Unlocking Case Ideas: Insights on Overcoming Barriers in Case Study Research

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Among the most challenging tasks in conducting research is figuring out who or what should be the focus of your next project. To our knowledge, although there are a considerable number of published cases (and likely an even larger quantity of unpublished cases), there has been almost no research on how researchers actually obtain their ideas for cases, not to mention follow-up research on how those ideas are brought to fruition and eventual publication, as well as the barriers to doing so.

BACKGROUND – 2023 NEW VIEWS SESSION

In order to learn more about this issue, we conducted an interactive New Views session at the 2023 NACRA conference in San Antonio, Texas, with approximately 25 case writers in attendance. Our primary objective for that session was to explore two questions: How *do* case researchers find case ideas? And are there any best practices? Attendees indicated that case ideas came from many sources: alumni contacts, subjects of a doctoral dissertation or prior research project, reports in the news or trade press, companies and organizations with which they had relationships, or perhaps a topic in the course syllabus, such as a learning objective that had not yet been adequately covered. During the session, we observed how passionately case writers spoke about their cases. Some attendees even referred to their cases as their "children," expressing how they did not want to give up on them, even when they had "hit a wall."

After the session, we remained curious about how other published case researchers felt about these issues. Although we had initially focused on where case ideas come from, we decided to pivot this investigation from case idea generation to a broader set of questions including how published case authors contracted with client companies and identified the barriers to completion and publication.

Methodology

With the help of the current *Case Research Journal* (*CRJ*) Editor, we conducted an open survey of case researchers who had published their work in the *CRJ* from 2019 to 2023. The survey was conducted via Qualtrics during April 2024. The survey was sent to 80 case writers who were designated as "corresponding authors" on *CRJ* cases, of whom 52 completed responses, reflecting a 65% response rate.[1]

While some respondents reported they would have preferred to record multiple answers (rather be forced to choose a single answer), our intent was to discern the

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primary sources of case ideas, case contracting techniques, and challenges to case completion. In addition, each question provided space for "Other" open-ended answers, allowing for multiple responses.

Approach

Our paper is structured around three primary topics: (a) case idea generation, (b) contracting with prospective case clients, and (c) challenges in gathering necessary data and information to proceed to publication. After each topic is introduced, we present a vignette based on one of this article's author's experiences, followed by data from the April 2024 survey. We then discuss how to tie the insights, prior literature, and data together. We close by offering some implications of this investigation for future research and providing practical tips for case authors.

CASE IDEA GENERATION – SERENDIPITY OR STRATEGY

A case idea can arise from a chance meeting with an amusing or charming person who has a story they are willing to tell. Many cases have centered around unique people who had an unusual background or had capitalized on a new relationship with another person. Serendipity — a fortunate discovery by accident — is often a beginning for the relationship between a case researcher and a protagonist or subject of the case. But how can case researchers make serendipity work for them?

Case idea generation vignette

Exhibit 1 compiles eighteen cases published by one of this article's co-authors in *CRJ* from 1997-2022. The exhibit tabulates the industry context, course learning objective(s), and primary source of the idea. Nearly all of these cases were generated by accidentally happening upon 'a good story' or 'a valid, willing protagonist.' Not listed are forty other cases published elsewhere, as well as ten cases that never saw the light of day. With respect to the latter, on several occasions the client organization backed out. Alternatively, so much time passed during the review cycle that a case no longer seemed relevant and the author needed to focus attention on other research projects.

Survey responses: case idea generation

Exhibit 2 enumerates the sources of case ideas reported by survey respondents in April 2024. Of the listed options, the predominant choices were: "a company or organization well known to me" (38%) and "course learning objective that required coverage" (19%).

Another 21% of survey respondents reported "other" sources of case ideas, most likely because they desired to report more than one source, for example: consulting practice, trade press, alumni contacts, and prior research, such as for doctoral dissertations or empirical papers using case-based data.

CONTRACTING WITH CASE CLIENTS

While serendipity also played a large role for the co-author of this article, at least when it came to contracting with prospective case clients, knowing what to accomplish and whom to ask for help do so (not to mention persistence) also appeared to have paid off.

Case contracting vignette

One of the co-author's cases (about a not-for-profit public radio and TV station) was actually suggested by another professor, who had attended a class to conduct a peer evaluation, as part of a final review for tenure and promotion in 2003.

> It was the first undergraduate capstone strategy class of the semester, and instead of reviewing the syllabus and sending students home early (as was then, and probably is still today, current practice), I handed out a 2-page case about "Robin Hood" by Joseph Lampel, asked students to read it and facilitated a discussion of the case for 50 minutes, before giving students a break. Every student (I recall there were about forty in that so-called 'seminar' class) had a chance to contribute to the discussion.
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> The peer evaluator prof came up to me during a break in the discussion and said to me, "wow! I wanted to raise my hand and contribute, but I know that is not fair to you. What a class — I never knew that business classes were so interactive! And your choice of a case about the topic of how to organize a group to combat social injustice and wealth inequality really spurred me to thinking about my own little nonprofit organization. Would you be at all interested in writing a case about that organization?" We had a contract!
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> So, as it turned out, this peer evaluator enjoyed the class so much that he asked me to write that case. He and another Political Science professor, and that other professor's wife at the time, had together founded the public station some years back. His new wife became executive director of the station (and was also the case protagonist).
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> The peer evaluator who had recommended the case was from the Political Science department and at the time also happened to be the head of our University's Retention, Tenure, and Promotion (RTP) sub-committee, the penultimate step for a probationary faculty member like myself to tenure and promotion to full professor. One might well conclude that it was a strategic decision on my part to invite that professor to review my class, since if he was positive, I reckoned, there was no way that the rest of the committee would vote against me.
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> I recall that I had to ask my department (Business) for special permission to have an evaluator from outside the department conduct the peer review, and my department chair reluctantly agreed, but advised me against it. "It's your funeral," the chair said, " . . . because the lefties in the PoliSci department hate us right-wing business folks [or something unprintable to that effect]!"
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> Well, as it turned out, asking this PoliSci professor to evaluate my teaching was indeed fortuitous: I not only was awarded tenure and promotion on my first attempt, but also given a lead to a wonderful case that later did get published in the *Case Research Journal*.

Survey responses – case contracting

How case researchers who responded to our survey do contract with and obtain permission from clients to write cases is shown in **Exhibit 3**. A clear majority of respondents report they contracted successfully with clients "by emphasizing the contribution to management education" (37%) or "by emphasizing the contribution to the organization" (21%). "Other" responses include multiple responses, "offering coauthorship," "choosing only small firms to avoid getting legal departments involved," "forgoing a consulting fee," and "offering company disguise."

CHALLENGES TO CASE COMPLETION

Regardless of whether a company is publicly held or privately owned, obtaining accurate and timely case data can be difficult. An inability to gather needed data can delay or even end a project.

Case data challenges vignette

Sometimes, though, it pays to be creative and persistent. One co-author of this article related the following.

> For three of the cases (about private companies), I ran into roadblocks obtaining financial data.
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> One of the companies simply did not have the financial data in Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) format, so I worked with the company's bookkeeper to generate income statements and balance sheets from the tax returns provided by the company. There was a good deal of back-and-forth between me and the bookkeeper regarding how the accounts should be classified (I am not an accountant!), but once we had finished the financials and presented them to the company for approval, they told me, "this is amazing! We have never been able to look at or even measure our progress as a business in this way before. Thanks so much for taking the time to prepare these schedules."
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> A second private company flatly refused to divulge financial data, so I obtained anonymized financial data representing three similarly-sized companies in the industry, operating in the same region, from a local bank. To create income statements and balance sheets, I averaged the numbers across the three sets of accounts to come up with a composite set of numbers. I then presented the composite schedules to the company's Chief Financial Officer (CFO). The CFO was astounded, and asked me "where did you obtain these numbers?" I then related the triangulation and interpolation technique that I had used. The CFO then said to me, "well, these are close, but not fully accurate. I'll give you a more accurate set of numbers to use providing you state clearly somewhere that these were provided in disguised form by us, OK?"
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> A third company provided financial data (the co-founder and CEO had been a Chartered Accountant in a prior career) without much hesitation, but when, during the journal review process, I and my co-authors discovered some problems with the numbers and sought explanations and updates, the company stopped communicating with us. As the clock was ticking towards final acceptance or rejection, there was nothing we could do except to explain to the then journal editor and reviewers that we had been stonewalled by the company, so we would have to go with what data we had been given and accept the consequences. We were fortunate that this explanation was sufficient, since we found out later that the company in question had been in the midst of a reverse merger prior to going public. For that reason, this particular company had entered a 'quiet period' during which no communications with outside parties were permitted.

Survey responses – case completion challenges

Once a case project gets underway, what did respondents say can derail it? We asked respondents to report how things can fall apart.

As shown in **Exhibit 4**, most respondents reported that the major barrier to project completion is an "inability to obtain confidential data" (38%). We interpreted that challenge to mean data from operations, e.g. financial statements, as well as metrics involving human resources, marketing, or production.

There were many "Other" responses to this question (40%). A handful turned out to be revealing:

- "The most important thing about generating an idea for a case is to find a gap in the case library that you can fill. That generally occurs to me after having looked for cases on specific topics. When I find that there isn't anything to support my teaching goals, I have gone out to develop a case of my own."
- "The management challenge/business problem was not robust enough to warrant publication. It was fine as an in-my-class topic, but not 'big enough' to warrant attention from a publisher or my effort to go through the publication review process."
- "Fitting the story to the teaching objectives; appeasing contradictory reviewers."
- "Client's lawyer was afraid his competitors would learn too much about the business."
- "Mostly the problem was time (too many things to do that are more urgent and better rewarded). Other times were because the topic is confidential. Others because I have the topic in mind, but I didn't know companies with that kind of situation (particularly because it would have been problematic for them to tell it in public)."

DISCUSSION

Case origins

As shown in **Exhibit 1 and 2**, a preponderance of case ideas reportedly originated from organizations familiar to the researcher, from professional contacts, or from a desire to meet a needed research (or learning) objective. This appears to be consistent with findings from a prior study about how research ideas originate. Based on a survey of Australian universities, earlier researchers identified the origins of seventeen studies (Maguire and Kench, 1984). Of those research ideas, four were initiated by industry and thirteen by the university researchers themselves. In our investigation, case ideas also predominantly come from the case researchers and not from external sources.

One of the possible explanations why most case research projects are not initiated externally, i.e. by client organizations, is that industry practitioners are generally unaware of the benefits of participating in applied research. Another possible explanation is that external funding agencies seldom provide grants to university scholars to underwrite the development of teaching cases.

Contracting benefits

To provide advice to case researchers that are seeking to contract with case clients, the Yale University School of Management (n.d.) notes that "many organizations cooperate in case studies out of a desire to contribute to management education." Over the years, the article continues, willing participants in case studies have reported that they were motivated to take part because "they understand the need for management school professors and students to keep current with practice," but also because they saw benefits for themselves such as (a) exposure in management school classrooms, (b) opportunities for student recruiting, (c) obtaining new insights about operations and decision making as chronicled by a neutral observer, and (d) opportunities for managers to observe discussion of issues and solutions for their organizations.

In contracting with prospective case clients, it appears important to distinguish between improving organizations through the research (e.g. the vignette about providing accounting) and using case research to do management consulting. The vignette and data from respondents indicate that client companies can benefit in many ways: exposure, potential hires from the business student classes, ideas for changes (if the company remains involved after the case is complete), or simply having to think about (during the interview) and read about (when the case is complete) their business and decisions in a new or different way.

Barriers to completion

With respect to challenges encountered by researchers, it is apparent that the primary stumbling blocks to completion of case projects is a mélange of (a) identifying a truly interesting and relevant dilemma, also known as "case focus," and (b) problems collecting the data that students — and that conference and/or journal reviewers indicate are necessary — for a case protagonist to make a decision to resolve that dilemma. The availability of researcher time, accessibility to robust ideas, positive collaboration with co-authors as well as journal reviewers, and the casewriter's ability to convince companies that no compromising information will be released to competitors are all factors that can make or break a case project.

A related challenge for researchers is choosing a compelling and specific case focus. How case researchers actually settle upon the best 'case focus' for their research (not to mention how to defend that focus to editors and reviewers of case journals) may well be related to their sources of case ideas, but establishing a correlation between these critical tasks is beyond the scope of this article and may warrant a future investigation.

IMPLICATIONS

In addition to the opportunities and challenges of finding the 'best' case focus, a number of areas for future investigation arose from our research. These areas are primarily (a) what are the take-aways for case researchers, (b) how can we as a community of researchers build greater awareness of our craft for potential case clients, as well as (c) apart from conference attendance, how modern technology might help to foster community among case researchers seeking assistance to bring their projects to fruition.

Advice for case researchers

Based on the vignettes, the experiences of the co-author tabulated in **Exhibit 1**, the survey data, and the bullet-point responses, here are seven tips for researchers to bring their cases from pre-idea to fruition:

1. Reach out to your network of professionals, academic colleagues, and family members to let them know you are interested learning about their challenges and possibly collaborating on developing a case.
2. Identify your primary learning objective(s) *before* you begin contracting with a company; that is, consider writing the Learning Objectives and Discussion

Questions section of the Instructor's Manual (IM) first, and choose an industry and company setting that will enable you to accomplish the objective(s).
3. Show how your case will provide value to a client company; often, companies are unaware of the benefits.
4. Treat journal editors and reviewers as your uncredited co-authors, as they are genuinely trying to help you sharpen your case focus and guide you to the information and data you will need to satisfy that focus.
5. Be strategic in obtaining data for your case; industry data are usually available that can be interpolated or extrapolated to approximate the operating metrics of companies reluctant or unwilling to provide those. In other words, don't give up!
6. Collaborate with other case authors who are well-versed in fields of business where you might not be as savvy, and learn from them. Co-authors will often cheerlead you across the finish line!
7. Know when to let go of a case project, as sometimes a company or a journal will signal that it is time to move on to another project.

Building awareness

Making industry practitioners aware of the potential of cases to improve their organizations is clearly an area warranting future investigation, since obtaining the willingness of external organizations to participate, and also share data, was top of mind among the concerns of survey participants. By the same token, many industry practitioners appear not to be aware of the benefit of cases.

Fostering community

With respect to fostering community among case researchers, utilizing or even repurposing an existing platform (e.g. LinkedIn, Academia, etc.) could be of some utility to both novice and experienced case researchers, not to mention researchers in other fields.

In terms of deploying contemporary technology to build awareness and make connections, development of a "Case Connection" app could provide researchers with (a) ideas for client organizations, (b) matches to prospective co-authors, and (c) a catalogue of previously published cases. Fastcase and MyCase are examples of apps used for collaboration and compilation of legal research, and Google Scholar, Mendeley, and ResearchGate each provide cloud-based platforms for academic users. Similarly, there may also be a need to use these platforms to inform grant funding agencies about the value of promoting teaching cases and case researchers about the availability of grants for that purpose.

We believe that since neither the major case distributors nor the case writing associations have introduced such an app to date, there is an opportunity for enterprising case writers to create such a platform to generate, share, and collaborate on the next case idea. Interested industry practitioners could likewise use the app to discover cases about other organizations that have grappled with opportunities and challenges similar to those they are facing.

While some respondents reported difficulties in working with case clients and co-authors, we believe that the collaborative nature and ease of use of platforms on which authors could share ideas may help unlock the doors to choosing, focusing, and completing a case. Why bother? We recognize that case researchers spend a good deal of time (and may experience anxiety) in the pursuit of publishing their work, while at the same time, practitioners eagerly await solutions to their organization's challenges.

Exhibit 1. Cases Published by Article Co-author in the *CRJ*, 1997-2022

	Case (CRJ publication year)	Industry	Primary learning objective	Source of idea
1	Brøderbund Software (1997)	Computer game software	Strategic management – diversification challenges	Student who worked at company
2	Mendocino Brewing Co. (1999)	Craft brewing	Strategic management – industry assessment	Faculty colleague ran a craft beer program at my university
3	RJM: Romancing the Vine (2000)	Wine	Pros & cons of vertical integration	Referral from professional colleague
4	Stone Creek Vineyards (2002)	Wine	Financial forecasting under uncertainty	Faculty colleague at another university
5	MBA Polymers (2003)	Plastics recycling	Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	MBA student project
6	Globalization of Beringer Blass (2004)	Wine	Strategies for competing in international markets	Referral from professional colleague
7	Girard Winery (2005)	Wine	Financial forecasting for a virtual brand	Referral from professional colleague
8	KRCB (2005)	Public radio & TV	Strategic management of not-for profit orgs.	Chair of university tenure & promotion committee visited my class
9	Happy Holidays Memo (2005)	Digital switches for telecoms	The "dark side" of entrepreneurship	Newspaper article
10	Respironics Inc. (2007)	Medical devices	Strategic management – growth strategies	Personal experience with CPAP machines for sleep apnea
11	Sula Vineyards (2008)	Wine	Optimal capital structure	Faculty colleague at another university
12	Ceja Vineyards (2011)	Wine	Marketing to Hispanic wine consumers - Diversity, equality, & inclusion	Visiting doctoral student from Italy attended presentation at Women for Winesense
13	Frog's Leap Vineyards (2012)	Wine	Sustainability and differentiation	Faculty colleague at another university invited me to work on prior video case about this company
14	Deutsch-Casella (2014)	Wine	Strategic management of a joint venture during a downturn	Faculty colleague at another university
15	Naked Wines (2015)	Wine	Strategic management of a disruptive business model	Faculty colleague at another university
16	Señor Sisig (2017)	Food trucks	Diversification scenario-building; diversity	Faculty colleague at another university; need to cover diversity learning objective
17	Russian River Brewing (2018)	Craft brewing	Strategic management – industry assessment	Former student is co-founder & president
18	Throwback (2022)	Craft brewing	Talent management and performance evaluation	Eldest son ran a beer tour bus company in New England & provided introduction to owners

Exhibit 2. Sources of Case Ideas Mentioned by Survey Respondents

	n	%
News or trade press	8	15%
Course learning objective that required coverage	10	19%
Company or organization well known to me	20	38%
Alumni contacts	3	6%
Brain wave in the middle of the night	0	0%
Other	11	21%
Total responses	**52**	**100%**

Exhibit 3. How Survey Respondents Secured Permission from Client Organizations

	n	%
…by emphasizing the contribution to management education	19	37%
…by emphasizing the contribution to the organization	11	21%
…by noting how the solutions that students might reach could result in new ideas for the organization	9	17%
Other	12	23%
Total responses	**51**	**98%**

Exhibit 4. Challenges to Project Completion Mentioned by Survey Respondents

	n	%
Inability to obtain confidential data	20	38%
Case client drops out of the project	8	15%
Case topic or client organization has already been covered by another researcher	2	4%
Other	21	40%
Total responses	**51**	**98%**

REFERENCES

Maguire, C., & Kench, R. (1984). Sources of Ideas for Applied University Research, and Their Effect on the Application of Findings in Australian Industry. Social Studies of Science, 14(3), 371–397.

Yale School of Management (n.d.), What Is a Case Study? Retrieved April 10, 2024 from: https://som.yale.edu/case-studies/approach/case-study-basics

NOTES

[1] The survey was "open," in that the survey invitation could be shared, so it was not possible to know how many people were eventually sent the link, and therefore the response rate we have derived is based on the best data available, even though it may not be 100% accurate.