How to Describe and Improve your Business Model to Compete Better



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What is this manual about?

Everybody talks about business models, business model innovation, differentiation and competitive advantage. These are fancy terms which are popular in management and business literature and are high on the agenda of many CEOs. Yet, at the same time, little concrete literature exists on how to manipulate business models in practice. This manual is a first simple attempt to fill this gap. In a step by step approach we introduce readers to the concept of business models. We particularly aim at helping SMEs describe and improve their business model to better compete.

This business model manual will allow us to:

- 1. draw the big picture of our business model and see how all the parts of it fit together;
- 2. achieve higher quality discussions among our management teams because we have created a common and visual language to talk about business models;
- 3. better reflect on the organizational structures that support our business model, such as business process models and roles and responsibilities among our employees;
- 4. reflect on business model innovation in a more structured way to come up with sustainable competitive advantages.

Acknowledgements

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PART I: Why bother?

Understanding and Innovating your Business Model Is Crucial

It is becoming increasingly indispensable to be able to question and improve one's business model in today's global and highly competitive business landscape even in traditional and established industries. It used to be that each industry was characterized by a single dominant business model. In such a landscape competitive advantage was won mainly through better execution, more efficient processes, lean organizations and product innovation. While execution and product innovation obviously still matter, they are no longer sufficient today.

Companies are now operating in industries that are characterized by multiple and co-existing business models. Competitive advantage is achieved through focused and innovative business models. When you analyze the airline, music, telecom or banking industry you can see that in each one there are different business models competing against each other. For example, in the airline industry you have the traditional flag carriers, the low-cost airlines, the business class only airlines and the fractional private jet ownership companies. Each business model accentuates different characteristics and competes on different aspects.

Based on this evolution in the competitive landscape the management and mastery of business models, as well as business model innovation are rapidly moving to the center of attention in boardroom discussions. The IBM Global CEO Study 2006¹, which reports on the agenda of CEOs in the next few years underlines this. It highlights that CEOs believe that business model innovation is becoming the new strategic differentiator and that business model innovation can pay off.

This new focus of executives means that some of the traditional management tools that we have used to date, such as industry analysis or business process reengineering, have to be complemented with new tools adapted to the new business environment. In this manual we outline a simple way of getting a grip on business models. It will help you describe business models in a synthetic way.

What actually is a Business Model?

The business model of a company is a simplified representation of its business logic. It describes what a company offers its customers, how it reaches them and relates to them, through which resources, activities and partners it achieves this and finally, how it earns money. The business model is usually distinguished from the business process model and the organization model.

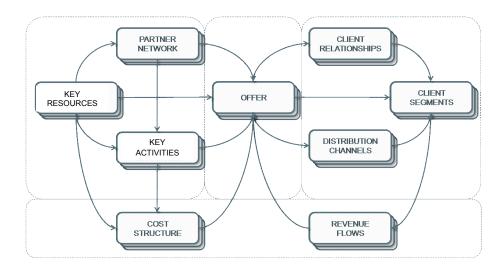
Business models can be described in a more or less formal way. In this manual we use a simple approach that consists of nine basic business model building blocks that allow us describe and draw all the aspects of a business model in a simple way.

¹ IBM Global CEO Study 2006: Expanding the Innovation Horizon

The Building Blocks of a Business Model

A business model can be described by looking at a set of nine building blocks. To get a good picture of our business model we should describe our:

- Customer segments: Our groups of customers with distinct characteristics.
- Value proposition: The bundles of products and services that satisfy our *customer segments*' needs
- Distribution channels: The channels through which we communicate with our customers and through which we offer our value propositions.
- Customer relationships: The types of relationships we entertain with each *customer segment*.
- Revenue streams: The streams through which we earn our revenues from our customers for value creating and customer facing activities.
- Key resources: The key resources on which our business model is built.
- Key activities: The most important activities performed to implement our business model.
- Partner network: The partners and suppliers we work with.
- Cost structure: The costs we incur to run our business model.

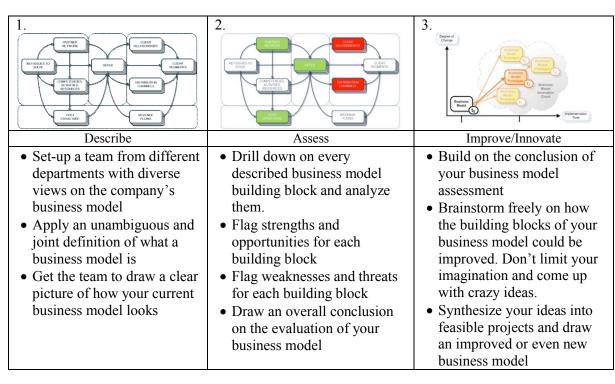


The Process of Describing, Assessing and Improving a Business Model

Many approaches and a lot of literature exist on how to launch strategic reflections on one's business. However, little has been written explicitly about processes to achieve business model improvement and innovation. In this manual we outline a simple three step process that companies of all size can use to improve and strengthen their business model.

At the root of this simple process lies a more precise way of describing business models. It helps entrepreneurs and executives achieve better discussions regarding their business models. This improvement in business model discussions then leads us to a more focused way of innovating the business model.

The business model improvement and innovation process starts with drawing a clear picture of our existing business models. The foundation for this is a common definition of what a business model actually is. For that we use the 9-building blocks in this manual. Once we have achieved a clear description we can continue with an assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of our current business model. This analysis will then give us the basis to design an improved business model, maybe even including some major innovations.



PART II: Describe your business model

Describing a Business Model Step by Step

Describing our company's business model starts with setting up an ad-hoc task force. Describing and innovating the business model should be a team effort. The reason for this is simple. The business model approach requires a holistic look at the business logic of our organization. Therefore we should consider the inputs from different parts of our company. It is often surprising how different each employee understands the business model and what different perspective they can bring into an innovation project.

Thus, the first step in a business model (renewal or innovation) project is the composition of a multidisciplinary team with people from different parts of the company and from different hierarchical levels. Obviously, the choice and number of persons participating depends on the size of the company and of the goals and ambitions of the project. Some projects may aim at modeling a large company's entire business model. Some may aim at modeling the business model of a specific department or business line. Others may aim at modeling a new start-up or spin-off business line.

When the project team is set up it must adopt an unambiguous and joint definition of what a business model is. In this manual we build on a business model definition consisting of 9 business model building blocks. There are, however, other less systematic approaches to describing business models, which you may want to consider.

After the team has adopted a common definition and approach to describing business models it can start drawing a clear picture of how the current business model looks like. In the following pages we describe step by step how this can be done. It is important during this phase that the different perspectives of the participants of the project are all integrated. The description of a business model should always be a joint description, which is understandable by everybody and based on a common language.

To sketch out a company's business model the team will describe each of the 9 business model building blocks and highlight the linkages between them. The building blocks of a business model are:

- Customer Segments
- Value Proposition
- Communication and Distribution Channels
- Customer Relationships
- Revenue Streams
- Key Resources
- Key Activities
- Partner Network
- Cost Structure

Customer Segments – who are our customers?

Business Model Building Block	Customer segments
Description	Our groups of customers with distinct characteristics
Objective	List the customer groups we are serving. Regroup them in terms of different needs and ways of reaching them or as to profitability.

Customers are the livelihood of every company since the revue streams come from them. Successful organizations understand their customers. They strive to propose them an adequate offer that caters to their needs. They recognize how to create value for them. They know how to reach them and they are aware of which relationships to build with them. Most importantly, from the enterprise perspective, successful companies know how to turn satisfied customers into revenue streams.

A clear description and understanding of a company's customers is an integral part of every business model. More precisely every company must ask itself if it is serving distinct customer groups with different needs and/or characteristics. In this manual we will start describing our business model by asking ourselves a number of key questions to identify who the customers and customer segments of our business model are.

Key questions

- Who do we create value for?
- Do any of these customers merit to be grouped into a distinct category, because...
 - o ... we propose them a distinct offer?
 - o ... we reach them through different communication and distribution channels?
 - o ... we entertain different relationships with them (e.g. more personal)?
 - o ... they have a substantially different profitability?

Once we have answered these questions and identified the different customer segments which our business model is serving we should describe each of them in a little more detail. This description can include various characteristics, such as demographic and geographical information, core needs and aspirations. This can be done for both, private as well as business customers. Visualizing the characteristics of one of our existing customers can help us to come up with a generic description for each of our segments.

After completing the descriptions of our different customer segments we should classify our existing customers among the identified segments. This is a good test of the segments we have come up with. Finally, we should add some statistical information on each segment, such as the number of current customers, profitability, growth potential, etc.

The full process looks as follows:

1.	2.	3.	4.
iji ii ii		111111	20 customers 30% margin 15% growth
brainstorm to identify customer segments by answering the above question	Describe each customer segment and their characteristics, for example by imagining existing customers	classify existing customers among the identified customer segments	add statistical information for each customer segment, such as number of customers margins and growth

Value Proposition - what do we offer each of our client segments?

Business Model Building Block	Value proposition
Description	A bundle of products and services that satisfies a specific <i>customer segment</i> 's needs
Objective	Identify the value you create for each distinct <i>customer segment</i> by describing the bundle of products and services you offer them.

Our offer is what attracts our clients. It is the value that they are willing to pay for. This value can be described as a value proposition for each customer segment. It portrays a specific bundle of products and services. A business model may consist of one or several value propositions for each of its customer segments.

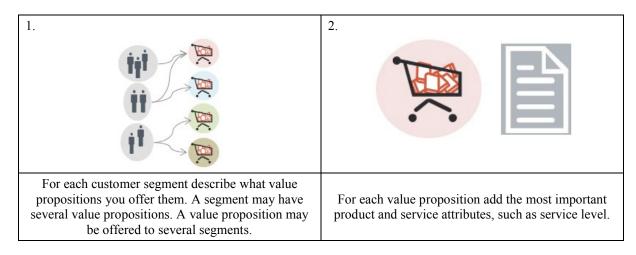
In the next step of describing our business model we outline the value proposition we offer each customer segment by answering another set of questions

Key questions to identify the value proposition building blocks

- What do we offer the market?
- What is the specific bundle of products and services you offer each of our customer segments?
- Which customer needs does each value proposition cover?
- Do we offer different service levels to different customer segments?

With the description of our client segments and the corresponding value propositions we have already outlined the heart of our business model. This is the kernel of our business model, but yet only the most basic part. A holistic view of our business comprises more building blocks, which we will describe in the following pages.

The full process of outlining a value propositions looks as follows:



Channels - how do we reach each of our client segments?

Business Model Building Block	Communication and distribution channels
Description	The channels through which we communicate with our customers and through which we offer our value propositions
Objective	Identify the channels through which we offer our value propositions to each customer segment

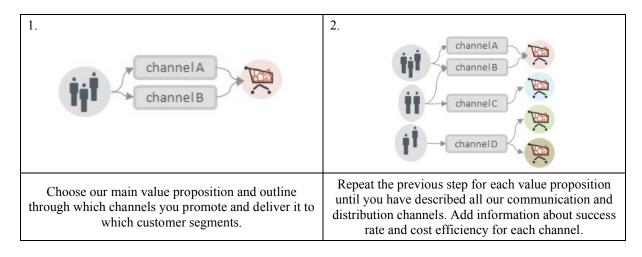
A company reaches its customers through various communication and distribution channels. They represent the interface between a company, its value propositions and its customers. These customer touch points include advertising, retail outlets, sales teams, websites, conferences, sales affiliates and many more. The means a company can use to reach its customers have multiplied over the years. This has left managers with a large set of design choices to reach their customers.

Communication and distribution channels have become increasingly important in business model design. A good and integrated channel design can be a powerful tool for differentiation and competitive advantage. For example, cost intensive channels should be used for very profitable clients, while unprofitable clients should be served through cost efficient channels.

Key questions

- Through which communication and distribution channels do we reach our markets?
- How well does each channel work?
- How expensive or cost efficient is each of our channels?
- Through which communication and distribution channels do we promote and deliver each value proposition?
- Through which channels do we reach each customer segment?

The process of describing a business model's communication and distribution channels may look as follows:



Customer Relationships – how do we relate to our clients over time?

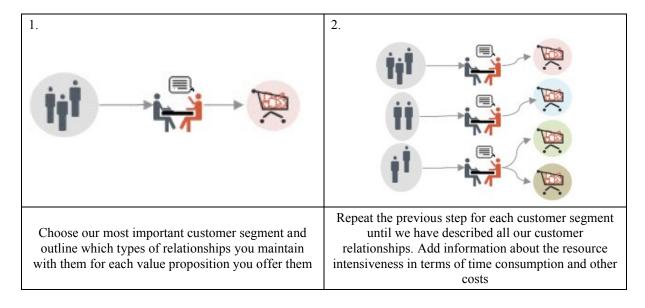
Business Model Building Block	Client relationship
Description	The types of relationships you entertain with each <i>customer</i> segment
Objective	Identify which types of relationships you have built and which you maintain with each customer segment

Getting relationship management right in our business model is crucial today to satisfy customer's expectations. For instance, customers paying a high price for a product or service will expect a high touch relationship, while customers paying a cheap price do not expect more than automated, yet customized relationships. A sound business model has a clear strategy for customer relationship management for each customer segment.

Key questions

- Do we develop and maintain different types of client relationships in our business model (e.g. more or less intense, more or less personal)?
- How resource intensive is each of these client relationship types in terms of time consumption and other costs?
- For each client segment, which client relationship types and mechanisms do we develop and maintain?

The process of describing a business model's customer relationships may look as follows:



Revenue Streams - how do we earn money?

Business Model Building Block	Revenue streams
Description	The streams through which we earn our revenues from our customers for value creating and customer facing activities
Objective	Identify which types of revenue streams we earn from each of our customer segments and value propositions

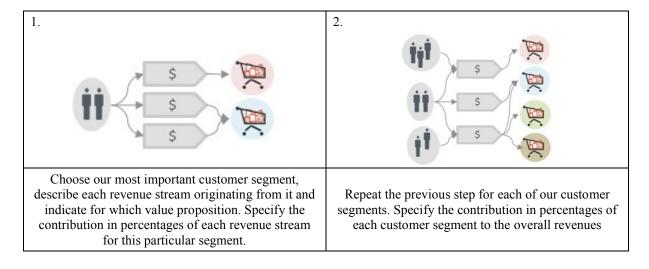
Our business model's sustainability depends on the revenues we can capture from our value creating and customer facing activities. Revenue streams come from one or several segments of clients who are willing to pay for the value they get from our offer. These revenue streams come in the form of selling, lending, licensing, commissions, transaction fees or advertising fees.

Key questions

- What are our revenue streams?
- What are the revenue streams from each customer segment and value proposition?
- How much is each revenue stream's contribution to overall revenues in terms of percentages?

Outlining the revenue streams for each customer segment carefully will help us draw a clearer picture on each segment's contribution to overall revenues. This provides the basis for further reflection on how to innovate in our business and revenue model.

Steps to outline our revenue streams consist of:



Key Resources – based on which assets are we running our business?

Business Model Building Block	Key Resources
Description	The key resources we need to make our business model function
Objective	Identify the key tangible and intangible resources which are the fundament of our business model

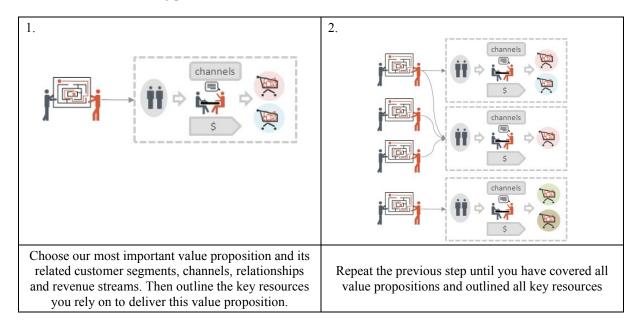
At the basis of every business model there is a set of key resources a company must dispose of to make its business model work. These *key resources* include classical ones such as human resources and tangible assets. Increasingly, business models are also built on intangible assets that are difficult to quantify, such as brand equity and expertise of a specific domain.

For a retail bank, for example, some of the general key resources of their business model are brand, people and reliable IT systems.

Key questions

- What are the key resources we rely on to run our business model?
- How does each of these resources relate to our value propositions and their corresponding customer segments, channels and relationships?

We will use the following process to describe the resources in our business model:



Key Activities - what key activities do we need to run our business model?

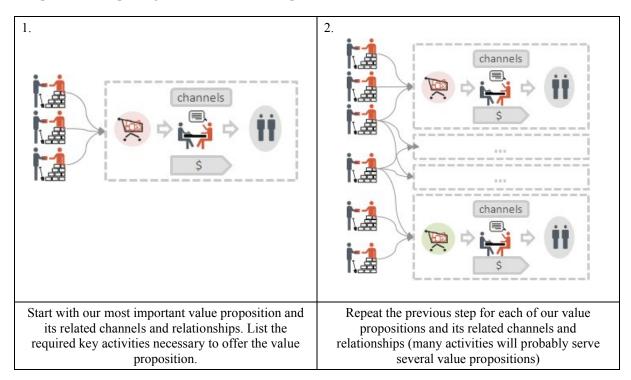
Business Model Building Block	Key activities
Description	The most important activities that have to be performed to run our business model
Objective	Identify which key activities we cover in our business model

To implement a business model a company needs to perform a number of *key activities*. It may perform these activities itself or get them done through a network of partners.

Key questions

- What are the main activities we operate to run our business model?
- On which *key resources* do they rely?
- To which value propositions, channels or relationships do they contribute?

The process of capturing the main activities required in our business model looks as follows:



Partner Network - with which partners do we leverage our business?

Business Model Building Block	Partner network
Description	The partners and suppliers we work with
Objective	Outline with which partners and suppliers we work to implement our business model

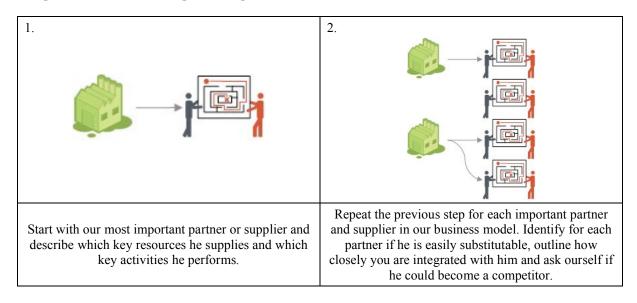
Today's Business Models are more and more the result of a network of partnerships, joint ventures, cooperation and alliances between different companies. Partners are involved, for example, to complement the value proposition, to bring in specialist competencies or to help deliver to clients.

Every company must ask itself if and how it can leverage its own business model by partnering with other companies. This includes the question of what a company wants to do by itself and what it wants to do with partners. It also includes the question of levering one's own value proposition by combining it with the value proposition of strategic partners.

Key questions

- Which partners and suppliers do we work with
- Which key resources do they relate to?
- To which value propositions, channels or relationships do they contribute?

The process to describe our partnership network looks as follows:



Cost Structure – where are our most important costs?

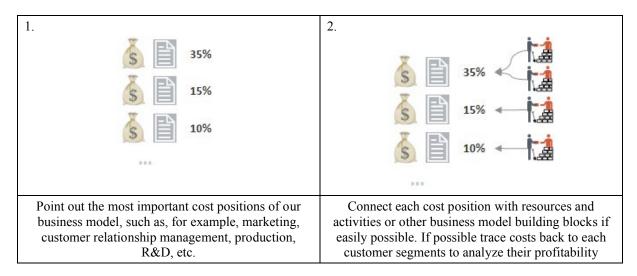
Business Model Building Block	Cost structure
Description	The costs we incur to run our business model
Objective	Identify our most important cost positions resulting from our business model

The cost structure is a direct result of all the other building blocks of the business model. Ideally costs should be traceable back to each business model block. In this manual we will use a light approach by simply listing the most important costs incurred and only if easily possible will we link them to a building block.

Key questions

- What are the most important cost positions in our business model?
- Can the cost positions be easily connected to a business model building block?
- Can costs be calculated for each customer segment?

The process to capture the cost structure of our business model looks as follows:



PART III: Assess and improve your business model

Business Model Assessment

In the previous section we learned how to describe a business model by going through each of its building blocks. Once we have a clear description of our business model we can start assessing it. We achieve this by asking a number of key questions that crystallizes a business model's strengths, weaknesses and highlights opportunities and threats. This analysis will give us the basis to reflect on an improved business model, maybe even including some major innovations.

The following questions give us a good start to assess our business model. Feel free to add more, which are specific to your unique context:

Key questions to	assess our business model
Customer	Do we know our customers and their needs good enough?
Segments	Are some customer groups likely to defect soon?
	Do we regroup different customer segments well enough
Value	Does our value proposition still cater well enough to our clients' needs?
Proposition	Do we know how our customers perceive our value proposition?
	Are our competitors offering similar value propositions at similar or better prices?
	How well are our customers served by other competitors?
Revenue	How sustainable are our current revenue streams?
Streams	How diversified are our revenue streams?
	• Are we dependant on too few revenue sources (e.g. from some big clients or one single business)?
	How well do we price our value proposition?
Communication	Do we have a well thought-through communication and distribution channel design?
and Distribution	How well do we reach our clients?
Channels	Do we know how successful our channels are in terms of customer acquisition?
	How well are our different channels integrated?
	Do we know how cost efficient are our channels are?
	• Do we use the right channels for the right clients (e.g. in terms of profitability)?
Customer	Do we have a customer relationship strategy?
Relationships	How good are our relationships with our best customers?
	Do we spend too much time and money in relationships with unprofitable clients?
	How well are we doing in managing our customer relationships (e.g. follow-up, etc.)
Key Resources	Do we dispose of the right key resources in terms of quality and quantity?
	Do we dispose off too many resources internally, leading to a lack of focus?
Key Activities	How efficient are we in performing our activities?
	Do we perform too many activities ourselves, leading to a lack of focus?
Partner Network	Do we use partners enough?
	How well do we work with our existing partners and suppliers?
	How dependent are we on our existing partners and suppliers?
Cost Structure	• Is our cost structure appropriate (e.g. low cost business model = low cost structure)?
	• Do we clearly understand which parts of our business model have the highest costs?
	How lean is our cost structure?

Business Model Innovation and Improvement

After having assessed and described one's business model the challenge remains its renewal. The good news is that we have already made the most important steps towards business model improvement and innovation once we have drawn a clear picture of our current business model. We can now build on the conclusions of our business model assessment, including strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Based on the above conclusions we should ask ourselves if and how we want to change each business model building block to arrive at a better business model. At this stage it is very valuable to let your imagination flow freely before narrowing down ideas to feasible projects.

To achieve business model improvement and innovation the business model team should ask itself the following questions:

Key questions to i	mprove and innovate our business model
Customer Segments	 Are there new customer segments we could serve?
	• Could we regroup/segment customers better according to their needs?
Value Proposition	• Could we offer our different customer segments more tailored needs?
	• Do our customers have other needs we could satisfy relatively easily by ourselves or with partners?
	 Could we complement our value proposition through agreements with partners (e.g. joint value propositions)?
Revenue Streams	• Could we introduce new revenue streams (e.g. lending/renting instead of selling)?
	 Could we do more cross-selling (e.g. offer our customers other products of our company or of partner companies)
Communication and Distribution Channels	• Could we increase our customer base by better using our channels?
	 How can we better use expensive channels for highly profitable clients and cost efficient channels for unprofitable clients?
	• Can we better integrate our channels (e.g. better link websites with physical outlets)?
	 Could we introduce new communication and distribution channels to reach our customers (e.g. partner distribution agreements)?
Customer Relationships	 What level of personalization do each of our customer relationships require (e.g. dedicated relationship manager or automated self-service)?
	 How can we spend less time and resources on unprofitable clients?
	• Should we introduce frequent buyer programs?
Key Resources	 Are there some key resources we could get rid of or substitute?
	• Are there some key resources that could be better supplied by partners and cheaper?
Key Activities	• Are there activities we would better outsource to partners?
	 Are our activities adapted perfectly to our value proposition?
	How could we streamline activities?
Partner Network	 Which partners could help us complement our value proposition?
	 Which suppliers could help us streamline our business model?
Cost Structure	 Are there ways we could reduce our cost structure (e.g. partnering, outsourcing, new suppliers, etc.)

End

[to be completed by La Trobe University]