CASE STUDY 1 · BUSINESS C1

Refounding the founder

Integrated case study · reading, analysis, negotiation and writing

BRIEFING

Nora Ostwald & Halden Systems

8 min

Company. Halden Systems — a nine-year-old B2B software firm serving mid-market European insurers. Fifty-two people, profitable, growing at 18% year on year. Founder-CEO: Nora Ostwald (44), a former actuary.

The year. Halden had a rough year. A major reference customer churned, publicly, over a botched migration. A magazine profile of Nora — written before the incident and published after — described her as "the industry's quiet contrarian". The two events collided in the market's memory; a competitor's sales team began forwarding the profile as a warning.

What Nora sees. Internally, Halden has never been stronger: retention is up, the engineering team has just shipped the most ambitious release in the company's history, and the last three hires are objectively better than anyone Nora has previously managed to attract. Externally, however, her calendar has changed. Analyst calls are cooler. A conference she used to keynote invited her onto a panel instead. Two prospective board members politely declined.

What the board sees. The chair, a former insurance CEO, has asked Nora to spend Q1 on what he calls, awkwardly, "voice work". He does not mean vocal coaching. He means: Halden needs its founder back in a public register that matches the company it now is, not the one it was two years ago.

COMPLICATION

Two advisors, two theories

6 min

Advisor A — Ines (former CMO). "Rebuild from the outside in. Book six talks, get her on two podcasts, ghost-write one long essay. Presence is a stock — you have to keep depositing. She's been silent for eight months; that's the whole problem."

Advisor B — Marek (executive coach). "Rebuild from the inside out. She lost her voice because she stopped believing her own positioning after the churn incident. No amount of stage time will fix that. Spend six weeks working out what she now actually believes about the category — then book the stage."

Both advisors have been right, in previous engagements, at different times.

DATA ROOM

What the numbers say

4 min

- Inbound analyst enquiries: down 34% YoY. Outbound win rate: up 6 points.
- Employer-brand survey among target hires: Halden is now perceived as "solid" (up) rather than "interesting" (down).
- Nora's public content in the last 12 months: 3 LinkedIn posts (avg. 340 words), one press interview.
- The churned customer has, quietly, come back — for a smaller product — under a new contract signed last month.

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

YOUR TASK

Discursive analysis

25 min

On your own, prepare a written response (400–500 words) to the following. Bring the draft to the next class.

- Which advisor is more right for Nora now? Defend your answer with at least one specific data point from the brief and one inference from the industry context.
- Draft Nora's new eleven-word positioning. It must be rejectable — a competitor's salesperson should be able to disagree with it out loud.
- Write the first ninety seconds of a keynote she could deliver at a mid-market insurance conference in three months. Use at least two inverted structures and one cleft sentence.
- Identify one thing Nora should stop doing to protect her reputation capital, and one thing she should start. Justify both.

COMPREHENSION

Check your reading

6 min

- Nora's central problem, in one sentence, is:
  (a) revenue decline
  (b) a widening gap between her real work and her public voice
  (c) an internal HR crisis
  (d) poor product-market fit
  Answer key: (b) a widening gap between her real work and her public voice
- Her advisors disagree principally about:
  (a) whether to raise a round
  (b) whether presence should be rebuilt inside-out or outside-in
  (c) whether to fire the CMO
  (d) whether to hire a coach
  Answer key: (b) whether presence should be rebuilt inside-out or outside-in
- The board's implicit worry is that Nora is:
  (a) under-qualified
  (b) over-exposed to the wrong audiences
  (c) burnt out
  (d) too junior
  Answer key: (b) over-exposed to the wrong audiences
- The eleven-word positioning she is asked to draft is intended to:
  (a) replace her marketing plan
  (b) force choices about what to no longer be
  (c) impress investors
  (d) raise prices
  Answer key: (b) force choices about what to no longer be

SELF-DEBATE

Advisor A vs Advisor B

15 min

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class

Argue both sides yourself, in writing. First, spend five minutes drafting the strongest possible case for Ines's outside-in playbook. Then five minutes on Marek's inside-out approach. Finally, five minutes writing the sentence that settles the debate for Nora now.

Each side of your argument must use, at least once: an inverted structure, a cleft, and two items of C1 presence vocabulary (gravitas, self-possession, credibility gap…).

Teacher notes

Coaching: When reviewing the student's draft, track whether they reach for evidence or for adjective stacks. The point isn't to declare a winner — it's to expose that presence is neither cosmetic nor purely internal.

HOMEWORK

Write the memo

30 min

Task (260–320 words): You are Nora's Chief of Staff. Write the memo she will read on the plane home, summarising your recommendation and its rationale. Structure it: Recommendation · Rationale · What we will not do · Next step.

- Open with a cleft.
- Use at least one inversion for emphasis.
- Name the specific audience Nora will lose by taking your recommendation — do not hide it.

WRAP-UP

Bring it back to you

6 min

- If your own reputation had a 'churn incident' this year, what would it be? Which of the two advisors would you hire?
- What is your own current 'silence gap' — the number of months since you last made a public claim?
- Name one 'stop' and one 'start' for yourself, in Nora's terms.
- Draft your own eleven-word positioning — rejectable.

Take-away:

ASK THE TEACHER — notes to bring to class