



## **Beyoncé: Say My (Brand) Name**

### **Case**

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## Abstract

When you combine art and artist, style and substance, talent and beauty, business and life, you get the brand that is Beyoncé. Her fans call her *Queen Bey* and her brand identity is the “Queen of Pop.” However, Beyoncé’s success is not simply as an artist. Beyoncé is a business and a global brand, with record sales, solo and collaborative tours, films, endorsement deals, an entertainment company, and fashion collections that have earned her sales of over 100 million records, a host of prestigious awards, and a net worth of 350 million dollars. As part of her branding, Beyoncé comes across as authentic and strong, political and polite, and social but not above her fans. She rarely speaks out verbally, relying on her music and art to do much of her talking. As it talks about her personal life, and various experiences fans can relate to, Beyoncé creates an air of transparency and thus authenticity for her brand. If you’re looking to build a strong, defined brand that speaks volumes, say *her* name, say *her* name: Beyoncé. This case looks at how Beyoncé built her brand and was able to turn challenges into brand-building opportunities.

## Case

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### Learning Objectives

By the end of this case study, students should be able to:

- explore how Beyoncé built and defined her brand;
- show how Beyoncé was able to use both professional and personal challenges as opportunities to evolve her brand; and
- assess if Beyoncé’s brand strategy is primarily proactive or reactive.

### Background

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter was born on September 4, 1981 in Houston, Texas. Beyoncé began her career as the lead singer of the R&B girl-group Destiny’s Child (the name was based on a passage from the Book of Isaiah), which was formed in 1996 and managed by her father Mathew Knowles. Since that time, Beyoncé has evolved as an artist and as a personal brand. She has fans around the world screaming her name and honoring “Queen Bey.” The Beyoncé catalog has been built with group (Destiny’s Child) and solo hits, while the Beyoncé brand has been strategically crafted moment by moment. Through her music, marketing, art, and businesses, Beyoncé has built a seemingly authentic brand that evokes strength, conviction, emotion, creativity, and success (Greenberg, 2017).

Through it all, several brand-defining moments have been key to her personal branding development and offer lessons in crisis management and personal branding success.

### Where It Began and Where It Stays: The Artist

From the beginning, Beyoncé’s art has spoken for her and to her fans. Destiny’s Child released their first song, “Killing Time” (*Men in Black*), in 1997 and their first album, *Destiny’s Child*, in 1998. The album won several awards at the Soul Train Lady of Soul Awards, including Best R&B/Soul Album of the Year, Best R&B/

Soul or Rap New Artist, and Best R&B/Soul Single for “No, No, No.” In 1999, Destiny’s Child released *The Writing’s on the Wall* album and garnered another number one single with “Jumpin’ Jumpin’” and two Grammy awards for “Say My Name.”

In 2002, Beyoncé made her film debut in Austin Powers’ *Goldmember* and later released her debut solo album, *Dangerously in Love* (2003). The album won five Grammy Awards and had two top Billboard singles (“Crazy in Love” and “Baby Boy”). Destiny’s Child officially broke up in 2006. Beyoncé released her second solo album, *B’Day*, in 2006 with three Top 10 singles (“Déjà Vu,” “Irreplaceable,” and “Beautiful Liar”). Beyoncé continued her acting career, with three starring roles (*The Pink Panther*, *Dreamgirls*, and *Obsessed*).

In 2008, she married Jay-Z, portrayed Etta James in *Cadillac Records*, and introduced her persona of Sasha Fierce (*I Am ... Sasha Fierce*). The album earned six Grammy Awards including Song of the Year for “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It).” In 2010, she founded her entertainment and management company, Parkwood Entertainment. The company had already existed as Parkwood Pictures (and released her 2008 and 2009 films) and later produced her tours and supported the release of several albums. Beyoncé’s fourth album, *4*, came out in 2011. *Beyoncé* was released in 2013, *Lemonade* in 2016, and *Everything Is Love* in 2018 (a joint album with Jay-Z).

Over the years, Beyoncé’s fans have responded with support for her art, and she has sold over 100 million records. She has also won many Grammy Awards and MTV Video Music Awards, in addition to other accolades for her art. In 2014, she became the highest-paid black musician in history. She was listed among *Time*’s 100 most influential people in the world (Sandberg, 2014). *Forbes* ranked her as the most powerful female in entertainment in 2017 (Howard, 2017). She has won a legion of core fans that includes strong contingents of teen to middle-aged women, and gay men, as well as key African-American audiences.

## The Beyoncé Brand-Defining Moments

The Beyoncé brand was built on a foundation of music, and to a certain extent film, but was defined by events (both planned and unplanned) and her reaction to them. Some of these moments were planned and some were not, but rather than let any of the unplanned moments define her, Beyoncé defined them. The following is a look at some of these moments and how Beyoncé used them to build her brand.

## Art, Awards, and Controversy

On September 13, 2009 at the MTV Video Music Awards, Taylor Swift was accepting the Best Female Video award for “You Belong With Me” when Kanye West jumped up on the stage, grabbed the mic, and interrupted Swift, saying: “Yo, Taylor, I’m really happy for you and I’mma let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time. One of the best videos of all time!” Kanye handed the mic back to Taylor and her time was up before she was able to finish her speech. Beyoncé used her Video of the Year win later to bring Swift back on stage and let her finish her speech. It was an opportunity for Beyoncé to show grace under pressure. She had to choose between supporting a country singer or a friend of Jay-Z. She chose Swift and reinforced her brand as sensitive and respectful, as well as brave and supportive.

This moment also supported Beyoncé’s image as a politically minded artist. Beyoncé had engaged in activism at several points in her career—including support of gay marriage and disaster victims—and was chosen to sing at the second inauguration of U.S. President Barack Obama in 2013. After the event, a scandal erupted about Beyoncé lip-synching the national anthem. But Beyoncé faced the music and stood up at a press conference about her upcoming Super Bowl Half Time performance and sang the “Star Spangled Banner” live. At that press conference she admitted to singing along to a backing track at the presidential event because she was a perfectionist and wanted the focus to stay on the president. With this surprise performance at the

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press conference, Beyoncé asserted her strength, confirmed her talent, and controlled her brand. She reacted quickly and decisively so she could move on to the next event in a believable and authentic manner.

On December 13, 2013, Beyoncé surprised people again by releasing a self-titled album without any warning. *Beyoncé* included 14 new songs and 17 videos and was billed as her first “visual album.”

I see music. It's more than just what I hear. When I'm connected to something, I immediately see a visual or a series of images that are tied to a feeling or an emotion, a memory from my childhood, thoughts about life, my dreams or my fantasies. And they're all connected to the music. I didn't want to release my music the way I've done it. I am bored with that. I feel like I am able to speak directly to my fans. There's so much that gets between the music, the artist and the fans. I felt like I didn't want anybody to give the message when my record is coming out. I just want this to come out when it's ready and from me to my fans. (Danton, 2013)

The significance of this secret release was twofold. First, the “surprise factor” caused more marketing response than any planned album release. Second, it showed that, from that point on, Beyoncé would decide when and how her music would be released. Her brand image now included unpredictability and control.

February 2016 was a busy month for Beyoncé's brand. On February 6, she released a previously unannounced new single, “Formation,” on Tidal (Jay-Z's streaming company) with a politically charged video on YouTube. “Formation” was her first new song since 2014. In it, she referred to the *Black Lives Matter* movement and detailed what it was to be black in the United States, singing: “I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros; I like my Negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils.” On February 7, Coldplay was the headliner at the Super Bowl, but Beyoncé also performed at the halftime show. With a Black Panther theme, the performance further aligned Beyoncé with the racial and political views expressed on “Formation.” Some believed Beyoncé stole the show. “Strung with a bandolier of bullets across her chest, Queen Bey showed America that she was more than just a pop vocalist, foreshadowing her transformation with *Lemonade* into a voice for black womanhood” (Bruner, 2017). This was another opportunity for Beyoncé to lend her support to the *Black Lives Matter* movement. Up until the release of “Formation” she had remained silent on that specific cause. Beyoncé let her music do the talking on the biggest stage (the Super Bowl) and in an environment that was sensitive to the issue.

Following the release of her single and strong Super Bowl performance, Beyoncé released the visual album *Lemonade* in April of 2016 to both critical acclaim and controversy.

When pop megastar Beyoncé releases new music, it's a game-changing moment. But no one was prepared for the narrative film album that was *Lemonade*, coming on the heels of the surprise release of *Formation* and a defiant Black Panther-themed performance in the Super Bowl halftime show. Beyoncé championed black Southern womanhood in ways that none of her contemporaries had done. The backlash was swift. Law enforcement blasted the *Formation* video as anti-police, with its references to police-involved shootings and a sinking cop car in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. Police officers created a “Boycott Beyoncé” movement and threatened to not work security for concerts on her world tour. (Quarshie, 2017)

It can be difficult for a popular artist, especially a black popular artist, to be political. With her 2016 artistic and marketing moves, Beyoncé re-established her brand with the black community and confirmed she was strong enough to keep her white pop fans as well. There was some backlash but mostly from those that either never liked her or felt she had become too political with her music and brand already. The ensuing *Formation* tour, Beyoncé's seventh concert tour, was extremely successful in revenue and reputation.

## Beyoncé: Marriage and Motherhood

Beyoncé approached marriage and motherhood with the same strength and style befitting her personal brand identity. There have been pregnancy photos worthy of a queen (Coleman, 2017), baby names full of sizzle and sass (Blue Ivy, Rumi, and Sir), and songs and videos full of personal moments. Beyoncé and Jay-Z have been fairly open about their marriage struggles from infidelity (“Becky with the good hair”), miscarriages (“I apologize for all the stillborns”), and family fights, including the elevator fight between Jay-Z and Beyoncé’s sister Solange (Petit, 2017). Throughout it all, most of their statements on the matter have been made through their music: most of his on “4:44” (Lamarre, 2017) and hers on *Lemonade* (Davis, 2016). It all came together on June 16, 2018 when Beyoncé and Jay-Z surprise-released a collaborative album titled *Everything Is Love*. In his *New York Times* interview with Dean Baquet in 2017, Jay-Z said, “We were using our art almost like a therapy session, and we started making music together” (Baquet, 2017). This album seemed to be the result. *Everything Is Love* in many ways completes the Knowles–Carter conceptual trilogy in an expert, tactical demonstration of family brand management (Coscarelli, 2018). In the final cut on the album, “Lovehappy,” Jay-Z says: “We broke up and got back together,” and Beyoncé adds, “We came and we conquered, now we’re happy in love.” The *Beyoncé*, *Lemonade*, and *Everything Is Love* albums served as a musical trilogy for the Beyoncé brand that was vulnerable and at its weakest point but remained silently strong throughout. She again let her music do the talking. The challenging experiences conveyed through the music aligned Beyoncé even more closely with her fans. Some could relate to what she was going through, and more could empathize with her.

## Beyoncé: The Business

While Beyoncé was dealing with both professional and personal challenges, the business side of her personal brand continued to grow. Although it seemed at times like the personal and political side of Beyoncé was private and none of our business (until she decided when and where to share it), the business of Beyoncé was very public. As part of her business, Beyoncé had established Parkwood Entertainment, an entertainment and marketing company in 2010. She had also collaborated with a range of companies, including signing endorsement deals with L’Oreal and Pepsi.

Beyoncé moved beyond collaboration to control with two key business ventures: Ivy Park, an activewear brand, and WTRMLN WTR, a juice brand. Both brands came with press conferences and releases. On March 31, 2016, Beyoncé launched Ivy Park by revealing two covers for the May issue of *Elle* magazine. The issue included an in-depth interview where Beyoncé explained her objectives for the brand and its impact on women. She said that her goal with the line was to “push the boundaries of athletic wear and to support and inspire women who understand that beauty is more than your physical appearance.” That same day, Beyoncé also released a promotional video titled “Where Is Your Park,” that gave fans a glimpse of her workout routine, samples of the clothing line, and a narration explaining the origin and significance of the brand and its name: Ivy, representing her daughter, Blue Ivy Carter, and Park, representing Parkwood Park in Houston, where Beyoncé used to go to exercise (Gottesman, 2016).

On May 3, 2016 Beyoncé invested in WTRMLN WTR (Rys, 2016). “Beyoncé is aligned with many of our company’s core values, especially our commitment to empowerment and passion to ‘seed change and spread liquid love’ among fitness enthusiasts. She is an inspiring human whose involvement will help educate the world about the importance of putting clean food and drinks into our bodies so that we can all be happy and healthy,” stated owner Jody Levy. Beyoncé explained the investment as a reflection of her values: “I invested in WTRMLN WTR because it’s the future of clean, natural hydration; as partners, we share a simple mission to deliver accessible wellness to the world... This is more than an investment in a brand, it’s an investment in female leaders, fitness, American farmers, and the health of people and our planet” (WTRMLN WTR, 2016).

## Beyoncé: The Future

Beyoncé has evolved from a feisty girl-group member to an assertive and strong business-woman and artist. She has built her brand on defining moments that may not continue to present themselves. The biggest challenge for a pop star is to grow old gracefully but relevantly. Should Beyoncé change her brand strategy now to age with her fans or try to re-brand herself with a younger audience? What lessons can be learned from Beyoncé's past that will help her define her brand in the future to continue her success?

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the Beyoncé brand?
2. How has Beyoncé developed her brand through professional and personal defining moments?
3. Does Beyoncé have a brand strategy? If so, is it primarily proactive or reactive?
4. What branding lessons can be learned from Beyoncé?

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