

Operationalize Your Brand to Grow Your Business

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Sustainable Business Strategies for Manufacturers, Retailers and Service Providers

Most business leaders know that relying solely on advertising is not an effective brand-building strategy -- but there is little consensus on the best way to build brands that can sustain the test of time.

To examine what drives brand success, my colleagues and I surveyed senior brand executives at over 70 major firms across a range of industries. When asked "What business practices are key to successful brand strategy development and successful brand execution?" respondents deemed all brand drivers equally important. In fact, no activity we asked about was deemed clearly *unimportant*.

The survey also revealed most companies only engage in measuring *external* brand activities, such as fielding brand health tracking studies with consumers and quantifying the impact of advertising and promotion campaigns on brand equity. Given the business adage "you manage what you measure," these findings about brand measurement support the conclusion that most companies are only managing external brand-building activities.

But to realize a brand's full and sustainable potential, businesses must also emphasize *internal* brand integration and activation. Meaning that, in addition to communicating the brand's image to consumers, the brand should be used (actually first and foremost) as a tool to guide decision-making and drive action throughout the organization. In other words, the brand should be **operationalized**.

"Operationalize" (the dictionary definition) means "to put into operation, start working." To "operationalize" a brand is **to integrate it into your core operations, culture, and customer experience**. And it looks slightly different, depending on the type of business. Here are three scenarios.

For a **manufacturer**, operationalizing the brand involves:

- designing the product as well as packaging, users manuals, etc. to create a cohesive and memorable brand experience
- driving R&D and product development with the bundle of values and attributes that define the brand, not by technological developments or an opportunistic market view
- developing a supply chain including raw materials selection and manufacturing processes that produces a finished product consistent with the values the brand claims to espouse
- employing distribution, pricing, and promotional strategies to support the competitive brand positioning
- providing product support and other after-sale experiences that builds brand loyalty

Example: Patagonia, the designer of outdoor clothing and gear, is guided by its brand mission: "Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis." The company's Footprint Chronicles is one of its many efforts that support the brand platform. Footprint Chronicles is a micro-site through which customers can track the carbon impact of Patagonia products from design to delivery. This provides an example of how a manufacturer has operationalized its brand through sourcing.

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Operationalizing the brand in **retailing** requires:

- planning product assortment and turnover to deliver a differentiated and relevant brand image to the target customer
- setting pricing and promotional strategies and service and return policies to support the competitive brand positioning
- hiring and training salespeople to appropriately interpret and reinforce the brand in every interaction with customers
- configuring the store layout and design and integrating channels to deliver a seamless, on-brand experience
- offering added-value services that increase brand value

Example: An example of brand operationalization through retail merchandising is Trader Joe's, the chain of over 300+ specialty grocery stores. The brand has become synonymous with the discovery of interesting, inexpensive foods. The company nurtures this brand platform by carefully curating its product assortment and continually introducing new items.

A **service provider** operationalizes its brand by:

- designing a pre-sale/sale/post-sale customer experience that delivers the values and attributes which define the brand
- establishing programs, pricing strategies, and service levels that support the competitive brand positioning
- hiring and training salespeople to communicate the brand value to prospects in a unique and compelling way
- hiring and training account managers and support staff to consistently make on-brand decisions that deliver the brand value to customers

Example: Bank of America has developed new services that build its brand value. It has Keep the Change™, a program in which the amount of a customer's purchase with a Bank of America debit card is automatically rounded up to the nearest whole dollar and transferred into the customer's savings account, so customers get to "keep the change" while growing their savings. With this program, Bank of America furthers the delivery of its brand platform which is about "unmatched convenience."

Sustainable brand-building requires business leaders to use the brand to guide and power every aspect of the business. It must function as the GPS, engine and fuel of the company. That means brand-building isn't a one-time program or a distinct effort; it's a complete, integrated way of doing business that can deliver consistent and significant rewards in exchange.

About Denise Yohn

Denise Lee Yohn has been inspiring and teaching companies how to operationalize their brands to grow their businesses for over 20 years. World-class brands including Sony, Frito-Lay, Burger King, and Nautica have called on Denise, an established speaker, author, and consulting partner.

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