

What Great Brands Do: An Interview with Denise Lee Yohn

Blending a fresh perspective, twenty-five years of experience working with world-class brands including Sony and Frito-Lay, and a talent for inspiring audiences, [Denise Lee Yohn](#) is a leading authority on building and positioning exceptional brands.

Denise is the author of the new book [What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest](#) (Jossey-Bass). She joins us today to talk about her book and the emphasis on customer experience in it.

Your book, *What Great Brands Do*, is about brands and yet it talks a lot about customer experience. Explain how you see the relationship between the two.

Customer experience is one of the three critical ways great brands are built (the other two are corporate culture and core operations). Every point of contact between a consumer and a brand represents an opportunity for the brand to enhance its value or undermine it. Companies that design their customer experiences to express their brands' values and attributes make meaningful and sustainable connections with customers.

That sounds like a very different approach to building a brand from the usual brand campaigns.

Yes. More often than not, a brand is perceived as a tool for external use — in marketing, PR, maybe even sales. People usually define a brand as a company's name, logo, image, or message, and they try to build their brands through creative advertising and marketing programs. But the fact is, none of these are your brand. These are simply manifestations or symbols of your brand.

If you look at the principles that drive the world's greatest brands, as I did when researching my book, *What Great Brands Do*, you find that great brands adopt a more complete view: a brand is a bundle of values and attributes that define the value you deliver to people through the entire customer experience. So they use their brands as management tools to fuel, align, and guide every aspect of their business. They focus first on delivering on their brand identities through their customers experiences and leave developing the cool campaigns and logos for later.

In *What Great Brands Do*, you introduce a tool called the Customer Experience Architecture. Take us through the what, why, and how of it.

A Customer Experience Architecture is a framework for designing and delivering exceptional customer experiences to different customer segments in different channels. It helps companies optimize, prioritize, and unify all their customer experiences so that each individual experience is part of a cohesive, integrated brand experience. A Customer Experience Architecture takes managers through each critical question and step in the process of designing a customer experience, including prioritizing each individual experience and employing all experience drivers (product, service, content, community, value, facilities, etc.). On my book site, WhatGreatBrandsDo.com, you can download the Customer Experience Architecture framework and access a worksheet to help you create one.

What is an example of a brand that gets customer experience right?

In my book I draw upon many large companies for my examples, but I want to talk about a lesser-known, smaller brand that has recently come on my radar because of the extraordinary customer experience it delivers: **PIRCH**. PIRCH, previously known as Fixtures Living, is a retailer of high-end kitchen, bath, outdoor, and laundry fixtures and appliances (think huge Viking ranges and Thermador refrigerators.) It currently has four units in Southern California.

From the moment you walk into one of its locations and are offered a hand-made latte or fresh cold juice, you know you're not in a regular store. The PIRCH experience involves lots of interactive elements: you can sample food made on one of their grills, move around sink fixtures to try out different combinations with different sinks, take a shower and get a massage to try out the shower heads and massage tables respectively...the list goes on and on. The space itself is gorgeous and the signage reflects the whimsical yet tasteful brand personality. Bottom line, PIRCH transcends its category and creates an emotional, memorable, and distinctive customer experience out of hard goods and big boxes. (You can see my recap of the PIRCH experience here: <http://deniseleeyohn.com/bites/2013/09/18/brand-experience-brief-pirch/>)

You and I met working on **TEDxSanDiego. How does TEDxSanDiego do “customer experience”?**

Last year, I had the privilege of leading the TEDxSD steering committee through the process of answering that very question. We examined our brand and strategy from multiple angles and ended up with a brand platform that informed every aspect of the TEDxSD experience. To dimensionalize our brand essence (“TEDxSanDiego is a catalyst for spreading ideas that change our world”), we said that “TEDxSD offers transformational experiences that enable people to learn, connect, inspire, and be inspired — and realize we all can be part of creating a better world.” The experience team — of which you, Sean, were a key member — did a brilliant job of bringing this platform to life through interactive experiences including 3-D CAVES (five-sided virtual reality rooms), a Deep Yoga Journey to Your Soul, and A Reason to Survive (ARTS) chalk mural to which participants could add their creations. These are the kinds of things that make TEDxSD unlike anything else out there.