

Momentum

Playbook 4

What's in Your Brand Arsenal?

By Maria Ross

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Playbook 4:

What's in Your Brand Arsenal?

The Superhero Origin Story

If you peruse the comic book fanboy sites on the Internet (a scary but entertaining task), you will find lots of talk about superhero origin stories.

Origin stories, if you don't know, are simply the mythology behind superheroes and how they came to be. They can also explain why the characters have certain strengths or weaknesses. They *always* have a weakness of some kind!

Young child Bruce Wayne witnesses his parents' brutal murder. Rather than become a ward of the state, his loyal servant, Alfred, becomes his guardian. Bruce adopts the Batman persona to not only avenge his parent's deaths but seek justice for all in need. He uses high-tech machines and creative gadgets such as his Bat Belt and the impenetrable Batmobile to fight the bad guys and win. But his Achilles Heel remains his rage over his parents' death and the deep emotions he feels as a human being when he fails to save someone in need.

Shortly before they perish, Kal-El's parents save their son from the planet Krypton's destruction by launching him, all alone, on a spaceship to Earth. He is adopted there by a kind couple, renamed Clark Kent, and soon discovers his superhuman powers, such as incredible strength and the ability to fly. His adoptive parents encourage him to use these powers for good and so he fights crime as Superman. His biggest weakness, however, is Kryptonite—pieces of rock from his destroyed home planet that strip him of his powers.

You are a superhero, too!

It's time for you to take stock of your origin story so that you can assess your own strengths and weaknesses. Knowing what they are will help you build your brand story and create the perfect messaging for your audience.

What's in Your Brand Arsenal?

Your brand communications should ideally play to your strengths and downplay or address your weaknesses, turning them into positives. By strengths and weaknesses, I'm not referring to your individual products. I'm talking about you or your business as a whole.

First let's tackle your brand strengths, or as I like to say, what is in your brand arsenal: those tools, gadgets and skills that help you fight crime.

The answers will form the basis of the words you use and the brand's overall visual and verbal look and feel. Try to do this at a macro level, not product by product. You can certainly talk in the aggregate about your product or service offering if there's something unique—"I'm the only online shop that sells Product X in this region"—but keep this high-level. Remember, this exercise will help you focus on the businesses strengths you want to convey with your company's overall brand.

What does your business really have going for it? What unique things, experience, or perspective can you offer? What compelling assets, skills, or connections do you personally have?

As a founder, you may represent the face of your business: your personal strengths are its strengths. So, a strength can even be YOU. For example, being well-connected in the community gives you an advantage over other businesses. Or do you have unique experience in your background, making you a bona fide expert?

Maybe your strengths are your education, your life experience, or how long you've successfully been doing this work already? Have you written books, taken classes, worked with award-winning clients?

Yes, it's time to lay it all out there and brag, brag, brag!

Articulating your strengths is vital to creating a strong brand and keeping your marketing lean and mean. If you're able to clearly grasp these strengths, you can:

- Stand out from the competition, especially if they do not have such strengths
- Gain trust and credibility from prospects
- Create messaging that speaks directly to these strengths for more impact
- Engage in the right marketing activities. If you're a fantastic speaker, um, yes, you should be doing more public speaking and networking

One Woman's Brand Superpowers

To bring this point home for you: The below case study from my book shows you how one business owner parlayed her unique strengths and experience into her brand and even marketing tactics—and I should add, Angela was recently on the TV show, *Shark Tank*!

Brand at Work: Major Mom

Who better to get your home or office in tip-top order than a former U.S. Air Force Major? That unique brand differentiator helps Angela Cody-Rouget, CPO (chief professional organizer) of Major Mom (MajorMom.biz) stand out from hundreds of bland, look-alike professional organizing companies. Major Mom's brand promise is to make organizing fun and to get the job done faster than anyone. And Angela walks her talk. She has two decades of training in order management, serving in the U.S. Air Force for eighteen years and eventually attaining the rank of major. She embraces and thrives in orderly environments. The company's mission is "to restore order and serenity to a client's home and office so they will experience the joy of living and working in organized and beautifully arranged environments." The mission is bigger than just "putting stuff away." Angela is out to restore peace in the home and bring families together.

This efficient and professional brand promise is the basis for every decision—from employees' unique camo and T-shirt uniforms to an efficient hiring process mapped out on their website. "Each time we create forms to use on the job or train our staff, we're thinking about brand consistency," Angela says. "We create our HR, PR, Client Care, Marketing and Sales Systems with our brand in mind. Consistency will help us build a national company."

Running her company like a well-oiled machine assures clients that Angela can indeed get their own homes and offices in order. This consistency is further articulated in a new-recruit training academy and six-month apprenticeship that ensures all Major Mom Liberators (not just Angela) will adopt and live the brand values.

Angela's distinct mission, vision, and brand values are clearly and consistently communicated across every brochure, ad, website page, and even their voicemail message. These values consciously guide business decisions. In one case, Angela turned down a PR opportunity on an influential radio and TV personality's show because his approach and demeanor didn't align with Major Mom's brand and values. She has also turned down a partnership opportunity with another organizing company that focused on "hauling junk" rather than her mission of making your home your treasure. Having such a strong brand that breaks the mold enabled Angela to extend beyond Colorado to Arizona. She's well on her way to achieving her vision to be the most recognized and respected organizing firm in the United States and the world.

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Don't Assume

Please don't assume people "already know" your strengths. They are busy and not paying attention. It's up to you to make it easy for them to understand.

But this is not an ego trip. It's about giving people a reason to believe. Your marketing and messaging must ALWAYS call out your strengths in a way that translates to how your target audience will benefit from them.

If you are a life coach with a graduate degree in counseling, and have seen patients for over 10 years, this gives prospects the trust, confidence and security they desire.

If your designs have won international awards, a business owner hiring you can feel confident that you will design something amazing for her.

If you have serious social media ninja skills, someone who needs a virtual assistant to help him build a loyal following can rely on you.

Your strengths form the basis for an authentic brand upon which you can truly deliver. All your messages, both visual and verbal, should amplify the strengths you bring to bear. This is how you avoid hype and "evil marketing." As I always say...

Marketing is not about lying to people. It is about communicating the truth of your story to the right people who need what you've got.

If being “hip and cool” is not really a strength and is not even offered in your goods or services, then don't try to create a brand that screams “hip and cool” just because you think that's what it takes to succeed. That's just false advertising and will only serve to disappoint. This may work for Apple, but may not work for you or the market you serve.

There are markets and audiences for everything. Build a brand that plays to your authentic strengths.

Know Your Kryptonite

Now it's time to get real. Where is your brand or business vulnerable? Where do you fall down against the competition?

You may find some of these answers in your business plan. Or you may just know yourself really well.

Is your business really small and cannot currently scale to take on too many clients?

Are you a talented marketing consultant but are completely clueless when it specifically comes to SEO?

Are you brand new to entrepreneurship and have no customers yet?

Are you physically unable to travel to clients in other cities?

Is your shop in a really bad location?

Are you a horrible writer? (Sidenote: if so, we'll be working on this in a later module!)

Are you an introvert who is not very good (or think you're not) at networking? (Sidenote: Yes, more on this in a later module, too!)

Make an honest assessment of where you or your business is weak. Now is not the time to delude yourself, because so much about your success will hinge on recognizing your weaknesses and then addressing them as an internal issue or turning them into positives in your customer-facing messaging.

Going though this exercise will also help you see where you need extra help on your marketing efforts.

Are you a small one-person shop? Yes...but that means clients get access to you, and not some junior person just out of college, like some of the “big guys” will offer you.

Do you only work with a limited number of clients? Yes...but that means you get personalized attention and a tailored plan based on your needs, not some cookie-cutter approach, like the “other guys” will offer you.

Are you terrified of speaking in public? Yes...but you can either stick to writing and blogging or you can take classes or training to increase your skills in this area.

If you're a small shop or one-man band, do not try to create a brand or message where you attempt to appear bigger than you are. Own it. **Promise what you can actually deliver for happier customers.** A weakness could be "It's a crowded market of many look-alikes" or "I lack start-up capital so I have to charge up front for services." Be honest with yourself. Being modest might cause you to miss a valuable opportunity to emphasize the good things and downplay the bad.

Avoid the Funhouse Mirror

Many of our own perceptions, good or bad, are biased. That's why it's helpful to get outside perspective.

If you're already established, you could spend a day talking to a select group of clients or customers and figure out why they love or hate you! Why did they hire you? What drew them to you? What do they think you are lacking? **Your clients or customers are a gold mine of information. Don't be afraid.** Arrange a coffee date, interview phone call or send them a survey online via [SurveyMonkey](#). Just remember to ask them to be honest and offer some type of incentive, such as a complimentary service, discount coupon, or a free coffee card, in exchange for their valuable time.

I once worked with a nonprofit organization that wanted to increase donations and community awareness about its services. As part of this work, we interviewed a representative sample of stakeholders, including employees, clients, donors, and board members, to get a sense of their brand perception and what they felt the organization was doing right and wrong. But we went a step further and interviewed clients who had a *negative experience*.

This yielded some of the most profound insights and perspectives that later went in to the messaging and brand strategy.

Finding out why people don't like you can be even more powerful than finding out why they do.

Need a template to approach a former client or customer? Try a variation of this to even approach colleagues or good friends:

Dear so-and-so,

Hope this email finds you well. Thank you for being a loyal (client/customer) of mine – I really enjoyed (serving you/working with you) on (that project/that house sale/that photography session) back in (whenever it was). How have things been going since then?

Could I please ask you a kind favor? Your keen insight would be invaluable as I'm working on better positioning my offerings and clarifying my brand. Could you spare (30 minutes by phone/1 hour for a coffee date/10 minutes for a an online survey) and share your opinion on my/our company's strengths and weaknesses? This will help me serve you and others like you much better in the future.

As a thank you for your time and energy, I'd like to (treat you to lunch/buy you coffee/send you a gift card/offer you a discount on a future purchase).

What do you say?! Again, your opinion means the world and would really be a big help. I'd also love to hear what you are working on these days and how I may be able to assist.

*With gratitude,
YOUR NAME*

PS: We'll be talking a lot more in a few weeks about gathering ideal client feedback to assess THEIR needs. For this lesson, you want to approach clients or colleagues for information about YOU.

Your Assignment: Assess Yourself!

Find a quiet place and take stock.

List out at least five of your current personal or business strengths. What do you do really well? Where do you shine? What past experience, education, or work proves your value? What is a unique approach or philosophy that you take to your work over your competition? Are you connected to the right resources or people to deliver outstanding results?

For each strength you listed, explain how a client or customer can benefit from it:

Take action! Do you believe your current website or marketing communicates these strengths clearly? Do a brief audit and see if there are any tweaks you can make right now to better showcase or explain your strengths to your audience!

Now, get honest and list out at least five weaknesses or challenges that you or your business face. Are there struggles with market share, awareness, quality, or anything related to how or what you deliver? Are their personal challenges or skill gaps that impact promotion or growth?

For each challenge you listed, how can you re-frame this as a positive for your audience? And if it's a personal challenge, what training or outsourcing could help you overcome it?

Lastly, if you are brave enough to seek some external perspective:

Identify three people you will contact this week to ask them about your brand's strengths or weaknesses. Commit to emailing them today and ask them for a brief phone call or a coffee date!

[Customize the email template](#) provided above to reach out.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

But wait, you're not quite done....

Now: post your answers or how you will commit to completing this exercise in our nurturing Facebook group for a chance to win a fabulous prize from yours truly.

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

Never, ever be afraid of honest feedback.

Assessing yourself or your business is not easy. It can often be just as tough to recognize all your great skills and accomplishments as it can be to admit your weaknesses. But doing so will ensure that you build a brand that amplifies the important things you bring to the table.

If you want to run a business with integrity, if you want to build an authentic brand that delivers value, you must be honest with yourself.

This means forget humble bragging and confidently list out your strengths and talents. And be self-aware enough to see your challenges or deficits.

Seeking input from others, while uncomfortable, will keep you honest.

Don't hide your light. but don't bury your challenges in the dark, either.

An honest assessment will help you clear away the dust and confusion and build a brand that shines bright.

Time to get real,

Maria

Goodies and Inspirations

Here's a [very personal lesson in authenticity](#) and why you must absolutely embrace your strengths. This is from a speech I did for women business owners, talking about my brain injury and how this lesson applies to building a strong brand.

I've heard that [StrengthsFinder 2.0](#) is a wonderful book for assessing your strengths. It pairs with the famous StrengthsFinder online assessment tool from Gallup, for which you get an access code with the book. This book is on my reading wish list!

If you want to totally geek out: Enjoy this [massive chart](#) of every superhero's power ever! And [this guide](#) to the Achilles' Heel of every superhero and villain. Even they have weaknesses, so don't be so hard on yourself.

Celebrate your strengths with this earworm of a song, ["I'm the Man"](#) by Aloe Blacc (yes, you've heard it!)