The Hotel Competitor Analysis Tool (H-CAT):
A Strategic Tool for Managers

by Cathy A. Enz, Ph.D., and Gary M. Thompson, Ph.D.
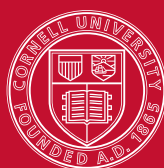
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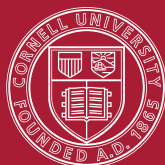
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The Hotel Competitor Analysis Tool (H-CAT):

A Strategic Positioning Tool for Managers

by Cathy A. Enz and Gary M. Thompson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The hotel competitor analysis tool (H-CAT) is an Excel® spreadsheet designed to help managers make strategic comparisons between competing hotels on critical success factors. The tool permits hotel executive teams to assess direct competitors and then use the results to inform future planning initiatives to change or enhance organizational performance. The formatted worksheets allow strategists to compare their hotel to competitors, but to also examine and make supplemental comparisons of rooms inventory, various food and beverage outlets, or other revenue units of the hotel that would benefit from competitive comparisons. This report describes the steps necessary to conduct a competitive analysis, although the spreadsheet is designed to be self-explanatory and easy to use. The goal of the competitor analysis tool is to help hotel operators improve key elements of their operation by making meaningful comparisons and then exploring areas of strength and weakness.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Understanding your competition is critical to predicting their future strategies, and essential before making strategic moves that may evoke aggressive responses. To evaluate the seriousness of a potential challenge from competitors you must examine their critical resources and capabilities. Depending on these capabilities your rivals may threaten your market position. Strategic planning helps management envision a future direction and develop the goals and strategies to reach that end.[1] Competitor analysis is one element of this strategic planning process. A diagnosis of key competitors allows managers to identify, anticipate, and avoid competitive threats that might ultimately reduce customer demand for their products and services.

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[1] Cathy A. Enz, *Hospitality Strategic Management: Concepts and Cases,* 2nd edition (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

Exhibit 1

Identify competitors: List and summarize your direct competitors.

Competitor Descriptions—Provide a general description of each competitor

Briefly describe the strengths and weaknesses of these competitors and their market share.

Name of Competitor	Principal Strengths and Weaknesses	Estimated Market Share (%)
1		
2		
3		

To help hotel managers understand their competition we have devised a simple and clear way to monitor and evaluate rivals, which we call the hotel competitor analysis tool (H-CAT). H-CAT is a spreadsheet that calculates absolute and comparative capability scores for up to ten competitors of the hotel in question, on up to ten different factors critical for success. The tool permits hotel executive teams to assess direct competitors and then use the results to inform future planning initiatives to change or enhance organizational performance. The formatted worksheets allow the strategists to compare their hotel to other properties, but to also examine and make five supplemental comparisons of subareas of the hotel, such as rooms inventory, food and beverage outlets, or other revenue units of the hotel that would benefit from competitive comparisons. We describe the steps necessary to conduct a competitive analysis here, although the spreadsheet is designed to be self-explanatory and easy to use. The goal of the competitor analysis tool is to help hotel operators improve key elements of their operation and facilitate future strategy development by making meaningful comparisons and then exploring areas of strength and weakness. In this report we discuss the steps in a competitor analysis and provide instructions and examples for how to use H-CAT.

EXHIBIT 2

List of competitor for three different analyses

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	Your Property:	The Grand				Name of Competitor			
2		Name of Analysis	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	Analysis 1	Overall	Peninsula	Four Seasons	Palace	Waldorf=Astoria	Ritz-Carlton	St Regis	Trump
4	Analysis 2	Spa	Peninsula	Four Seasons	Palace				
5	Analysis 3	Fine Dining	60 Thompson	Four Seasons	Carlyle	Monkey Bar	Daniel	Ducasse	
6	Analysis 4								
7	Analysis 5								
8	Analysis 6								
9									
10		Click to Proceed, after specifying information above							
11									
12									
13									

Identify Competitors

The first step in a competitor analysis is to identify your di-rect competitors, using a form such as that shown in Exhibit 1. A competitor is any firm that offers services or products to the same market segment or customer group as you do. This may include operations that appear to be in a different business but supply similar needs. For example, your hotel's fine-dining establishment might directly compete with local restaurants and your spa with a local health club. Take note also that your competitor might be located in a different market or even a different country. After you have identi-fied your competitors, the next step is to take some time with your management team to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these competitors and to analyze their market share.

Once you have identified, discussed, and listed pos-sible competitors, open the H-CAT spreadsheet and click on the parameters tab. List the types of analysis you wish to conduct. The first analysis is usually an overall evaluation of the hotel in question. You can then list up to five additional analytical targets. For example, you might wish to conduct an analysis of your spa or golf facilities, your meeting spaces, or different food and beverage outlets, or perhaps you wish to separate your rooms inventory and conduct different analysis based on room size, amenities, or views. After list-ing up to five sub-analyses, enter the name of up to 10 com-petitors for each analysis. Keep in mind that you may wish to identify different competitors in your sub-group analysis than you identified for the overall analysis. Once you've listed the analyses and competitors, click the gray button titled, "Click to Proceed, after specifying information above." You will notice that you now have a tab at the bottom of

the spreadsheet for the overall analysis and each additional sub-analysis. As an example, Exhibit 2 shows three different analyses for luxury hotels in New York City.

(2) Entering Data for the H-CAT Analysis

1. Identify critical success factors. Critical success factors (CFSs) are those activities that a company must do well to be successful. Click on the "overall" tab and you will see that the H-CAT spreadsheet begins by asking you to select the factors that are most critical to success for you and your competitors. You should identify between six and ten differ-ent factors. Exhibit 3 provides a list of possible hotel critical success factors based on the relatively limited research that has been conducted in hospitality contexts.[2] This list may help you to think about the factors you believe to be critical.

2. Weight each critical success factor. As you see, H-CAT allows you to select between three and ten critical success factors on which to base your analysis. Considering too few or too many factors makes your analysis less effec-tive, so be sure to select an appropriate number of factors that are truly important. Once the critical success factors are identified and listed, assign a weight to each factor. Weights represent the relative importance you attach to a given fac-tor. Try not to give your CFSs all the same weight, but do allocate weights so that they sum to 100 percent. The tool will let you know if you have not correctly assigned weights. Exhibit 4 is an example of a hotel that has identified five

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[2] For example, see: B. Brotherton, "Critical Success Factors in UK Budget Hotel Operations," *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, Vol. 24, No. 9 (2004), pp. 944-969; and A. Neal Geller, "Tracking the Critical Success Factors for Hotel Companies," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (February 1985), pp. 76-81.

EXHIBIT 3

Possible hotel critical success factors

•	Added-value facilities in guest rooms
•	Central sales or reservation system
•	Choice of room type for guests
•	Consistent accommodation standards
•	Consistent service standards
•	Convenient locations
•	Corporate contracts
•	Customer loyalty and repeat business
•	Customer surveys and feedback
•	Design and look of guest bedrooms
•	Disciplined operational controls
•	Efficiency of guest service
•	Geographic coverage of hotel network
•	Good value restaurants
•	Guest bedroom comfort level
•	Guest security
•	Gust recognition
•	Hygiene and cleanliness
•	Low prices
•	Operational flexibility and responsiveness
•	Quality audits
•	Quality standards
•	Responsiveness to customer demands
•	Size of guest bedrooms
•	Size of hotel network
•	Speed of guest service
•	Staff empowerment
•	Staff recruitment and selection
•	Staff training
•	Standardized hotel design
•	Strong brand differentiation
•	Value for money accommodation
•	Warmth of guest welcome

Source: Bob Brotherton, "Critical Success Factors in UK Budget Hotel Operations," *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, Vol. 24, No. 9 (2004), pp. 944-969.

EXHIBIT 4

Example of critical success factors and weights

CFSs with weights summing to 100 percent. To determine how to assign weights you might wish to discuss various factors with your team. For example, in Exhibit 4, location is given a weight of 18, while cleanliness is given a weight of 23. Of the five CSFs in the example, cleanliness is considered most critical while value price is least critical.

3. Rate your hotel and each competitor. After establishing the CFSs, rate each of the competitors you identified using the scale of 0 = very weak to 10 = very strong. Your ratings should reflect your own best judgment. While these rating are clearly subjective in nature, remember your goal is to stimulate strategic thinking. Exhibit 5 shows an example of the ratings provided for each competitor. In this example, Value Inn is ranked 7 on the 10-point scale, or above average, on the location dimension, while Checkers Inn is rated 5, indicating an average location. Thus, that score is relatively weaker than the other, better located property.

(3) Interpreting Your H-CAT Scores

H-CAT converts your rankings into scores that are provided for your own hotel and each competitor on each of the critical success factors. Color-coding helps reveal high scores (green) and separates them from low scores (red) and middle scores (yellow). Exhibit 6 shows a completed competitor profile analysis. In the example, Value Inn has a score of 126 on location, a green high score, which compares favorably to the Budget Inn competitor, which has a low score of 90 on this dimension.

H-CAT provides three summary scores: an absolute percentage score, a relative percentage score, and a ranking. The absolute or real percentage score gives you each hotel's true score based on the weights and rankings you provided.

EXHIBIT 5

Ranking hotels on each critical success factor

	#	Factor	Weight		Value Inn	Super Low	Budget Inn	Rest Well	Valley Hotel	Checkers Inn		Value Inn	
1		**Critical Success Factors**											
3	1	Location	18		7	6	5	7	4	5		126	
4	2	Cleanliness	23	Scores:	3	7	5	8	3	7	Wt * Rtng:	69	
5	3	Security	22		5	5	5	5	4	5		110	
6	4	Service	20		4	7	5	6	6	8		80	
7	5	Value Price	17		7	5	6	5	8	9		119	
14		**Total Weight:**	100				**Absolute Percentage Score:**					50.4%	6
15							**Relative Percentage Score:**					74.8%	8

Note: Scale values range from 0 = very weak to 10 = very strong, with 5 = average.

EXHIBIT 6

Completed competitor profile

	#	Factor	Weight		Value Inn	Super Low	Budget Inn	Rest Well	Valley Hotel	Checkers Inn		Value Inn	Super Low	Budget Inn	Rest Well	Valley Hotel	Checkers Inn
1		**Critical Success Factors**															
3	1	Location	18		7	6	5	7	4	5		126	108	90	126	72	90
4	2	Cleanliness	23	Scores:	3	7	5	8	3	7	Wt * Rtng:	69	161	115	184	69	161
5	3	Security	22		5	5	5	5	4	5		110	110	110	110	88	110
6	4	Service	20		4	7	5	6	6	8		80	140	100	120	120	160
7	5	Value Price	17		7	5	6	5	8	9		119	85	102	85	136	153
14		**Total Weight:**	100				**Absolute Percentage Score:**					50.4%	60.4%	51.7%	62.5%	48.5%	67.4%
15							**Relative Percentage Score:**					74.8%	89.6%	76.7%	92.7%	72.0%	100.0%
16		**Number of Critical Success Factors:**	5 ▼				**Ranking:**					5	3	4	2	6	1
18		**LEGEND**															
19		**Parameters/Inputs**															
20		**Calculated Cells**															

In contrast, the relative percentage score gives a value for your hotel relative to the other competitors. This score allows you to compare your hotel to the selected competitors. Take Checkers Inn in Exhibit 6, for example. Checkers has an absolute score of 67.4 percent, but a strong relative score of 100 percent. To interpret these scores we would say that Checkers has plenty of room for improvement but is the best of the six hotels based on the CSFs in the competitive analysis. From the ranking of hotels you can also see that Checkers is ranked #1.

EXHIBIT 7

Overall competitor analysis and final summary

#	Factor	Weight	Sea Breeze	Daisy	Ocean View	Yorshire	Regal		The Palace	Grand	Drifters	Sea Breeze	Daisy	Ocean View	Yorshire	Regal
1	Customer loyalty & repeat business	23	7	4	5	1	1		161	138	115	161	92	115	23	23
2	Strong employee culture of service	21	8	3	7	1	1	Wt * Rtng:	63	147	105	168	63	147	21	21
3	Strong brand differentiation	19	5	4	5	1	1		95	95	95	95	76	95	19	19
4	Well furnished guest room	16	6	6	8	5	6		64	112	80	96	96	128	80	96
5	Convenient Location	12	5	8	9	3	8		84	60	72	60	96	108	36	96
Total Weight:		100	**Absolute Percentage Score:**						46.7%	55.2%	46.7%	58.0%	42.3%	59.3%	17.9%	25.5%
			Relative Percentage Score:						78.8%	93.1%	78.8%	97.8%	71.3%	100.0%	30.2%	43.0%
Number of Critical Success Factors: 5			**Ranking:**						4	3	4	2	6	1	8	7

LEGEND
Parameters/Inputs
Calculated Cells

Tabs: Parameters, **Overall**, Spa, Gym, Meeting Spaces, Fine Dining, Golf Course, Summary

	The Palace	Top Competitor		
Analysis	**% of Maximum**	**% of Maximum**	**Name**	**Relative Performance**
Overall	46.7%	59.3%	Ocean View	Worse than best competitor
Spa	90.0%	67.0%	Grand	Better than best competitor
Gym	89.0%	63.0%	Drifters	Better than best competitor
Meeting Spaces	57.0%	73.0%	Sea Breeze	Worse than best competitor
Fine Dining	50.4%	67.4%	Ocean View	Worse than best competitor
Golf Course	86.4%	64.4%	Grand	Better than best competitor

The final tab of the H-CAT provides a summary of all the separate analyses. Exhibit 7 shows an overall competitor analysis and the summary results for a hotel called The Palace and its seven competitors. The summary tab shows the absolute percentage score for your hotel and compares your score to the top competitor. In the example, The Palace and its top competitor are listed for each analysis. In addition to an overall analysis, the supplementary analyses include spas, gyms, meeting spaces, fine dining outlets, and golf courses. The overall analysis absolute percentage score for The Palace is 46.7 percent, while the top competitor is the Ocean View with an absolute percentage score of 59.3 percent. While each tab provides the details for all competitors on a given element of operations (e.g., spa or meeting space), the sum-mary tab gives you the final performance comparisons, with only the top competitor listed for each analysis.

Conducting a competitor analysis is one way in which a hotel can keep track of those organizations that provide similar goods and services. To begin the process of reflection on your competitor analysis, determine which competitors are stronger than your own hotel and which are weaker. Summarize the advantages of the different competitors. Indicate anything unique about your hotel's products or services and do this for each competitor. Ask yourself how each competitor is likely to beat the competition given their profile scores. Finally, consider the major strategic issues each competitor must address in light of their scores.

Final Thoughts

One issue that we want to raise is that the planning process often unfortunately seems to be reserved for senior management and fails to engage lower-level hotel managers in the analysis. However, by using H-CAT in meetings with department managers, and by conducting sub-analyses for different food and beverage outlets or revenue producing areas, more managers can be drawn into the process and encouraged to think strategically about likely competitor moves and countermoves. Since day-to-day decisions that shape the future of the hotel are often made by lower level managers, this tool is a simple and easy way to help engage lower-level managers in competitor analysis.

Another criticism of the strategic planning process is that it is often poorly conceptualized, political, and even mechanical, reducing the level of real strategic thinking. H-CAT requires thoughtful use, since it is only as good as the inputs you provide. Nevertheless, it allows any manager to systematically look at the competition, and may serve as a departure from your existing process. Keep in mind that a key question after conducting a competitor analysis is, how will the competition respond to your strategic initiatives? By first conducting a competitor analysis it is easier to see the likely changes and responses the competition is willing and able to initiate. ■
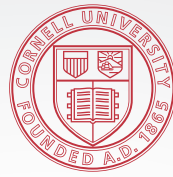
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