

**Criteria | Corporates | General:**

## Criteria Methodology: Business Risk/Financial Risk Matrix Expanded

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*(Editor's Note: We are republishing this criteria following our periodic review completed on Dec. 8, 2010. In the original version of this article published on May 26, 2009, certain rating outcomes in the table 1 matrix were misspelled. A corrected version follows.*

*Table 1 supersedes tables 1, 2, and 3 in the following articles:*

- "Business And Financial Risks In The Global Telecommunication, Cable, And Satellite Broadcast Industry," published Jan. 27, 2009;*
- "Key Credit Factors: Business And Financial Risks In The U.S. For-Profit Health Care Facilities Industry," published Jan. 21, 2009;*
- "Key Credit Factors: Methodology And Assumptions On Risks In The Packaging Industry," published Dec. 4, 2008;*
- "Business And Financial Risks In The Investor-Owned Utilities Industry," published Nov. 26, 2008;*
- "Business And Financial Risks In The Global Building Products And Materials Industry," published Nov. 19, 2008;*
- "Business And Financial Risks In The Commodity And Specialty Chemical Industry," published Nov. 20, 2008;*
- "Business And Financial Risks In The Oil And Gas Exploration And Production Industry," published Nov. 10, 2008;*
- "Key Credit Factors: Business And Financial Risks In The U.S. Trucking Industry," published Nov. 4, 2008;*
- "Business And Financial Risks In The U.S. Gaming Industry," published Sept. 25, 2008;*
- "Key Credit Factors: Business And Financial Risks In The Retail Industry," published Sept. 18, 2008; and*
- "Business And Financial Risks In The Restaurant Industry," published Dec. 4, 2008.*

*Table 1 also supersedes only table 1 in "Business And Financial Risks In The Global High Technology Industry," published Sept. 18, 2008.)*

Standard & Poor's Ratings Services is refining its methodology for corporate ratings related to its business risk/financial risk matrix, which we published as part of "2008 Corporate Ratings Criteria" on April 15, 2008, on RatingsDirect at [www.ratingsdirect.com](http://www.ratingsdirect.com) and Standard & Poor's Web site at [www.standardandpoors.com](http://www.standardandpoors.com).

This article amends and supersedes the criteria as published in Corporate Ratings Criteria, page 21, and the articles listed in the "Related Articles" section at the end of this report.

This article is part of a broad series of measures announced last year to enhance our governance, analytics,

dissemination of information, and investor education initiatives. These initiatives are aimed at augmenting our independence, strengthening the rating process, and increasing our transparency to better serve the global markets.

We introduced the business risk/financial risk matrix four years ago. The relationships depicted in the matrix represent an essential element of our corporate analytical methodology.

We are now expanding the matrix, by adding one category to both business and financial risks (see table 1). As a result, the matrix allows for greater differentiation regarding companies rated lower than investment grade (i.e., 'BB' and below).

**Table 1**

<b>Business And Financial Risk Profile Matrix</b>						
<b>Business Risk Profile</b>	<b>--Financial Risk Profile--</b>					
	<b>Minimal</b>	<b>Modest</b>	<b>Intermediate</b>	<b>Significant</b>	<b>Aggressive</b>	<b>Highly Leveraged</b>
Excellent	AAA	AA	A	A-	BBB	--
Strong	AA	A	A-	BBB	BB	BB-
Satisfactory	A-	BBB+	BBB	BB+	BB-	B+
Fair	--	BBB-	BB+	BB	BB-	B
Weak	--	--	BB	BB-	B+	B-
Vulnerable	--	--	--	B+	B	CCC+

These rating outcomes are shown for guidance purposes only. Actual rating should be within one notch of indicated rating outcomes.

The rating outcomes refer to issuer credit ratings. The ratings indicated in each cell of the matrix are the midpoints of a range of likely rating possibilities. This range would ordinarily span one notch above and below the indicated rating.

## Business Risk/Financial Risk Framework

Our corporate analytical methodology organizes the analytical process according to a common framework, and it divides the task into several categories so that all salient issues are considered. The first categories involve fundamental business analysis; the financial analysis categories follow.

Our ratings analysis starts with the assessment of the business and competitive profile of the company. Two companies with identical financial metrics can be rated very differently, to the extent that their business challenges and prospects differ. The categories underlying our business and financial risk assessments are:

### Business risk

- Country risk
- Industry risk
- Competitive position
- Profitability/Peer group comparisons

### Financial risk

- Accounting
- Financial governance and policies/risk tolerance
- Cash flow adequacy

- Capital structure/asset protection
- Liquidity/short-term factors

We do not have any predetermined weights for these categories. The significance of specific factors varies from situation to situation.

## Updated Matrix

We developed the matrix to make explicit the rating outcomes that are typical for various business risk/financial risk combinations. It illustrates the relationship of business and financial risk profiles to the issuer credit rating.

We tend to weight business risk slightly more than financial risk when differentiating among investment-grade ratings. Conversely, we place slightly more weight on financial risk for speculative-grade issuers (see table 1, again). There also is a subtle compounding effect when both business risk and financial risk are aligned at extremes (i.e., excellent/minimal and vulnerable/highly leveraged.)

The new, more granular version of the matrix represents a refinement--not any change in rating criteria or standards--and, consequently, holds no implications for any changes to existing ratings. However, the expanded matrix should enhance the transparency of the analytical process.

## Financial Benchmarks

**Table 2**

Financial Risk Indicative Ratios (Corporates)			
	FFO/Debt (%)	Debt/EBITDA (x)	Debt/Capital (%)
Minimal	greater than 60	less than 1.5	less than 25
Modest	45-60	1.5-2	25-35
Intermediate	30-45	2-3	35-45
Significant	20-30	3-4	45-50
Aggressive	12-20	4-5	50-60
Highly Leveraged	less than 12	greater than 5	greater than 60

## How To Use The Matrix--And Its Limitations

The rating matrix indicative outcomes are what we typically observe--but are not meant to be precise indications or guarantees of future rating opinions. Positive and negative nuances in our analysis may lead to a notch higher or lower than the outcomes indicated in the various cells of the matrix.

In certain situations there may be specific, overarching risks that are outside the standard framework, e.g., a liquidity crisis, major litigation, or large acquisition. This often is the case regarding credits at the lowest end of the credit spectrum--i.e., the 'CCC' category and lower. These ratings, by definition, reflect some impending crisis or acute vulnerability, and the balanced approach that underlies the matrix framework just does not lend itself to such situations.

Similarly, some matrix cells are blank because the underlying combinations are highly unusual--and presumably

would involve complicated factors and analysis.

The following hypothetical example illustrates how the tables can be used to better understand our rating process (see tables 1 and 2).

We believe that Company ABC has a satisfactory business risk profile, typical of a low investment-grade industrial issuer. If we believed its financial risk were intermediate, the expected rating outcome should be within one notch of 'BBB'. ABC's ratios of cash flow to debt (35%) and debt leverage (total debt to EBITDA of 2.5x) are indeed characteristic of intermediate financial risk.

It might be possible for Company ABC to be upgraded to the 'A' category by, for example, reducing its debt burden to the point that financial risk is viewed as minimal. Funds from operations (FFO) to debt of more than 60% and debt to EBITDA of only 1.5x would, in most cases, indicate minimal.

Conversely, ABC may choose to become more financially aggressive--perhaps it decides to reward shareholders by borrowing to repurchase its stock. It is possible that the company may fall into the 'BB' category if we view its financial risk as significant. FFO to debt of 20% and debt to EBITDA 4x would, in our view, typify the significant financial risk category.

Still, it is essential to realize that the financial benchmarks are guidelines, neither gospel nor guarantees. They can vary in nonstandard cases: For example, if a company's financial measures exhibit very little volatility, benchmarks may be somewhat more relaxed.

Moreover, our assessment of financial risk is not as simplistic as looking at a few ratios. It encompasses:

- a view of accounting and disclosure practices;
- a view of corporate governance, financial policies, and risk tolerance;
- the degree of capital intensity, flexibility regarding capital expenditures and other cash needs, including acquisitions and shareholder distributions; and
- various aspects of liquidity--including the risk of refinancing near-term maturities.

The matrix addresses a company's standalone credit profile, and does not take account of external influences, which would pertain in the case of government-related entities or subsidiaries that in our view may benefit or suffer from affiliation with a stronger or weaker group. The matrix refers only to local-currency ratings, rather than foreign-currency ratings, which incorporate additional transfer and convertibility risks. Finally, the matrix does not apply to project finance or corporate securitizations.

## **Related Articles**

Industrials' Business Risk/Financial Risk Matrix--A Fundamental Perspective On Corporate Ratings, April 7, 2005

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