

SWOT – SUMMARIES WITHOUT THEORY: THE HISTORY, LIMITATIONS, AND USE OF SWOT IN MARKETING CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

SWOT is a ubiquitous tool used by both marketers and managers for a variety of purposes. There have been calls for its demise (Barney, 1995), a “product recall” (Hill & Westbrook, 1997) or significant modifications to SWOT (Morris, 2005; Panagiotou & van Wijnen, 2005). Despite these criticisms of SWOT, it still appears in the vast majority of principles of marketing and marketing management and strategy textbooks. We examine this tool from a pedagogical perspective, hoping to answer the fundamental question – “is SWOT impossibly flawed, or can it, with significant modification, become a much more useful tool to marketers and strategists?”

To understand some of the shortcomings of SWOT, we surveyed its coverage in introduction to marketing, marketing management and strategy, and introduction to management textbooks. (We include the latter because marketing professors may rely on a base laid in the introduction to management course.) In total, we examined 12 principles of marketing texts, 11 marketing management and strategy texts, and 18 introduction to management texts. (Our content analysis instrument is available upon request.)

On average, most marketing texts spent less than ½ page covering SWOT; total coverage ranged from 1/4 page to 5 pages. While there is great variation in coverage, it is marked by its brevity. None of the texts discussed the history of SWOT, and only one marketing strategy text discussed extensions to SWOT (in that case, TOWS analysis). Only one of the introductory texts discussed the benefits of SWOT, and none of the texts mentioned limitations of SWOT! Very few (only half the principles texts and a third of the marketing strategy texts) discuss the purpose underlying SWOT analysis. Few of the texts discussed the “nuts and bolts” of conducting a SWOT analysis, and less than half the principles texts described the output of a SWOT analysis.

Therefore, unless students pick up a detailed understanding of SWOT in other courses, it is unlikely that they will understand this concept at more than a cursory level. Hence, there is a good explanation why marketing students do not know how to conduct a worthwhile SWOT analysis. Textbooks provide very little, and often superficial, information on how to execute a SWOT. In the absence of solid instruction about the whys or hows of SWOT analysis, it seems highly unlikely that students will be able to develop this knowledge on their own.

Moreover, given this lack of effective formal training on the use of SWOT, it becomes apparent why the literature is replete with examples of poor use of SWOT in practice. If marketers fail to learn how to use SWOT during their business programs, exactly when and how do we expect them to learn it? Will they have time or inclination during their busy careers to dig out what the literature says about SWOT? Presuming the answer to this rhetorical question to be “no,” we cannot wonder why SWOT is so poorly executed in practice.

Further, in spite of all the discussion in the marketing and management literatures regarding SWOT’s limitations and drawbacks, the texts we examined make no mention of such limitations and drawbacks. This seems to be particularly unfortunate at the marketing strategy level where there should be more opportunity to look at a number of marketing concepts in a less naïve, more in-depth fashion than in the introductory marketing course. Additionally, we can hardly expect our graduates to approach the topic of SWOT with any sophistication if we fail to highlight its benefits or drawbacks. Are we surprised that they apply it inappropriately in inappropriate situations when we fail to tell them what to watch for when using this tool?

References Available on Request