

B8216 – Economics of Strategic Behavior

Spring 2024

Paola Valenti
Office: Kravis 591
pv2194@columbia.edu

Lectures: Wednesday 9:00 am – 12:20 am
Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

This course examines the underlying economics of successful business strategies, including:

1. The sources of long-run competitive advantage.
2. The dynamics of competition and competitive advantage.
3. Strategic interactions (competitive and/or cooperative) among firms.

Three characteristics distinguish our approach. First, we focus on fundamental strategic decisions that firms face rather than more detailed operation/managerial issues. Second, we seek broad principles that can be applied across many firms and markets, rather than anecdotal success stories or institutional details that apply only in limited cases or as a result of idiosyncratic factors. Finally, we develop these broad principles from the framework of microeconomic theory. As such, potential answers will be subjected to the rigor of economic analysis to test their validity and applicability.

The approach toward teaching and learning is primarily inductive. That is, you will learn the concepts and principles outlined above largely through examples – this is the essence of the case study method. The goal is to carefully study specific business situations and decisions with the goal of extracting broader principles about business strategy, which will then be available to you in a wide variety of managerial contexts. Class time will be split roughly 65/35 between case discussions and lectures.

Good cases are necessarily complex and ambiguous. In preparing for case discussions, you may find sorting through this complexity and ambiguity to be frustrating. The problems presented in the case discussion may not have one correct answer. However, there will generally be a set of insights and solutions that are better than others. And it is in working through the messy details to find these insights and solutions – both in your own preparation and in-class discussion – that the concepts and principles introduced in the readings and lectures will come alive and be enriched for you.

Prerequisites

The learning in this course will utilize, build on, and extend concepts covered in the following core courses:

Core Course	Connection
Managerial Economics	1. Understanding market competition and equilibrium thinking in the short-run 2. Market equilibrium thinking in the long-run and barriers to entry 3. Strategic Interaction among firms and Nash Equilibrium 4. Pricing with market power
Strategy Formulation	1. Creation of value vs. value capture 2. Competing firm

Students will be expected to have mastered these concepts and be able to apply them in the course

Readings

1. Bruce Greenwald and Judd Kahn (2005): Competition Demystified (CD)
2. Case studies, readings, and class handouts posted on Canvas.

Case wrap-up slides will be posted after each class. Whenever relevant, lecture slides will be posted before class.

Course materials (videos, assignments, problem sets, etc.) are for your use in this course only. You may not upload them to external sites, share them with students outside of this course, or post them for public commentary without the instructor's permission.

Method of Evaluation

Your performance will be based on class participation (40%), case write-ups (20%), and a final exam (40%).

Class participation (40%) (individual, type B) counts for a significant portion of your grade. Your participation grade will be based on attendance and on the quality (not quantity!) of your contributions to class discussions. In particular, your class participation grade will be based on two metrics:

1. Engagement (20%): During class and in-between classes, you will be asked to complete small tasks. The fraction of tasks that you complete determine your engagement grade. These tasks include:
 - a. Online Quizzes. For most sessions, there will be an online quiz posted on Canvas, to be completed before the beginning of the session. Questions are multiple-choice and/or require you to write a paragraph justifying your answer. Grading is based on the thoughtful completion of each of the quizzes. Your answers may be used in class and you may be called to discuss them.

- b. PollEverywhere. During most sessions, you will be asked to answer questions via PollEverywhere. Your answers will be used in class and you may be called to discuss them. Your PollEverywhere answers are also used to track attendance.
2. Contributions (20%): Your in-class contributions are expected to be:
 - a. Relevant: Are your comments related to the case and to the comments of others? Do they move the discussion forward? Do they bring clarity to the general discussion?
 - b. Fact-Based: Have you used specific data from the case, from readings, or from personal experience to support the assertions that you are making?

Case discussion constitutes more than half the class time, so there will be ample opportunity for each of you to participate. If you feel that you are preparing well but that I am not calling on you enough, please let me know so that I can address the problem.

In addition to your voluntary participation, I will regularly “cold call” you to facilitate class discussion and therefore, I expect that you do the readings in advance and come to class well prepared to open or lead the case discussion. I ask that you deal with the cases as you find them; do not seek outside or post-case data on the firm or industry. Of course, if you already know things about the case, from previous experience, this can be very useful in case discussions. Please let me know about it in advance, and I will make a point to call on you at the appropriate time.

Case Write-ups (20%) (group, type A). Please form groups of at most four students (strict limit). Each group is responsible for submitting two write ups per each part of the course, for a total of six submissions:

- Part 1: Aldi, The Economist, Capital One, Etsy, Tesla
- Part 2: Albert Heijn, Philip Morris, General Mills, Pratt and Whitney
- Part 3: RyanAir, Microsoft, Red Bull, Nintendo, Spotify

Note, if two cases are discussed in the same class, you can only submit the write-up for one, not both.

For each case, Section F lists the questions that you have to address in you write ups.

Due date: Write-ups are due the day before the case is discussed in class. Submit online via Canvas.

Format: Write-ups should be no longer than one page. This is an exercise in synthesis. Length does not translate into a higher grade. In answering the question, it is essential that you use concepts developed in class.

Use: I may occasionally call upon someone or a group to discuss their ideas.

Final exam (40%) (individual, type B). The final exam will take place on April 24th, and it will be a remote, open-book, case-based exam. After our final session, on April 17th, you will receive a case study. You will have one week to read it and review the class material. On April 24 at 8:00 am EST, you will receive the exam questions, which you will have to answer before April 17th at 12pm.

Classroom Norms and Expectations

You are expected to adhere to [CBS Core Culture](#) by being Present, Prepared, Participating. Please note that laptops and smartphones are not permitted in class.

Attendance is mandatory. If you are unable to attend a class, you must email me in advance explaining the reason of your absence. Please review and be familiar with the MBA [Attendance Policy](#) and the [Exam Policy](#).

Inclusion, Accommodation, and Support for Students

At Columbia Business School we believe diversity strengthens any community or business model and brings it greater success. The School is committed to providing all students with equal opportunity to thrive in the classroom by providing a learning, living, and working environment free from discrimination, harassment, and bias on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or ability.

Students with documented disabilities may receive reasonable accommodations. Students are encouraged to contact the [Columbia University's Office of Disability Services](#) for information about registration.

Columbia Business School adheres to all community, state, and federal regulations as relate to Title IX and student safety. Read more about [CBS' policies to support Inclusion, Accommodations and Support for Students](#).

Honor Code and Academic Integrity

The [Columbia Business School Honor Code](#) calls on all members of the School community to adhere to and uphold the notions of truth, integrity, and respect both during their time in school, and throughout their careers as productive, moral, and caring participants in their companies and communities around the world. All students are subject to the Honor Code for all of their academic work. Failure to comply with the Honor Code may result in [Dean's discipline](#). Here you can review examples of [academic misconduct](#) that may result in discipline.

Outline of the Course

Part 1: Fundamentals of Strategy and Competitive Advantage

The first part of the course is focused on understanding the sources and dynamics of competitive advantages. It presents a simplified approach to business strategy, based on the notion that any long-run competitive advantage must rely on “barriers to entry.” Firms without competitive advantages should concentrate all their efforts on being efficient. Firms that do have competitive advantages need to design strategy with their competitors in mind.

Date	Topics Covered	Cases and other readings
January 24	Introduction Competitive Advantage Industry Analysis	<i>Enterprise Rent-a-Car</i> CD Chapters 1, 2, and 3
January 31	Sources of Competitive Advantage	<i>Aldi – The Dark Horse Discounter</i> <i>The Economist</i> CD Chapters 4 and 5
February 7	Learning Curve Platform Markets	<i>Capital One</i> <i>Etsy</i> CD Chapters 6 and 7
February 14	Overcoming Barriers to Entry Dynamics of Competitive Advantage	<i>Tesla</i> <i>Netflix</i>

Parts 2 and 3: Managing Strategic Interactions

After having developed the basic tools for the analysis of competitive advantage, we will use game theory as a framework for analyzing shared competitive advantages. The basic issue is simply this: when competitive advantage is shared with other firms, any action I take will generate a reaction by my competitors. How can I predict and incorporate those reactions in forming strategies so that I am not blindsided, and if possible, can even use them to my advantage? We will focus attention on two distinct strategic problems: Price Cooperation (Part 2) and Strategic Entry (Part 3). More concretely, can I find a way to move away from mutually destructive price competition, toward win-win games? How do I enter an industry, or avoid entry by new competitors?

Part 2: Price Cooperation and Industry Equilibria

Date	Topics Covered	Cases and other readings
February 21	Game Theory Strategic Interactions Dynamics of Collusion	<i>Philip Morris</i> <i>Shrimp Game</i> Game Theory Hand Out CD Chapters 8 and 9
February 28	Price Wars, Competition and Cooperation Industry Structure	<i>Albert Heijn</i>
March 6	EXAM WEEK – NO CLASS	
March 13	SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS	
March 20	Competition and Cooperation	<i>General Mills</i>
March 27	Competition and Cooperation	<i>Pratt Whitney</i> Antitrust Handout
April 3	Competition and Cooperation	

Part 3: Strategic Entry and Bargaining Power

Date	Topics Covered	Cases and other readings
April 3	Strategic Entry	<i>Ryan Air</i> <i>Microsoft</i>
April 10	Strategic Entry	<i>Red Bull</i> <i>Spotify</i>
April 17	Bargaining Power	<i>Nintendo</i>
April 27	Final Exam	

Case Preparation Questions

These are the questions that you should address in your write-up. You can use the same questions to prepare for class discussion, irrespective of whether you also submit a write-up.

Enterprise

- Analyze Enterprise's strategy and competitive position. Why has Enterprise been so successful?
- How attractive is the car-rental industry in terms of long-term profitability?

Aldi

- Discuss the main elements of Aldi's strategy. Does this strategy result in a cost advantage in the discount grocery segment relative to Walmart?
- Does Aldi have a (sustainable) competitive advantage in the US? Yes or no?
- How should Walmart react to Aldi's expansion? Should they imitate some of the key choices of Aldi's? Should they go to a price war to stop Aldi's expansion?

The Economist

- What explains the success of The Economist thus far? Why has it managed to succeed while so many other magazines are struggling?
- How was The Economist able to increase prices and circulation at the same time?
- What are the main industry threats that The Economist should be sensitive to? What are the main opportunities that it could take advantage of?

Capital One

- What competitive advantages, if any, does Capital One have?
- Are these advantages sustainable into the future?
- As head of Capital One, what would be your strategic priorities?

Etsy

- Evaluate Amazon's initial response to Etsy's entry. Did they blow it? Motivate your answer.
- Does ETSY have a sustainable competitive advantage? Can Amazon replicate Etsy's strategy?

Tesla

- Should BMW expect Tesla to grow into a strong direct competitor like Audi (versus Tesla being either limited to a niche or a flash in the pan)? Is Tesla at a competitive advantage or disadvantage? How will that evolve?
- What do you think of Tesla's entry strategy? What barriers did it have to overcome? How did it manage to do so? Will other firms follow in Tesla's footsteps?
- How do you expect the industry to evolve?

Netflix

- Explain Netflix's entry strategy in video streaming. Why has it been successful?
- In the early 2010s, Netflix started pivoting towards the production of its own content (as opposed to distributing content produced by others). Provide a rationale for this pivot.

Philip Morris

- Using data from the case, provide a comprehensive industry analysis of the tobacco industry during the 80s.
- Now compare this industry with the segment of the car rental industry in which Enterprise operated in the 80s. From a competitive perspective, how is PM's position different from Enterprise's? What is the first-order difference between these two industries?
- What accounts for Philip Morris' dramatic shift in strategy in April 1993? What are its goals?

Albert Heijn

- Using data from the case, provide a comprehensive industry analysis of the food retail industry in the Netherlands at the beginning of the 2000s.
- What kind of competitive advantage did Albert Heijn have at the beginning of the 2000s?
- In your opinion, what is the strategic goal (if any) in Albert Heijn's dramatic price cut in October 2003?

General Mills

- Using data from the case, provide an estimate of the cost of entry, namely initial investment in fixed costs to reach MES, for the RTE Cereal industry in the 80s.
- Using the framework developed in class, explain why the RTE Cereal industry has been such a profitable business in the 80s?
- Describe the role of the price leader in this industry. More generally, what industry problem does a price leader solve?

Pratt and Whitney

- Should Pratt & Whitney go ahead with the GTF? Or, was the decision made by previous management to pull back from new engine programs the right one? (Assume UTC's cost of capital is 8%)

- Assuming PW has decided to go ahead with the GTF technology, how should it proceed?
- How feasible do you think it is for P&W and GE to coordinate on a better industry equilibrium? Is cooperation so hard in this industry? Explain why.

RyanAir

- Describe Ryan Air's entry strategy.
- Evaluate Ryan Air's entry strategy. Will it succeed?
- Place yourself in the shoes of the CEO of BA or AL. How would you respond to Ryan Air's entry?

Microsoft

- What, if any, competitive advantages does Google enjoy in search? Are these competitive advantages sustainable?
- Does Microsoft have a competitive advantage in search? What market share do they need to be profitable? Do you think they will be successful?
- How should Google respond to Microsoft?

Red Bull

- Describe Red Bull's entry in the US market. What kind of strategy did the company adopt to successfully enter the market?
- Was it a strategic mistake for Coke to let Red Bull freely enter the US market? Did Coke have any competitive advantage to fight off the new entrant? If so, what were the sources of such an advantage?
- How was Monster able to catch up with Red Bull? Why didn't Red Bull react more aggressively to Monster's entry?

Spotify

- Who are the major players in the music industry? Which players in the value chain have the strongest position? Explain.
- How attractive is the music streaming market in the medium to long-run? Identify main threats and opportunities for Spotify.

Nintendo

- Nintendo successfully recreated the home video game business following the Atari-era boom and bust. How did it do so?
- How was Nintendo able to capture value from the home video game business? How did it prevent content developers (e.g., Electronic Arts) and distribution channels (e.g., Walmart, Toys'R'Us) from capturing this value themselves?