What Are Case Competitions

Idea In Short

Case competitions let students solve real business problems under time pressure. Pick your team well, work backwards from hypotheses, build a story-driven deck with a clear executive summary and finish strong with a confident, human presentation.

Case Competitions Are Great Fun

I did nine case competitions during my MBA days. They are a chance to compete with students and see how good you are at cracking the case. The format differs considerably. Some competitions last three or four hours, while others can last a month. Some are among several schools, while others are within your school alone. Many are company-sponsored, combining goodwill with a chance to see which students have potential. Some have cash prizes, while others give you bragging rights and corporate gear.

Easy to Find, Hard to Do

If you search for case competitions you will find dozens sponsored by consulting firms, business schools and other groups. If you are at a business school, ask around and participate, because you will learn a lot. If your school does not have one, think about starting one, because it rallies the larger community for a useful pedagogical exercise. The Global Case Competition at Harvard offers $10,000 in prizes and draws more than 100 teams worldwide. 1 The tips below cover what you can control and what you cannot. Either way, it is a chance to test your thought process, teamwork and presentation skills.

Prepare Before You Go

Given a choice, pick your team well, prioritizing trust among participants, diverse skills and fun working chemistry. Know the audience, whether faculty, recruiters or finance, marketing and consulting professionals. Talk to peers who participated before to learn what worked

and what did not. Look at last year's case, which is usually published, and reverse-engineer a smart solution. Preparation separates teams that look polished from teams that panic.

Think Through the Case

Read through the case carefully but focus on the key points, because half of cases are needless details. Work backwards from hypotheses rather than aimlessly assembling slides. Frame a general outline for the presentation, deciding the main sections and what you want to say. Time-block your effort across the architect, carpenter and judge roles, because time management is key. 2

Do the Analysis

Put the data into a spreadsheet, because business schools in particular want to see that you modeled it out. Divide and conquer by assigning hypotheses and analyses that need finishing. If outside resources are allowed, use analyst reports, industry surveys and investor relations decks. For unconventional data, be unconventional with LinkedIn, Glassdoor, forums and chat boards. Even if 90 percent of this never makes the deck, it creates great appendices.

PowerPoint Craft

Tell a story, asking how you would explain this to a not-so-smart cousin. Use the pyramid principle and put the executive summary first. Use slide titles effectively, because titles are the key real estate on each page. Titles should tell the story, so slide one leads to slide two and so on. All graphs, tables and data should support your point. Make axes and numbers legible, remembering some judges are older than you. Avoid clip art and cheesy photos, because top firms do not use them. Focus on main points and push boring details to the appendix. Use data when you can, because as one partner said, specificity provides credibility. Cover implementation, considerations and risks to show realism and maturity.

Judge Your Slides Ruthlessly

Ask "so what" of every slide, because all slides should have a point. Time your presentation, aiming for six or seven pages in 15 minutes. Build an appendix you love, so when a judge asks a question you have a slide ready. Assign someone to be the red team and poke holes

in your arguments to prepare for Q&A. Show management acumen by sprinkling in marketing, finance, operations, IT and human capital. Ensure your presentation has a point of view, with strong opinions loosely held. 3

Presentation

Stick to the story, because judges hear five or six versions of the same case and you must be memorable and salient. Practice the mechanics of who presents, how to hand off, who flips slides and who leads Q&A. Smile and be gracious, pretending the audience is the client paying the bills. Make eye contact with key judges so they understand your points. Be human, because no one likes a robot, and business robots are the worst. Pace yourself, because the worst outcome is running out of time, which is why the executive summary goes up front. Finish strong, because studies show people remember the first and last things you say. Be confident, since optimism and confidence are contagious. Answer Q&A eagerly, thankful for the feedback as if solving the problem together. If you and your team do not know an answer, admit it and say you will investigate. Please do not read your slides, because the audience can read faster than you can talk.

Afterwards

Meet people and have some fun. If you make two or three great connections, the whole thing was a win. Forgive yourself, because you need to be your own best fan club, and if you made a mistake, no worries. Thank your teammates and sponsors, because this is all a great opportunity.

The Real Prize Is the Network

The trophy is nice, but the durable value of a case competition is the network you build along the way. Teammates who watched you perform under pressure become trusted references for years. Judges who remember a sharp answer become recruiters or mentors. Competitors from rival schools become future colleagues and collaborators. The compressed, high-stakes format accelerates relationships that normally take months to form. Students who treat the event purely as a contest miss this, while those who stay curious, gracious and human leave with connections that pay back far beyond the prize money. The case itself will be forgotten, but the people you impressed will not.

- 1The Global Case Competition At Harvard Brings Together Student Teams To Solve A Finance Case Over Three Weeks, With Cash Prizes And A Final Judged By Executives And Faculty
- 2Kellogg's Winning Strategies Emphasize Laser Focus On One Compelling Solution, Robust Primary Research And A Beautiful, Actionable Presentation
- 3MBA Case Competition Tips Emphasize Picking A Balanced Team, Researching The Sponsor And Judges, And Maintaining A Logical Storyline With Clean Slides

Summary

Case competitions reward structured thinking, teamwork and storytelling. Read carefully, model the data, use slide titles to tell the story and cover implementation and risks. Be human, finish strong and make two or three great connections. Forgive your mistakes and thank your team.