

## CASE EXAMPLE

## Madonna: still the reigning queen of pop?

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The music industry has always been the backdrop for one-hit wonders and brief careers. Pop stars who have remained at the top for decades are very few. Madonna is one such phenomenon; the question is, after over 25 years at the top, how much longer can it last?

Described by *Billboard Magazine* as the smartest business woman in show business, Madonna, Louise Ciccone, began her music career in 1983 with the hit single 'Holiday' and in 2005–2006 once again enjoyed chart success for her album 'Confessions on a Dance Floor'. In the meantime she had consistent chart success with her singles and albums, multiple sell-out world tours, major roles in six films, picked up 18 music awards, been the style icon behind a range of products from Pepsi and Max Factor to the Gap and H&M, and became a worldwide best-selling children's author.

The foundation of Madonna's business success was her ability to sustain her reign as the 'queen of pop' since 1983. Along with many others, Phil Quattro, the President of Warner Brothers, has argued that 'she always manages to land on the cusp of what we call contemporary music, every established artist faces the dilemma of maintaining their importance and relevance, Madonna never fails to be relevant.' Madonna's chameleon-like ability to change persona, change her music genre with it and yet still achieve major record sales has been the hallmark of her success.

Madonna's early poppy style was targeted at young 'wannabe' girls. The image that she portrayed through hits such as 'Holiday' and 'Lucky Star' in 1983 was picked up by Macy's, the US-based department store. It produced a range of *Madonna lookalike* clothes that mothers were happy to purchase for their daughters. One year later in 1984, Madonna then underwent her first image change and, in doing so, offered the first hint of the smart cookie behind the media image. In the video for her hit



Photo: DPA/PA Photos

'Material Girl', she deliberately mirrored the glamour-based, sexual pussycat image of Marilyn Monroe whilst simultaneously mocking both the growing materialism of the late 1980s and the men fawning after her. Media analysts Sam and Diana Kirschner commented that with this kind of packaging, Madonna allowed the record companies to keep hold of a saleable 'Marilyn image' for a new cohort of fans, but also allowed her original fan base of now growing up wannabe girls to take the more critical message from the music. The theme of courting controversy but staying marketable enough has been recurrent

throughout her career, if not slightly toned down in later years.

Madonna's subsequent image changes were more dramatic. First she took on the Catholic Church in her 1989 video 'Like a Prayer' where, as a red-dressed 'sinner', she kissed a black saint easily interpreted as a Jesus figure. Her image had become increasingly sexual whilst also holding on to a critical social theme: for example, her pointed illustration of white-only imagery in the Catholic Church. At this point in her career, Madonna took full control of her image in the \$60m (€48m; £33m) deal with Time-Warner that created her record company Maverick. In 1991, she published a coffee-table soft-porn book entitled *Sex* that exclusively featured pictures of herself in erotic poses. Her image and music also reflected this erotic theme. In her 'Girlie' tour, her singles 'Erotica' and 'Justify my Love' and her fly-on-the-wall movie 'In bed with Madonna' she played out scenes of sadomasochistic and lesbian fantasies. Although allegedly a period of her career she would rather forget, Madonna more than survived it. In fact, she gained a whole new demography of fans who not only respected her artistic courage, but also did not miss the fact that Madonna was consistent in her message: her sexuality was her own and not in need of a male gaze. She used the media's love affair with her, and the *cause célèbre* status gained from having MTV ban the video for 'Justify my Love', to promote the message that women's sexuality and freedom is just as important and acceptable as men's.

Changing gear in 1996, Madonna finally took centre stage in the lead role in the film *Evita* that she had chased for over five years. She beat other heavyweight contenders for the role including Meryl Streep and Elaine Page, both with more acceptable pasts than Madonna. Yet she achieved the image transition from erotica to saint-like persona of Eva Peron and won critical acclaim to boot. Another vote of confidence from the 'establishment' came from Max Factor, who in 1999 signed her up to front its relaunch campaign that was crafted around a glamour theme. Procter and Gamble (owners of the Max Factor make-up range) argued that they saw Madonna as 'the closest thing the 90s has to an old-style Hollywood star . . . she is a real woman'.

With many pre-release leaks, Madonna's keenly awaited album 'Ray of Light' was released in 1998. Radio stations worldwide were desperate to get hold

of the album being billed as her most successful musical voyage to date. In a smart move, Madonna had teamed up with techno pioneer William Orbit to write and produce the album. It was a huge success, taking Madonna into the super-trendy techno sphere, not the natural environment for a pop star from the early 1980s. Madonna took up an 'earth mother/spiritual' image and spawned a trend for all things Eastern in fashion and music. This phase may have produced more than just an image as it is the time in Madonna's life which locates the beginning of her continued faith in the Kabbalah tradition of Eastern spiritual worship.

By 2001, her next persona was unveiled with the release of her album 'Music'. Here her style had moved on again to 'acid rock'. With her marriage to British movie director Guy Ritchie, the ultimate 'American Pie' had become a fully fledged Brit babe earning the endearing nick name of 'Madge' in the British press.

By 2003 some commentators were suggesting that an interesting turn of events hinted that perhaps 'the cutting-edge' Madonna, 'the fearless', was starting to think about *being part of* rather than *beating* the establishment when she launched her new Che-Guevara-inspired image. Instead of maximising the potential of this image in terms of its political and social symbolism during the Second Gulf War, in April 2003 she withdrew her militaristic image and video for the album 'American Life'. That action timed with the publication of her children's book *The English Roses*, based on the themes of compassion and friendship, which sparked questions in the press around the theme 'has Madonna gone soft?'

By late 2003 she had wiped the military image from the West's collective memory with a glitzy high-profile ad campaign for the Gap, the clothing retailer in which she danced around accompanied by rapper Missy Elliot to a retrospective remix of her 1980s' track 'Get into the Groove'. Here Madonna was keeping the 'thirty-somethings', who remembered the track from first time around, happy. They could purchase jeans for themselves and their newly teenage daughters whilst also purchasing the re-released CD (on sale in store) for them to share and a copy of *The English Roses* (also promoted in the Gap stores) for perhaps the youngest member of the family.

Late 2005 saw the release of the 'Confessions on a Dance Floor' album that was marketed as her

Releases	Year	Image	Target audience
<i>Lucky Star</i>	1982	Trashy pop	Young wannabe girls, dovetailing from fading disco to emerging 'club scene'
<i>Like a Virgin</i> <i>Like a Prayer</i>	1984	Originally a Marilyn glamour image, then became a saint and sinner	More grown-up rebellious fan base, more critical female audience and male worshippers
<i>Vogue</i> <i>Erotica</i> <i>Bedtime Stories</i>	1990 1992 1994	Erotic porn star, sadomasochistic, sexual control, more Minelli in <i>Cabaret</i> than Monroe	Peculiar mix of target audiences: gay club scene, 1990s' women taking control of their own lives, also pure male titillation
<i>Something to Remember</i> <i>Evita</i>	1995	Softer image, ballads preparing for glamour image of <i>Evita</i> film role	Broadest audience target, picking up potential film audiences as well as regular fan base. Most conventional image. Max Factor later used this mixture of Marilyn and Eva Peron to market its glamour image
<i>Ray of Light</i>	1998	Earth mother, Eastern mysticism, dance music fusion	Clubbing generation of the 1990s, new cohort of fans plus original fan base of now 30-somethings desperately staying trendy
<i>Music</i>	2000	Acid rock, tongue in cheek Miss USA/cow girl, cool Britannia	Managing to hit the changing club scene and 30-something Brits
<i>American Life</i>	2003	Militaristic image Che Guevara Anti-consumerism of American dream	Unclear audience reliant on existing base
<i>Confessions on a Dance Floor</i>	2005	Retro-1980s' disco imagery, high-motion dance-pop sound	Strong gay-icon audience, pop-disco audience, dance-based audience

comeback album after her lowest-selling 'American Life'. It and the linked tour achieved one of the highest-selling peaks of her career. The album broke a world record for solo-female artists when it debuted at number one in 41 countries. By February 2007 it had sold 8 million copies. Here Madonna focused on the high-selling principal of *remix*, choosing samples of the gay-iconic disco favourites of Abba and Giorgio Moroder to be at the heart of her symbolic reinvention of herself from artist to DJ. By cross-marketing the album image with Dolce & Gabbana in its men's fashion shows, Madonna cashed in on her regaining the dance-pop crown. Will this, her latest album, stand the musical test of time? Who knows? But for now it seems to have more than met the moment.

Sources: 'Bennett takes the reins at Maverick', *Billboard Magazine*, 7 August (1999); 'Warner Bros expects Madonna to light up international markets', *Billboard Magazine*, 21 February (1998);

'Maverick builds on early success', *Billboard Magazine*, 12 November (1994); A., Jardine 'Max Factor strikes gold with Madonna', *Marketing*, vol. 29, (1999), pp. 14–15; S. Kirschner and D. Kirschner, 'MTV, adolescence and Madonna: a discourse analysis', in *Perspectives on Psychology & the Media*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 1997; 'Warner to buy out maverick co-founder', *Los Angeles Times*, 2 March (1999); 'Why Madonna is back in Vogue', *New Statesman*, 18 September (2000); 'Madonna & Microsoft', *Financial Times*, 28 November (2000).

### Questions

- 1 Describe and explain the strategy being followed by Madonna in terms of the explanation of competitive strategy given in Chapter 6.
- 2 Why has she experienced sustained success over the past two decades?
- 3 What might threaten the sustainability of her success?