From Stable to Table: The Case of Findus and the Horse Meat Scandal

TEACHING NOTES

The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

Purpose

The following paper is a teaching note aiming to support teachers when presenting the case of Findus and the horse meat scandal which occurred during the year of 2013. The teaching note is also created with the purpose to provide guidance in terms of informing and instructing teachers on what to think about when practising this case. Additionally, it outlines key points such as how to introduce the case, main learning objectives, time plan, discussion questions, teaching suggestions, as well as a reflection in the final part of the paper. Furthermore, the aim with the teaching note is also to provide support to teachers on what to include when presenting the case in order to make it as interesting as possible. What is further intended with the teaching note is to enable teachers to structure the training session and classroom discussions around the case study. The paper also includes background information and relevant theories and frameworks in order to understand the context further. The background knowledge is of vital importance since it equips instructors to effectively guide discussion and answer potential questions from participants. By the end of the paper the teacher is also provided with possible solutions to the problems, which allows instructors to gain valuable insights which thereon can be shared with the participants during the case discussion.

The paper will be structured as follows: case synopsis, learning objectives, theories and frameworks, key learning objectives, discussion questions which is further subdivided into main- and assisting questions, thereafter the paper presents teaching suggestions and finally finishes off with a reflection.

Case synopsis

Findus is a multinational food brand and best known for its wide range of frozen food products, including everything from ready meals, vegetables to meatballs and seafood. Findus is one of the largest players within the frozen food category in Sweden. They are mostly recognized for their convenience, quality, and innovation in the frozen food sector. Their aim is to provide families with convenient and nutritious meals that would save them time without compromising on taste or quality. Regardless if you cook for yourself, to friends or family, or as a professional cook for school children, restaurant visitors or elderly people -Findus ambition is to contribute with natural, healthy and sustainable food products (Findus, 2024).

Their commitment of responsible sourcing of the finest ingredients and investing in eco-conscious packaging made them acquire a reputation of reliability and excellence. Families turned to Findus for comfort and reassurance, knowing that behind every meal was a legacy of quality and care. By bringing families and friends around the dinner table and reminding them of simple joys of good foods and good company. Symbolising more than just a convenient meal, but also a trusted companion in the kitchen. By the 2000s Findus continued to grow and innovate, introducing new products and expanding into new emerging markets across Europe.

On the 15th of January 2013, the British FSA (equivalent to the Swedish "Livsmedelsverket") officially stated that they found traces of horse-DNA in the burger meats from a supplier that distributes to many stores and restaurants in the Irish and British market. Rumours had been swirling around and whispers of a scandal threatening the foundation of Findus has forced the company to create a crisis management group as a proactive action of what potentially is yet to come. Allegations had surfaced suggesting that Comigels products, which Findus had been sourcing for years, might contain horse meat instead of the advertised beef that is written on their frozen food packages. Comigel is one of the major suppliers of frozen food products to multiple different companies across Europe which means a wide spread scandal is imminent. In the case of Sweden, this means that not only Findus will be affected but also their main competitors in the category.

Findus pride themselves on integrity and their reputation of quality products, which has for a long time been the keystone of their reputation amongst consumers. Any suggestion that their products contained horse meat could spell disaster for the brand and its reputation.

Being a member of Findus crisis management team that just received the information of FSA's findings, the question arise:

- ***How should Findus proceed with the information from FSA's findings and increasing rumours that products containing horse meat might spread to Findus own supply chain?***

Learning objectives

"From Stable to Table - The Case of Findus and the Horse Meat Scandal" serves to provide multiple different learning outcomes within the area of Corporate Brand Management and Reputation. Firstly, the objective is to enable students to discuss, analyse, reflect and gain a nuanced understanding of solving a business case that can contribute to potential future managerial situations. Secondly, engaging in this case discussion, the goal is to further enable students and teachers to equip themselves with a teaching plan of how a business case can be practised. By providing information on how to prepare and structure case discussions the aim is to give them the most beneficial structure in order to make this case as valuable as possible. Thirdly, the objective is also to develop students' understanding by making them critically reflect, analyse, but most importantly, practically apply theoretical frameworks and theories within the area of Corporate Brand Management and Reputation on a real life business case. In the following section, these theoretical concepts will be individually presented and applied to the case of: "From Stable to Table - The Case of Findus and the Horse Meat Scandal".

Theoretical concepts

Corporate Brands and Reputation

In order to make this case as pedagogical as possible, the key theoretical themes have to be outlined and carefully unfolded to be able to support the discussions. To start off, the two highly interlinked topics of brand and reputation management are central in this particular case. At its core, the word reputation means, according to the dictionary "the opinions that are generally held about someone or something" (Roper & Fili, 2012). Applying reputation in the business world with existing corporate brands, results in the phenomenon of corporate reputation as a product of it. Brands are therefore at the centre of reputation management (Roper & Fili, 2012)

A more academic definition of corporate reputation can be described as "the net perception of a company's ability to meet the expectations of all its stakeholders" (Fombrun, 1996). Corporate reputation can consequently be seen as a representation of a firm's previous actions and results as well as its different images. The four images that comprise reputation are often considered to be the social image, financial image, product image and recruitment image (Fombrun, 1996.) Maintaining a good reputation can serve as a competitive advantage and enables firms to charge premiums, however if it's not managed properly, a bad reputation can be detrimental. Recovering damaged reputation is always more difficult than building and maintaining it right from the start (Roper & Fill, 2012). Since modern brand management is increasingly focused on corporate brands, understanding how to manage the corporate reputation becomes just as important. Ultimately, the corporate reputation can be seen as the aggregated views of images and identity that all internal and external stakeholders have of the corporate brand (Roper & Fili, 2012).

The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix is a tool for fusing the three elements of identity, communication & positioning, and reputation, which makes up a brand, into a single entity in the form of a corporate brand. The framework and its two outer layers is a guide for ongoing interactions and management of a corporate brand (Urde, 2021). The Matrix in itself helps an organisation answer 9 key questions which in combination, and if the elements are coherent with each other, opts for a strong corporate brand. It is constructed of external elements which relates to how the corporation wants to be perceived and reflects the value proposition, relationships and positioning. The internal elements form the foundation of the brands identity relies on the Mission & Vision, Culture and core competencies. There are also elements bridging the internal and external aspects which are its personality, brand core and expression. Before diving into the case of Findus, it's pivotal to understand the interplay of the elements that form a corporate brand. As presented in Exhibit 1, arrows can be drawn across the matrix and if the elements are coherent with each other, they may ultimately converge into organisational capabilities of the brands strategy, interactions, competition and character (Urde, 2021).

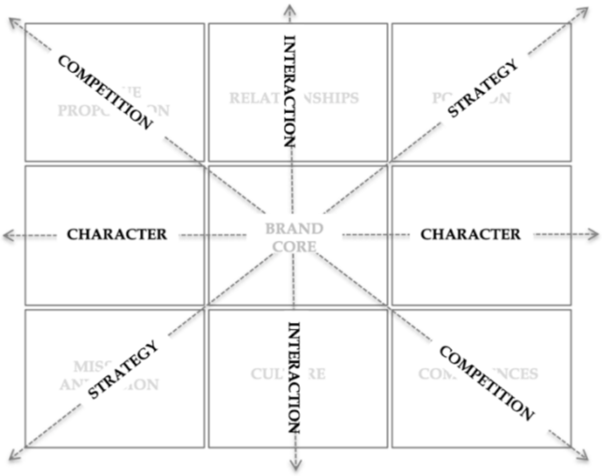


Exhibit 1: Corporate brand identity matrix

As for the reputational layer of the matrix which is of high relevance as reputational risk is a high stake in the horse meat scandal of 2013. As previously mentioned, the reputation of the corporate brand is an aggregated view of the views and judgements that stakeholders have of the brand. The reputation layer of the matrix supports executive teams with a set of questions that explores the relation between a specific element and its effect on the brand's stature (Urde, 2021). The various questions can, among other situations, be applicable for troubleshooting and alignment. As presented in Exhibit 2, the dotted lines connecting the brand elements with the reputational aspects represent the brands communication and positioning (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

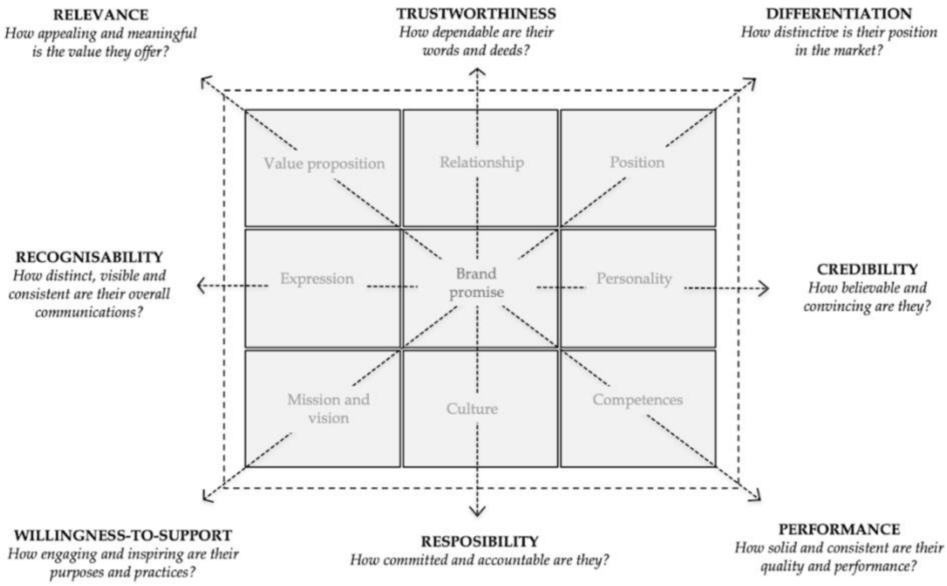


Exhibit 2: Corporate brand reputational matrix

Understanding the key reputational aspects that might be affected in brand crisis situations like this is critical when Findus executive management team has to make swift decisions. In this particular case, the reputational aspects of credibility, trustworthiness, responsibility and willingness-to-support are all put to the test and it is therefore necessary that management decisions keep these in mind at all times in order to reduce the negative perceived stakeholders associations as a result of the scandal. Greyser (2009) highlights the importance of authenticity in defending reputation in crisis and that forthrightness in communication and credible behaviour are appropriate ways of doing so. This authenticity draws on the "reputational reservoir" which is the trust that the brand has generated over time. This "reservoir" can be drawn upon during times of crisis (Greyser, 2009). Moreover, handling a product failure crisis in a way that positively exceeds the expectations of the stakeholders may in the long term increase the customer satisfaction (McCollough, 2009)

Game Theory and Business Scapegoating

When a company experiences a situation where the outcomes risk affecting their reputation, typically after a specific incident, they must carefully decide how to react. Before taking action, corporations must assess the different potential impacts that different measures may result in. One way of analysing this from an economics perspective is by applying the concept of Game theory (Wang, Scheutz & Cai, 2021). Game theory is the study which occurs when interacting choices by various economic agents affects each other's utilities (Ross, 2024) and is often exemplified by the famous "prisoners dilemma"-paradox. In the specific case of Findus, the varying actions that actors within the same industry/category will take may ultimately affect their and their competitors' utilities respectively. Since extensive product-harm crises like this one, can potentially have spillover effects in other companies due to shared ingredient suppliers (Clereen et al, 2013) and Gao et al (2012) argue that the first affected should accept responsibility to reduce the impact on the entire industry. This increases the utility for the other actors but will instead have a drastically negative impact on the utility of the single company. If Findus goes public with their test findings, it may ultimately risk affecting image and reputation negatively as they take unproportionate blame. If they instead choose not to announce their results and stay silent, a competitor may take the hit first which will be beneficial media-wise for Findus, but if they are however caught with their secrecy later on then that may affect their reputation (utility) even more negatively. Findus must therefore evaluate if its worth to make their findings explicit to be seen as a responsible whistleblower at the risk of becoming the industry scapegoat.

Scapegoating is a term that originally describes a situation where a person is blamed for something that someone else has done. In modern management academia, it's a key discursive strategy used by organisations to shift the blame during a crisis. Scapegoating can also be deployed by other stakeholders like politics, media and consumers where the targeted organisation gets an unproportionate amount of criticism (Payne & Davidsson, 2008). Scapegoating in particular is a concept that's appropriate to analyse through game theory (Roulet & Pichler, 2020).

A common example of scapegoating is the case of McDonalds, where the fast food chain receives vastly more criticism for making their consumers' diets more unhealthy compared to other fast food restaurants like Burger King or KFC. The two latter could benefit from the negative attention directed towards McDonalds, instead of affecting themselves (Payne & Davidsson, 2008). The concept Scapegoating is therefore relevant in the case of Findus, as explained in the game theory section, they risk becoming the industry scapegoat if they choose to go public with the real contents of their frozen lasagna.

Overview of Key Learnings

Table 1 provides an overview of key learnings that the audience should take away from this case. The table is based on Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956).

Table 1, Key Learnings Table

OBJECTIVES	GENERAL LEARNING	FINDUS
Remembering	…that even stakeholders involved with the brand can in turn damage the corporate brand reputation. To always make sure and continuously work with stakeholders so that everyone is in line with the corporate values and principles.	Findus: Remember that the corporate brand reputation can be affected by interacting stakeholders. In the case of Findus, their supplier Comigel supplied Findus with products containing horse meat affecting Findus' reputational aspects.
Understanding	…the corporate brand management theories and communication strategies involving this case.	Findus: Corporate Brand Identity Matrix, Corporate Brand Identity Reputational Matrix
Applying	…key corporate brand management frameworks and concepts to provide the most suitable and relevant crisis strategies in order to manage the issue and the impact on corporate reputation.	Findus: Brand Crisis Management, Game Theory, Business Scapegoating, Corporate Brand Identity Matrix, Corporate Brand Reputational Matrix.
Analysing	…the most applicable and effective crisis management strategies that would in the end turn out to be the most successful for the protection of the brand and its reputation.	Findus: Analyse Findus decision to be transparent with the result meanwhile risking to become a scapegoat damaging their brand reputation.
Evaluating	…different management decisions relating to a	Findus: How Findus manages the positive results of their

	challenging issue threatening a corporate brand identity and its reputation. As well as evaluating effective short- and long term communication strategies with stakeholders in mind.	lasagna containing horse meat, decision to be transparent with the risk of scapegoating.
Creating	…crisis management strategies in relation to a crisis occurring from one main supplier with the consideration of different stakeholders and the brand identity core simultaneously.	Findus: Final decision made by understanding different stakeholder wants and needs.

Discussion questions

In order to achieve an engaging and relevant case discussion that strives to go in line with the key learnings of the case, there are a few core questions that the discussion leader must ask the audience. These questions can be found under the section: Main questions. In order to enrich the discussion further, and depending on which direction it will take, there are a few assisting questions the discussion leader can use to guide the discussion. They also serve to address different problems and angles of the case. These questions can be found under the section: Assisting questions. All questions (Main- and Assisting questions) are constructed with a purpose to enable the students to apply their theoretical knowledge on the case.

Main questions

The main questions are divided into two steps since this is a two-step case. The first main question refers to when Findus just received the information about FSAs tests that they found traces of horse-DNA in the burger meats from a supplier that distributes to many stores and restaurants in the Irish and British market.

The second main question refers to when Findus received their results from their conducted DNA analysis of their own meat through a German laboratory. Where the test results came back positive, and the meat contained between 60-100% horsemeat and the scandal are now a fact for Findus.

Step 1.
Being a member of Findus crisis management team that just received the information of FSA's findings, the questions arise:

- *How should Findus proceed with the information from FSA's findings and increasing rumours that products containing horse meat might spread to Findus own supply chain?*

Step 2.
Being a member of Findus crisis management team that just received the positive test results of their own products, the questions arise:

- *What should Findus' crisis management team do in order to handle this situation?*

Assisting questions

Step 1.

- *What are the immediate steps / actions you should take?*
- *Based on FSAs information, should Findus form an investigation group in order to ensure if products do contain horse meat?*

Step 2.

- *What are our key problems to tackle?*
- *What are the immediate steps / actions Findus should take?*
- *Should Findus, as the market leader in the Swedish frozen food industry, be transparent and announce the results at the risk of becoming scapegoat?*
- *Should Findus wait and see if any of their competitors, like Dafgårds, communicate about this scandal first with the chance of avoiding major backlash?*
- *Should Findus open up a dialogue with competitors that have been similarly affected?*
- *Should Findus initiate product recalls or halting production of affected products?*
- *Depending on the decision, how should you, the crisis management group, communicate with internal and external stakeholders?*
- *How are we addressing the impact of this scandal on Findus brand reputation and consumer confidence? What are the strategies in order to rebuild trust with our customers?*

Teaching Suggestions

The following part of the teaching note has the purpose to give the teacher/instructor information and recommendations on how to prepare and deliver the case. The objective is to understand the case to its greatest extent and how one can facilitate productive discussions in order to achieve the case's goals and learning objectives.

The Pre-Presentation Phase

In order to conduct a successful case discussion, preparation is key. First of all the most important thing is to familiarise yourself with the case. In this sense it regards the importance of reading the written case, theron reading the management decisions, and lastly studying the teaching note in order to understand how to conduct the case as successfully as possible. After reading the case material, it is recommended for the instructor to prepare the structure of both the presentation and the case discussion. The preparation should include how to conduct the discussion, what material should be included, in what order and how to lead the discussion so that nothing important is being left out.

Furthermore, the instructor should identify the key learning objectives and how these can be achieved during the case discussion. It is advised to define what knowledge, skills or insights the audience should gain from the discussion. Additionally, it is important to learn the assisting case question in order to spur the discussion further if it feels like the audience is stuck.

In the pre-presentation phase, the instructor should also make sure that the audience has received the written case so that they can familiarise themselves with the case and gain a comprehensive understanding of what is yet to come.

Lastly, what is further important in order to achieve a valuable case discussion is for the instructor to prepare some visual material, for example a well structured powerpoint that highlights the most essential parts of the case. Providing the audience with videos, pictures, and physical objectives that could be relevant in order to enhance the understanding of the case is also recommended. It can contribute to a more dynamic presentation that in turn engages the audience.

The Introduction Phase

The next phase in the introduction phase and this phase pans out in the room with the audience in place. This phase is just before the instructor is about to start presenting the case. This phase is mainly about engaging the audiences' interest and encouraging participation. More specifically, the suggestion is to create an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere that encourages active participation. Here the instructor has the chance to invite students by for example starting off with simple ¨small talk¨. The reason behind is to break tension and potential nervousness that students may feel. It also provides the instructor with a smooth way to introduce the case subject and get the audience in action mode. Additionally, by asking the audience general questions about for example the food industry or Findus as a brand it provides the instructor with an overview of the students prior knowledge. Important in the introduction phase is also to not forget that the entire room is in a ¨case bubble¨ and it will be in that bubble the discussion will exist for the whole session.

Discussion phase

The first task just before entering the discussion phase is to make sure that the audience understands the case and the case questions and that there are no uncertainties amongst the students. What is also useful just before entering the discussion phase is to remind the audience that it is time for action mode and that they are now in the roles of the crisis management team of Findus. In the meantime, the instructor should also remind oneself to equip the role of being a discussion leader. As a discussion leader it is important to be impartial and involve as many voices as possible in order to enrich the discussion with various opinions, but also to make sure everyone feels involved. It's about being open minded to every thought and opinion and encouraging students to speak their mind. If no one is talking and the discussion feels a bit stuck, a ¨cold call ¨ could be useful. This is when you ask someone in the room if they have an opinion even though they may not raise their hands. Another tool to use if the discussion feels a bit stuck is to use the assisting questions listed in this teaching note.

During the discussion phase it is also recommended to use the whiteboard as much as possible in order to write down key points from the audience but also to enable a more structured discussion which will help both the audience and you as a discussion leader. During the discussion, a board plan could be beneficial to use in order to structure the discussion in terms of: challenges/problems, alternatives, recommendations.

Important to remember during the discussion is that this case is a two-step case, involving the first question of what Findus should do with the information from FSA. When the class has decided on an action regarding this question, it is time to move forward to the next step in the case. This part is when Findus has received positive tests that their lasagna contains 60-100% horse meat. This is the main part of the case and the task for the group is to decide how to manage this situation. It is therefore important for the discussion leader to allocate more time for the second part since that the scandal now is a fact and it's now more of a complex situation.

Conclusion phase

When the time allocated for the discussion starts to run out it is necessary for the discussion leader to provide a short conclusion of what has been said in the room. In this final phase it is also important to together with the class to highlight the most important suggestions and also together with the class decide on which solutions to proceed with. This could be done through a simple voting in the room where the audience raises their hand on the alternative that pleases them the most.

When the class has decided on which path to take, it is now time for the discussion leader to reveal the management decision. This is done through the same powerpoint presentation used when presenting the case. When done presenting the decision it can be useful to create a short discussion and reflect on the actual management decisions that were made by Findus and compare it with the reflections and decisions made in class. Feel free to ask the audience questions on what they think about the management decision. This last part is also allocated for the instructor to provide a brief conclusion of what can be learned from the case and also open up for any last questions. Important to remember is to end the case with thanking the audience for their participation and their insightful thoughts and opinions.

Time plan

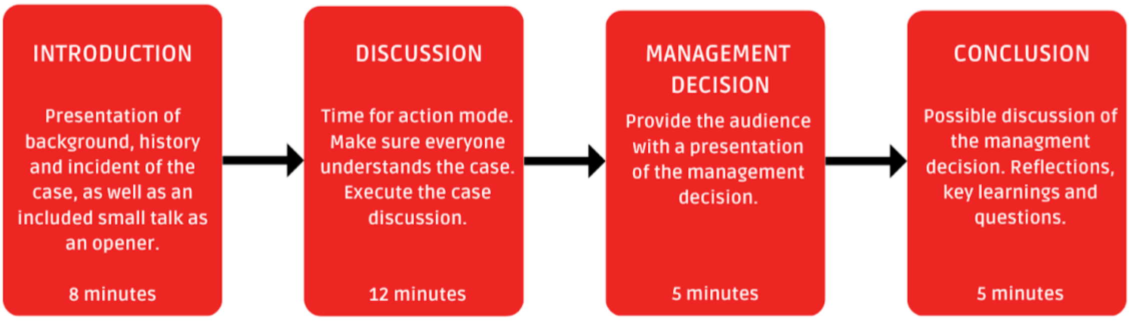
The following section will provide the discussion leader with a possible time plan (seen in Figure 1.) of the case discussion in order to make the case as valuable as possible for the attendants. In total there will be a maximum amount of 30 minutes allocated for the whole presentation which will then be divided into multiple time slots, focusing on different aspects of the case. The aim with the time plan is also to help the instructor to manage the time but also the discussions so that every important aspect of the case can have a chance to shine through within the assigned time.

The first 8 minutes of the case is allocated for the instructor to present the case where a background and history of Findus is made, as well as the actual incident itself. Preferably there should be smooth transitions between these phases. Additionally, it is recommended to open up the presentation by talking more generally with the audience, for example asking a food related question or something similar. The aim is to have some sort of small talk that invites the audience before its time for action mode. It is important to make sure that they are comfortable and by having some initial small talk it can serve this purpose, as well as it can warm up their mindset.

When the background, history and the incident have been presented it is time to get in action mode by giving the audience the case questions. The allocated time for the discussion is 12 minutes. Here the aim is to establish what the problems/challenges are, as well as making sure the audience provides multiple alternative solutions and recommendations. Example on this board plan can be seen in Table 2. When this is done the upcoming 5 minutes will be allocated for the instructor to provide the audience with a presentation of the management decision.

In the last five minutes of the discussion the purpose is to conduct a short discussion and reflect on the actual management decisions that were made by Findus in real life. In order to extend the understanding it is of importance to compare the reflections and decisions made in class with the actions made by the management team of Findus. The last part is also allocated for the instructor to provide a brief conclusion of what can be learned from the case and also open up for any last questions.

Figure 1: Time Plan.



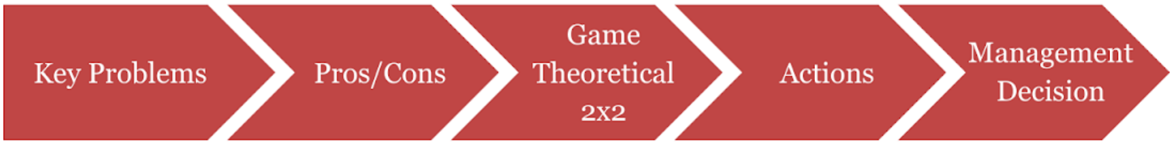
Board plan

In order to structure the discussion and make it comprehensive, it's important to establish a board plan. The board plan that we have formed is constructed to drive the students through a decision funnel to ultimately come to a conclusion of the actions Findus should take. For the first discussion phase, the key problems will be outlined so that everyone in class has a similar picture. As we move to the second discussion phase, the pros, and cons of disclosing the new information, staying silent or joining forces with competitors will be evaluated and illustrated on the board. To effectively conceptualise and summarise the discussion, a game theoretical 2x2 table will illustrate the various alternatives that the students later on will use as a foundation for their managerial decision. Ultimately, when a specific box has been chosen through a democratic vote, the discussion will proceed to evaluate appropriate actions to take forward.

Table 2: Example of our Board Plan.

Findus\competitors	Disclose new info	Stay Quiet
Disclose new info	Shared confession = Equally distributed attention	Findus seen as responsible whistleblower at the risk of becoming the industry scapegoat
Stay Quiet	Competitor seen as responsible whistleblower at the risk of becoming the industry scapegoat	Negative reputation for reactive behaviour when discovered

Figure 2: Workflow process for class discussion



Reflection

Writing a business case has been a journey filled with both interesting challenges and new learnings to take on into the future. The first challenge the group faced was deciding on a business case that would provide a valuable discussion and provide insightful key learnings related to the field of corporate brand management and reputation. In the beginning of the journey there were a few alternatives that were in the loop, but after some guidance and valuable supervision from our professor, Mats Urde, the decision was made, Findus and the horse meat scandal was the way to go. Another challenge has been to make sure to cover all relevant aspects of the case and present it to the audience in an logical and understandable manner. This is of great importance since this would in turn enable the readers to comprehend the case and provide useful insights and thoughts to the case discussion. In relation to this, another challenge was to make sure that the information collected about the case would provide a discussion that in the end would contribute with essential key learnings that the audience could take away from the case. Findus and the horse meat scandal is a complex case with multiple stakeholders and occurring events, therefore it was challenging to reduce the information so that it became concrete, specific and relevant. The solution for this issue was to early on make sure all members of the group were on the same page with the same heading and goal in mind.

Further valuable insight learned from the experience of writing this master case was to consider the aspect of having multiple perspectives to address in mind. It was not only having the discussion leader in mind, as being the primary receiver when writing the teaching note. Making it understandable and graspable so that the teacher can interpret it and practically apply to a real case discussion. The challenge also involved having a more general audience in mind, especially when writing the written case and the management decision. As mentioned before, Findus and the horse meat scandal is a complex case, therefore the challenge here was not only to reduce everything to relevant and concrete parts, but also to make it easily understandable and logical coherent. The aim was always to ensure that people who never heard about the scandal, or Findus, would understand it. This master case is on one hand made to be a learning opportunity for the students engaging in it, but on the other hand it is written to ensure that teachers and discussion leaders can absorb it and then present it. This was a very interesting but yet a tricky balance to master when writing the case. Not only do you need to consider the instructor and the students, but also you need to consider yourself as a case writer. Here the challenge was, as mentioned earlier, to cover as many details as possible so that others who read it are able to understand and solve it. By continuously shifting between these roles when writing the case was a new and valuable experience. It was also without a doubt necessary in order to provide the readers with a solidly based case.

Overall, the experience of writing this master case has been highly rewarding. The process has given us new ways of applying theoretical knowledge on real life situations which has been fulfilling. The case writing has in overall challenged our thinking, but also our understanding of a complex case and how to apply relevant theoretical concepts to it. It has been a journey of challenges that in the end has provided us with multiple valuable takeaways. Last but not least, it has been a great experience of teamwork management where the group members have been forced to rely on- and support each other throughout the whole process.

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