose. This sometimes requires a telephone call to determine which is which.

"This is a (Terrible/Excellent) Piece of Writing . . ."

Not all academics know how to write, and few business schools teach creative writing. Report writing, yes. But creative writing, rarely. You have a right to expect that your case be a good one, but still it would be unfair to refuse its release just because you feel it will put the class to sleep. Lively class discussions follow naturally when the writing itself contains elements of real life: humor, suspense, conflict and human characterization. You may help the writer capture these elements, by recalling conversations, incidents, meetings, or specific examples illustrating the subject problem. That kind of data is essential, if the writer is to recreate your situation well enough to let the students identify themselves with your people and your organization.

For both your sake and the writer's, however, you should resist the temptation to get involved with the detail of the manuscript's wording. High-level editing can be a frustrating time-sink, for both of you. The writers will value your suggestions, but only they can judge what fits the teaching purpose of the case; the process will be smoother if you leave them in control of the writing, and responsible for it.

"Can I Attend the Class Discussion? Should I?"

Most professors will jump at the chance to have visitors in class. Class visitors universally report satisfaction with their experience; the investment of time (and sometimes travel) appears worthwhile. You should note that invitations come from the professors who actually teach the class, and your writers may not themselves be the first instructors to use the case. Class participation is a personal arrangement between you and the faculty member.

"What Happens After I Release the Case?"

Depending on its quality, the case may be filed away unused or it may be taught thousands of times, in schools and companies all over the world. Your writers may submit the case for presentation at a case development workshop or for refereed journal publication. Either of these routes will bring the case to the attention of textbook authors, who are eager to find new materials for their next editions. Workshops are organized by a number of faculty development organizations that encourage case writing and teaching. The North American Case Research Association (NACRA) began its workshops in 1958 and began publishing its Case Research Journal in 1980. Cases accepted for the quarterly Journal go through a rigorous process of review and revision; only 10 to 15 percent of manuscripts are typically accepted.

A successful teaching case will endure for years. It may be taught by hundreds—even thousands—of professors, to tens or scores of thousands of students. When you let a case researcher document a problem in your organization, you contribute in a major way to business education.

"How Can I Tell Whether My Writer's a Good One?"

Granting access to a case researcher is a lot like hiring an employee: the most important ingredient is mutual trust, which usually comes from a combination of references and personal contact. You should feel free to talk with the supervising faculty member, or to others at the writer's school. (The Dean there, by the way, would be a useful contact if you'd like to take the initiative. and invite someone in to do a case.) In the best of worlds, your confidence should permit you to write this kind of memo, to introduce the writer to your colleagues:

> "Mr. A.K. Schreiter, of the local business school, has asked to write a teaching case about our current situation. I am delighted with this opportunity; I've offered my co-operation and yours, to the extent you can spare the time for interviews. You should be aware of the following understandings:
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> "I will sign off on the finished case before it is circulated either inside or outside the organization. I have reserved the right to disguise it, and Mr. Schreiter has agreed to disguise your comments if you want, so none of your opinions will be traceable to you as an individual without your agreement ahead of time. Under these conditions, all of us should feel free to talk openly, without fear of tarnishing the organization's image. I'll decide, when we see what the finished case says, whether it can be published under our own name.
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> "With luck, we'll learn more from this case than Mr. Schreiter's students will. We'll gain a new viewpoint on our problems, the chance to attend a class discussion, and maybe the chance to hire one or two of those students."

If your discussions with the writer have given you a basis for making this kind of introduction, whether it's written or verbal, then the chances are you're working with a "good" researcher.

Few executives pondering the release of a case will experience all of the reactions I've described here. Most of them take a great deal of pride in the finished case, and benefit from its use for several years. The purpose here has been to anticipate potential surprises, and prepare you to be a demanding, knowledgeable host to that case writer. A few minutes spent now, discussing confidentiality, resource requirements, pedagogical purpose, and classroom participation could prevent one of those rare misunderstandings which result in collapse of the case development process, and of the case writer as well.

The important thing is that you know what you're getting into, so you can manage the process to produce an outstanding case. That's my own selfish reason for writing this memo: I may teach your case some day, and I'd like it to be a good one.