

We Didn't Start the Fire: What Can Billy Joel Teach Us About the External Environment?

Abstract

As changes in the firm's general environment may create opportunities and threats that influence firm performance, general and strategic management textbooks frequently provide external analysis tools. In this exercise, I introduce analysis of the general environment through Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire." Students listen to the song, select a lyric, and, using the language of external analysis, examine how the change or condition marked by that lyric created opportunities and threats for industries or firms. By examining the eventualities of historical changes, students develop their skills to assess the impacts of current trends on today's industries and firms.

Keywords: External analysis, general environment, institutional theory

Introduction

As changes in the firm's general external environment may create opportunities and threats that influence firm performance, general and strategic management textbooks frequently provide external analysis tools through which students identify, classify, and assess these changes in relation to an industry or firm. In this activity, I introduce analysis of the general external environment through Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire." While the song was written to chronicle the years from Joel's birth (1949) to the album's release (1989), this span includes nearly all of the Cold War, making the lyrics full of allusions to significant political, economic, and social change. These changes provide a ripe avenue for exploring how changes in the general environment influence the development of industries and firm performance.

In this activity, students listen to the song, select a lyric, and then, using the language of external analysis, examine how the change or condition marked by that lyric created opportunities and threats for industries or firms. This allows students to see the eventualities of historical changes on industries and firms of that time, which develops their skills to assess the possible impacts of current trends on today's industries and firms. This exercise is best suited for undergraduate students in a face-to-face introductory management or strategic management course; however, it may be adapted for use online.

Theoretical Background

Firms do not exist in vacuums. Rather, external trends and events influence decision-making in firms and firm performance. Strategic management courses and textbooks nearly universally include coverage of external analysis to assist students in determining when aspects or forces in the external environment may create opportunities or threats for firms. Frequently, the discussion of the external environment is split between the general external environment and

the industry environment. Treatment of the general external environment typically includes multiple facets, which may include political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental trends (PEST, PESTLE). Barney and Hesterly (2019) include six facets of the general external environment: demographic trends, cultural trends, economic climate, legal/political conditions, specific international events, and technological change.

Pedagogically, this activity follows many who have noted the benefits of using music in the classroom (Powell & Veiga, 1986; Rettig, 1979; Zimmerman, 1986). Similar to the approach here, Rettig (1979) mentioned the enjoyment that students had on “music day,” where they had to illustrate course concepts with popular songs of their choice. Zimmerman (1986) used country music to expose students to blue collar life. Moreover, many students report that they first heard “We Didn’t Start the Fire” in a primary or secondary school history course. This previous exposure may provide an anchor for students to more readily connect with the lessons of this activity (Ausubel, 1968).

Learning Objectives

After completing this activity, students should be able to:

1. Identify specific trends or conditions across six facets of the general environment;
2. Assess potential impacts of these trends on industries or firms; and,
3. Evaluate whether these impacts provide opportunities or threats for the industries or firms in question.

While these are the primary learning objectives for this activity, students may also learn to:

4. Articulate the influence of key Cold War developments on the current political, economic, and business landscapes; and,

5. Appreciate strictly 80s Joel.

Activity Overview

Course context. I have only used this activity in an in-person undergraduate, senior-level strategic management course. However, the activity may be used in an introductory management course, or any course, if that course includes coverage of the impacts of trends or conditions in the general external environment on firm performance. Within the strategic management course, I use the activity early in course to begin discussions of external analysis. The activity may be adapted for online courses by forgoing groups in favor of individuals and using a discussion forum format. I have used this activity in classes comprising 25-35 students, although it can be used in much larger classes.

Equipment. This activity requires a computer with internet access, projector, and speakers. Ideally, the classroom would be equipped with tables or moveable desks and chairs, although this is not strictly necessary, so long as students can discuss in small groups.

Timing. This activity can be adapted to fit a variety of time slots. At a minimum, the activity requires 30 minutes, although not every group may be able to present in this short timeframe. The activity can be extended to fill a 50 or 75 minute class period by allowing more groups to present or by encouraging each small group to present about multiple lyrics.

Activity. Before the activity, I will have introduced six facets of the general external environment and provided an example of a trend or condition in one of those facets and its impact on a particular industry or firm. I then move into the activity, which unfolds as follows:

1. Small group formation (5 minutes): I ask the students to self-select into groups of 3-4, depending on this number of students present.

2. Brief activity introduction (5 minutes): I instruct students that they will use lyrics from Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" to examine how trends in the general environment impact industries and firms and create opportunities and threats for a firm. I inform them that each group will be responsible for discussing how specific events or trends mentioned in the song impacted industries or firms at the time and what opportunities or threats were associated with this trend or condition, and that each group will share with the larger group a summary of their discussion.
3. Music video (5 minutes): I then show the official music video for "We Didn't Start the Fire" in all of its 80s glory. The official music video can be found here:
<https://youtu.be/eFTLKWw542g>.
4. Lyrics assignment (5 minutes): I assign each group a portion of the lyrics to examine in more depth. I adjust the length of the assigned lyrics to fit the number of groups. There are five verses in the songs. Appendix A includes the full lyrics. For five or fewer groups, I may assign a full verse. For 6-10 groups, I may divide each verse in half to assign half verses. As each verse is packed with lyrics, this approach of splitting verses can be continued to accommodate up to 20 groups without duplicating lyric assignments.

Helpfully, Genius.com provides an annotated version of the lyrics, which allows a student to click on a specific lyric to see what/who it refers to. I provide an example in Appendix B. I provide this link to students when assigning each group lyrics.
5. Small group discussion (10 minutes): I give students 10-15 minutes to select a lyric to explore in more depth, read about what the lyric refers to, classify the trend or event into one of the six facets we previously covered, think about and research how the trend or

event referred to in the lyric impacted specific industries or firms, and discuss what opportunities and threat were associated with these impacts.

6. Informal presentations (15 minutes): I then ask a member from each group to informally present a summary of their group's discussion. These presentations frequently morph into dialogue between me and the presenter to either expand the lessons or narrow the focus the group's work. My follow-up questions tend to focus on clarifying the meaning of lyric and encouraging more specificity regarding impacts or opportunities or threats.

Session Description

This session is best suited for a 60 minute timeframe, which will be used as follows:

1. Introduction (5 minutes): Presenter and participants will introduce themselves.
2. Theoretical overview (5 minutes): Presenter will briefly introduce the conceptual context described above and the activity.
3. Activity (40 minutes): Participants will complete the activity.
4. Participant feedback and conclusion (10 minutes): Participants will discuss opportunities to improve or adapt the activity for other formats.

References

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Appendix A: “We Didn’t Start the Fire” Lyrics

Verse 1:

Harry Truman, Doris Day, Red China, Johnnie Ray

South Pacific, Walter Winchell, Joe DiMaggio

Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Studebaker, Television

North Korea, South Korea, Marilyn Monroe

Rosenbergs, H-Bomb, Sugar Ray, Panmunjom

Brando, The King And I, and The Catcher In The Rye,

Eisenhower, Vaccine, England's got a new queen

Marciano, Liberace, Santayana goodbye

Chorus:

We didn't start the fire

It was always burning since the world's been turning

We didn't start the fire

No, we didn't light it, but we tried to fight it

Verse 2:

Joseph Stalin, Malenkov, Nasser and Prokofiev

Rockefeller, Campanella, Communist Bloc

Roy Cohn, Juan Peron, Toscanini, Dacron

Dien Bien Phu Falls, "Rock Around the Clock"

Einstein, James Dean, Brooklyn's got a winning team

Davy Crockett, Peter Pan, Elvis Presley, Disneyland

Bardot, Budapest, Alabama, Khrushchev

Princess Grace, Peyton Place, Trouble in the Suez

Verse 3:

Little Rock, Pasternak, Mickey Mantle, Kerouac

Sputnik, Zhou En-lai, Bridge On The River Kwai,

Lebanon, Charles de Gaulle, California baseball

Starkweather Homicide, Children of Thalidomide

Buddy Holly, Ben-Hur, Space Monkey, Mafia

Hula Hoops, Castro, Edsel is a no-go

U-2, Syngman Rhee, payola and Kennedy

Chubby Checker, Psycho, Belgians in the Congo

Verse 4:

Hemingway, Eichmann, Stranger in a Strange Land,

Dylan, Berlin, Bay of Pigs invasion

Lawrence of Arabia, British Beatlemania

Ole Miss, John Glenn, Liston beats Patterson

Pope Paul, Malcolm X, British Politician sex

J.F.K. blown away, what else do I have to say?

Verse 5:

Birth control, Ho Chi Minh, Richard Nixon back again

Moonshot, Woodstock, Watergate, punk rock

Begin, Reagan, Palestine, Terror on the airline

Ayatollah's in Iran, Russians in Afghanistan

Wheel of Fortune, Sally Ride, heavy metal suicide

Foreign debts, homeless Vets, AIDS, crack, Bernie Goetz

Hypodermics on the shores, China's under martial law

Rock and Roller cola wars, I can't take it anymore

Appendix B: Example of Annotated Lyric from Genius.com

WE DIDN'T START THE FIRE LYRICS

[Verse 1]

Harry Truman, Doris Day, Red China, Johnnie Ray
South Pacific, Walter Winchell, Joe DiMaggio
 Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Studebaker, Television
 North Korea, South Korea, Marilyn Monroe
 Rosenbergs, H-Bomb, Sugar Ray, Panmunjom
 Brando, *The King And I*, and *The Catcher In The Rye*,
 Eisenhower, Vaccine, England's got a new queen
 Marciano, Liberace, Santayana goodbye

[Chorus]

We didn't start the fire
 It was always burning since the world's been turning
 We didn't start the fire
 No, we didn't light it, but we tried to fight it

Genius Annotation [4 contributors](#)**1949**

"Red China" refers to the conclusion at the end of the Chinese Civil War (a war that began even before World War II). On October 1, [Mao Zedong](#) (widely known as Chairman Mao) proclaims the "People's Republic of China" with its capital at Beijing, which is renamed *Beijing*.



[Chiang Kai-shek](#) (Chairman of the National Military Council who opposes a Communist-run government) and approximately 2 million Nationalist Chinese citizens retreat from mainland China and