

Writing A Teaching Case - Interview with Dietmar Sternad and Katri Karem



What made you decide to write a teaching case (with teaching notes) rather than a research case?

DS: I very much believe in the power of cases as an effective teaching tool. Students frequently give the feedback that they learn the most from putting themselves into the shoes of an individual manager, critically reflecting on the choices that need to be made in a particular decision situation, but also deriving more general learnings from the case that enables them to enhance their repertoire for dealing with similar situations. Writing a comprehensive teaching note in addition to a case forces you to think about the learning process in a structured way. You need a lot of time and effort for it, but it really pays off, as the quality of the class experience greatly improve when it is well-prepared in detail.

KK: The case company was a small start-up created by young passionate people who can well serve as (entrepreneurial) role models for students. Frequently the starting point of a good case is positioned at a developmental stage where students can not identify themselves with the protagonist and the situation, but the Cherry case definitely gives them a boost of positive energy: everything is possible.

Your case is written about a company from Estonia. What are your thoughts on the availability of quality assured teaching cases with a focus on Estonia? What would you like to see improved?

KK: There is definitely not enough cases about Estonian companies and this is related to a set of different factors. First, the economy itself is quite young and the first spectacular case companies, situations and settings have developed only recently. Second, the tradition of cooperation between the academia and the companies is in its infancy and it is not always easy to convince the owners and managers of companies that writing a case is a good opportunity to document a certain development stage of the company and create extra positive international attention. Third, case teaching as a method has only recently taken off in Estonia creating a demand for local cases.

When an author is preparing to research and write a case study, what considerations should be given to the amount of time required and resources needed?

DS: It is possible to write the case itself in a few days only. It can even happen that you enter a “flow”-like state when you immerse yourself in the story of your protagonist and the company that he or she has built, that makes the writing process itself very enjoyable. This was certainly the case with the Cherry.ee project. The precondition, however, is thorough prior research. That, however, usually takes a few months, from the initial idea about the case and its learning goals to conceptualization, collecting data, putting it together, creating a storyline, seeing the gaps, gathering additional data, a first write-up of different sections and preparing your teaching concept to the final product. There’s a lot of work behind, but when you teach the case and you experience how students actually learn from it, you are happy that you did it.

KK: Controversially, it is difficult to plan the exact amount of time needed for a case, but it is also useful to have a certain deadline in mind - like we had with the Ceeman/Emerald case competition. Otherwise you could stay at giving the final touch forever and not admitting that the case is good enough to let it go. The writing process is a bit like a funnel - you start with having a lot of information and data and you distill it down to the case study as a synthesis of your prior research. Also, it is useful to focus attention on other issues and return to a case after certain period to have a more critical and neutral look on anything written previously. Having a co-author helps a lot here.

Your case study is about Cherry.ee, a company in online sales industry in Estonia. You do not disguise the company you write about. How did you go about forming a relationship with the company in the first instance?

KK: The first contacts with the owners were established when Mr Tomp was a guest speaker to an e-business class in the Estonian Business School. As both the speaker and the students enjoyed the interaction, the session was repeated with other study groups and as those interactions took place simultaneously with the company's success in the market it seemed almost natural to write a case study.

What advice would you give to authors wishing to build a productive relationship with the protagonist/ organization featured in their case?

KK: Continuing from the previous comment, I think we were lucky to have the contact established before Cherry become a big and well known player in Estonia. Later we have encountered difficulties with approaching other companies that have already seen remarkable success and thus they have created protective layers of contact persons who sometimes hinder the access to top managers and decision makers. It is vital that the protagonist is really willing to give input to the case and that he/she finds the process enjoyable. In fact, I would even recommend asking a potential protagonist to be a guest speaker in a class as this gives a good impression about the person's willingness to open up and share experiences. And once these experiences have been presented in the form of a guest lecture it is much easier to convince the protagonist to develop the story into a case study.

Tell us about your case study: what were your initial objectives? Did they change as your work progressed? What came first: an interest in the subject area covered or an interest in the company?

DS: Katri followed the development of the company, also due to her strong interest and expertise in social media marketing which Cherry.ee has extensively used. We both decided to take a closer look and found that the case could also be a perfect tool for discussing other issues, especially Internet entrepreneurship and how to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. We then extended our scope from the initial emphasis on marketing and also made sure that we included entrepreneurial and strategy issues, thus offering a more holistic learning experience for our students, in which they need to take into account interrelationships between different foci instead of having a purely functional view only.

KK: My initial objective was to write a case study on Cherry.ee and Dietmar as a more experienced colleague in case writing helped a lot in identifying the topics where the learning outcome of the case was the most useful. For me it was definitely the interest in the case that came first and I jumped head first into piling together all materials and information I could find and it was Dietmar's task to separate the wheat from the chaff. As the work progressed, the case started to have a clearer structure and also the data gathering was more focused on what we really needed to make it work as a learning case.

Teaching cases are intended for use in seminar/lecture rooms to engage students and so require a strong pedagogical focus. Did you test out your case study in class? If so, how did this contribute to the evolution of the case itself, with a particular focus on the teaching note?

DS: Of course, we are teaching our cases also. Even before writing a case, students' reactions to a protagonist's or company's story can be tested in class. If there is a lot of positive resonance, like in the Cherry.ee case, you know that this might qualify as good raw material for a case study. One of the main questions in this context is indeed: Can students be engaged with the case? If you see that the story generally works, you refine it with each round of teaching. It is essential to find out what the key "contested issues" are in the case, those situations where more than one alternative strategy can be chosen and on which students have strongly diverging opinions. It is these contested issues that make a case discussion really interesting, and they usually only emerge in intense case discussions. Therefore, repeated testing and refining of the teaching approach in class is really crucial.

What three top tips would you give for companies working in online sales and marketing?

KK:

- 1) For the startups I think it is essential to look at everything a company does from a marketing point of view. During business training to small start up companies I frequently encounter their worries about lack of marketing budgets. If you do not have money for marketing activities you can always show a level of excellence in everything you do, so your other activities become your marketing.
- 2) Define the brand for yourself and stay true to it in all your activities. In online environments brands become more dispersed and open to different interpretations, thus it is vital to provide a coherent image from the company itself. Deciding who you are not and what you would never do is part of what you really want to be.
- 3) Harnessing the power of your existing networks and contacts in the early stage of company growth will help to grow the circles of supporters faster than traditional marketing tools would. Beware of not over-exploiting your good social relationships, though.

Katri KEREM is a professor of marketing in the Estonian Business School and Director of Master Programmes at EBS. She holds a doctoral degree in economics from the Tallinn Technical University and is a graduate of the International Management Teachers Academy (IMTA). Before starting academic career she has worked as an advertising and PR manager for one of the largest Estonian wholesale companies and has several years of work experience from the international advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi. She has been teaching academic and executive education courses on varied marketing topics mainly related to advertising, internet marketing and e-business in different universities in Estonia. Professor Kerem has also been teaching international seminars in IAE Aix-en-Provence Graduate School of Management in France for the last three years. Katri Kerem runs her own small consultancy business which is focusing on consulting and teaching for a wide range of organizations – businesses, local governments, NGOs, etc. In 2011, she received the 2nd award in the international Emerald/CEEMAN Case Writing Competition.

Dietmar STERNAD is a Professor of International Management and the Program Director of the International Business Management Master’s program at Carinthia University of Applied Sciences in Villach, Austria. In his prior career, he was managing several media companies in Austria and Slovenia. Dietmar Sternad is a graduate of CEEMAN IMTA and has also taught at Aix-Marseille Université IAE (France), Kozminski University (Poland) and the University of Graz (Austria). He is the author/editor of the following books: “Strategic Adaptation” (2011, Springer Wien/New York), “Handbook of Doing Business in South East Europe” (2011, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills/New York), “Cross-Border Cooperation” (2012, Franz Steiner Verlag/Stuttgart), and “Grundlagen Export und Internationalisierung” (in German, forthcoming, Springer Gabler/Wiesbaden). In each of the years 2010-2012, he won international awards for producing case-based teaching materials (e. g. from Emerald/CEEMAN and from the Academy of Management).

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