

Boston Box

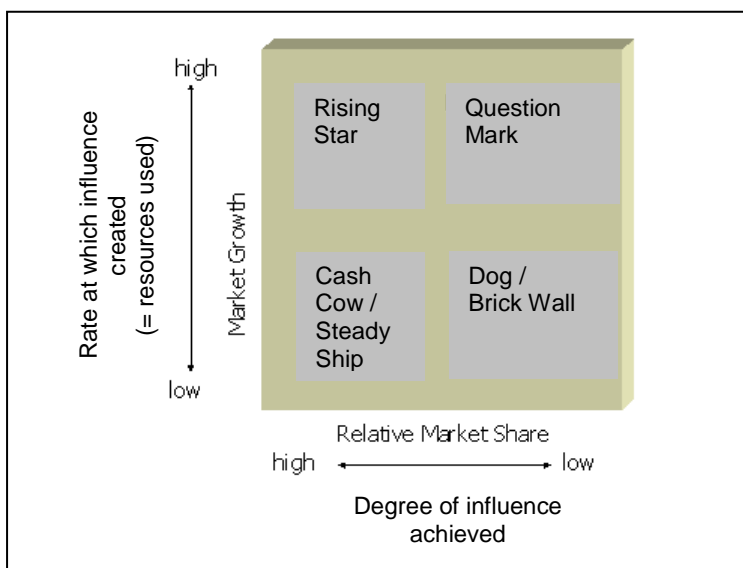
The Boston box (or Boston Consulting Group Growth-Share Matrix, as it is formally known) is a classic tool of strategic planning and was developed in the early 1970s by Bruce Henderson. The business version of the matrix analyses different products according to their rate of market growth and achieved market share, usually by looking at sales figures. In its adaptation to policy influence the product market share (along the top) becomes the degree of influence generated by a new idea or research, while the market growth (along the side) is the rate at which this influence is being gained, and the (usually proportional) rate at which resources are being consumed.

Many organisations will have more than one influencing project on at a time and they may need to consider how to share scarce resources between them, how to assess the potential of an influencing project and what to do when a project has reached the natural end of its life. This is particularly important when credibility and profile – central to any influencing project – are just as scarce as money and time. The Boston box provides a framework for assessing the life-cycle of a project and allocating resources among different projects and campaigns.

Detailed Outline of the Process

The analysis is best carried out in a group that includes those who resource and manage the organisation's research projects. The first step is to clearly distinguish the different issues being promoted – perhaps there are several messages from one research project, or many different research projects all with one message. The next step is to understand the four-stage 'Product life cycle' and identify the position in the cycle of each of the current research and policy influence 'products' or messages.

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There are four likely stages (represented by the four quadrants of the matrix in the figure):

1. If it is a new issue or project, the amount of influence created is low to start with, but the campaign is resource intensive and the outcome is unknown. This is a **'question mark'** or **'problem child'**.
2. If the profile among the policy audience has started to grow, and the degree of influence on the up, the project becomes a **'rising star'**. However, resourcing is likely to be heavy and the organisation may have to stake their reputation and credibility on the issue.
3. If things are fairly advanced and most of the policy audience is convinced, and the expense of communicating, networking and publishing around the issue has slowed, then the issue becomes the **'steady ship'** because the momentum has been created and progress is sure and almost irreversible. The campaign or issue has essentially been 'won'. (In sales and marketing terminology this is called the **cash cow** stage.)
4. If the product or issue has had its heyday, and the audience or market is looking for the next big idea, then it is likely the influence of the project has dropped. There is no shift in attitude among the policy audience and although it may not consume much in the way of resources, it does tie up staff and capacity. This is called the **'brick wall'** (or the **'dog'** in the commercial version).

Is there a project that never grew out of the question mark because it was never properly resourced? Can a project with high audience influence really justify its very high cost? Are there projects that have been around for a long time and become dogs? What are the costs and benefits of keeping them on, or not re-launching them? Even the best idea or message can lose its punch, but re-branding and re-packaging can often help, as the example below shows.

A Good Example

Following an exhilarating period of 'star' growth in the early 1970s, the centre party in British politics reached the 'steady ship' in the mid 1970s but was quickly followed by a 'brick wall' in the late 1970s as the party vote declined. At this point the product was re-invented: the 1981 launch of the all new Social Democratic Party saw a 'question mark' quickly rise like a phoenix from the ashes through the 'star' stage to reach the 'steady ship' again. In order to continue growing in influence an influencing group must innovate.

Further Information

- The Boston box is described in some detail at: <http://www.quickmba.com/strategy/matrix/bcg/> and the <http://www.themanager.org/Models/BostonBox.htm>.
- The Campaigning Handbook by Mark Lattimer (www.dsc.org.uk) describes how the Boston Box can be adapted to campaigning.
- Further refinement of the Boston box ideas are addressed by the GE / McKinsey Matrix, which considers market share and growth rate to be only two of many factors that determine an idea or innovation's strength.

