

# Eating right, better relationships, and exercise should be your 2014 business resolutions, too

**The UpTake:** You may have New Year's resolutions for yourself in 2014, but do you have any goals for your business? Branding expert Denise Lee Yohn, who is out with a new book, has three key resolutions to remake your brand, and they probably jibe with your personal ones.

It's that time again – January is the month of New Year's resolutions. While many people have set individual, personalized goals for 2014, how many have made a resolution for their businesses?

The New Year brings a reason to look at your company afresh and an opportunity to commit to making some changes. Your brand, in particular, likely deserves reassessment. But the traditional branding approaches companies have relied upon for decades are becoming less relevant and less reliable. It's time for the way companies nurture, grow, and leverage brands to change.

There are some New Year's resolutions that will make 2014 a brand- and business-building year. In fact, the most common resolutions made by people— spend more time with friends and family, eat right, and exercise more – also make sense for companies.

## **Spend more time with friends and family: aka Prioritize brand relationships**

As people reflect on life's priorities, relationships invariably rise to the top. You focus on the people you are, or want to be, really close with. That's because relationships are more meaningful and satisfying when people know each other intimately.

In the same way, relationships are the priority for businesses—intimate relationships with customers. As customer intimacy increases, so does brand equity and customer value.

Customer intimacy is not a new idea, but the way companies pursue it needs to change. New technology and media have given rise to fresh ways that companies can engage their customers, but most of these approaches miss the point. Focusing on accumulating Facebook "likes" and generating shareable content is actually only engaging customers in the communication about the brand – not with the brand itself. This is like deciding to pursue a deeper relationship with a friend by resolving to talk more about him.

Instead, companies should pursue intimacy with customers by combining customer knowledge with operational capabilities. Your goal should be to uncover proprietary insights about people's attitudes and purchase behaviors and develop innovative ways to meet their needs, whether that means customizing a product or fulfilling a special request. Most companies now have database algorithms and customer analytics at their fingertips, so data should be integrated and aligned with operational developments so that customers' unique needs can be met.

This is how companies gain loyal, truly satisfied customers. Resolve to pursue true intimate brand relationships, not simply intimate communication.

## **Eat right: aka Focus on internal engagement and alignment**

Eating healthy is often at the top of New Year's resolution lists. People recognize they need to be more conscientious about what they put into their bodies. Likewise, companies should turn their attentions inward when it comes to brand building.

Culture change—not communications—is the place to start when you want to define your brand. Corporate culture determines whether or not a brand is embraced and appropriately interpreted and reinforced by employees in customer interactions. And those customer experiences shape brand perceptions more powerfully than any advertising campaign ever could.

So, internal brand engagement and alignment should be a top business goal for the coming year. A clear, consistent, common understanding of the brand needs to be shared among all your internal stakeholders, from the highest levels of the organization to frontline employees.

Senior leaders should set strategic decision-making criteria and operational agendas for delivering brand value. Managers need to overcome silos by focusing on the desired brand experiences and how they must work together to deliver them. Frontline employees should be informed, inspired, and equipped to interpret and reinforce the brand appropriately with every customer, every time.

Nourishing a brand through internal efforts will make it leaner and stronger, and give it credibility when it comes time for external communications. “Garbage in, garbage out” doesn't only apply to eating.

### **Exercise more: aka Use your brand**

As January gym memberships and ab-blasters sales show, many people start an exercise program in the New Year so they can get active.

Increasing brand impact requires a similar bias for action. When you examine great brands like Starbucks, IBM, and Nike, you find a common underpinning: the leaders of these companies conceive of their brands as strategic platforms to be used throughout their organizations. They identify the key values and attributes that define their brands, and operationalize them as the most critical way of managing and growing their businesses. They use their brands to inform company culture, drive their core operations, and shape their customer experiences.

Brand exercise, if you will, contrasts starkly to brand expression, the more typical approach to brand-building. It's also a lot harder. Creating cool logos and catchy taglines is easy—delivering on-brand experiences at all brand touch-points is hard, resource-intensive work. But brands are like muscles—the more you use them, the stronger they become. And exercise is a great New Year's resolution for both.

New Year's resolutions for businesses come with the same caveat as ones for people. They're only as good as the commitment to make them stick. People can afford to go easy on themselves if they fall off the wagon because it's likely they'll have another chance next year. With brands, the future is less certain.

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***Denise Lee Yohn is a leading authority on building and positioning exceptional brands and the author of [What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest](#) (Jossey-Bass, January 7, 2014). Yohn blends her own fresh perspective with a talent for inspiring audiences, honed over 25 years of experience working with world-class brands including Sony and Frito-Lay.***