Strategy/marketing consulting skills
MRKT 9601-062-20061

Instructor Information:

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Introduction:

Strategy consultants help organizations analyze and solve some of their most challenging business problems. These problems are typically ill-defined and cross-functional, with several critical unknowns. There is either too little data or too much data. Client personnel frequently hold conflicting views on the situation. And there’s simply not enough time or resources to get to chisel the perfect solution.

How do successful strategy consultants navigate this complex terrain, engagement after engagement? They deploy an established set of structured problem-solving, communication, and influencing skills that help them bring clarity and structure to the business problem, swiftly develop a relevant fact base, identify the appropriate solution and gain organizational buy-in.

This course exposes students to this suite of consulting skills. The emphasis in the course is on developing structured problem-solving skills, with additional focus given to communication and influencing skills. The learnings from the course are broadly applicable across business functions and across industries, and besides their relevance to consulting, will be valuable in corporate strategy assignments, business development and entrepreneurship.

The course is organized around the phases of a typical consulting engagement: problem definition, problem structuring, data gathering & analysis, recommendations development & presentation. Students will get to learn and practice specific consulting tools and principles associated with each of these five phases, such as issue trees, hypothesis-driven problem-solving, interview guides and the pyramid principle.

The course emphasizes hands-on practice and real-time feedback. Formal discussion of consulting tools and skills will be supplemented by mini-cases and consulting cases based on real-life engagements. Students will get a number of opportunities to exercise and hone the skills they are introduced to during the course.
All students in the course will work in teams on live consulting engagements with local businesses. These engagements are organized in partnership with the Small Business Consulting Program (SBCP) at CBS. Teams will get the opportunity to apply learnings from the course to their consulting engagements, and to present and discuss their issues, approaches and recommendations in class.

**Learning Objectives:**

The course aims to help students learn how to:

- Establish an understanding with the client on the need for a consulting engagement on a specific topic, and the appropriate approach and resources to be deployed
- Concretely define the scope of a consulting engagement
- Break up a complicated problem into logical pieces that can be individually addressed
- Efficiently gather the right data to build a relevant fact base
- Effectively extract information from internal and external experts
- Synthesize information to drive key conclusions
- Develop specific recommendations that provide the highest value to the client among feasible alternatives
- Present recommendations and conclusions in a persuasive manner to gain buy-in
- Influence others effectively using a range of ethical tactics

**Class Format:**

The course is based on four interweaving threads:

- **Lectures** that describe specific tools and principles of structured problem solving and communication.
- **Mini-cases** that help students practice and internalize these tools and principles, and
- **Consulting case (BioCo)** involving a sanitized real-life engagement that provides students an end-to-end view of the consulting process and allow them to compare their approaches against the actual approach taken by consultants on that engagement.
- **Small Business Consulting Program (SBCP) Engagements** that allows students to roll up their sleeves and work as consultants on real business problems.

**Class Participation:**

Student participation in class is integral to the learning experience in this course. Several classes will feature mini-cases that students are asked to analyze during class discussion.

Needless to say, class attendance is critical. Students must attend class regularly and with appropriate preparation if they wish to leave this course with a tangible assimilation of the skills discussed.

A number of classes will involve student (team) presentations. All students are expected to be present for these presentations and participate in the discussions – a highly effective method for developing and broadening one’s consulting skill-set and experience is to get wide exposure to, and critically evaluate, others’ approaches to solving business problems.

**Reading Materials:**

There is no required text for the course. If you would like to probe certain topics in more detail, feel free to check with me on where to look for reading materials.

Course materials consist of class lecture notes and case readings. These will be distributed in class over the course of the semester.
**Grading**

1. Class Participation: 25%

2. SBCP Engagement:
   - Five (5) Engagement Reports Each report = 5%, total = 25%
   - Presentation I (Problem Definition & Structuring) 20%
   - Presentation II (Major Issue Resolution) 10%
   - Presentation III (Recommendations & Supporting Data/Analysis) 20%

**TOTAL** 100%

**Teams**

Students will need to form teams of 4 members for working on the SBCP engagement. If you need help in forming a team, please communicate this to our TA via email latest by Sunday, January 29 and we will help assign you to a team.

**BioCo Engagement**

This is a sanitized version of an actual strategy consulting engagement for a U.S. biotech firm. Engagement materials will be distributed at appropriate stages of the course.

**SBCP Engagement**

The Small Business Consulting Program (“SBCP”) at CBS works with entrepreneurs, nonprofit organizations and other businesses to provide pro-bono consulting services in a broad range of areas. SBCP has selected a number of organizations and specific issues for which they are seeking consulting services. SBCP will assign each team to one organization and the associated issues it faces.

Each team is expected to work in a committed manner with their client in formulating, structuring, investigating and resolving a specific organizational problem. The engagement may last beyond the semester; the only requirement for the course is that (a) the problem formulation and structuring is accomplished in time for Team Presentations I (Problem Definition/Structuring), (b) one major issue is brought to resolution in time for Team Presentation II (Major Issue Resolution) and (c) a significant portion of the engagement is completed in time for Team Presentations III (Recommendations & Supporting Data/Analysis). See the attached class schedule for these dates.

SBCP has selected organizations for the program from among a pool of applicants. Selection criteria include the anticipated level of commitment from the sponsor to supporting the engagement and the nature of the problem it is seeking help on. **If a team finds itself in a situation where it is not able to make timely progress on its engagement due to a lack of client commitment, the situation should be brought to the attention of the professor in a timely manner so that appropriate options can be discussed.**

Details on how teams will be matched with qualified organizations will be provided in the first class.

**SBCP Engagement Reports 1-5**

Each report will be 1-page summary of the team’s activities and learnings related to a specified consulting topic. The topics will be distributed in the class. The due dates for these reports are given in the class schedule.

**SBCP Presentations I, II & III**
Detailed guidelines on the team presentation will be distributed during the course of the semester.

These presentations are based on three objectives:

1. To have teams demonstrate their application of course tools and frameworks in a real-world context (and be graded for the same),
2. To provide teams with feedback and suggestions to enhance their effectiveness in tackling the client’s problem, and
3. To hone students’ abilities to efficiently and critically evaluate strategic analysis, recommendations and presentations across a spectrum of industries and business issues.

Each team must load their presentation on time in BOLD in the SBCP – Presentation X (I, II or III) folder. The deadline for each presentation is given in the class schedule, included later in this document. The specific date on which each team will present in class will be announced later.

The presentation must contain all the key points the team want to make, and any supporting facts/data/analysis. While we will have class discussion during the presentation, teams will be graded primarily on the basis of the presentation content submitted prior to class.

Scheduling review meetings with clients:

It is suggested (though not required) that teams schedule review meetings with their clients sometime AFTER each of the in-class presentations. For instance, a team may schedule a “launch” meeting with their client to discuss their understanding of the client problem and their proposed solution approach after they have gained in-class feedback on Presentation I, and it may schedule an interim or final “progress review” meeting with the client to discuss findings and recommendations after they have gained in-class feedback on Presentation III.