[Gabriel Rossi](#)

[Gabriel Rossi: Foreword by Martins Vieira Jr.](#)

About Gabriel

Brand Strategist from Brazil, trained in institutions such as Syracuse/Aberje, Madia Marketing School and Bell School, he advises high-performance brands on how to progress and achieve their full potential in a connected world. Gabriel also [writes](#) extensively and is regularly quoted about the topic.

A conversation with Denise Lee Yohn (Mundo do Marketing Column)

I recently had the pleasure of interviewing [Denise Lee Yohn](#) for my column on [Mundo do Marketing](#) (Brazilian marketing channel). Denise is one of the most respected authorities on modern branding. During our conversation, she told me very interesting things regarding the concept of 'brand as business' as well as brand extensions and the current digital paradigm.

You can access my column [here](#). However, for those of you who are not familiar with Portuguese, please find below the English version of the material. It was a real nice interview . Enjoy.

Gabriel Rossi: What are the characteristics of a really strong brand in today's recessionary atmosphere? How does it distinguish itself (external and internal perceptions) from the rest?

Denise Lee Yohn: The characteristics of a strong brand today are the same as they've always been: a strong brand is meaningful, differentiating, believable, transcendent, (conveys value beyond a specific offering), and consistently delivered and experienced. These are the things that help a brand stand out and connect with customers and prospects in any economy – perhaps, though, the need to be these things is now stronger than ever.

Brands must also be clearly understood and considered by its internal stakeholders (i.e., the people responsible for delivering it) as a sustainable competitive advantage and as adding business value. A strong brand is operationalized, meaning it is put to use in every aspect of the business. This is the way for companies to grow and create value within the budget constraints of the recession.

Gabriel Rossi: Could you please explain the concept of 'brand as business'?

Denise Lee Yohn: "Brand as business" is a management approach which involves the deliberate and systematic management of the business around the brand. "Brand as business" transforms the brand from only a symbol or expression of what the company does into a valuable tool used in the organization's core operating system. The brand becomes more than an awareness generator and goodwill producer. It serves as a driver and compass for everything the company does – from generating shared insights about the business, to driving superior planning decisions, to facilitating consistent and efficient execution.

Gabriel Rossi: What is the difference between expressing your brand and operationalizing it in the digital world?

Denise Lee Yohn: Most of the buzz in the digital world is about expressing your brand — that is, using new technologies and innovative techniques to communicate with consumers about your brand. Starbucks' use of social media is an excellent example of new brand expression. The promotions they've run on their Facebook page and the engagement ads on the Facebook home page have all helped them build a large fan base. Other social media initiatives, such as asking people to take photos of new outdoor advertising and post them on Twitter, and using a YouTube video to promote its Election Day free-coffee offer, are other ways Starbucks has used new digital tools to express its brand — but these differ from operationalizing the brand.

The dictionary defines operationalize as "to put into operation, start working." So to operationalize a brand is to use it — to drive your business with it and develop an organizational system for delivering brand values and attributes. One company that uses new internet technologies to operationalize its brand is Nike. Nike's brand is about providing innovation and inspiration to every athlete. So they've built Nike+, a sensor/tracking system for running which integrates with nikeplus.com so that users can track their own progress, compare their performance with others, participate in forums, etc. Nike+ makes it possible for runners to set up virtual "challenges" with other participants and to personalize their homepage to illustrate their mood, the weather, the route, etc. Nike is operationalizing their brand by integrating new technologies into their core operating systems.

Gabriel Rossi: Digital word of mouth is creating an entirely new accountability scorecard for companies. Therefore, what's the real meaning and importance of brand authenticity as the consumer voice will carry on growing, and new forms of expression will rise?

Denise Lee Yohn: Brand authenticity starts with being crystal clear about the values and attributes your brand embodies – and then communicating and delivering them in everything you do. This is what a company can control.

A company can't control the social media conversation about its brand, but it can lead it. By proactively

engaging customers and influencers in true dialogue about your brand and your business, you increase the likelihood that the messages they broadcast will interpret and reinforce the brand appropriately

Gabriel Rossi: What the battle between Facebook vs Twitter can teach Branding professionals?

Denise Lee Yohn: I don't see it as battle because I think they're two very different platforms and I don't think it's necessary (or likely) that one wins and the other loses. Certainly Facebook currently enjoys stronger brand awareness and familiarity (mostly because it's been around longer) and offers more functionality (again, primarily because its developers have been working on it longer) – but I think both brands have proven to be powerful cultural movements and both have lots of potential in terms of future impact on culture, commerce, and communication.

I recommend though that the companies work on further differentiating themselves from each other. Instead of following each other's leads and introducing similar applications and features in typical marketing tit-for-tat fashion (e.g., real-time search), they should focus on developing their core identities. If I had to say what these identities are, I believe the essence of Facebook is community-building and Twitter is about communications – certainly there's more to both brands, and there's also overlap between these, but the point is that these are two very distinct identities and each brand should develop new apps/services/features/benefits that reinforce its own.

Gabriel Rossi: In your article "The Brand Ultimatum", you argued that "a credible brand extension is driven by a deep brand identity...Like a hero who headlines a blockbuster movie, a brand must captivate its audience's imagination". Please explain your thesis.

Denise Lee Yohn: Sure. A deep brand identity functions like a character whose narrative has many layers to unpeel. Take Jason Bourne, the hero of the Bourne movie series. Beginning in "The Bourne Identity," Jason Bourne embarks on a journey of self-discovery. Through the story that unfolds across the three Bourne films, the audience is drawn further into the hero's quest for self-knowledge — with each installment revealing enough of his story to satisfy our curiosity but leaving enough unresolved to prompt palatable anticipation for the next one.

In the same way, a brand must have rich, multiple layers of associations in order for brand extensions to be compelling. New iterations of the brand must reveal new dimensions of the brand identity. A few years ago, Dove, the beauty care brand, revealed new and provocative attributes and values of its brand over the duration of its Campaign for Real Beauty and accompanying brand extensions — evolving from somewhat defensive self-affirmation to more proactive self-empowerment.

Gabriel Rossi: Does this mean that brands like Harley Davidson and Volvo should not be extended?

Denise Lee Yohn: Yes. Just as some great movies shouldn't been serialized, brand extensions don't make sense for all brands. The Harley-Davidson brand is already completely understood; there is no more brand story to tell. It has a rich and powerful identity but not necessarily a deep one – so seeking out novel categories like cake decorating (something the company did indeed try) into which to extend the brand ultimately makes the new products seem formulaic and forced.

Marketers should examine the depth of their brand's identity and determine whether or not its narrative has the seductively generative quality necessary to sustain extensions. If not, that doesn't mean the brand and business cannot grow. Extensions are not the only way for mature brands to invigorate and leverage their brand equity. New approaches in media and messaging can generate fresh appeal and salience. Building your brand with new segments or identifying new touchpoints through which to experience your brand can produce new business growth.

Gabriel Rossi: What are the main questions to be made in order to determine whether your brand should be stretched or remain focused?

Denise Lee Yohn: I suggest examining your brand along 4 dimensions:

1. dynamic vs. static — Dynamic story characters are those who undergo some sort of change – a change in understanding (of themselves or of the world) or motivation (the purpose or cause they pursue). Static characters, in contrast, remain basically unchanged throughout a work. Brands are dynamic or static as well – and a dynamic brand is a deep one. Ask yourself if the strength of your brand is derived from its flexibility and adaptations over time or from its consistency and single-mindedness. Does it make sense to evolve your identity to reflect changing culture patterns or shifting contexts – or is your brand identity timeless and self-referential?

2. symbolic vs. literal — Brands can be desirable because they stand for something more meaningful or because they are more literal. When Apple issued the cry to "think different," it was calling people to embrace higher-order values such as individuality and freedom. The symbolic nature of the Apple brand has provided a firm foundation for its broad footprint. Conversely, the BMW brand identity as "the ultimate driving machine" is literal – it's what you experience when you drive one. When considering a brand extension strategy, assess the nature of your brand identity: Does it seek to represent a higher order ideal or carry a symbolic message? Or, does it represent something more tangible and convey a literal message? Symbolic brand identities tend to be deeper and more extendable.

3. mysterious vs. straightforward — Characters who are not who they initially appear to be generally are more extendable than those who are simply who they say they are. Similarly, brands with some mystery to them whet consumers' appetites for extensions. Consider where your brand lies on the continuum between mystery and straightforwardness – is there more to reveal about your brand or is its story fully told? Do consumers anticipate learning more about you or do they prefer the security of knowing you well now?

4. momentum vs. maturity — The subject's maturity is a consideration for storylines and extensions alike. Ongoing coming-of-age stories lend themselves to sequels; brands that seem to have momentum lend themselves to extensions. Google is a great example of brand that seems to be growing up before our eyes. Does your brand attract people with its youthful experimentation? Or, have most people already grown up with your brand and now see it as an established mature one? Ask yourself whether or not your brand has enough momentum to enter new categories.

Gabriel Rossi: What are the pillars of innovative brand engagement?

Denise LeeYohn: If you're asking about how brands can use innovation to engage its customers, I would say there are at least 3 pillars:

1. enhancing core brand value — In the race to introduce the latest and greatest products and services, many companies pursue innovations that may be cool but have little to do with the core value they currently deliver to customers. This is a mistake because such innovations distract the company from its core target and business – and customers are likely to view them as confusing or irrelevant. Innovations that build on existing brand:customer relationships and enhance the value which the brand is already delivering to customers are inherently more engaging.

2. differentiating from competitors – Many new products and services are simply bigger/smaller/faster/better/cheaper/etc. versions of competitive offerings. That's because most companies plot their innovations with the usual category levers and by following category trends – but they should be looking instead to "zig" while competitors are "zagging." Market salience and buzz worthy-ness come from

truly new, breakthrough ideas that prompt customers to think of the brands and categories in completely new ways.

3. striking a deeper chord – Engagement also comes from connecting deeply with customers. That's not to say an innovation, or a brand for that matter, has to be serious. You can really resonate with someone with your brand's quirky offerings or a playful personality. The important thing is to be memorable and meaningful.

Above all of these, though, is that the innovation needs to work. Time and again, I've seen companies introduce new products/services that just don't live up to their promises. The ensuing disappointment detracts from the brand's equity and squashes any hope of increased engagement with customers.