The Tic-Tac-Toe Framework: An evolution of SWOT for strategic analysis

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ABSTRACT

The SWOT Matrix is a framework that is widely used in strategic planning for management, marketing, and other disciplines yet it leaves out key information and is not intuitive to many users. Due to changes related to the English language itself, the acronym is no longer meaningful to current users, especially non-English speakers. These deficiencies undermine its effectiveness. The paper overviews the SWOT Matrix's limitations and introduces the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework, a more refined strategic planning tool that addresses these limitations. It then delineates how to use the framework for strategic planning in management, marketing, and other contextual situations in which long-term strategic analysis is required. The associated assignments allow students to apply the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework for strategic planning purposes. A fictionalized example of Tic-Tac-Toe analysis results is provided for illustrative purposes.

Keywords: strategic analysis, SWOT, business planning, marketing analysis
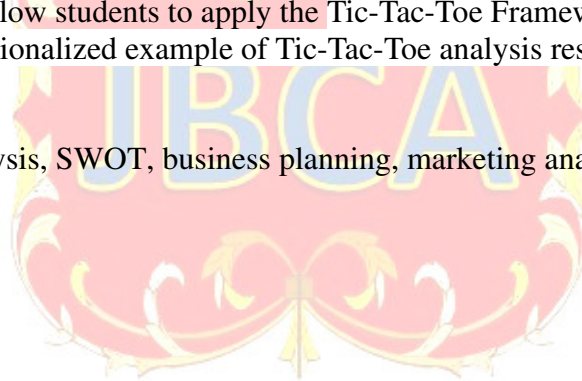
INTRODUCTION

While there are many frameworks used to guide strategic planning activities, the SWOT Matrix is the one considered in this article. It is taught to the vast majority of business students in the US and is one of the most common frameworks used. As a result, SWOT has often been at the core of strategic analysis activities. Over the years, a number of researchers have criticized SWOT as an effective tool for analysis. Some have suggested it should be scraped altogether (Hill & Westbrook, 1997 and Martin, 2021). Others have suggested SWOT be improved with additional analytical tools (Piercy & Giles, 1989; Pinkton & Wright, 1998; Kurttila et al., 1999; Koch, 2000; Valentin, 2001; Coman & Ronen, 2008; Ying, 2010; Agarwal et al., 2012; Kajanus et al., 2012; Phadermrod et al., 2016; Pandya, 2017; David et al., 2016; Vlados, 2019). This article does not propose that SWOT, or any other particular analysis framework, is bad per se, but we do suggest that the SWOT Matrix is deficient. Specifically, it leaves out key information that should be considered and, on the surface, is not intuitive to many users.

This paper proposes an evolution of SWOT that will address a number of deficiencies. In addition, an introduction to SWOT is given that outlines the most significant of these issues. Though such frameworks are generally described in a company setting, as is used in this article, they are also used at other contexts such as individuals, non-profits, industries, governments, and even nations (Helms & Nixon, 2010); any context where there is sufficient information to assess the context, make comparisons, and derive potential response actions. This paper proposed a more refined framework that addresses the more serious issues with SWOT in a way that is both intuitive, more robust, and that lends itself more readily to multi-lingual environments.

THE SWOT MATRIX AND ITS LIMITATIONS

The "SWOT" analysis framework is used to help analyze a company's situation as a part of the strategic planning process. It is generally presented as a two-by-two grid with the four cells labeled as Strengths (S), Weaknesses (W), Opportunities (O), and Threats (T). Hence, the "SWOT" acronym. Frequently, positive factors are located in the top cells and negative factors in the bottom cells, with internal factors in the left cells and external factors in the right cells. The analysis generally involves listing relevant factors in each of these four cells that overview internal strengths and weaknesses of the company as well as opportunities and threats that the company faces externally.

The intent of a SWOT analysis is to relate a company's internal qualities to external circumstances and generate potential actions that the company might pursue that would benefit its strategic efforts over a future planning period, typically 4-6 years or more. However, the SWOT Matrix has a number of limitations that undermine its effectiveness as a tool for strategic analysis and planning. These limitations include issues with the matrix itself that make it challenging to understand and correctly utilize the framework for the purpose of strategic planning. The causes of these limitations with the SWOT Matrix can be separated into four categories: (A) issues with its structure, (B) the terms used, (C) input factor criteria, and (D) assumptions. Next, these four usage limitations will be defined and then elaboration provided as to how each undermines the effectiveness of SWOT as a tool for situation analysis. Some additional concerns will also be noted.

The first limitation with the SWOT Matrix is its structure. The SWOT matrix is traditionally illustrated with a two-by-two structure with four cells; positive and negative internal

factors, and positive and negative external factors. The matrix does not incorporate a place for output factors where the potential actions that the company might pursue would be listed. Thus, the structure is inadequate to truly frame a complete analysis. The overall purpose of a situational analysis is to match internal factors with external factors and yield some strategic options, yet the SWOT matrix has neither a place for that matching to clearly be completed, nor for any of the possible strategic options proposed to be laid out in an orderly manner.

A second limitation with the SWOT Matrix is with regard to its terms. Like most languages, the English language has changed over time and the meanings of the input factors no longer reflect what they once were. For example, when the terms "strength" and "weakness" were initially selected for SWOT, the words were relative terms, meaning they required some point of comparison. For example, the words "strength" and "weakness" in a comparative sense indicated a company was stronger or weaker in terms of a particular measurable relative to a competitor, an industry or strategic group average, societal or legal expectations, or something else. In present-day conversational English, these two words are not utilized in the same way and have lost that quality of comparison. The term "opportunity" has also experienced a shift in meaning as well. In everyday usage, it more commonly refers to something that can be done rather than to some favorable situation a company faces. For example, "Our company has an opportunity to do XYZ", which is a statement of a strategic response rather than a statement of an environmental stimulus. The word "threat" is now often used to express a phenomenon that might happen in the future rather than a present-moment negative external circumstance. Finally, an additional challenge is that these four terms do not translate well into other languages. Thus, the fuzziness they have in English is potentially amplified in an international context.

A third limitation with the SWOT Matrix is the criteria used to distinguish input factors. As there are no clear criteria generally given for input factors, they are often subjective, biased, or without support. For example, input factors may include information previously true about the company or expectations with regard to the future rather than descriptions of present-tense phenomena. Information may also be presented without support or context and thus be either unintentionally inaccurate or misleading. History, hopes, and vagaries are generally not a sound basis for planning. Simply put, stating what happened in the past is not as relevant as stating what those past phenomena left as lingering changes to the company or external environment. Current, accurate information is needed for sound strategic planning. This limitation can also undermine efforts to use diagnostic tools such as the IFE, EFE, Grand Strategy Matrix, etc. later in the analysis to assess inputs and prioritize the relative importance of each. As input factors serve as the very foundation upon which any output strategies are derived, this limitation has the potential to significantly weaken or undermine later steps in the strategic planning process.

A fourth limitation of the SWOT Matrix framework is its omission of key information about the company. The matrix does not clearly include facts foundational to the company's identity such as its mission, vision, values, motto, and organizational culture, nor does it provide a place for direct input by company leaders regarding priorities, style, and other such issues related to leadership. This information thus must be taken for granted by SWOT planners if it is to be incorporated. These characteristics are critical to the strategic decision-making process as they help a company choose to eliminate or incorporate certain strategic alternatives. Leaving such important information to assumption could mean pertinent inputs or outputs are missing from the analysis.

Some additional concerns have been leveled against the SWOT Matrix and its use in strategic planning, which have been blamed for reducing its effectiveness, though these concerns

are not truly limitations with the SWOT Matrix itself so much as with incorrect or poor usage of it. This distinction is important. If all the limitations with the SWOT matrix previously identified were addressed, these concerns would potentially remain as they can only be resolved by proper usage of a situational planning tool.

One criticism that has been leveled against SWOT is that it can be used as an ad hoc process once and then not considered again. A better situational analysis would be an iterative process that changes as factors change, thus strategic actions must be refined across time as new information becomes available or interim objectives are reviewed. Such an iterative review and update is more likely to maintain a favorable fit between a company's resources and its external environment than a simple ad hoc, or once-and-done, planning process. Another criticism of SWOT is an insufficiency in evaluation of the external environment taken without any other guiding methodologies or tools. That is, a thorough assessment of a company's external environment needs to include as many relevant forces as possible, which are not guided by the SWOT analysis framework alone. Analysis models such as Porter's Five Forces or PESTEL can help a company identify and consider a more comprehensive array of factors pertinent to the analysis. If planners do not use such models, the SWOT Matrix will likely be deficient in the factors incorporated. Again, these concerns are not faults with the SWOT Matrix itself, but rather are due to a lack of understanding of how strategic planning is to be done in general. It is not the tool's fault that the user does not know how to wield it properly.

THE TIC-TAC-TOE FRAMEWORK

While SWOT has a number of limitations that undermine its effectiveness as a tool for strategic planning, the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework presented here will be examined as to how it fully addresses each of the limitations identified earlier. The Tic-Tac-Toe Framework is presented using a three-by-three grid as indicated in Figure 1 (Appendix). Its name is derived from the inner vertical and horizontal lines that resemble a tic-tac-toe game board. For the purpose of this introduction, the cells that these lines form are numbered from one to nine starting in the upper left corner and progressing across and then down the rows to the lower right. These numbers should not be construed as the sequence in which the information is collected, nor analysis is to be done but are only used to simplify reference to them.

The nine cells in the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework are separated into four major sections; Identity Factors, Internal Factors, External Factors, and Output Strategies. The Identity Factors are in Cell 1 would include facts foundational to the company's identity and thus to the style or flavor of its existence, which is integral to the logic behind the entire strategic planning effort. These factors include such things as the company's mission, vision, values, organizational culture, slogans, mottos, and even managerial or leadership style.

Internal Factors would be listed in Cells 4 and 7, which represent the current internal traits of the company identified during an organizational analysis, and are attributes over which the company has some control and are applicable primarily to just the company under review. They are also current, meaning the company presently has them; not that it previously had them or desires to have them in the future. These current internal traits are separated into two categories which are referred to as "Better-Than Traits" and "Worse-Than Traits." The adjectives "better-than" and "worst-than" are used to make it clear that these traits are comparisons to something else. A company may be "better than" or "worse than" another organization, a group average, the entire industry, societal or legal expectations, or even

something else in some way. "Current Internal Better-Than Traits" are the qualities that would generally have been referred to as "strengths" in SWOT. "Current Internal Worse-Than Traits" are the qualities that would generally have been referred to as "weaknesses".

External Factors would be listed in Cells 2 and 3 and are the result of the industry, or external, analysis. As external circumstances, these are conditions beyond the control of any one company in the industry in question. They are also current, meaning they represent the conditions at present, not those in the future nor the past. These current external circumstances are separated into two categories which are referred to as "Favorable Circumstances" and "Unfavorable Circumstances." Favorable circumstances are conditions that are not controllable by the company but might be beneficial to it. Unfavorable circumstances are conditions that are not controllable by the company but are likely to be detrimental to it. "Current External Favorable Circumstances" are the conditions that were previously referred to as "opportunities" in the SWOT Matrix. "Current External Unfavorable Circumstances" are the conditions that were previously referred to as "threats" in the SWOT Matrix.

The output blocks of the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework are shown as Cells 5, 6, 8 and 9. These four cells are where the results of the creative process in which a strategist considers internal traits in light of external circumstances would be listed as a series of potential strategic actions a company could take. Each category of strategic output is distinguished both with a short descriptive name, to help it be more easily understood, as well as identified with a general class strategy type. Note that, because a given potential strategic action might be in response to more than just two input factors, a potential strategic action might be listed in multiple output cells.

In Cell 5, Better-Than Traits are matched with Favorable Circumstances to yield "BF Outputs", which are strategies that utilize a company's Better-Than traits to capitalize on one or more Favorable Circumstances. These strategies can be referred to as "Easy Success." The strategic mindset for BF Outputs is generally aggressive and include strategies the company would benefit from pursuing with priority, such as circumstances of unsatisfied demand, capitalizing on first mover advantages, etc.

In Cell 6, Better-Than Traits are matched with Unfavorable Circumstances to yield "BU Outputs", which are strategies that attempt to use a company's Better-Than Traits to negate, neutralize, or counteract one or more Unfavorable Circumstances. These strategies are referred to as "Protect Yourself." The strategic mindset for BU Outputs is typically defensive and represents strategies the company might use to defend itself from adverse conditions beyond its control.

In Cell 8, Worse-Than traits are matched with Favorable Circumstances to yield "WF Outputs", which are strategies meant to take advantage of Favorable Circumstances to convert a company's Worse-Than traits to Better-Than traits. These strategies are referred to as "Pumping Iron." The descriptive name is drawn from the use of weights to strengthen muscles that are not as strong as they need to be. The strategic mindset for WF Outputs is typically "Conversion" and describes strategies the company might consider when it is looking for ways in which it can improve "worse than" facets of itself.

In Cell 9, Worse-Than traits are matched with Unfavorable Circumstances to yield "WU Outputs", which are strategies that attempt to just keep the company (or portions of it) operating in the face of Unfavorable Circumstances under conditions to which the company is vulnerable. These strategies are referred to as "OH NO!" The strategic mindset for WU Outputs is "Survival" and describes strategies the company would use to continue its existence.

ANALYSIS USING THE TIC-TAC-TOE FRAMEWORK

Analysis using any tool or framework begins with the gathering of appropriate information. The sequence outlined below is proposed as the approach to be used for the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework primarily based on ease of collection. The process is designed to be iterative and ongoing in that, once completed, it is generally not created again from scratch but rather is reviewed regularly and all sections updated accordingly. As a result, changes to input factors, for example, might make a given strategic option no longer viable in one or more of the output blocks. Rather than continue existing strategies that no longer make sense, an iterative review process helps keep the strategic track an organization is following relevant and meaningful, as well as fresh in the minds of those involved.

The Identity Factor information is generally collected first and contains the information considered foundational to the company's identity, which is critical to strategic planning efforts. This information provides a guiding set of constraints as they will help a company choose to eliminate or incorporate certain options simply because they complement or contradict an organization's identity. Identity factors include phenomena such as the company's mission, vision, values, organizational culture, leadership style, etc. Much of this information should be readily available and typically does not change as often as many other factors considered during the strategic planning process.

For the internal (company) analysis, the current internal traits of the company are identified with comparisons to some other entity. Other analytical models such as PESTEL and Porters Five Forces are typically used to guide the planner's thinking as to what should be considered. The primary purpose of using models such as these is to ensure no key information context is left out of the analysis. Each trait incorporated into the framework must be a comparison and must currently be. Current internal traits are then identified as either better-than or worse-than traits and include relevant point of comparison information (i.e., relative to a competitor, an industry average, etc.) that is measurable. Current Internal Better-Than (BT) Traits and Current Internal Worse-Than (WT) Traits are then labeled and numbered (i.e., BT1, BT2, … or WT1, WT2, …) and listed in their associated cell as indicated in Figure 2 (Appendix). Each trait should be listed as a single, grammatically correct, sentence with a present verb tense. Specifically, the verb tense is "present-continuing" rather than "present perfect". For example, stating "High unemployment causes a drop in disposable income among consumers" is generally always true, which is inappropriate here. That statement does not say anything about whether or not unemployment is high currently. If unemployment is high, a better statement would be in present-continuing tense and worded as, "High unemployment is causing a drop in disposable income among consumers." While this is admittedly a subtle difference, stating something that is always true is generally not as useful as a statement that makes it clear that the statement is true AND applicable to the current situation at hand.

For the external (industry) analysis, the current external circumstances for the industry or strategic group in which the company operates are identified. Models such as PESTEL and Porters Five Forces models are again used for this aspect of the analysis. Each circumstance incorporated into the framework must currently be true and be beyond the direct control of any one competitor in the competitive group. Current external circumstances (i.e., economic trends, changes in customers, technological innovation, etc.) are then identified as either favorable or unfavorable with supporting information that is measurable. Current External Favorable Circumstances (FC) and Current External Unfavorable Circumstances (UC) are then labelled and

numbered (i.e., FC1, FC2, … or UC1, UC2, …) and listed in their associated cell. Each circumstance should be listed as a single grammatically correct sentence in present-continuing tense.

While the internal and external analysis can be completed in either order, the authors generally recommend that the external (industry) analysis should be performed first as it helps to prevent biasing the external analysis with information about the company identified during the internal analysis. That is, if the internal analysis is performed first, it is more difficult to perform an unbiased external analysis. If performed without bias, an external analysis might look similar for any company in a given competitive group, which might be important in teaching situations or in situations in which the industry analysis will be used for multiple divisions of a larger organization. If an analysis yields too many internal traits or external circumstances, further diagnostic tools such the Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) Matrix and External Factor Evaluation (EFE) Matrix can be used to narrow down and prioritize them to a more manageable number.

The final step in the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework is the creative process of developing a list, or lists, of potential output strategies. The four output cells are where the individual potential actions are listed that are derived from matching the company's internal traits with their external circumstances in light of the identity factors. These strategic actions are then labeled, numbered, and then listed in their associated cell. Labeling is based on the traits and circumstances from which a strategic action is derived. For example, a Better-Than trait matched with a Favorable circumstance is labelled a BF output .

HOW THE TIC-TAC-TOE FRAMEWORK ADDRESSES THE SWOT LIMITATIONS

The first limitation of SWOT is its two-by-two structure which provides no clear indication of how internal factors would be matched with external factors nor any place for strategic options to be laid out. The four Output Strategies cells in the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework clearly communicate both how internal traits and external circumstances are matched and what the resulting strategic actions are.

A second limitation of SWOT is in its terms. As the meaning of several terms used in the SWOT Matrix has shifted over time, the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework uses new wording to improve clarity and make factors more intuitive. For the internal analysis, instead of the terms "strength" and "weakness", the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework labeled these factors as current internal traits to communicate both that these characteristics are present and are under the control of the company under evaluation. To add further clarity, the descriptors "Better Than" and "Worse Than" were added to intuitively suggest a comparison. For the external analysis, instead of the terms "opportunity" and "threat", the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework labeled these factors as current external circumstances to communicate both that these characteristics are present and are beyond the control of the company in question. To add further clarity, the descriptors "Favorable" and "Unfavorable" were used to clarify how each should be considered. The terms "opportunity" and "threat" are not used, given that contemporary usage of these words is no longer helpful.

A third limitation of SWOT is the criteria used to distinguish input factors. The new wording used by the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework to label both the internal and external factors as well as the criteria associated with those labels (current, comparable, and positive/negative) provide a clearer foundation upon which to derive output strategies.

A fourth limitation of SWOT is its omission of key information about the identity and culture of the company. SWOT assumes that information key to the company's identity and

ideas for change by company leaders would be incorporated into the situational analysis, but provides no method of doing so directly. Leaving such important information to assumption could mean pertinent inputs or outputs are missing from the analysis. As this information is critical to the strategic decision-making process, the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework explicitly requires that information be included and does so in the early stages of the analysis.

BENEFITS AND APPLICATIONS OF THE TIC-TAC-TOE FRAMEWORK

Key among the benefits of this revised framework is the clarity it provides over SWOT and other analysis frameworks. Inclusion of identity factors supports the tailoring of strategic analysis to particular contexts. The familiar 9-cell analysis layout provides additional organization clarity to the interplay between inputs and outputs. The additional output clarity, in particular the division of output into four classifications, aids in the suggestion of broad and familiar types of strategies. In addition, SWOT, by its very name and nature, is somewhat limited to users of the English Language who understand what each of its four component titles mean, while the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework is applicable to any user who understands the simple concepts of "Better-than/Worse-than" and "Favorable/Unfavorable". The improved overall clarity of the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework over frameworks such as SWOT greatly improves its teachability both to those who speak English as a native language and to those who do not.

Another significant benefit of the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework is that it lends itself more easily to applications far broader than strategic analysis of for-profit entities. It works well in many contexts where inputs can be grouped into its four input factors and identity information can be described, even if merely at a rudimentary level. Furthermore, it works well with both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, government and civilian organizations, contexts involving the largest and smallest organizations, and even when considering personal long-term life choices. In fact, teaching the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework of analysis need not be limited to business contexts at all. Rather, it can be used in nearly any context in which long-term strategic analysis is required and then generalized to other contexts as the need arises.

APPLICATION

The project applying the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework involves three sequential course assignments. Each assignment is submitted and reviewed before students are allowed to progress to the next step. This process allows the instructor to address errors quickly and before students build upon them in later assignments.

To start, students are given a specific industry and several publicly-traded companies in that industry. Using this information, students are assigned the external analysis. Basic research on the external environment in which the industry operates involves collecting information on the industry and the companies specified. Students are required to identify one favorable and one unfavorable current external circumstance for each of eleven model factors (six from the PESTEL and five from Porter's Five Forces). Each factor needs to have a proper index number designated (FC1, UC1, etc.) and a valid citation supporting it. A fictionalized example for the soft drink manufacturing industry is provided in Figure 3 (Appendix). Completing the external analysis as a first step has helped students keep analysis at the industry level.

Next, students are assigned one of the publicly-traded companies upon which they are to complete further analysis. This research involves collecting information about the company and competitors in its strategic group. Initially, students use sources such as the company's website and 10-K Report to ascertain Identity Factors such as the company's mission, vision, leadership, etc. Each factor needs to have a proper index number designated (I1, I2, etc.) and a valid citation as illustrated for a fictionalized soft drink manufacturing company in Figure 4 (Appendix). Students are then required to complete an internal analysis which involves identifying at least eleven favorable and eleven unfavorable current internal traits. Company traits must be clearly favorable or unfavorable based on comparisons to competing companies, to the strategic group average, to an industry average, or even to societal expectation or law. Each trait needs to have a proper index number designated (BT1, WT1, etc.) and a valid citation. A fictionalized example for a soft drink manufacturing company is provided in Figure 5 (Appendix).

Finally, analysis is performed using the Tic-Tac-Toe Framework. This analysis involves matching traits with factors to yield potential actions that the company might take. Students are required to develop a list with at least two actions for each of the four types of strategic choices (BF, BU, WF, and WU). Each strategic choice needs to indicate the trait(s) and circumstance(s) from which it was derived. A fictionalized example for a soft drink manufacturing company is provided in Figure 6 (Appendix).
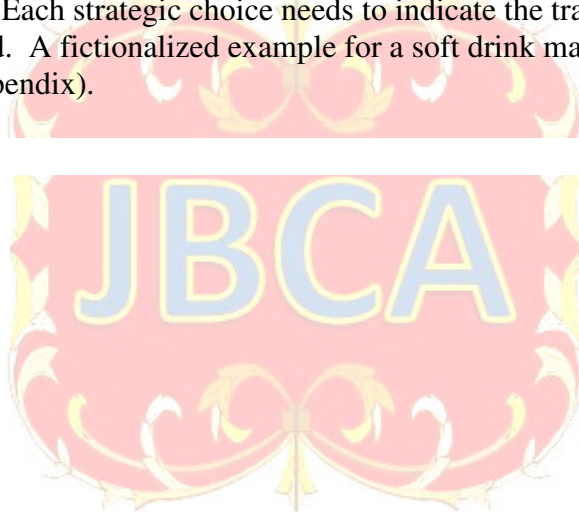
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APPENDIX

Figure 1. Tic-Tac-Toe Framework cells

1	2	3
Identity Factors	Current External Favorable Circumstances	Current External Unfavorable Circumstances
4	**5**	**6**
Current Internal Better-Than Traits	BF Outputs ("Easy Success")	BU Outputs ("Protect Yourself")
	Strategic mindset: Aggressive	Strategic mindset: Defensive
7	**8**	**9**
Current Internal Worse-Than Traits	WF Outputs ("Pumping Iron")	WU Outputs ("OH NO!")
	Strategic mindset: Conversion	Strategic mindset: Survival

Figure 2. Tic-Tac-Toe Framework labelling and output

(1) Identity Factors	(2) Favorable Circumstances	(3) Unfavorable Circumstances
Mission, Vision Value(s), Motto, Slogan(s) Leadership, Culture	FC1. ******** FC2. ******** Etc.	UC1. ******** UC2. ******** Etc.
(4) Better-Than Traits	(5) BF Outputs	(6) BU Outputs
BT1. ******** BT2. ******** Etc.	BF1. ******** BF2. ******** Etc.	BU1. ******** BU2. ******** Etc.
(7) Worse-Than Traits	(8) WF Outputs	(9) WU Outputs
WT1. ******** WT2. ******** Etc.	WF1. ******** WF2. ******** Etc.	WU1. ******** WU2. ******** Etc.

Figure 3. Sample Tic-Tac-Toe Framework for Cells 2 and 3: Fictionalized External Factors for the soft drink manufacturing industry

Cell 2: Current External Favorable Circumstances

FC1. There is an increasing demand for fruit-flavored drinks due to the perceived health benefits of fruit consumption (Citation, year).

FC2. Biotechnology is advancing the development of new flavors and low-calorie sweeteners (Citation, year).

FC3. The appeal for healthier, more functional beverages is fueling innovation, drawing new consumers into the category (Citation, year).

FC4. The current affordability of online marketing versus traditional advertising reduces non-price competition costs (Citation, year).

FC5. The threat of new entrants into the soft drink industry is low due to brand loyalty, as

demonstrated by licensing deals with most fast-food restaurants (Citation, year).

FC6. New technologies are allowing companies to better understand consumer product preferences (Citation, year).

Cell 3: Current External Unfavorable Circumstances

UC1. High interest rates are reducing disposable income, leaving less money for discretionary spending (Citation, year).

UC2. The American public is becoming more health conscious, leading to a 3% decrease in soft drink consumption in 2023 (Citation, year).

UC3. Ongoing concerns around price discrimination are fueling calls for more government oversight (Citation, year).

UC4. Growing consumer demand for environmentally friendly packaging is currently increasing the power of raw material suppliers in the packaging industry (Citation, year).

UC5. Breweries are shifting some attention away from beer towards soft drinks due to less complexity and greater profitability, which is increasing competition (Citation, year).

UC6. The FDA's proposal to ban certain food additives in fruity drinks and sodas reflects a significant development in regulatory practices affecting the soft drink industry. (Citation, year).

Figure 4. Sample Tic-Tac-Toe Framework for Cell 1: Fictionalized Identity Factors for a company in the soft drink manufacturing industry

Cell 1: Identity Factors

I1. Mission Statement: "Create more smiles with every sip and every bite."

I2. Vision Statement: "Be the Global Leader in Beverages and Convenient Foods by Winning with XYZ Positive."

I3. Value Statement: "ABC is committed to delivering sustained growth through empowered people acting responsibly and building trust."

I4. Motto(s): "That's what I like."

I5. CEO: Jane Doe

Figure 5. Sample Tic-Tac-Toe Framework for cells 4 and 7: Fictionalized Internal Factors for a company in the soft drink manufacturing industry

Cell 4: Current Internal Better-Than Traits

BT1. ABC is better than LMN and XYZ in terms of free cash flow, which allows for investments back into the business (Citation, year).

BT2. ABC is better than the other companies in the strategic group in terms of steps toward net zero carbon emissions (Citation, year).

BT3. ABC is better than the other companies in the strategic group in terms of making significant capital investments in sustainable facilities, creating a formidable barrier to entry for potential new competitors (Citation, year).

BT4. ABC is better than XYZ in terms of having significant R&D resources to rapidly respond to competitive pressures and changing consumer preferences (Citation, year).

BT5. ABC is better than XYZ in terms of positive social media analytics (Citation, year).

BT6. ABC is better than LMN in terms of versatility, as seen by its use in cocktail drinks (Citation, year).

Cell 7: Current Internal Worse-Than Traits

WT1. ABC is worse than the other companies in the group in terms of mitigating inflationary pressures in international markets (Citation, year).

WT2. ABC is worse than XYZ at combating increases in raw material costs through commodity hedging, negatively impacting their cost management (Citation, year).

WT3. ABC is worse than XYZ in terms of sugar-free offerings and international availability of these products (Citation, year).

WT4. ABC is worse than the strategic group in terms of product line depth and width, resulting in over dependence on its current products (Citation, year).

WT5. ABC is worse than XYZ in terms of expertise regarding AI and machine learning from interactive fountain drink dispensers (Citation, year).

WT6. ABC is worse than XYZ in expanding its supply chain outside the US and European markets. (Citation, year).

Figure 6. Sample Tic-Tac-Toe Framework for Cells 5, 6, 8 and 9: Output Strategies for a company in the soft drink manufacturing industry

Cell 5: BF Outputs

BF1. ABC should allocate significant R&D funds to the creation of fruit-flavored and more functional drinks (BT1, BT4, FC1, FC3).

BF2. ABC should develop an online marketing campaign that targets bars, restaurants, and adults who consume alcoholic beverages to demonstrate its applicability in cocktail drinks (BT5, BT6, FC4, FC5).

Cell 6: BU Outputs

BU1. ABC should promote its net-zero carbon emissions goal to grow and maintain consumer brand loyalty (BT2, BT3, UC4, I1).

BU2. ABC should strengthen sustainability and climate initiatives to counter influencer marketing bans and regulatory scrutiny (BT2, BT3, UC3, UC6).

Cell 8: WF Outputs

WF1. ABC should revamp its low-calorie product line to include more flavors and varieties (WT3, WT4, FC2, FC3).

WF2. ABC should invest in technology that allows AI to be used to determine soft drink flavor preferences (WT4, WT5, FC6).

Cell 9: WU Outputs

WU1. ABC should revamp its global pricing strategy to better respond to raw material costs, macroeconomic factors, and competitive dynamics (WT1, WT2, UC1, UC3, UC5).

WU2. ABC should remove artificial sweeteners from its products, replace them with natural ingredients (WT3, WT4, UC2, UC6).