

Teaching cases

Maria's Journey: Can You Go Home When "Home" Changes?

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In the heart of the Appalachian Mountains, a young entrepreneur named Maria has been making waves with her innovative approach to social media marketing. Demand for her services is growing and she loves the community that helped launch her business. She feels an obligation to pay it forward and help it thrive. The community, in turn, has found Maria's skill set important to its economic development campaigns and is placing increasing pressure on her to help with its campaigns. Maria wants to help, but time to a young, growing entrepreneur is a scarce resource. Just how much of herself should Maria give?

Note to Instructors

The case can serve as a tool for discussions on entrepreneurship, CSR/ESG, stakeholder tradeoffs, work-life balance, and place-based innovation. The case is grounded from insights gained from the USASBE Rural Entrepreneurship Symposium in Italy and recurring themes observed from years of consulting. The protagonist, "Maria," has been created to manifest the business and personal stressors that students and entrepreneurs encounter as they create and grow business ventures. This is particularly true of those students in rural or regional institutions.

Overview

This case presents the story of Maria, a young international student and aspiring entrepreneur who is building a successful social media marketing business in a rural Appalachian town. As her firm grows, she is faced with balancing personal goals, cultural values, and stakeholder demands. The case raises important issues related to social expectations, local economic development, rural innovation, and strategic issues under resource constraints.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Suggest strategic entrepreneurial actions **balancing** personal, professional, and social goals.
2. Evaluate the **trade-offs** between firm growth and community expectations for rural entrepreneurs.
3. Use **Porter's Five Forces framework** to analyze a small service business in a rural context/community.
4. Utilize a **SWOT analysis** of to assess a small business.
5. Understand how **ESG frameworks** apply to small entrepreneurial ventures.
6. Explore **rural entrepreneurship** and its impact on cultural community identity.

Suggestions for Using the Case

This case is appropriate for:

- Undergraduate or MBA courses in:
 - Social Entrepreneurship
 - Small Business Management
 - Strategic Management
 - Business Ethics
 - Corporate Social Responsibility
 - Marketing Strategy

The case may be used for classroom discussion or written reflections.

Maria's Story

In the heart of the Appalachian Mountains, a young entrepreneur named Maria has been making waves with her innovative approach to social media marketing. Demand for her services is growing and she loves the community that helped her launch her business. She feels an obligation to pay it forward and help the community thrive. The community, in turn, has found Maria's skill set important to its economic development and is placing increasing pressure on her to help with its campaigns. Maria wants to help, but time for a young, growing entrepreneur is a scarce resource. Just how much of herself should Maria give?

Maria arrived in the United States from Italy as an international student, intent on earning her degree and returning to her much-loved Marche region of Italy to help her family run its business. Maria made her decision to attend a regional institution in the Appalachian Mountain region of the US due to the university's vibrant entrepreneurship program and its familiar setting. While not possessing the name recognition of larger schools in urban settings, the university was in a geographical region with rolling hills, slow-paced friendliness, and community culture that mirrored the Apennine mountains in which she grew up.

Maria's desire to learn more about entrepreneurship stemmed from watching her parents' success with the "agriturismo" business they ran. Italian agriturismo programs provide governmental financial, developmental and operational assistance to individuals that have the desire to restore run-down and vacant farmhouses and properties back to working tourist destinations and economic engines for their locale. Maria watched her parents work hard to rebuild and convert their property into a successful bed and breakfast. This work was a passion for her parents, and they felt a sense of pride knowing that not only were they providing income and opportunity for the family but contributing to ever-increasing tourism and sense of vibrance to their region. Maria's parents were well-known and respected in the region for their talent, accomplishments, and willingness to assist in hosting dignitaries and visitors to the area: they were frequently called upon to entertain, instruct, and feed those the village wanted to impress. Maria's parents worked hard to build a reputation and stability for the family, contribute to the community, and maintain the ancient buildings and immense grounds of the property. The facility is beautiful, but money is tight due to the intensifying competition for the tourists that make Marche a destination. Maria gained a deep respect for her parents' entrepreneurial spirit but also saw the immense burden that came with providing a cultural experience expected with the agritourism funding and assistance. Maria hoped that the social media marketing skills she learned at the university would help her parents' business thrive. Maria's parents supported her desire to attend the university in the United States. However, privately, they worried that their daughter would become another statistic in the brain drain of the youth from the region.

A Feeling of Home

Maria thrived at the university. She found her faculty were eager to learn about her family background and helped her design a curriculum pathway that would be most beneficial to her goals. Maria embraced her new friends, making frequent trips with them to enjoy the Appalachian trail, its waterways, and growing eco-tourism businesses. In addition to the social growth, she also felt empowered by the coursework and opportunities being presented. She was particularly drawn to the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility and the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles she explored in her social entrepreneurship course. Though she understood its main purpose as evaluative in nature to assess an organization's impact on the environment, its commitment to social responsibility, and its adherence to ethical governance practices, she operationalized it much deeper. For Maria, the ESG framework provided guidance to her as to why her parents were so committed to running their operation and being so intertwined with employees and community. Maria integrated her personal history and understanding of "place" with the theoretical frameworks in her courses. It all was becoming clear- the key to being successful was not simply financial, but an intertwining of her goals, her firm goals, and a con-

textualized understanding of the historical, social and institutions that make up her community.

The Idea

As her academic program progressed, Maria gained confidence through the many experiences and opportunities offered to her. A marketing class in her sophomore year provided her with an opportunity to learn more about social media marketing (SMM) as a tool to build awareness, expand a firm's geographic footprint and customer base. This was just what Maria had been searching for to contribute to her family business. Maria declared a double major- Entrepreneurship and Marketing- and constantly visualized how her readings, projects, and theoretical development could be applied to her family bed and breakfast.

In the spring of her Junior year, Maria entered an Innovation Challenge sponsored by her university and local businesses. Her entry, "Bringing Growth to the B&B Though SMM," did not win the competition but placed third. Maria was disappointed. However, during the awards reception one of the panel judges, the local head of the Chamber of Commerce, approached her and praised her work. She asked if Maria would be willing to help the local Chamber put together a SMM campaign for its Summer Festival the town had planned. Maria spoke to her advisor, who not only encouraged her to take on the project but earn internship credit while completing the job. Maria took a chance and said yes.

Being a full-time student while working on an important campaign for a real-world business is not easy. But, for Maria, it was exhilarating. She eagerly met with the local business leaders working on the project. She was uncertain how they would respond to the ideas of a student and was hesitant to share. Over time, she learned the more she shared about herself and her ideas, the more they valued and embraced her. The festival was a huge success. Though Maria was somewhat relieved to have made it through, the pride she felt in contributing to the success of the event was one of the most rewarding experiences of her life. She took a tremendous emotional risk and challenge in working on this project- but she was so happy she did.

As happens after innovation competitions, it was the conversations after the festival that provided Maria with her next challenge. Several local business owners came to Maria and asked if she could help them with creating SMM campaigns for their businesses. While some may see these "asks" as wonderful opportunities, Maria, was torn. It was now her senior year. Her plan was to graduate and return to Italy to work in the family business. Maria thought about the offers...these were not internships but real, paying, campaigns... what a great way to continue to grow professionally. On the other hand, what about her parents? Her hometown? Maria discussed her dilemma with her friends and faculty. They listened and gave advice. Her advisor, however, suggested she speak with her parents and wondered why she didn't start the business, treating her family as a third, "special client." Maria Zoomed with her parents. They listened. Maria was sure she heard them deflate with the news. After some pause, it was Maria's mother that said

she was proud of her as she had turned out just like them. Yes, they would rather have her home. But they wanted her to explore her dreams, "We will be your first client. We are proud of you- do your best!"

Teaching Note

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Suggested Discussion Questions

1. **What makes rural entrepreneurship like urban entrepreneurship? How do they differ?**
2. **Why do the organizations wish to include Maria on their boards? If you were Maria, what would be your response?**
3. **What responsibilities does Maria have to her community when running a small business?**
4. **What expectations should Maria have of her community?**
5. **Conduct a SWOT analysis of Maria's business.**
6. **Apply Porter's Five Forces to Maria's firm.**
7. **How might ESG principles guide Maria's future decisions?**
8. **What are some strategies Maria could use to balance business growth and community obligations?**

Suggested Answers/Guidance

1. **What makes rural entrepreneurship similar to urban entrepreneurship? How do they differ?** Stu-

dents will want to point out that there are many similarities to being an entrepreneur in either urban or rural settings, as the principle drivers, identifying a need, structuring a solution and taking risks are the same. However, there are differences. This would be a good time to compare how the histories, relationships, markets, financial and institutional support opportunities may greatly differ.

2. **Why do the organizations wish to include Maria on their boards? If you were Maria what would be your response?** This may be a good time to gauge your student's perspective on motivation between individuals. Pure altruistic or selfish motives are rare. A general understanding that the desire to create win-win outcomes should be identified so that Maria and the organizations benefit from their interactions. Student responses should show this balanced analysis.
3. **What responsibilities does Maria have to her community when running a small business?** As a successful entrepreneur in the Appalachian region, Maria has a responsibility to give back to the community that has supported her endeavors. This may include promoting local businesses, creating employment opportunities, and contributing to initiatives that foster economic and social development in the area. However, Maria must understand the importance of balance. If her company is not successful, she cannot do good. This is an opportunity for Maria to learn that building an organization means delegating and developing her colleagues. In other words, it does not have to be Maria providing all of the CSR assistance. Perhaps this is a time for a development opportunity for Jim. Regardless of who is providing the aid, best to track total contributions and keep them at an industry average to maintain mission focus.
4. **What expectations should Maria have of her community?** This is an opportunity for you and your students to discuss resource dependency relationships. When managing a growing firm, Maria needs to be certain that the region is attractive to not only her, but current and future employees. This means strong schools; town amenities; growth so that employees and markets can develop; infrastructure; police and fire protection; effective, but reasonable, regulation; and access to health care among other factors. Rural regions might not be welcoming to "outsiders," is the community embracing Maria and her efforts? Is the town encouraging and celebrating innovation and businesses success?

5. SWOT Analysis:

Strengths: - Italian Cultural Background. - High Demand for Digital Marketing - Strong Community Ties	Weaknesses: - Low Brand Recognition/No regional awareness - Sole owner with limited Capabilities - Balancing Student work/life expectations with community initiatives
Opportunities: - Regional networking opportunities - Leveraging online platforms to increase brand awareness (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Fivver and Indeed) - Gain experience with automation technology	Threats: - Lack of boundaries between personal and work commitments - Competition from Larger regional/international firms - Economic Limitations based off Rural location

6. Porter's Five Forces

1. Rivalry between competitors: Moderate
 - Limited direct competitors and personal relationships give Maria an advantage.
 - Online tools and companies are available if clients choose to seek them out.
2. Threat of Suppliers: Moderate to High
 - Automotive creative platforms can replace her services with little to no cost.
 - Expert freelancers can be acquired relatively easily with online platforms.
3. Bargaining Power of Buyers: High
 - Community clients may expect pro-bono or discounted services.

- Maria's sense of community obligation may reduce her ability to negotiate a fair rate.
- Low switching costs.

4. Power of Suppliers: Low

- Maria's rural background gives her a differentiated competitive advantage.

5. Barriers of Entrance: Moderate

- Social and digital marketing services have low entry barriers, especially due to her ties within the local community.

7. Using ESG Principles to guide Maria's work

Maria's work can easily reflect ESG principles

Environmental: Maria's Service is a non-tangible item without a physical environmental footprint.

Social: Strong engagement with local community leaders; creates brand awareness and community good will.

Governance: As Maria grows, she has an opportunity to set ethical standards for her business. An example might be a rule guide to pro-bono services. This also allows her to measure and track her impact.

8. What are some strategies Maria could use to balance business growth and community obligations?

- Develop a "Community Help Budget" (time + money).
- Limit pro bono hours weekly and prioritize focusing high-impact services.
- Reframe leadership roles as strategic business ventures if they offer networking or brand awareness.
- Monthly re-evaluate alignment with personal morals and business goals.

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