

Trekking the Doping Terrain: The Lance Armstrong Saga

TEACHING NOTE

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.

Teaching Plan

The following is a teaching note intended to support any teachers, professionals or presenters in the Lance Armstrong case. These notes are designed to aid in preparation for discussing the case, offering recommendations on how to introduce it, suggestions on key points to include, and ideas for making this case more engaging and thought-provoking. The teaching note also includes an outline of learning objectives that seek to help students understand the various perspectives of the case. Finally, a forward-thinking plan is provided from the brand, Trek Bikes', point of view on how to approach the scandal in this case, along with potential key takeaways for the teacher to consider when preparing for any discussions.

Case Synopsis

This case, involving Trek Bikes, (the sponsor), versus Lance Armstrong, (the cycling athlete), spans from the late 1990s when Armstrong's career began to the early 2010's when the confessions of doping surfaced (Cohen, 2020). It revolves around allegations of doping that proceeded to tarnish Armstrong's celebrated cycling career. Trek Bikes, a prominent bicycle manufacturer forged a sponsorship with Armstrong early on, solidifying a partnership that saw Armstrong promoting the brand throughout his Tour de France victories (Cohen, 2020). While rumors surrounded the athlete throughout the entirety of his career, they truly gained traction in early 2010's when former teammates and support staff had come forward with damning evidence and confessions of their own. The United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) conducted investigations, leading to Armstrong being stripped of all seven of his Tour de France titles amongst other accolades (Delaney, 2012). This fallout had significant implications for Trek Bikes as they became tainted by the scandal by association. Thus, Trek had a big decision to make: how would Armstrong's now-tarnished legacy have a bearing on their brand, storytelling and credibility? How should the fallout be handled, and how to communicate it in such a way which would avoid risks of future partnerships, and distance themselves from controversy? This ultimately, leads into the case question:

You are the brand manager at Trek and you are writing a brand book. How will you navigate the Lance Armstrong and doping scandal as it pertains to your brand legacy?

Learning Objectives

This Lance Armstrong x Trek Bikes case provides valuable insights into corporate brand management, particularly touching on corporate communication, brand identity, and navigating reputational challenges. The primary goal for the audience is to grasp the theoretical foundations behind these concepts and translate them into actionable strategies that are applicable to a variety of business/branding

scenarios. It is crucial that the teacher plays a pivotal role in presenting the frameworks to facilitate discussions that would encourage audience engagement and analysis in case-specific challenges. Thus, the following section details the academic concepts highly pertinent to the case while outlining the learning objectives derived from the theories themselves.

Corporate Brand Identity Frameworks

The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016)

The Urde/Greyser Corporate Brand Identity Matrix helps analyze how Trek Bikes' identity evolved in response to the Lance Armstrong doping scandal. It's the ideal starting framework to get the bigger picture view of Trek's association with Lance, and how it would play out following the scandal.

The doping scandal practically forced Trek Bikes to re-evaluate its brand matrix, and their values. Previously, many of their communications, and identity centered primarily on Lance and his partnership. While it's a lucrative one, it just shows that when embroiled in controversy, the building blocks could crumble, forcing the brand to lean on its defined core to rebuild back up in the eyes of consumers and from an internal, corporate perspective. The following statement backs up the true strength of a brand's identity core:

"The identity core is a point of departure and home base in understanding and managing your corporate (organizational) brand." (Urde, 2022, p.1)

So, the question becomes – what the definition of a brand truly is. What was the definition of brand that can be applied to Trek? Thus, the following statements are aligned to the branding foundation that is set in consideration with Trek and why there was such controversy surrounding its partnership with Armstrong:

"Fundamentally, a brand is a promise, and a strong brand is one with a clear positioning and an earned reputation for keeping its promise. A promise kept builds trust and helps an organization reach its goals and stay true to its purpose." (Urde, 2022, p.1)

In the wake of the scandal, it is crucial to go back to the drawing board and truly evaluate what the brand continues to stand for, and what messages are being put out to the world/stakeholders/consumers with its communications. Primarily, because as times evolve, so does the brand, and if there is a blip in its legacy, repositioning is required. It cannot remain stagnant, and expect to ride it out. The following statement puts the above explanation into perspective:

"The brand is continuously shaped and positioned in people's minds and hearts in a cultural setting and competitive environment." (Urde, 2022, p.3)

Figure 1 Corporate Brand Identity Matrix as applied to the Lance Armstrong x Trek Bikes Case (Urde & Greyser, 2016)

EXTERNAL	<p style="text-align: center;">VALUE PROPOSITION</p> <p style="text-align: center;">HIGH-QUALITY BICYCLES MEETS INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY AND SUPPORTING CYCLISTS AT ALL LEVELS OF THEIR JOURNEY</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">RELATIONSHIPS</p> <p style="text-align: center;">TRUST AND RELIABILITY ARE EVERYTHING, AS WELL AS THE PASSION FOR CYCLING</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">POSITION</p> <p style="text-align: center;">LEADER IN THE CYCLING INDUSTRY, WHILST LEVERAGING THEIR HERITAGE, EXPERTISE, AND DRIVEN BY PASSION</p>
EXTERNAL/INTERNAL	<p style="text-align: center;">EXPRESSION</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ADVENTURE MEETS FREEDOM AND EXPLORATION</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">BRAND CORE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A STRONG COMMITMENT TO INNOVATION, QUALITY, AND CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS AS WELL AS ENCOURAGING THEIR PASSION FOR CYCLING</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PERSONALITY</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PASSION IS AT THE HEART, BUT SO IS INSPIRATION, RELIABILITY AND SHARED ENTHUSIASM FOR THE SPORT</p>
INTERNAL	<p style="text-align: center;">MISSION & VISION</p> <p style="text-align: center;">THE <u>MISSION</u> IS TO INSPIRE AND EMPOWER PEOPLE TO EXPERIENCE THE FREEDOM/JOY OF CYCLING. THE <u>VISION</u> IS TO BE A LEADER AND CHAMPION THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF CYCLING</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">CULTURE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">INNOVATION, COLLABORATION, AND EXCELLENCE ARE AT ITS CULTURAL CORE. TO FOSTER A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AMONG CYCLISTS</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">COMPETENCES</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IT'S LONGEVITY IN THE INDUSTRY SHOWS THEIR EXPERTISE, AND ITS WHERE PRODUCT INNOVATION MEETS CUSTOMER CENTRICITY</p>

As seen in **Figure 1**, the fleshed-out matrix highlights both the external, external/internal, and internal views of the Trek Bikes organization. Ultimately, the brand was built on the idea of innovation and customer-centricity.

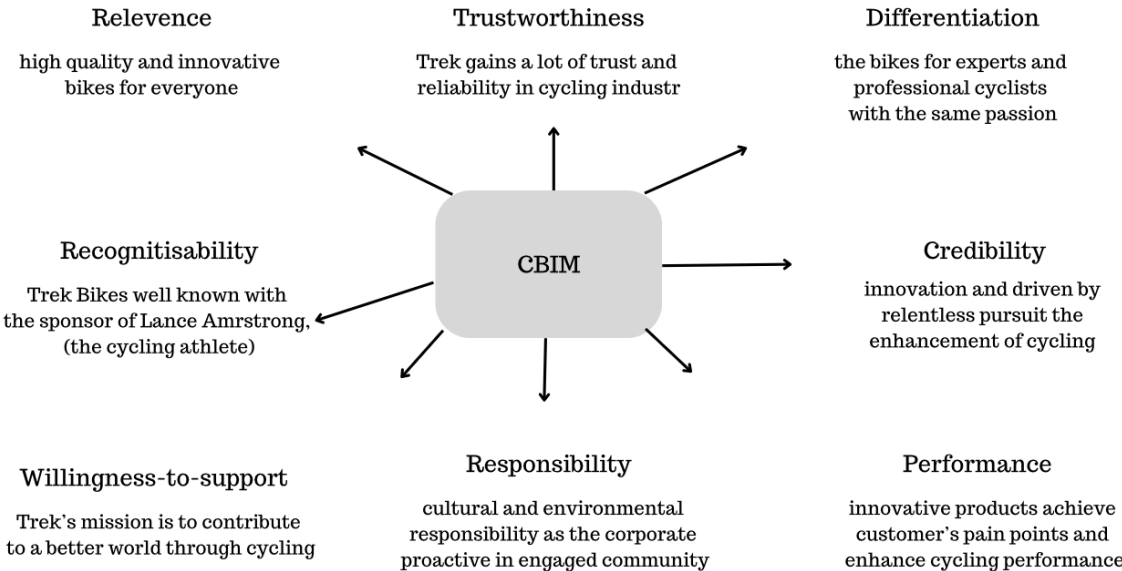
To understand further, the matrix shows that at its core, Trek Bikes had a lot more to offer in the industry and to consumers than merely its association with Armstrong. It's undergoing a shift from a narrowly focused brand identity that centered heavily on its link to the professional athlete and his success, to a brand that now has a broader identity encompassing various other facets of it beyond one individual endorsement. In addition, this matrix underscores the importance of managing both the external and internal perceptions to maintain brand integrity, reputation, and mitigate the reputational challenges effectively.

Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix – CBIRM (Urde & Greyser, 2016)

As in **Figure 2** the corporate brand reputation is crucial for corporate brand management that is based on how people judged collectively from the historical performances to present context (Fombrum, 1996; Roper & Fill, 2012). There are various elements of corporate brand that can be identified in Trek's case, including Relevance, Trustworthiness, Differentiation, Credibility, Performance, Responsibility, Willingness-to support, and Recognisability.

With the horizontal path on character, credibility is directly related to the brand's personality that is perceived by others. After Lance Amrstrong confessed his involvement in doping during the important competitions in Tour De France, which negatively impacted the Trek's brand image and made the credibility decreased in the corporate brand reputational matrix. Moreover, this situation also affected the trustworthiness of the brand as well since Trek was known worldwide because of Amrstrong, but the brand was also destroyed by his confession that's the reason why there was a decrease in trustworthiness. Even though Trek was facing a lot of challenges from Lance Amrstrong's scandal, the company still recognized more often due to the variety of media that provided the situation of this case. Therefore, the company should analyze how well the personality or brand identity comes through in all communications both internally and externally to maintain the reputation among stakeholders in the cycling industry in order to create a stronger brand with a narrative on the strategy of Trek Bikes.

Figure 2 Corporate Brand Identity and Reputational Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016)

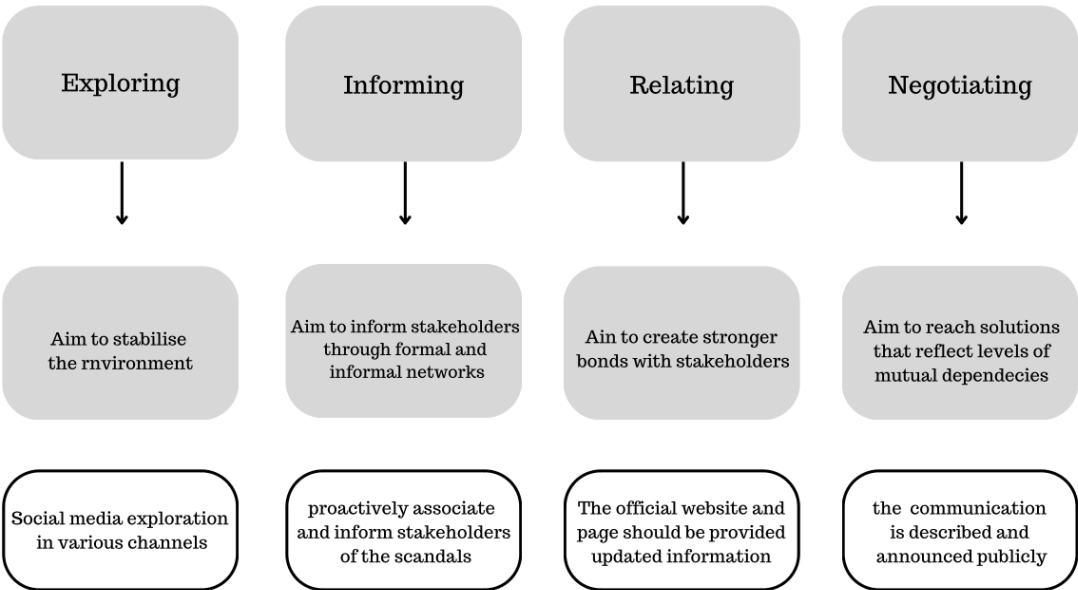


Four Tasks of Corporate Communication (Roper & Fill, 2012)

In **Figure 3** of the case of Trek, the company faced a reputational crisis from Lance Amrstrong's confession; therefore, the Four tasks of corporate communication can be applied to effectively manage the communication among stakeholders (Roper & Fill, 2012). The corporate communication consists of Exploring, Informing, Relating, and Negotiating. The first stage as Exploring, this aims to understand the environment to reduce the unexpected events that can interrupt and negatively affect the company's reputation, gathering the information from various sources such as press, news, media reports, stakeholder and government opinions. Trek used social media to explore the situations in various aspects among bike fans and other related stakeholders. For informing, the task is to proactively associate and inform

stakeholders of the scandals to be aware and communicate actively. Trek should actively respond and inform all stakeholders that they are aware of this situation. Some of the important information will be crucial and informed internally to discuss with boards and corporate responsibility. In Relating, the task is to interact with organizations and individuals to create strong and closer bonds between stakeholders. The official website and page should be provided updated information about the next steps of this case after his confession. Lastly on Negotiating, the decoded communication is described and announced publicly about the adaptation of the company strategy after this scandal that affected Trek’s reputation and history.

Figure 3 Four Tasks of Corporate Communication



Key Learning Objectives

The following **Table 1** details an overview of the key learnings to be adhered to in this case in a presentation. Inspired by Bloom’s Taxonomy learning objectives framework, below is how it applies to this case in particular (Bloom, 1956).

Table 1 Key Learning Objectives from Bloom’s Taxonomy

Objective:	Explanation:	Case Context (CC)
Remembering	How a scandal can rock up brand perceptions and affect key stakeholders such as the brand itself from the association.	CC: How Trek’s brand legacy has a blip of negative associations as their link to Armstrong damaged their reputation

		and the reaction from stakeholders demanded action.
Understanding	Certain models from the Corporate Brand Management playbook to support the case.	CC: The implications of scandal on a brand and its subsequent corporate communications call into play the CBIM, CBIRM, and other strategies surrounding corporate communications.
Applying	Theoretical concepts to analyze the brand management to restore brand reputation post-scandal.	CC: CBIM, positioning the brand, strategies with rebranding, and storytelling, emotional brand appeal, stakeholder management in crisis communications.
Evaluating	Strategic communications strategies that a brand would use to address controversy, and its efficacy on stakeholders involved.	CC: The case leans on its corporate identity, while handling any reaction/fallout. Evaluating how the reactions can be handled with media statements, their brand book, and a future outlook on how to address the tainted brand legacy.
Creating	A plan of recommendations to rebuild trust whilst adhering to the brand's core identity, and leaning on the CBIM.	CC: A decision on how to address controversy and a solid plan with preventionary measures so the brand's relationship with its customers or its sponsored athletes doesn't face the same fate.

Discussion Questions

The main question of the case serves as a springboard for broader discussion. The goal is for the class to reflect upon the question and use the assisting questions,

(separated into past and present day guiding questions), as a further prompt to analyze the brand, and the partnership it entered into, further.

Main Question

You are the brand manager at Trek and you are writing a brand book. How will you navigate the Lance Armstrong and doping scandal as it pertains to your brand legacy?

Assisting Questions

Divided into two sections, these sets of questions set out to target multiple sides of the case to encourage engagement, while noting the case timelines.

Present day (2021)

- How should the company handle its legacy despite having a dark history?
- How should the company manage the dark sides of its history, and how to navigate the communications forthwith to respectfully acknowledge all sides of the company legacy?

Past (2012-3)

- How should the company publicly address the doping scandal?
- How should Trek Bikes safeguard themselves against future partnerships with athletes (whether rookies, or veterans), to avoid getting caught up in a similar controversy?
- What proactive steps can the company take to rebuild trust and restore its reputation in the aftermath of the scandal?
- What role can corporate social responsibility initiatives play in Trek Bikes' efforts to rebuild its brand reputation in the aftermath of the scandal?
- How should Trek Bikes address potential employee concerns or questions about the company's future direction and brand strategy in light of the doping scandal?
- How should Trek Bikes balance the need for transparency and accountability with the desire to protect internal company interests and information regarding the doping scandal?

Teaching Suggestions

This section is meant to communicate suggestions for the presenters/teachers who lead with this case to their audience. The goal is to understand the case, its objectives, and reflect on the gaps or improvement where needed.

Pre-Presentation Phase

In anticipation of presenting the case to the class, it is essential that students receive all the necessary materials at least 24 hours prior to the presentation to adequately prepare for discussions. The preparation materials given to the students should include the written case, containing the background information and detailed description of the incident. This can also be distributed at the start of the lecture/class to still give students ample time for review and following along with the presenters in all the facts.

Given the complexity of the case, careful planning in advance is required to ensure structured presentation flow and the ability to foster discourse that is meaningful for all parties.

Prior to the presentation, the teacher must have a thorough understanding of the case, and research knowledge to present and communicate the facts correctly. By crafting the teaching note, the teacher will have an extensive understanding of how to conduct discussion, where to bring in the main points, and how to concisely communicate the pitfalls and high points of the brand's involvement in this case. The teaching note includes all relevant frameworks, intricacies of the case as applied to the theory, as well as the structure of the presentation itself. It also includes the questions to stimulate classroom discussion. Subsequently, reviewing the management decision document will provide deeper insight into the case and give the teacher the outcomes ahead of time so as to construct the bigger picture of the entire case. No puzzle pieces should be missing from a presenter, and they should have as much information as possible.

Lastly, when presenting to the class, good quality visual aids are paramount. Either in the forms of videos, or a PowerPoint presentation that includes the videos, graphics, and key frameworks, it will serve as an aid throughout. Further, when discussing brand alternatives in the resolution of the case with the class, the whiteboard is an enormously useful helping hand. By dividing the whiteboard into sections, and writing student responses when pitching solutions, it is clear on the student position on the case, as well as the proposed outcomes/solutions.

Introduction Phase

Presentations, while largely rooted in facts and research, should carry a lighthearted tone throughout. To 'break the ice' with the audience, start with presenter introductions, perhaps the decision to pursue the case in the first place, as well as some starting questions that will appeal to the audience. It will adequately prep the classroom for the discussion and presentation that will take place and transition into the case seamlessly.

For this particular case, the teacher should begin by asking if anyone has watched cycling events, or has gone out to buy a bicycle and if they had any brand

preferences. This touches on both the idea of Lance Armstrong – which will be the next question – and Trek Bikes as a bicycle brand. Second, the question of if anyone has heard of the athlete is critical, and if there is low recognition, a small two-bullet point summary of the athlete is needed. To gauge the reaction of the room in such a complex case with multiple elements is vital for pace, and engagement.

Discussion Phase

The teacher should allow the discussion phases in the class by prompting the overall case situation and adopt the role of management team members from Trek company in order to have an active conversation in the class. The main question that is selected from the written case should be shown on the board to ensure that every participant is on the same page of solving the case on the given topic before starting the discussion. The moderator is performed by the teacher who will be a neutral conductor without any bias from any specific sides of the discussion. To maintain the flow of discussion, the conductor should utilize the whiteboard with important notes during the conversation to ensure everyone is on the same page. After receiving various ideas and information from the management team members, the teacher will summarize the key points that are crucial in this case and empathize to further discuss deeper in those specific areas of the case.

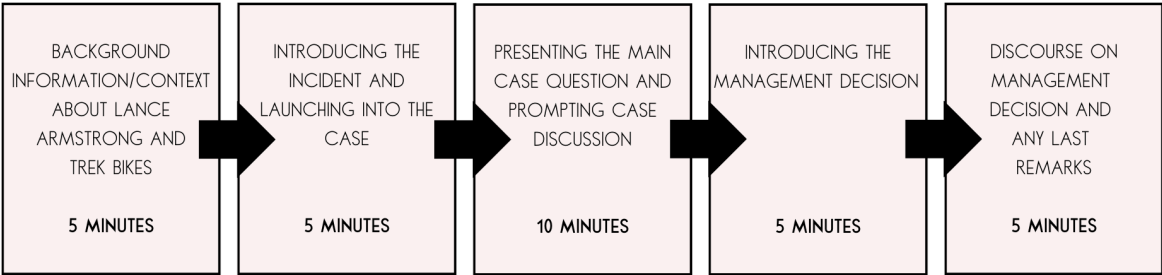
Conclusion Phase

After discussing the given questions, the teacher summarizes and transfers the conclusion with key takeaways in the class. The class is called upon to vote and make their own decisions on this topic. Consequently, the management decisions have been shown in the actual case by applying the corporate matrix to the analysis. The information and conclusion that has been discussed during the class are compared with the actual management decision making in order to highlight the differences and similarities in the decisions. Lastly, the teacher summarizes the important points after discussion and allows everyone to contribute or add more on these actions that the company made a decision to allow them to have an open mind on solving the corporate brand case analysis.

Time Plan

While the total presentation time is 30 minutes, in order to maximize the time, the breakdown of the sections presented to the class is as follows: case background, presenting the incident, introducing the case question to encourage discussion, showing the management decision for further discourse, and ending off on concluding remarks. As noted in **Figure 4**, 5 minutes each shall be given for the background and incident introduction, with 10 minutes for the core of the case which is the main question to prompt discussion and analysis. Further, the last 10 minutes are split evenly for 5 minutes spent on the management decision, and 5 on the concluding comments. At the conclusion, the teacher will rally all the facts and comments made, to leave with a few remarks and close out the presentation.

Figure 4: Visual Time Plan Breakdown (30 Minutes)



Stakeholder Recommendation Plan

In preparing for the presentation and following discussion, it is imperative for the presenter to know all key points and plans of the case. As a group, the aim is to develop a comprehensive plan beforehand to be brushed up on the talking points, all while taking into account the key learning objective to achieve in the class discussion. This *Stakeholder Recommendation Plan* as seen in **Table 2** serves as a guide full of recommendations, and a general framework of how said discussion would be structured in real time. It’s a guiding direction, and how to steer the conversation periodically if discourse is getting slightly off-track. Overall, post-discussion of the case, the audience should have a good grip on the case context, general knowledge, and analysis to serve as a foundation before segueing into the management decision.

Table 2 Stakeholder Recommendation Plan

Key Tasks and Challenges	Alternatives	Courses of Action
Rebuilding Consumer Trust through amendment of their Reputation and Perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking the feedback of the company consumers into account, and how this scandal affected their perception to craft a plan forthwith. • Leaning on their values to emerge as a company that is steadfast and stable, letting the company, and its heritage, expertise speak for itself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor social media coverage to understand consumer concerns and any changing perceptions or opinions still held about the brand. • Engaging in CSR activities to lean on community values Trek Bikes holds as a company.
Safeguarding their Brand Equity to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on brand-building activities to reinforce positive brand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a brand audit to see the state of the damage

mitigate reputational risks in the future	<p>associations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considering that doping or scandal is common in sport, but how to keep a clear divide so it doesn't affect the brand in the long-run. 	<p>throughout the years, and its recovery trajectory.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rely on expert consultancy opinions or PR firms to track consumer sentiment, brand performance metrics, and overall tracking of progress. • Develop contingency plans for any future fallout.
Make a Decision on Long-Term Strategic Partnership Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsoring celebrated, but retired athletes who are still known as 'greats' but have a clean history in their sport/career. • Find new athletes: either rookies in the sports, or current athletes who don't have rumors attached to their name. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing how past partnerships have gone awry, but mentioning that they have developed a new way forward. • Seeing who is relevant in the sport, and considering whether another partnership is worth taking on in general.

In **Table 2**, there are three columns, one for *Key Tasks and Challenges*, the second for *Alternatives*, and lastly, the third for *Courses of Action*. The key is to explore all possible sides of the case, and this table provides a potential roadmap to that discovery. It delves into the brand from different lenses, and when the action steps are considered for implementation, it becomes a true action-packed plan for the brand. This table is created from a brand perspective.

Reflection

Crafting the Lance Armstrong, Trek Bikes case proved to be a stimulating, yet challenging endeavor, prompting the exploration of various angles and options in corporate branding the onset. Discussions within the group commenced during the preparatory stages of class, BUSN35 Corporate Brand Management and Reputation at Lund University, which is led by Professor Mats Urde. After insightful supervision sessions with Professor Urde, the group navigated through the complexities of structuring the case and formulating a compelling question to present. While delving into the controversy surrounding Armstrong's doping scandal, the group faced the task of maintaining objectivity while exploring diverse case solutions and alternatives from Trek Bikes' perspective. Given the real-life implications of

Armstrong's case, avoiding bias was crucial, and facilitating student engagement was at the forefront. Balancing these roles, whilst honing in on a question that would capture the essence of the entire case.

To expand, maintaining objectivity given the group's knowledge of the case's outcome was significantly tough. In delving into the feasible alternatives for how Trek Bikes should act from a branding perspective, it forced a separation from the group's awareness of real-life events to give a platform for comprehensive discourse. The group stayed factual, while ensuring that there was analysis that exposed the duality of the case and adhered to impartiality to present a case that could be debated from both sides. There was a group commitment to presenting diverse viewpoints, and potential scenarios by placing ourselves in the shoes of the brand to draw multiple conclusions regarding Trek's strategic response to the controversy.

Ultimately, effectively framing all the elements of the case posed the greatest challenge because the brand implications for Trek Bikes were numerous. To achieve a balance of the intricate details of Armstrong's downfall with the broader repercussions on Trek's brand identity demanded meticulous planning and strategic framing. The group grappled with the task of distilling the complex legal battles, ethical dilemmas, USADA investigations, and brand management strategies into a coherent narrative. A narrative that would both resonate with the students and provoke meaningful discussion.

Through collaborative brainstorming sessions, iterative revisions, and support from Professor Urde, the group devised a framework and case flow that effectively synthesized the disparate elements of the case while maintaining clarity and focus. By prioritizing key insights and structuring the case with charts and models to facilitate critical analysis, the group was thus able to navigate the challenges posed by the wide scope of the subject matter. The ability to overcome this obstacle underscores the importance of adaptability, teamwork, and creative problem-solving in crafting an engaging, yet insightful case study.

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