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Branding the Madonna Way

By Mary T. Morgan

Madonna, whose Drowned World Tour 2001 just came to a quiet close, has achieved what every brand strives for: an enduring, unique, meaningful and relevant place in consumers' hearts and minds. Whether you love her or hate her, Madonna can teach you the fundamentals of effective branding.

Contrary to what many pundits claim, Madonna is not the master of reinvention, but rather the master of vision. For her 17 years in the limelight, she has intimately understood and remained true to her brand. Her message may change as her interests do, but she never wavers from her purpose, to encourage self-expression.

And that purpose, like those of all strong brands, is rooted in core values. Madonna's branding era has been marked by a consistent demonstration of three core values: provocativeness, innovation and reality.

Provocativeness: Stirring up reactions. Madonna commands attention with her messages. She always seems to hit home, either by generating pleasurable emotions (she raises the spirit and gets the toes tapping with the anthem, "Holiday") or by causing uneasy or uncomfortable feelings (there's a reason her picture book, *Sex*, isn't on many coffee tables). But, every message conveys a viewpoint that evokes a reaction. When it comes down to it, isn't that what self-expression is all about?

Innovation: Taking chances. The word "dated" never comes to mind with the Madonna brand. She always seems to communicate her messages in entertaining, timely and fresh ways. We have seldom seen the same Madonna twice. Her sold-out Drowned World performances featured music from her latest two albums and, in a break from music tour tradition, only two of her '80s hits. How many of us would have the guts to break the proven formula of focusing on what works in our own category?

Madonna takes chances. Sometimes they work. Sometimes they don't. But risk-taking is how Madonna and other thriving brands learn and grow. Although few know the behind-the-scenes mechanics of Madonna's brand plan development, it's obvious she has a system in place to generate the most effective options for executing each of her messages. It's also clear that the person who

knows the brand best—Madonna—makes the final call, resulting in messages that are new and involving while being "on strategy."

Reality: Striving for perfection but acknowledging imperfection. Madonna's messages are human and revealing, especially compared to her competition, entertainers who tend to hide and deny.

Madonna may not tell all, but her songs openly chronicle her relationships with her father and daughter, and show her willingness to acknowledge her own imperfections.

She keeps us comfortably involved in the brand as we follow her road to self-discovery, from the genre-breaking musical motion picture *Evita* to the emotionally grounded album *Music*, yet creates a distance that makes us want to learn more.

To be real is to be vulnerable. As the world was reeling from the recent terrorist assaults, Madonna expressed her political views and her emotions. She used her stage to lead a prayer for peace at a sold-out concert in Los Angeles, urging

President Bush to show restraint in retaliating for the attacks on the Pentagon and New York's World Trade Center. "Violence begets violence," she told the audience of 18,000 people, per Reuters. "And I don't know about you, but I want to live a long and happy life, and I want my kids to live a long and happy life." (Proceeds from that show's ticket sales were also earmarked for relief efforts.)

As Madonna says in a fitting title from the *Music* album, "Nobody's Perfect." She makes mistakes. We all do. But she seems to have the uncanny ability to admit, discover strength from and move quickly beyond them, allowing her to focus on and perfect what comes next.

Whatever Madonna's future messages, you can bet they will stick to the fundamentals. Are you doing the same with your brand, staying true to your purpose and values? If not, maybe it's time to follow the advice of another Madonna title and "Express Yourself." ■

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