

Follow the leader

Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, provide leaders with a remarkable new toolset to engage with followers, but they must be used wisely for maximum impact.

Jamie Anderson, Jörg Reckhenrich and Martin Kupp explore the evolving art of followership

In *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?* Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones explore the concept of followership in the context of leadership within organisations. Their assertion that followership is a key element of organisational success has had a deep impact upon the way that many business leaders approach the art of management. But what is, and will be, the impact of social media on the ability of leaders to build and sustain a followership community?

In the past, if the leader wanted to engage with a mass of followers, whether they be employees in a large multinational company or fans in a music hall, the degree of intimacy that could be achieved was very limited. While some leaders, such as Jack Welch and Lou Gerstner, were renowned for their intimate fireside chats with employees, this level of personal sharing could only be achieved with a handful of people. Wider communications were held in town hall type events, or via corporate communications channels such as email or webcasts, or even through autobiographies. Similarly, if Madonna wanted to communicate to her fans about her values, this was typically achieved via the mainstream media or in some cases via sermons at her concerts. The degree of closeness that Madonna was able to achieve with the majority of her followers was restricted.

Social media has blown apart this millennia-long tradeoff between reaching a mass of followers in an intimate way, and has created the opportunity for what we term “mass intimacy.” Because of low-cost storage

and increasingly fast connection speeds, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow the leader to provide rich information about their lives (Just for Me) directly to their followers (Just for You) in an immediate way (Just in Time). And, what’s more, these social media platforms are not simply broadcast platforms as was the case with so many communication mediums in the past. Rather, followers can engage with the leader and other followers in a network dialogue.

But, despite the “mass intimacy” that social media platforms enable, the basic principles of followership still apply. After all, even if a leader chooses to create a Facebook page or Twitter account, there is no guarantee that others will want to follow them. And that is why social media is simply a new tool for engaging with followers – the leader still needs to craft a strategy for attracting and sustaining a followership base.

Lady Gaga is an exemplar of the new realities of followership. Not only does she understand the power of mass intimacy, she has also implemented a remarkably consistent approach to delivering what we see as the three pillars of a social media followership campaign. The first pillar is communicating a personal narrative (Who am I?); the second is developing a collective narrative (Who are we?); and the third is building a future narrative (Where are we going?). These principles have already been discussed in literature on followership, but they are less well appreciated in relation to social media as a tool for personal branding.

THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE...

Who am I?

Goffee and Jones assert that the best leaders excel in their followers’ eyes by being themselves and by revealing things about what made them who they are: they are able to communicate “Who am I?” Think of Mahatma Gandhi, who often spoke about how he was strongly influenced by Western writers such as Henry David Thoreau and John Ruskin, by the writings and personal example of Tolstoy, and by his own intensive immersion in religious writings from both East and West. He renounced worldly pleasures, as well as the fruits of industrial civilisation. For Gandhi, a story was never enough; embodiment in one’s own way of life was an integral part of the message. His clothes reflected his decision to adopt the life of an ascetic and he wore the same attire whether he was meeting the rural poor of India or the political power brokers of the British Empire.

Steve Jobs, the iconic late CEO of Apple, seemed also to have a deep appreciation of the importance of a personal narrative. He often spoke about his upbringing and early years as an entrepreneur. University was a financially difficult experience for Jobs, sleeping in friends’ dorm rooms, returning Coke bottles for food money and getting weekly free meals at the local Hare Krishna temple. His decision to drop out of university was based on a deep sense of love and responsibility for his parents who he felt should not waste their life savings on his education when he was not sure what he wanted to do with his life. Despite dropping out, he still visited campus but decided to sit in on those classes that he thought were fun or interesting rather than career forming. He later explained how his attendance at calligraphy lessons inspired the creation of different fonts

on the first Macintosh. In the mid-1970s he spent time in India and came back a Buddhist with his head shaved and wearing traditional Indian clothing. During this time, Jobs experimented with psychedelics calling his LSD experiences “one of the two or three most important things he had done in his life”. Despite his wealth, in his later years Jobs usually wore a black long-sleeved turtleneck sweater made by St Croix, Levi 501s and New Balance 991 sneakers. This is the “uniform” for many knowledge workers and programmers around the world. Apple made huge strides forward, yet Steve Jobs’s outfit stayed more or less the same for over two decades.

Lady Gaga has also been extremely skilful at communicating her personal narrative. She often talks about how she learned to play piano from the age of four, went on to write her first piano ballad at 13 and began performing at the age of 14. Despite the affluence of the Upper West Side of New York where she grew up, Gaga stresses that she does not come from a wealthy background, stating that her parents “both came from lower-class families, so we’ve worked for everything.” Lady Gaga speaks often about her childhood and teenage years, describing herself as “a freak, a maverick, a lost soul looking for peers.” She always refers to herself as a contemporary artist rather than a musician, and after high school studied at New York University’s Tisch Art School. Even early on,

“Gaga has been extremely skilful at communicating her personal narrative”

before she achieved international acclaim, Lady Gaga was unabashed about her potential: “Some people are just born stars. You either have it or you haven’t, and I was definitely born one.” Gaga’s dress embodies who she is – a work of art – but she says that “She was born this way”, loving to dress-up since she was a little girl. Her fans will never see her in track pants. “I owe them more than that,” she says. In a recent interview with US current affairs programme *60 Minutes* she spoke about her ultimate purpose in life: “I don’t want to make money... I want to make a difference.”

Clearly, Gandhi, Jobs and Gaga all helped their followers to understand something of who they are and where they come from because they understood that followers demand authenticity. What is new is the way in which social media platforms allow leaders to demonstrate this authenticity directly on a daily basis. It is therefore imperative for the leader to have a good understanding of what Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood have termed the personal leadership brand that they want to communicate. It is all too easy to post frivolous or off-handed remarks on social media sites that could be detrimental to the personal brand that the leader wants to build with their followers. The leader must have a clear understanding about what he or she wants to be known for, and then ensure that these traits are communicated as part of their social media activities. So in her tweets, and on her Facebook page, Gaga is very consistent in getting across her core values: acceptance for all, equality, creativity and honesty. >

PHOTO GETTY

THE
COLLECTIVE
NARRATIVE...

Who
are
we?

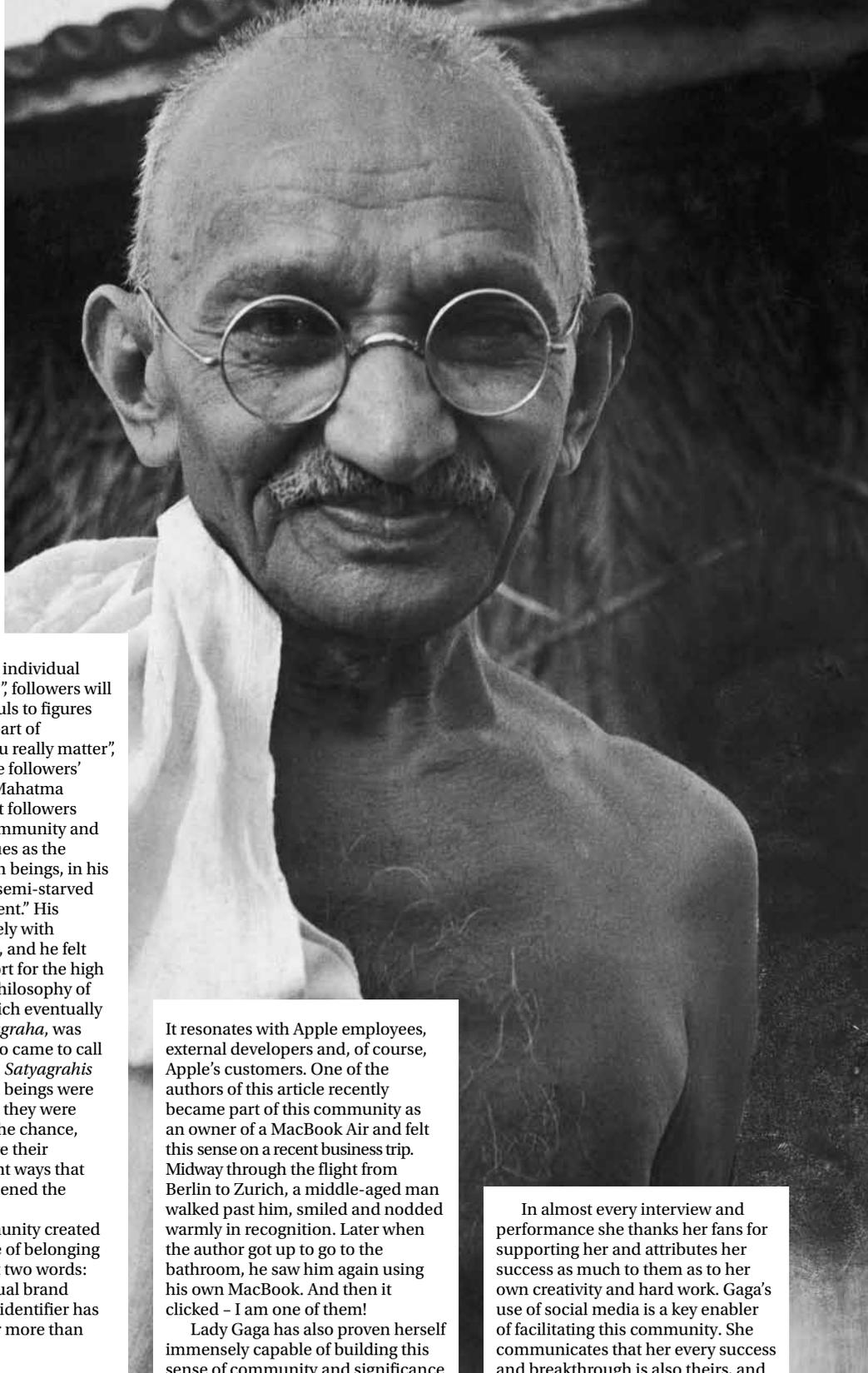
Beyond demanding the individual narrative of “Who am I?”, followers will give their hearts and souls to figures who make them feel a part of something and say, “You really matter”, no matter how small the followers’ contributions may be. Mahatma Gandhi understood that followers want to feel part of a community and saw his natural colleagues as the mass of ordinary human beings, in his own words the “dumb, semi-starved millions whom I represent.” His identification was entirely with ordinary human beings, and he felt an instinctive discomfort for the high and mighty. Gandhi’s philosophy of peaceful resistance, which eventually became known as *satyagraha*, was adopted by millions who came to call themselves *satyagrahis*. *Satyagrahis* believed that all human beings were united by far more than they were divided and, if offered the chance, should be able to resolve their differences in nonviolent ways that confirmed and strengthened the humanity of both sides.

For the Apple community created by Steve Jobs, this sense of belonging might be defined in just two words: “think different.” This dual brand slogan and community identifier has remained consistent for more than two decades.

It resonates with Apple employees, external developers and, of course, Apple’s customers. One of the authors of this article recently became part of this community as an owner of a MacBook Air and felt this sense on a recent business trip. Midway through the flight from Berlin to Zurich, a middle-aged man walked past him, smiled and nodded warmly in recognition. Later when the author got up to go to the bathroom, he saw him again using his own MacBook. And then it clicked – I am one of them!

Lady Gaga has also proven herself immensely capable of building this sense of community and significance among her followers. She draws upon being the weird girl in class and gives the message that the fans are okay the way they are, a message that resonates strongly with teenagers, but also with gay and lesbian fans.

In almost every interview and performance she thanks her fans for supporting her and attributes her success as much to them as to her own creativity and hard work. Gaga’s use of social media is a key enabler of facilitating this community. She communicates that her every success and breakthrough is also theirs, and typically announces her new singles and albums directly to her fans – even before the media is informed. She addresses her followers as her “Little Monsters” and has gone so far as tattooing this pet name on her arm.



THE
FUTURE
NARRATIVE...

Where
are we
going?

The final pillar of leveraging social media to build a followership is what we call the future narrative, or “Where are we going?” Goffee and Jones say this is about “exciting others through a passionate commitment to clearly articulated personal values and a vision.” Think of Gandhi, who inspired followers not only across all levels of society in India but across the world. Free India was not the primary cause to which Gandhi devoted his life, rather it was the prospect of better relations among people everywhere. To colonisers and colonists, the powerful and dispossessed, Gandhi said, “We are all first and foremost, human beings and we must relate to one another on that naked basis.” This message resonated in all parts of the world where human rights were being violated. His self-professed followers included two young men who would both go on to have a profound impact upon society – Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Like Gandhi, Steve Jobs excited his followers with a future narrative. Early in his career, Jobs described Apple as “The only thing standing between IBM and total worldwide domination.” Jobs always aspired to position Apple and its products at the forefront of the information technology industry by foreseeing and setting trends, and every year he stood up at the MacWorld conference and evangelised about how Apple was changing the way that humanity interacts with technology.

Lady Gaga communicates to her fans, via social media, that together they can make the world a better place. She is involved in social causes that touch her fans and is passionate about how they can make a difference together. Since the start of her career she has been an outspoken activist for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, and is also involved with anti-bullying initiatives. She has spoken

about her own battle with bulimia, initiating a discussion about eating disorders among her followers. She declared at a concert: “I want you to let go of all your insecurities... reject anyone or anything that ever made you feel you don’t belong.” In 2011, Gaga launched the nonprofit Born This Way Foundation, which focuses on the empowerment of young people and issues such as self-confidence, wellbeing, anti-bullying, mentoring and career development. Her actions have attracted cynicism from some elements of the press, but her overwhelmingly positive message about how she wants the world to become a better place resonates strongly with her millions of followers.

In a very short period of time, Lady Gaga has emerged as a music industry phenomenon and astute adherent to the principles of followership. Just like Gandhi and Jobs before her, she understands that followers demand authenticity, a sense of community and an exciting future vision. Gaga’s second album, *Born this Way*, topped the charts in all major markets, with the single of the same title becoming the fastest selling in history. *Time* voted her one of the most influential people in the world, and she has more than 30 million Facebook friends and close to 38 million Twitter followers. It is perhaps no coincidence that the growth of such a broad followership has corresponded with a global explosion of her music sales

(more than 25 million albums and 60 million singles) even at a time of widespread music piracy – after all, you do not steal from your friends. She has not only understood how to leverage social media to connect intimately with her followers, she has also demonstrated the potential business impact of how this intimacy can deliver commercial results.

Perhaps we should be talking not about the new economics of the internet, but about the Gaganomics of online followership. ■

RESOURCES J Anderson, M Kupp and J Reckhenrich, ‘Strategy Gaga: Little Monsters Big Rewards’, *Business Strategy Review* (Vol. 24, Issue 1, 2013); J Anderson, M Kupp and J Reckhenrich, ‘Lady Gaga: Born This Way?’, Antwerp Management School Case Study (2012); Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, ‘The Art of Followership’, *European Business Forum* (Summer, 2006); Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, *Why Should Anyone Be Led By You?* (Harvard Business School Press, 2006); Howard E Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy Of Leadership* (Basic Books, 2011); RE Riggo, *The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations* (Jossey-Bass, 2008)

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