

The Musician as "Brand" – Defining "Success" and Building a Winning Strategy to Achieve It

You want to be a successful musician. But have you figured out what you mean by "successful"? Are you chasing your version of success or someone else's? Are you just taking whatever comes your way while you wait for the stars to align, or for someone else to make it happen for you?

These are big questions, and if you don't immediately know the answers, don't panic. But before you set off on a spiritual quest for knowledge, seeking gurus on a mountaintop (or a nightclub), let's put them in a framework that will let you define the answers for yourself and channel this knowledge into a more successful career, on your terms and no one else's.

Before you get any further, let's take a moment and think about what it means for you to be successful, because there are plenty of completely viable ways to be a successful musician.

1. You could be the next guy known only by one name – Wynton, Wayne, Yo-Yo
2. You could lead a well-known band that plays major Performing Arts Centers and Festivals
3. You could be a member of a successful touring group
4. You could be the first-call studio player and sideman in your city, with the pick of gigs, getting to constantly play with different musicians and share with the best
5. You could get a steady gig with musicians on the same wavelength, that lets you keep creating around a day job, teaching or other activities

Every one of these options is someone's definition of success, even if it isn't yours. But until you decide what you want to achieve, you can't put yourself on the path to reach the goal. In business, executives constantly say things like "you get what you plan for" because it's true.

To put it simply: if you don't know what you want, you'll never get it. Defining what you want to achieve, and how you will achieve it is Strategy. Without Strategy, there's no way to judge if a decision will lead to success.

In this article, we'll discuss how you develop your own Strategy and success plan, and how you use it to guide your career decisions. By doing that, you are doing what thousands of successful people in other careers do all the time, and what companies and brands do when they want to grow, or when they want to change direction and improve their results.

The best companies, the ones that survive and grow for generations, are built on shared values that the employees understand completely. In many cases, these values are also understood by the consumers, who judge the company by whether its products live up to those values. Let's think about a few companies that continually espouse their values:

BMW calls itself "the ultimate driving machine" and all their cars are built to deliver tremendous control and feeling to the driver, while also being very luxurious.

Louis Vuitton trains artisans who can hand-make its bags according to rigorous standards of quality.

Craftsman makes tools that people can rely on for strength, workmanship and durability.

Everything these companies do must reinforce these values, from engineering to design to marketing, or people will stop buying the product. Therefore, the people in charge of these companies must deeply understand these bedrock principles or risk a costly misstep.

The best brands have something very special, which is called a Unique Selling Proposition. This means that they have some quality, benefit or identifier that the competition doesn't have, or doesn't do as well. Think about your career as a musician and consider what your unique selling proposition might be. Because music is so personal, every musician has something that they do differently than everyone else, and that can be an incredible strength when building a strong career. Identify it, nurture it, protect it—your Unique Selling Proposition is one of your most powerful tools, as long as you understand it and use it to elevate everything that you do. For musicians, the risk is committing to a project that is at odds with what makes you special—there's almost no way to stand out in a good way.

But how does this apply to a musician? A musician isn't making products and selling them to consumers, right? A musician didn't become a musician to act like a "suit," right? A musician has to "go with the flow," right?

Wrong – a successful musician IS a brand with a unique selling proposition ("that tenor player with the coppery tone" or "the bassist who can sight-read ANYTHING"), who sells (gets paid to deliver) a product (music) to a consumer (the audience, the bandleader, the music department head). If you want to get more gigs, or make more money, or become better known, it's time to build a brand, develop a strategy and make a plan.

Like we said, for most brands, Strategy is based on Values, on what the brand stands for at its core. This is true for people, too. So the first place to start is by figuring out our values and what kind of people we are. Values can be anything that is true to your core, that drives you, that lies behind every decision and instinct you have.

Here are some examples:

- Material comfort ("I want to have enough money")
- Community ("I want to contribute to my community, do charity work, help others")
- Family ("I want to be a good father/mother/son/daughter")
- Spirituality ("I follow the teachings of my church")
- Adventure ("I want to do new things")
- Security ("I'm not a risk-taker" or "I want a steady income")
- Personal Development ("I never want to stop learning")
- Respect ("I want to be famous")

Don't limit yourself to these examples, but use them if they really apply to you. Be sure that you think of values in the broadest terms possible—values are abstract ideas. Write down your core values, at least 4:

Great. Now that's done, you're ready to roll out to the next gig, right?

Not quite. What do you do with values? Values don't tell you what jobs to take, or how to make it big. Values are the bedrock—the foundation—on which everything else is built. This is a crucial point, because you should try your best to NEVER do things that are contrary to your values—it's very hard to be successful when you're fighting your very nature and your most deeply-held beliefs.

For example – if your values included “being the leader” and “extroverted” then it might not be a great idea to audition for the role of Second Trumpet in an orchestra, where you have to commit your energy to supporting the principal player, matching her approach, blending with her sound. It would be a constant struggle to play your part without overstepping the boundaries.

With that in mind, we need to define our Goals. Our Goals must be built upon the foundation of our values. Why? Because by achieving our goals, we are able to live our Values, which makes for a harmonious, happy life.

How do we know what goals to choose? It's easy when we have already defined our values. The Goal you want to set is one that is neither easy nor impossible, and that leads to the fulfillment of your Value. It is possible to have more than one Goal for a value, but focus on just one for now to get the hang of it.

Let's build a couple examples.

Value = Material Comfort

Goal = Earn enough money to cover all my expenses and occasional splurges and put away 10% in savings

IMPORTANT: Don't worry about HOW you'll achieve this goal right now, just focus on what achievement allows you to live in harmony with your Value.

Value = Spirituality

Goal = Get hired as music director of a church of my denomination

IMPORTANT: Don't worry if you can't achieve this goal today. Goals can be short-term or long-term.

Perhaps you need to participate in a church music group, or get more education in order to achieve this Goal. We'll work that out when we define the Actions to Reach Our Goal.

Value = Fame/Notoriety

Goal = Get/create publicity for everything you do. Obviously, if you want to be famous, you have to get really good at making people notice what you're doing.

Now it's your turn. Take the values that you identified above, and create at least one goal that helps to fulfill each one.

Value	Goal
Let's build an income	Then you can take the steps to one of the goals you have set for yourself

Okay. You've begun to define your brand by defining your values and what separates you from the competition. You have selected some goals to achieve your values. All set, right? Let's hit the street!

Not so fast. What good is a goal without a plan to get there? "You get what you plan for," remember?

So how do we make plans to achieve the goals? How do we evaluate choices that we encounter along the way? The key to this is identify the steps to take, the actions that move us closer to achieving the goals we have set.

So what is an action? Seems like an obvious one, right? But a lot of people underestimate the importance of setting up these steps. The key here is to be as specific as possible, and to break things down. Every "action" should have the following:

- A clear beginning – when we start doing it. It can be the first thing we do, or it can come after something else, what is called a "dependency" (for example, if your goal is to "earn money from songwriting" then one of your steps might be to "control my own publishing" which is dependent on a couple steps – setting up a publishing company, registering copyrights, etc.)
- A clear ending – we know when we have completed an action. In the example above, "setting up a publishing company" is a very concrete step – you can break it down into smaller steps, but this action is complete when you have the legal documents establishing your publishing company.
- A defined outcome or outcomes – what are you accomplishing with this step? In the case above, we are setting up a publishing company because it has specific benefits that support our goal of "earning money from songwriting."
 - Protecting our creative work so no one else can claim it
 - Creating an entity to collect royalties
 - Earning a larger share of publishing royalties by controlling both the writer's share and the publisher's share
- A deadline – this is a very important part of any action. If we want to achieve the goal, we need to complete the actions. If we don't set deadlines, we can't measure our progress. Are we on track or off? Do we need to make adjustments to our plans?

It's important to note that there are different ways to achieve goals – different actions that can lead to the same result. For example, especially in pop music, the best way to earn more from songwriting might not be to set up one's own publishing company, but to get a contract with a major publisher who

can pay us an advance and help promote our songs to a broad audience and generate a lot more revenue than we could on our own.

Let's build an example, and then you can work out the steps to one of the goals you have set for yourself in the previous section.

Up above, we built this example:

Value = Material Comfort

Goal = Earn enough money to cover all my expenses and occasional splurges and put away 10% in savings

So what are the steps to achieve this? How do we know we are on the right track or chasing the wrong things? Break it down as much as possible and use the information to make choices.

What are the first things you need to do in order to more clearly define this goal and the actions that are necessary? Remember that each action needs 4 elements:

- A beginning
- An ending
- A clear outcome
- A deadline

So let's build a set of actions to achieve our goal:

Start	End	Action	Outcome
4/1/13	5/1/13	Analyze last year's income	Determine how much money we made last year, and what the sources of the money were
4/1/13	5/1/13	Build a budget	Figure out exactly how much money we need to earn to achieve our goal
4/1/13	6/1/13	Track spending	Write down exactly how much money we are spending, and on what. When this action is complete, we should know where are money is going every month.
6/1/13	6/15/13	Analyze results and define next steps	Compare our budget to our income – are we already making enough money or do we need more? How much more? Compare our budget to our spending – are we spending our money in ways that align with our goals? Are there choices we can make that will bring us closer to our goal?
4/1/13	4/15/13	Set up accounts for savings	This could be a savings account at the bank, a stock account at eTrade, a retirement account, college funds if we have kids, etc.

What we accomplished so far? If we really did our work, we should now have enough information to make real decisions to bring us to our goal of earning enough money to cover expenses, occasional splurges and savings. Let's make up some numbers to illustrate the point.

Action 1: Analyze last year's income.

It turns out we made \$35,000 last year from the following sources:

- \$15,000 from teaching private lessons @ \$50/hr (300 hours)
- \$6,000 from going on a summer tour (6 weeks + 2 weeks rehearsal = \$750/week or \$4.46/hr if you couldn't do any other work on the road)
- \$4,000 from studio recording sessions (16 sessions @ \$250 each)
- \$2,000 from gigs as a bandleader (\$20K gross, \$2K for us after expenses, salaries, etc – 40 gigs at \$500 average)
- \$4,000 from gigs as a sideman (40 gigs at \$100/night plus a few rehearsals)
- \$4,000 from working in an office through a temp agency (267 hours @ \$15/hour)

Action 2: Make a budget

After looking at all our bills, we need to earn \$44,000/year to cover our expenses and savings, plus a little for splurges. So the gap between our income and our expenses is \$9,000 if we are saving enough, \$5,000 if we are saving nothing.

- Rent = \$1250
- Utilities (cable/internet, heat, electricity, etc) = \$300
- Cell phone = \$100
- Car Insurance = \$175
- Food = \$400
- Health Insurance = \$300
- Student Loan = \$250
- Gas/Car maintenance = \$250
- Clothing, other items = \$150
- Subway fare = \$100
- Savings = \$400

Action 3: Analyze spending

After we tracked our spending, it is clear that we are spending way too much money eating out, which means we have been putting things like gas and clothes on credit cards, building up some debt, and we haven't been saving any money.

Action 4: Analyze results

In real life this may be more complicated, but in this case, it is fairly simple:

1. We need to earn an additional \$9,000/year to achieve our financial goal
2. We need to adjust our spending to fit our budget
3. We need to start saving some money each month

Action 5: Set up savings vehicles

We set up an online high-interest savings account, and investigated retirement accounts. We found three strong IRA accounts, with low fees and lots of investment options. Each of them requires between \$1,000-\$1,500 to open an account, so our goal is to put money in the savings account and then transfer to the IRA once we have accumulated some savings.

So far, so good, right? But now we need to evaluate our options and set the next set of actions to achieve our goals.

This is an important point – we may not be able to plan ALL the steps at the beginning, and we may have to adjust our actions along the way if we find that our plan isn't getting us closer to achieving our goal.

So let's analyze and see where we are:

- We need to earn an additional \$9,000.
- We identified seven sources of income

So what can we do? There are a few choices here

- Create additional sources of income
- Increase one or more of our existing sources of income
- Cut our expenses to close the gap

If you look above, the budget we laid out is pretty basic, so there may not be big savings – possibly, we could get rid of cable, or get a cheaper cell phone plan or eat less expensive meals at home, but nothing there is going to make a big enough dent in our spending to close the \$9,000 that we need.

So how do we decide which sources of income to try to increase? This is a complicated question because it needs to be taken with consideration of all our other goals – maybe we want to be a full time bandleader, or we want to stop going on the road because we want to start a family. These considerations have a major impact on our plans, but for now, we'll try to focus purely on how we decide what to do to earn the \$9,000 that we need.

The place to start is by evaluating all the sources of our income, and how they help us achieve our income goal.

First, which ones give us the most “bang for the buck” – which earn us the most income with the least investment of time?

- We make the most money from teaching, but it takes a lot of time.

How does this fit in? It pays pretty well at \$50/hour, but we invest a lot of hours in it.

- o Can we take on more students without jeopardizing our other work?
- o Can we increase our fee without losing students?
- o Can we find an extension to teaching that will bring in extra money? Leading masterclasses at a university, or judging a competition like All-State for students?

- Going out on big tours can be very rewarding a lot of fun, and it's one of the few ways to spend a lot of time playing with the same musicians, but look at the hourly pay, considering you're unable to take any other work while you're on the road. So unless a tour offers some other major advantage, or it's with a group that pays more, this isn't the best way to achieve this goal.
- Studio work pays very well, at least on an hourly basis.
 - o Can we get more studio work?
 - o Can we get hired as the contractor for studio sessions, which comes with a higher pay scale? What is involved in this? If we don't know, we better find out.
- On the surface, it looks like playing as a sideman and playing as a leader are worth about the same, from the standpoint of cash in hand, but is that really the case?
 - o How much work is required of the leader that is not required of a sideman?
 - Getting the gig
 - Hiring the band
 - Arranging rehearsal
 - Promoting the show
 - o The key here is to balance the short-term income opportunity with the long-term career building opportunity of leading our own group. How to maximize the number of sideman shows with chances to develop one's reputation, build an audience and effectively raise one's price? That is the key to earning more income in the long term.
- The work for the temp agency is perhaps not the sexiest way to earn the rent, but if we aren't earning what we need then a backup can get us through a dry spell.

This is one example of how we work through the choices that we're presented with. In order to drive our career forward, we make the choices that:

- Move us closer to achieving our goals
- Align with our values
- Emphasize our Unique Selling Proposition