

Momentum

Playbook 10

What's Your Vibe?

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Playbook 10:

What's Your Vibe

What Lady Gaga and Madonna Have In Common

When pop sensation Madonna first burst on the scene in the 80's, it may have been easy to dismiss her as a one-hit wonder. She was right there on the fashion trend of her time: fingerless gloves, heavy eye makeup, big, teased hair. She wore strands of bracelets, ripped off-the-shoulder t-shirts and fedoras. Come to think of it, much of this seems to have come back, as have all things 80's.

She was racy, raunchy and provocative. She invited controversy.

If you see photos of Madonna over the years, you can track her "periods" just as you can a famous painter: Her burlesque/dominatrix phase; Her short-hair/rebel phase. Her Glamour Girl/Vogue phase; Her "trying to be taken seriously as an actress" phase; Her retro-Disco/Ray of Light phase.

Her fashion styles have evolved, but her vibe of being daring, trendy, controversial and provocative continues to be the common thread.

Same is true of Lady Gaga. One minute, she's wearing meat dresses at the Grammys. The next, she's playing a sweet and innocent coquette who performs classic duets with crooners like Tony Bennett. But while her clothes may change, and even her musical repertoire, Gaga has always spoken out for the underdog, for the gay community, for celebrating diversity because you were "born this way." She is not afraid to take risks. She gives tirelessly to charity and even performed at the Super Bowl Halftime Show, a testament to her broad appeal.

She is daring, bold, original and outspoken.

Both of these women have drastically changed external styles over the years, but their inner core stays steady. **The look and feel evolves but the consistent vibe inside remains the same.** Some fans may claim whiplash from the carousel of image changes, but these divas have done a very good job of creating a unique voice and personality for their personal brands. Even if that outward personality is ever-changing.

You want your brand and business to have a clear, differentiated personality, vibe and style, too.

No One Else is YOU

Differentiation does not mean you do something no one else has ever done. It just means you do it in your own way. Gaga and Madonna could be seen as “the same” in many respects, but, really, they are each such unique individuals who do things their own way, too.

Your work is probably something that others have done. But one of the ways you can differentiate is how your business looks, talks, and in many cases, acts.

In other words, your brand’s personality.

Your brand personality is made up of your inner core and your outward style.

Your inner core stems from your mission, WHY, and core values. These are not pieces that should be “rebranded” frequently.

But HOW you convey these to the world—your outward style—can definitely evolve over time. Looks become dated. Websites need refreshing. Madonna couldn’t pull off the teeny-bopper, punk-queen look forever, could she?!

Fun Time! Brand Attributes

Brand attributes are the adjectives, images, phrases or emotions that you want your business to evoke. They are the most useful tools for a designer, writer or any other partner who needs to communicate your brand.

Brand attributes inform your design, copy tone, and even content. They are the vibe you want people to get when they hear your name or see your logo.

This is the fun stuff, my friends.

Describing your business with adjectives, phrases, images, emotions is what people love the most about branding!

You can probably easily rattle off the brand attributes for many of your favorite brands:

Apple: Innovative, sleek, hip, finely-designed, modern

Disney: Family-friendly, magical, full of wonder, imaginative, childhood dreams

Tiffany & Co.: Elegant, romantic, timeless, expensive/high-quality

Businesses are not the only entities with clear brand attributes. Famous people have them (these are called *personal brands*.) Cities and countries have them. Even events have them. So do books, magazines, websites, TV shows, movies....you get the idea.

What do you think of when you think of Audrey Hepburn? Perhaps classy, graceful, elegant. Or how about Einstein or George Clooney? Completely different vibes.

How about New York versus New Orleans? Paris versus Morocco? Very different brand attributes, yes?

And what adjectives come to mind when you think of Christmas, Valentines Day or Yom Kippur?

Of course, many of the attributes you state will come from your own experiences with these people, places or events. We'll explore this more in a minute.

Words Matter

Your goal is to find meaningful ways to express your brand attributes. Ways that will help inform your work, but also enable others to immediately understand your brand vibe.

You can use adjectives, but you can also use emotions, phrases, images, people or places to represent your brand. As you read above, many have brands associated with them. I challenge my clients to think of other ways to express their brand attributes by using famous people (alive or dead), fictional characters, places, TV shows and all the things mentioned above. It can be very useful to use analogies to describe your brand vibe.

Word choice matters. Pick meaningful attributes that are tactile, clear, and rich with meaning.

Such words are much more useful to a designer or writer than bland words.

The worst brand attribute you can use? *Professional*. To what? To whom? In what context? This can mean so many different things. Of course you want your business to be professional in some sense. That's a given.

But perhaps what you really mean is "buttoned-up" or "conservative" or "precise." These are stronger words that can guide your look and feel.

"Nice?" How about playful, exuberant, comfortable, welcoming, approachable, down-to-earth, compassionate, nurturing, affectionate?

My secret weapon is [Thesaurus.com](https://www.thesaurus.com). Start exploring to find the best word possible. For more than thirty minutes, a client and I once debated the merits of "cheeky" versus "sassy." It was a subtle nuance, but accurate: "Cheeky" was a much better option for her.

At a recent client workshop, we tried to find a better way to say "risk-averse" that didn't make them sound "afraid" but spoke to the fact that they triple-check everything to ensure quality and legal compliance. We landed on "diligent." As soon as we did, the entire room went, "Yeah! That's it!" Ah, the power of the right word!

It's Up to You....And It's Not

Companies choose brand attributes they hope others will use in describing them. But if the visuals, words or experiences do not match the promise, then customers will form their own brand perception—and it may not be one you want. This is why many people have a negative opinion of WalMart. When I ask conference audiences about their brand perceptions of Wal Mart, I often hear things like “dishonest, shady, trashy or unethical.” Of course, this is not the brand perception the company wants people to have, nor do I think that the marketing department actually lists these as desired brand attributes. But these impressions are formed from the public’s personal experiences and what they hear in the news, or even see on sites like [People of Walmart](#).

Ultimately, your brand is what others say it is, not what you say it is.

Does this mean creating a brand strategy is out of your control? Of course not! **When you articulate a clear, strong brand strategy, it is much easier to make hundreds of intentional decisions at every touch point, thus shaping the right impression you desire.**

But only if you can back it up with your actions.

Don't Write Brand Checks You Can't Cash

Your brand, from top to bottom, must be based on your organization’s (or personal, if you are a solopreneur) actual strengths and talents.

You can't just be something because you *want* to be, if you're not.

I've worked with many tech companies who all say: We want to be Apple. Why? Because Apple dominates the market, customers wait in line to get their products and they are seen as hip, cool and innovative.

Yes, it would be lovely to be seen as hip, cool and innovative.

It would also be lovely for me to dance like Beyonce, write like Jane Austen or rock a messy bun like some gorgeous female celebrity.

The thing is, many of these companies, while extremely successful in their niches, don't want to do the things that Apple *does to be Apple*. They are not hip and cool and innovative. They don't invest in R&D. They don't attract the best design talent on the planet—many didn't even invest in user experience or design! Their products and software, while incredibly powerful and useful, served a completely different purpose and market.

Don't set false expectations. Walk your talk. Play to your own strengths. There are markets, audiences and needs for everything.

I once had a client that offered virtual marketing services. They did fast, quality work at a reasonable price. Truthfully, It was nothing that would blow your mind. Just solid, professional work.

The owner wanted to change the name of the company and create a whole design image that made it seem like they were the next creative, innovative and modern sweetheart of the digital world.

But that's not who the company was. They delivered something else, something that many businesses rightly need. So I advised against this rebranding.

Being an authentic brand means walking your talk. Focus on what you do well, what your work will actually deliver, how you do what you do to deliver amazing results. Brand success goes deeper into your DNA and impacts much more than just your marketing or a cool logo.

Make the right promise so you know you can keep it.

Your Assignment: Articulate Your Brand Vibe

What are your desired brand attributes? Don't censor yourself. Write down as many adjectives, images, people, songs....whatever...that represent your desired brand personality and vibe. Think about who you are, how you work and what you offer to the people you want to reach. For inspiration, look back at *Playbook 2: What's Your WHY* and your *Playbook 4: What in Your Brand Arsenal?* And remember....[Thesaurus.com!](https://www.thesaurus.com/)

Do any images convey your brand? Find them online and paste the links here:

Narrow your list down to the five to seven most important attributes. A laundry list of words will only confuse the matter and lead you into “*You can’t possibly be all these things!*” territory. You’re going for clarity here. To help, group similar words or images together. For example, perhaps “Smart, Savvy and In-the-Know” are all variations on one theme.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

Congrats! You just won \$10,000,000 USD to run a Super Bowl ad for your business, project or big idea! Who would you pick as your celebrity spokesperson? This person could be alive or dead, real or fictional. If you can’t decide, pick two.

If it helps you at all, Red Slice’s is Tina Fey! :)

My celebrity spokesperson would be: _____

But wait, you’re not quite done...

Now: I’d love to see your brand attributes and, of course, your celebrity spokesperson choice posted on the Facebook page by Friday. Creativity counts, and I’ll be rewarding a fab prize!

Remember, we are here to encourage you and provide any feedback. If you’re like me, often it’s fellow collaborators that help me polish my ideas to a glossy sheen.

Again, I’m going to reward you all year long, so don’t lose your **MOMENTUM**: Post it now and keep that train moving!

One Last Thing...

Your business or work has so much to offer the world. Dress up your brand in a way that will appeal to your ideal audience, whomever they are.

There are markets and brands for everything. If there weren't we wouldn't have Target AND Neiman Marcus, fine china AND disposable dinnerware, Team Edward AND Team Jacob, punk rockers AND salsa dancers....and, yes, Apple AND Microsoft.

You just have to be clear on your specific talents, unique personality and to whom you're talking. You can carve out your own tribe and beautifully serve them exactly what they want and need.

Create success in your own unique way, with your own unique vibe and personality. Not everyone has to strive to be "one thing" just because they see another company effectively building that brand.

People told Madonna and Lady Gaga early in their careers that they wouldn't succeed by being themselves, that they had to fit into certain molds to make it. And now they've created unique brands which *others* admire and want to emulate. All by being themselves and playing to their strengths.

Build a brand that stands out, dress it up appropriately to convey a consistent message, but ground it to who you are and what you can truly deliver.

Here's to YOU!

Maria

Goodies and Inspirations

In addition to finding just the right word by playing around with Thesaurus.com, get those creative juices flowing from these [380 high-emotion words](#) guaranteed to make you more persuasive.

A good read about [“personality words”](#) and how you might replace some tired old ones with some fresh, new ones.

Creative Test! Hone your ability to articulate brand personalities quickly and clearly: Visit some of these sites below and give yourself 30 seconds to identify three brand attributes you get from the layout, visuals, imagery or copy/language. As you open your eyes to how brands use touch points with intent to create a specific impression, you will start recognizing the strategy behind many of the most popular brands out there.

[Kris Carr](#)

[Betsy Johnson](#)

[Pabu](#)

[The Pioneer Woman](#)

[Ligne Roset](#)

[Method](#)

[Virgin Galactic](#)

[Thrillist](#)

[Kaboom Productions](#)

[Cartier](#)