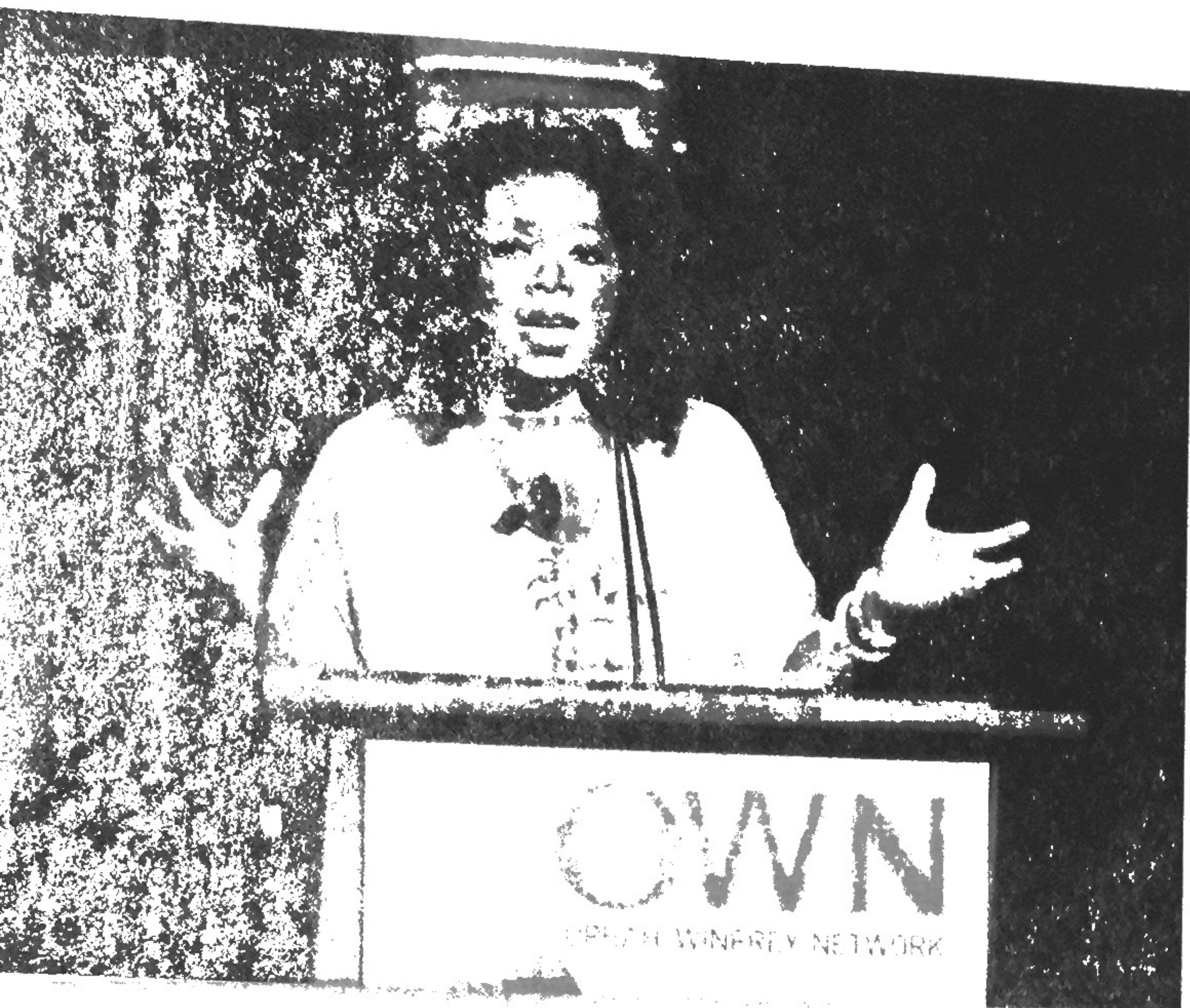


Chapter Case Study

OPRAH WINFREY, A BRAND UNTO HERSELF

A cultural icon who rose from poverty to become one of the world's most influential entrepreneurs, Oprah Winfrey is many things to many people. Certainly she is an entertainer who comes across as women's most intimate friend and advocate. Winfrey also has inspired and coached an audience of millions on how to "live your best life." But perhaps most of all, Oprah Winfrey is a marketer and the savvy leader of a media empire that has extended her brand worldwide.

Starting with her immensely successful TV program, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Winfrey expanded her personal brand through a range of other vehicles, which in any other context would be known as product lines. These lines include her production companies, Harpo Films, Harpo Radio, Harpo Print and Harpo Studios; *O, The Oprah Magazine*; Oprah.com, her website, which profiles all her ventures;



When you think of Oprah Winfrey, think big: Harpo Productions, Inc.; O, The Oprah Magazine; O at Home Magazine; Harpo Films; and the Oxygen television network; not to mention her philanthropic work with the Oprah Winfrey Foundation.

Oprah's Book Club, which some have credited with saving the publishing industry; multiple TV and radio spin-offs; and OWN, the Oprah Winfrey Network, also called her "next chapter."⁴⁸ Each element functions as a division of Harpo Productions, her multimedia entertainment company.

Building on Oprah's own compelling story of personal triumph, the Winfrey brand offers multitudes of fans not only an example of self-improvement but also authentic proof, from Winfrey's own life, that anyone can control his or her own destiny. Over the years, Winfrey has chronicled her childhood of poverty and sexual abuse, struggles to control her weight, and the difficulties of being a powerful woman in a highly competitive industry. The revealing details have only strengthened the connection with her viewers, who adore her. The message is compelling and authentic: If I can do it, you can, too.

Viewers believe her. That trust gives Winfrey tremendous influence, and it also translates into a flair for helping other brands connect with her audience. An inveterate shopper, she likes to showcase the products she loves. Her endorsements, offered without compensation, can make little-known products into superstars overnight. The month following her episode featuring aromatherapy slippers called Foot Cozys, manufacturer DreamTimes sold 20,000 pairs, up from its usual monthly volume of 3,000. Marketing experts say the Oprah brand, built on the credo of self-improvement and living well, now ranks with the towering brands of Coca-Cola and the Marlboro Man, leaving one observer to admit, "I'm hard-pressed to think of a stronger brand than Oprah."⁴⁹ That means that the Oprah brand has been enormously profitable, making Winfrey the wealthiest of America's 400 richest self-made women, with a combined worth of \$2.7 billion.⁵⁰

Winfrey began building her public persona long before she gained any national recognition, starting as a local news anchor in Nashville and then a talk-show host in Baltimore. With her move to Chicago in 1984, Winfrey gained increasing attention when her morning program, *AM Chicago*, surpassed the ratings achieved by the then-talk show king Phil Donahue. By 1986, her program was rebranded as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and its host was gaining a reputation for offering confessional, straight talk, like a "group therapy session."⁵¹

Her daily program reigned supreme among talk shows for 25 years, drawing 12 million U.S. viewers at its peak, with more than 4,500 episodes and 30,000 guests. The messages of confronting life's difficult realities and taking time for self-care remained central in brand extensions, including syndicated spin-offs such as *Dr. Phil* and *Rachael Ray*. Newer shows, usually featuring Winfrey's favored celebrity life coaches, have also increased her brand recognition. On his shows, Dr. Mehmet Oz provides insights into living a "longer, more vibrant life." *In the Bedroom with Dr. Laura Berman* counsels women about how to juggle the pressures of home and work and still feel sexy.⁵²

Other extensions focus on different areas. Winfrey has continued to promote her brand and ethos of personal growth in her monthly magazine *O, The Oprah Magazine*, which features Winfrey on every cover and has a circulation of about 2.4 million, making it the 18th largest in terms of circulation in the United States.⁵³ Movies produced by Harpo Films also have brought some of the country's most respected actors together with scripts arising from acclaimed books, such as *Tuesdays with Morrie*, featuring Jack Lemmon and based on the best-selling novel by Detroit sportswriter Mitch Albom; *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, based on the Zora Neale Hurston novel and starring Halle Berry; *Beloved*, a film based on Toni

Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, directed by Jonathan Demme and co-starring Winfrey and Danny Glover; and *The Great Debaters*, which received a Golden Globe nomination and co-starred Denzel Washington and Forest Whitaker. Winfrey also provided backing for the release of *Precious*, an Oscar-winning film based on a novel by Sapphire. Each new introduction celebrated the preservation of human dignity against terrible odds—disabling disease, crippling poverty and abuse, racism.

The latest venture—launching her own cable television network—took Winfrey into new territory, with lots of challenges, though still aligned with her brand's promise of controlling one's own destiny. It's not her first risky move: Buoyed by the terrific success of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, in the late 1980s, Winfrey bolted from both King World Productions, which syndicated the show, and ABC, which produced it. Taking total control through Harpo Productions gave her complete ownership of the brand and syndication fees, estimated at \$100 million. That move established the cornerstone of her empire.

But the initial launch of OWN was rocky, and for its first two years the network struggled to earn profits. Early reviews criticized Winfrey for taking the fun out of her programming.⁵⁴ *Oprah's Lifeclass*, the flagship show and latest incarnation of Winfrey's personal brand, came off like a series of lectures, preaching that "you are responsible for changing your life and making it better."⁵⁵ More recently, the network has sought to balance such uplifting but boring messages with American viewers' appetite for gossip. Its reality series *Lindsay* documents the efforts of the young actor and frequent news item Lindsay Lohan to get her life in order.⁵⁶

Just a few months after the launch of OWN, Winfrey shuffled her leadership structure and took the top post herself. As always, she was determined to take control of her brand and her company. She would do what she had always exhorted others to do: Live her best life through her own brand.

Questions

1. Visit the company website (<http://www.oprah.com>) and identify and describe the different product lines that it markets.
2. How would you describe its product line breadth?
3. Review the different product categories in each of the company's product lines. Which has the greatest depth? Which has the least?
4. How has the company positioned its brand? How does it go about communicating its position?