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Cracking the case

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Can you build a convincing business case within 24 hours? A bunch of undergraduates did.

“When corporate people watch our teams (in action), their usual response is: we want to see more details,” recounts **Corrinne Fiedler**, Senior Lecturer at the University of Minnesota’s Carlson School of Management. “They say, ‘Show me ‘how’.”

The “teams” that Fiedler is referring to are made up of three undergraduates selected to participate in business case competitions, both within the United States and internationally. Fiedler led one of those teams, **Team Paradigm**, to this year’s [APEX Business-IT Global Case Challenge](#), the fifth edition of an annual student-run competition started by undergraduates at Singapore Management University’s School of Information Systems.

“Team members know they need to include details such as the link to strategy, risks, and financials,” Fiedler adds.

Problem statement

Twenty-four teams took part in this year's competition, which featured cases about Sentosa, a tourist island located off the southern tip of Singapore. Sentosa Leisure Management (SLM) runs the day-to-day operations on the island, where there is one main problem: How to entice Singapore residents to visit the island more often and spend more money. Overlaid on that problem were the opportunities and challenges posed by this year's competition theme: mobility - in particular, the increasingly pervasive use of mobile devices by people moving around and interacting with each other in physical space.

"We are a very unique setup with a unique set of challenges," explains **David Goh**, Senior Divisional Director at SLM. "Unlike a theme park, we don't have a lot of control over the elements within the island - we're not the single owner and operator of everything on the island. There are many investors whom we call Island Partners who run about 80 percent of the leisure offerings."

"So to think of a solution to try and mine data and raise the service quality for our guests means getting Island Partners to buy into the idea of what we are trying to do," argues Goh.

Cracking the case

Benjamin Hohl, **Zach Wettstein**, and **Wendy Lu** make up Team Paradigm. "We have tryouts for this team," Fiedler told *Perspectives@SMU* on the sidelines of the competition, "and we pick students who are a little more technical, has the financial skills, and who's a strategic thinker - the team quarterback."

Wettstein, Team Paradigm's "quarterback", describes their approach to solving a case. "We start with a powerpoint of a skeleton where we want to go, identifying the problems and solutions, and go from there. As for the information, we use different frameworks such as Gartner and other IT sources. We also look at public information on the financials. But a lot of information we pull straight from the case."

Team Paradigm finished second runners-up. Like most of the six teams that made the finals, it had identified the main issue - "pain point" in business jargon - that SLM face: visitors find it difficult to navigate around the island.

"A lot of them came up with ideas such as an itinerary planner, or what (eventual champions) JEP nicely put as 'Guest Experience Optimiser - GEO'; I love that name!" SLM's Goh enthuses. "There were some ideas about some form of points system; one group called it 'coins' so people would come back again and again to spend those coins. That's in line with what we're thinking of here."

While clearly impressed with the quality of the presentations, Goh felt the teams missed an opportunity to score a knockout punch. "As we saw through the presentations, there was one thing that everybody missed: 80 percent of the leisure offering on Sentosa are not owned by us. That means every additional dollar that we generate for our Island Partners, we only get a very small percentage of it coming back to us as rent to the landlord."

"Because of that, a lot of those ideas would be very hard to implement from a financial perspective. If one of the teams could crack that and come with a plan that said, 'Ok, here's a more realistic NPV (Net Present Value) from SLM's perspective', and present that to SLM's board showing how else you can make this work, that would have been the game changer."

The bottom line

That is not to say SLM was disappointed with what they saw from the students; far from it.

“When I look at the finalists’ presentations, I felt that there are two approaches,” explains **Eu Kwang Chin**, SLM’s Divisional Director for Information Technology. “One approach articulates a lot on the concept and the risks, but the implementation plan is rather simplified. It’s very hard to comment on whether they’ve gone through the necessary thinking to work out the end level details to execute the plan.”

“To be fair to them, they are doing the right thing by bringing across the key messages in the 12 minutes that they have to deliver the presentation. So in this group, I learnt from them the big ideas that they’ve brought forth.”

Conversely, the other approach emphasises details, leaving insufficient time to articulate the overall strategy. It is a perpetual problem that businesspeople – undergraduate business students or CEOs of Fortune 500 companies – face: making difficult strategic choices under pressure.

“Usually, we get one 24-hour case (in case competitions), and then we are done,” explains Hohl of Team Paradigm. “Here, we’re given two cases up front, and then we have to prepare a third presentation as well. So the number of deliverables and the number of presentations we had to prepare were just (overwhelming).”

While such high-pressure situations will not be an everyday occurrence in the business world, it is something that is hard to simulate in classrooms, making it an invaluable teaching experience.

“I believe we will send more teams to competitions like this,” says Fiedler. “I teach, and when you listen to students talk in classrooms, they talk like they’re students. I want them to learn how to talk and think like businesspeople so that they’re credible speakers in front of the judges – big picture and the details.”

And THAT is what a business education is about. Of course, it would help if you can do so in 12 minutes or less.