

How some brands become great

San Diego author says principles apply to people, too

By [John Wilkens \(/staff/john-wilkens/\)](#) 1 p.m. Feb. 8, 2014

San Diego brand consultant Denise Lee Yohn has worked with Sony, Land Rover, Jack in the Box, Oakley and other well-known companies. In her new book, "What Great Brands Do," she argues that it takes more than an eye-catching logo or clever slogan to be successful.

In a phone interview, she also talked about what "personal branding" means in this age of social media self-promotion.

Q: Why did you write this book?

A: I've been working with brands for 25 years and I have become both frustrated by the lack of understanding about how to build a great brand and still excited and passionate about the impact that brands can have on people's lives.

Q: Give me an example of a company that's doing what you advocate.

A: Maybe the quintessential example is Starbucks. Everyone knows that they inspire customer loyalty, but how did they get to be so great? They've taken their brand values and attributes and driven them into everything that Starbucks does, from the culture they create within the organization among their baristas to the culture they create for the customers in their stores.

Q: Can you give me an example of those values?

A: One of Starbucks' values is respect and dignity for all. It starts with the way they treat and engage their own employees. Even their part-time employees get health-care benefits, stock awards, free coffee. By cultivating a culture that's around those values of respect and dignity, they then have employees who want to treat their customers with respect and dignity and bring a customer experience to them that is special and memorable and different from what you get at other restaurants.

Q: At the beginning of the book, you talk about Kodak as a company that didn't quite get it and suffered. What did they do wrong?

A: There are many hypotheses. Some people say it was poor management. Or a lack of R&D. Or they didn't get the transition to digital. All of that may be true, but when I looked into it, what I found was that all of those things were symptoms of a deeper problem, which is they lost their brand as a compass.

Their brand was all about creating these wonderful emotional moments that in the past with photography had been very much about memory. Today, pictures are much more about being in the moment and sharing, but they are still very emotional and very much part of the connection and the way people relate to each other. But I think that Kodak kind of lost that and they got almost too caught up in the technology and trying to figure out how to make the transition from film to digital. They forgot that overarching all that should have been how do we maintain this emphasis on the strong emotional connections that we as a brand facilitate.

Q: One of the principles in your book seems counterintuitive to an outsider: Great brands don't chase customers. Explain that?

A: I think a lot of them are counterintuitive. I intended people to think differently about brands. In the case about not chasing customers, the idea is that if you try to be everything to everyone, you end up being nothing to no one. If you try to appeal to as many people as you can, what your unique value is becomes very diluted.

Rather than chasing every possible customer out there to make yourself appealing to all the different needs and desires that they want, great brands get much better traction and then produce much more results by focusing on specific segments of customers.

Q: Customers are constantly barraged with ads and marketing. How does that play into your thinking?

A: You're right, they are getting barraged and it's getting harder and harder to get people's attention. What I found in my research is that while great brands are concerned about getting people's attention, it's about getting the right people's attention. And getting the right kind of attention.

It's companies that are able to break through all the clutter that's out there, find the customers who are really interested in that brand and then provide meaningful offers and messages and information to them — it's those companies that succeed at developing loyal customers who stay with them for a very long time.

Q: Your book is geared to business leaders, but are there applications for the rest of us? Aren't we all supposed to be branding ourselves?

A: I don't know if it's because more people are on social media, so they are more conscious of how they are presenting themselves, or maybe more people are looking for jobs, but I do think more people are aware of their own personal brand.

There are personal branding experts and books that will advise people on how to dress and what their resume should look like. Those things are important, but ultimately it comes down to starting inside with you as a person. What do you believe in? What do you value? What is your uniqueness? What are the things that you do that create value for other people that no one else does as well as you do?

Starting inside and keeping those values in mind and then designing your brand around them is as important for people as it is for businesses.

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