

**Amazon: A Case Study**

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| **Word Limit for Assignment: 3,000** | **Actual Word Count: 2,798** |

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# Introduction

This report is a study of Amazon.com, Inc. The intention of this study is to delve into the different aspects of the company’s history and consider its future. Further to this, we intend to address a number of details regarding the make-up of Amazon. We will begin by specifying what they do and examine their selling points. What do they provide the IT community in terms of its services and unique offerings?

A SWOT analysis will be undertaken to exhibit an array of information. What strengths have arisen from Amazons efforts, what weaknesses are still present, what opportunities can be grasped, and finally, what or whom poses a threat?

Most important to this study is Amazons current stance. Key to understanding this stance is where the company’s priorities lie. Who are their key competitors and how does Amazon fare against them? What are their target markets and demographics? Furthermore, we must review the company’s financial status and where they are positioned in today’s global economy and how strongly they may lead in their given industry.

The scope of this study demands a considerable amount of research and a broad range of sources to be utilised. Fortunately, our chosen case study allows us a plethora of online content to scour; removing most substantial limitations that could arise. Our methods of investigation to complete the objectives outlined above will include online research, team evaluation meetings, and other research strategies.

# Company Summary

Amazon is an e-commerce company founded by Jeff Bezos on July 5, 1994. Bezos started the company in his garage in Bellevue, Washington. In the beginning Amazon was marketed as an online bookstore. Bezos chose to sell books as a starting point due to the high demand worldwide for literature and that the initial risk monetarily was smaller as the price points for books is smaller than other products.

Amazon’s rise to the top can be put down to the company culture that Bezos cultivated from the beginning. The company’s central focus is on the customer which has led to many innovations by way of listening to the customers and taking action on ideas generated from these observations. The company’s values statement includes the line “If you don’t listen to your customer you will fail. But if you only listen to your customers you will also fail”.

## Products & Services

From the beginning Amazon was marketed as an online bookstore. However the company soon branched out and began delivering other services and products such as:

**Amazon Prime** – a paid subscription service that offers users free shipping, streaming audio/video for a monthly or yearly fee.

**Amazon Web Services (AWS)** – AWS is a suite of cloud-computing services that operate from 16 regions around the world. These services include storage, networking, database, application services deployment and management and tools for the Internet of Things (IoT). This service is marketed as a cheaper way to implement these services rather than building a physical server farm.

**Kindle** – The kindle is a line of e-readers that include devices incorporating E Ink electronic paper displays and Android based tablets. All of these devices are integrated with the Kindle store which is on online e-book store managed by Amazon

**Fire TV** – A digital media player that allows users to stream digital audio and video in high definition.

**Music** – Amazon music is an online music store launched in January 2008. It was the first music store to sell music without digital rights management (DRM).

**Consumer Electronics** – Amazon also sells many categories of consumer electronics and also allows third party sellers to sell their products through the Amazon website.

## Selling Point

**Customer Reviews** – Allowing customers to write their own reviews of the products they have bought through Amazon has given the website more of a community feel and emboldens the trust future customers will have in buying products. The ratings system is based on a rating scale of one to five stars. Customers can comment on the reviews and give the reviews a vote to indicate whether they found the review helpful or not.

**Content Search** – Amazon provides a unique feature called “Search inside the book” which allows users to search for keywords within many books in the websites catalogue. In order to avoid copyright violations there is a limit on the number of pages that will be returned to the user. Amazon also instructs the users’ browser to disable printing.

# SWOT Analysis

## Strengths

**Product Variety –** Amazon is unique in the fact that it offers a huge variety in the products that it can sell, and will sell to consumers. Originally Amazon only sold books, but currently, Amazon offers over thirty sub-categories for you to select from, ranging from Books, CDs, games, jewellery and even the long outdated VHS tape.

**Independent Sellers** **–** Amazon allow third party sellers to sell their products through any of their websites. This allows for their products to be seen by a larger market (millions according to Amazon themselves). Amazon have stated that approximately 40% of its unit sales are from third-party sellers. [1]

**Amazon Prime Membership –** Amazon Prime Membership gives customers access to streaming video, music and e-books. It also offers its members free two day shipping on certain items throughout the UK and America, while also offering free same-day delivery to eligible ZIP codes. Amazon offers this service to consumers for £7.99 a month, starting with a free 30-day trial and offers half price to students.

## Weaknesses

**Failing Products –** Due to the success of their first tablet, the Kindle, in 2014, Amazon attempted to try their hand at releasing a smartphone. Amazon launched the Fire Phone in the US, and it has since been considered a massive failure that the company is still feeling the effects from. On its original release date, the phone cost $199, now it costs $1 with a 2-year AT&T contract. The company has said that it has roughly $83 million worth of unsold Fire phones. [2] Amazon once again attempted to release another tablet, aptly named the “Kindle Fire”, this didn’t do as well as the original Kindle.

**High Debt –** Amazon currently has high debt after struggling to make profits in developing nations.

**Independent Sellers –** While Amazon’s independent sellers can be considered one of their core strengths, they are not without their flaws. For starters, the varying prices between different third party sellers in the marketplace and their service can be considered below Amazon’s standard, as most of them charge up to two times the original price that Amazon originally asked for, with a horrible standard for customer service and deliveries.

**Tax Avoidance –** Amazon primarily runs its European outlet from Luxembourg, this has allowed them to minimize the amount of tax that they have to pay on their revenue that is generated in other countries across Europe. This has also allowed Amazon to cut its tax bill in the United States, with Amazon paying a tax rate of 5.3% over the past five years. [3]

## Opportunities

**Physical** Stores **–** Amazon currently has three physical book stores open in the United States; these are located in California, Washington and Oregon respectively. They are currently planning on opening six more in California, New York, Illinois, New Jersey and Massachusetts. [4] If Amazon opened physical stores outside the US, it can help the customers engage with the brand, which in turn, will result in increase in repeat purchase and continue to build up their loyal customer base.

**Global Expansion –** Amazon could benefit from expansion mainly in developing economies due to their markets having low competition in online retail.

## Threats

**Walmart –** Currently, Walmart are considered as Amazon’s biggest threat in the online market, with the company’s online sales at approximately $13 billion in the year of 2016. [5] Walmart’s online websites in America, UK and Canada are in direct competition with Amazon.

**Security –** Increasing concerns over online shopping due to identity theft and hacking, leaving customers data exposed has threatened Amazon’s success.

# Current Stance

## Key Competitors & Target Market

Amazon is one of the most visited websites in the world within the field of online shopping. Online marketplace has become more popular over the last decade. This has led to high levels of competition with companies such as eBay and DoneDeal. The site is widely known for its wide selection of books, although the site has expanded to sell electronics, music, furniture, and apparel.

Amazon could be characterized as an online store that avails a platform for big or small businesses to promote their products through the website. This also provides a remarkable benefit to consumers as they can shop a wide range of products. These include: books (audible textbooks, kindle books) Music & Games Electronics & Computers, Garden & Tools Beauty, Health & Grocery, Toys, Kids & Baby Clothing, Shoes & Jewellery Handmade, Sports & Outdoors, Automotive & Industrial. In addition, it allows individuals to sale second hand products (such as memorabilia). For example, if a user wants to buy a PS4 console, it will provide the option of buying it for full price from different stores (there can be a difference in the price depending on the store) and also buy a second-hand console. Amazon aims specifically at the upper and middle class people, who possess a limited experience in the basic technology. As May of 2016 amazon had Market Cap. Of **292.6**Billion with revenue over 136 billion USD for 2016.

Similar to Amazon, users can also purchase and sell items using eBays’ online marketplace system. Amazons main competitor would be eBay. Despite people’s perception of the two companies being similar there are some distinct differences. The main difference would be that eBay is a wholesaler. This means that a person can sell merchandise at the lowest price. This is usually done to retailers who will resell the products to their customers. In contrast, Amazon allows users to sell their goods in a higher price, therefore they can make a higher profit. However, this could have a negative effect on the seller as customers would rather buy form a website that sells products at a lower price without reflecting the quality of the product.

By using eBay to sell your own goods it provides you the option to choose between a fixed price and an auction format with creating your own product description. Amazon doesn’t provide the freedom that eBay does. Amazon only allows sellers the option of a fixed price format and it creates the product description for you which means less work for the users. The most important difference between Amazon and eBay is that they have an entirely different fees structure. EBay charges the seller a monthly rate for listings. Amazon.com lets the seller to list for free but takes a cut when they make a sale. EBay charges fees based on sales of a monthly basis. However, you will be happy to hear that insertion fees for the first 50-100 listings per calendar month, depending on listing format and category, are 100 percent free. This means that selling on Amazon.com can be much more expensive than eBay. In general, it is best to list only items that have a high volume of traffic on Amazon.com.

There is a clear distinction in the payment process carried out by the two companies. In eBay, if the seller receives a payment via PayPal they get all the cash and eBay bills them at the end of the month. On the other hand Amazon.com holds up your payment up to two weeks with the purpose of covering returns and refunds.

## Finances

To assess the finances for Amazon, we’re going to review select data, such as growth rate, net worth, and market share values for the past decade or so. This should give us a strong indication of the company’s state as of the date of this analysis and allow us to speculate on the possibilities ahead. As can be seen in the graph in Figure 1, Amazon as a company has grown at a staggering rate. The graph identifies the value of a single share as each year comes to a close on December 31st. From this, we can calculate that, as of market close on the 7th of February, 2017, values per share have risen by over 4200% since 2003. [6]

Amazons surge in growth can be attributed to the company’s attempt to branch out of e-commerce. Forays into hardware, media, education, and R&D projects have proven greatly successful as they are now one of the largest companies in the world. [7]

Now sitting as the third most valuable brand, Amazon is quickly approaching those in first and second place; Google and Apple respectively. Apple had initially staked its claim as the largest brand in 2011 but has seen its value drop in recent months. Possibly due to consumer backlash over certain business practices and shareholders believing that the iPhone has reached its peak popularity. [8] [9] Thus, we may see Amazon surpass Apple much sooner than expected.

Since its founding in 1994 as *Cadabra*, Amazon has amassed a wealth of assets from its products, services, and subsidiaries. Figure 2 shows that the previous five years have offered a large and steady growth; amounting to an average increase of 27% or 12.71 billion dollars per year. Figure 3 shows that the average profit margin is 0.467% when calculated with net income over a five year period. This value increases to 29.92% when calculated with gross income.

From this analysis, it’s simple to determine that Amazon is doing very well. With consistent upticks in the company’s daily revenue stream and stock value, we can verify the success that is Amazons brand, customer loyalty, and overall service.

## Industry Leaders

Viewing the financial statistics, we can assume Amazon are leaders in today’s economy. Amazon belongs to the e-commerce sector and has found itself climbing the peaks of the retail industry also. For example, Amazon may see eBay as an obvious competitor but finds itself eclipsing its yearly revenue. Calculating the difference in Figure 3 and Figure 4, we can establish that Amazon had a 1414.37% greater revenue than eBay in 2016 alone.

However, viewing a not so obvious competitor in Walmart, a retail chain that has recently broadened its scope by investing in e-commerce, [5] we can see in Figure 5 a sales revenue of nearly three and a half times that of Amazon. Amazon *is* catching up to the largest retailer in the world [10] but with Wal-Mart’s current online initiative, we may see it continue to pull further ahead.

Excluding Wal-Mart’s choke-hold on the top-spot, Amazon has certainly solidified itself as a true contender in this digital age. With ever increasing necessity in online outlets; mass migrations from traditional retailers and other industry leaders to these virtual plains proves Amazon to be in a most advantageous position. Founded so near the dawn of the World Wide Web, the company has accrued experience like none other in its 22 years.

As it prevailed through the dot com bubble, [11] Amazon has charged its way into every household. Its ubiquitous nature may even give rise to neologisms; as Google is to web searching; as Photoshop is to image manipulation; Amazon could become synonymous with online shopping.

# Conclusion

To complete this study, we will summarise the contents of our various findings and discuss steps Amazon might take to improve their position and brand.

Considering the company as it stands today, it certainly has not faltered in terms of progress. Growing with shifting market priorities over the past two decades, Amazon has arguably set a precedent for the e-commerce industry. Introducing a number of products, opening up services to third party sellers, and becoming a staple in the distribution of online literature, it’s acceptable to consider Amazon not just a leader, but a titan of industry.

Key recommendations are for the company to review cost cutting measures and increase incentive for sellers to utilise the Amazon services to promote brand loyalty. From the financial statistics, we concluded that profitability - while a large sum of money - was still only fraction of total sales. Much of this can be attributed to various costs; operations being the most notable. Furthermore, increasing incentive for external sellers to travel to the Amazon online platform could introduce many new consumers to the outlet; generating greater potential revenue.

## Limitations

This study is limited and should be viewed as such. A deeper knowledge of Amazons inner workings could produce a better understanding of their progress and indication of the future. Without which, we can only speculate.

## Prospects

Amazon has very strong prospects and should it continue its upward trajectory and maintain its current momentum, investment could be very profitable. While it might not produce significant returns in the short term, it will most definitely return volumes over longer periods.

# Reference List

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
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# Appendix A – Financial Charts



Figure 1. Amazon Growth Rate, 2003-2017, Source: [Market Watch – Interactive Charts](http://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/AMZN/charts?chartType=interactive&countryCode=US)

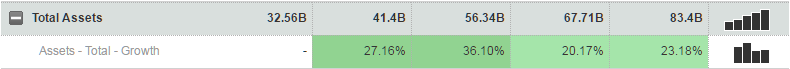


Figure 2. Amazon Total Assets, 2012-2016, Source: [Market Watch – Balance Sheet](http://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/amzn/financials/balance-sheet)

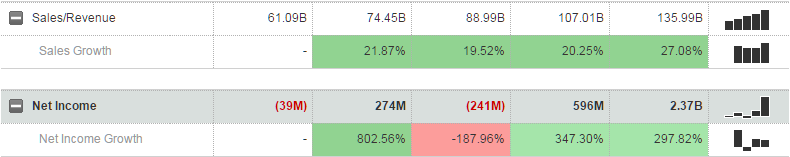


Figure 3. Amazon Revenue & Income, 2012-2016, Source: [Market Watch – Income Statement](http://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/amzn/financials)

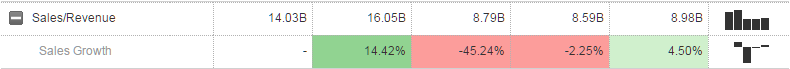


Figure 4. eBay Revenue, 2012-2016, Source: [Market Watch – Income Statement](http://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/ebay/financials)

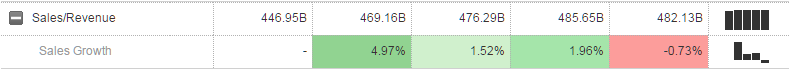


Figure 5. Wal-Mart Revenue, 2012-2016, Source: [Market Watch – Income Statement](http://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/wmt/financials)

# Appendix B – Minutes

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Meeting Title / Project Name & Number** | | | |
| Date: | 30 January 2017 | Location: | F Block - Library |
| Time: | 1:30 p.m. - 2:25 p.m. | **ID:** | **1** |
| Called By: | Sean Moloney |  |  |
| Attendees: | Eoghan De Bhal, Sean Moloney, Joseph Tierney, Nikos Vourdanos |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **I** | **Open Meeting** | | |
|  | Objective: Present ideas and options - Delegate tasks and positions to team members | Notes: Called - Sean (1:30 p.m.) | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **II** | **Action Items from Previous Meeting** | **Responsible** | **Due Date** |
| 1 | N/A |  |  |
| 2 |  |  |  |
| 3 |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **III** | **Agenda Topic** | **Notes** |  |
| 1 | Setup - Ensuring awareness of agenda / Request for any additional items |  | |
| 2 | Present company options - Discuss | Selected Amazon | |
| 3 | Delegate research tasks | Everyone happy with tasks | |
| 4 | Other | Discussion on project structure | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **IV** | **Action Items** | **Responsible** | **Due** |
| 1 | Volunteer - SWOT | Joseph | One week |
| 2 | Delegation - Company Summary and "Selling Point" | Eoghan | One week |
| 3 | Delegation - Competition and Market | Nikos | One week |
| 4 | Volunteer - Finances and Industry Leaders | Sean | One week |
| 5 | **Delegation - Research and build library of references** | **All** | **One week** |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **V** | **Close Meeting** |  |  |

Table 1. Minutes for 30th January, 2017

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Meeting Title / Project Name & Number** | | | |
| Date: | 06 February 2017 | Location: | F Block - Library |
| Time: | 1:10 p.m. - 1:50 p.m. | **ID:** | **2** |
| Called By: | Nikos Vourdanos |  |  |
| Attendees: | Eoghan De Bhal, Joseph Tierney, Nikos Vourdanos |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **I** | **Open Meeting** | | |
|  | Objective: Present ideas and options - Delegate tasks and positions to team members | Notes: Called - Nikos (1:30 p.m.) | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **II** | **Action Items from Previous Meeting** | **Responsible** | **Due Date** |
| 1 | Volunteer - SWOT | Joseph | One week |
| 2 | Delegation - Company Summary and "Selling Point" | Eoghan | One week |
| 3 | Delegation - Competition and Market | Nikos | One week |
| 4 | Volunteer - Finances and Industry Leaders | Sean | One week |
| 5 | **Delegation - Research and build library of references** | **All** | **One week** |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **III** | **Agenda Topic** | **Notes** |  |
| 1 | Setup - Ensuring awareness of agenda / Request for any additional items |  | |
| 2 | Review research - Discuss |  | |
| 3 | Expand/Make Suggestions |  | |
| 4 | Other |  | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **IV** | **Action Items** | **Responsible** | **Due** |
| 1 | Outline research topics further for members | All | One Week |
| 2 | **Begin writing / Complete each topic** | **All** | **One Week** |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **V** | **Close Meeting** |  |  |

Table 2. Minutes for 6th February, 2017

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Meeting Title / Project Name & Number** | | | |
| Date: | 13 February 2017 | Location: | F Block - Library |
| Time: | 1:10 p.m. - 1:50 p.m. | **ID:** | **3** |
| Called By: | Sean Moloney |  |  |
| Attendees: | Eoghan De Bhal, Sean Moloney, Joseph Tierney, Nikos Vourdanos |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **I** | **Open Meeting** | | |
|  | Objective: Review completed topics and discuss presentation | Notes: Called - Sean (1:10 p.m.) | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **II** | **Action Items from Previous Meeting** | **Responsible** | **Due Date** |
| 1 | Outline research topics further for members | All | One Week |
| 2 | **Begin writing / Complete each topic** | **All** | **One Week** |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **III** | **Agenda Topic** | **Notes** |  |
| 1 | Setup - Ensuring awareness of agenda / Request for any additional items |  | |
| 2 | Review completed work |  | |
| 3 | Delegate and discuss presentation |  | |
| 4 | Other |  | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **IV** | **Action Items** | **Responsible** | **Due** |
| 1 | Implement changes based on team feedback | All | 3 Days |
| 2 | **Complete PowerPoint presentation sections** | **All** | **One Week** |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **V** | **Close Meeting** |  |  |

Table 3. Minutes for 13th February, 2017

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Meeting Title / Project Name & Number** | | | |
| Date: | 20 February 2017 | Location: | F Block - Library |
| Time: | 1:30 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. | **ID:** | **4** |
| Called By: | Sean Moloney |  |  |
| Attendees: | Eoghan De Bhal, Sean Moloney, Joseph Tierney, Nikos Vourdanos |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **I** | **Open Meeting** | | |
|  | Objective: Review presentation and practice | Notes: Called - Sean (1:15 p.m.) | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **II** | **Action Items from Previous Meeting** | **Responsible** | **Due Date** |
| 1 | Implement changes based on team feedback | All | 3 Days |
| 2 | **Complete PowerPoint presentation sections** | **All** | **One Week** |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **III** | **Agenda Topic** | **Notes** |  |
| 1 | Setup - Ensuring awareness of agenda / Request for any additional items |  | |
| 2 | Review presentation | Order will follow report structure | |
| 3 | Submit edits |  | |
| 4 | Practice |  | |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **IV** | **Action Items** | **Responsible** | **Due** |
| 1 | Implement changes based on team feedback | All | 3 Days |
| 2 | Complete PowerPoint presentation sections | All | 3 Days |
| 3 | **Practice** | **All** | **3 Days** |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| **V** | **Close Meeting** |  |  |

Table 4. Minutes for 20th February, 2017