



always forward.

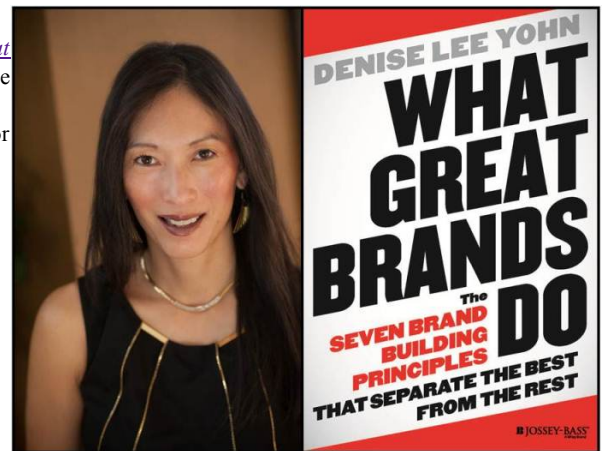
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[Leadership Lessons from Great Brands](#)

11 Feb 2014/0 Comments/in [Guest Post](#), [Leadership](#) /by [Ron Kitchens](#)

Today's blog post is from [Denise Lee Yohn](#), a friend of Southwest Michigan First who spoke to many of you at last year's Catalyst University 2013. Denise just released her new book, [What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles that Separate the Best from the Rest](#). Because good branding is key to the success of any great business, I asked Denise to share a little bit of her expertise in this area today. If you are at a place in your leadership journey where you are looking for clear, valuable insight into your personal brand or that of your organization, I highly recommend Denise's book! Enjoy the post.

Always Forward.
Ron



Try for a moment to imagine your brand as a source of light. In an ideal world, the light of your brand would shine brightly and directly on your intended customers, so that they could see very clearly the value that your brand offers to them.

The reality, though, is that the clutter and tumult of today's marketplace crowd in between your brand and your customers, diffusing your light or obscuring it altogether. People have a hard time differentiating what you do from others and struggle to discern why they should choose you over another.

Your employees and other stakeholders – vendors, distributors, service providers – are the critical filters or lenses that exist between your brand and your customers. In their roles they can help focus the light of your brand – or they can distort it. And the little things they do in person for your customers have far more impact on brand perceptions than what you might claim in your advertising messages. That's why brand-building involves far more than typical branding activities such as identifying a good name, creating a cool logo, and running creative advertising.

Brand-building starts and ends inside your company. As companies with great brands demonstrate, brand-building is in no way confined to advertising and marketing. The proliferation of social networks and the pervasiveness of marketing in recent years may give you the impression that you should elevate the brand communications function in your organization. But great brands know that real, sustainable brand equity and influence comes from an entirely different way of thinking about and using their brands. The leaders of great brands such as Starbucks, IBM, Apple and even up-and-comers such as Shake Shack and Chobani conceive of their brands as complete strategic platforms. Instead of merely promoting their brands as external images, they use their brands as management tools to shape their culture, drive their core operations, and design their customer experiences. They operationalize their brand as the most integral way of managing and growing their business.

How do you do what great brands do

Start inside. Start your brand-building process by cultivating a vital, vibrant culture that unifies, aligns, focuses, and motivates all your employees with your brand. Your culture determines whether or not your brand is embraced and appropriately interpreted and reinforced by your employees to your customers, so culture-building is the necessary first step in brand-building. Ensure everyone who works on your brand knows what your brand stands for – your purpose and defining values and attributes – and understands their roles in making that vision a reality through their daily decision-making and actions.

Then apply your brand as that superior guiding light to your *strategies and planning decisions*. Seek to develop superior emotional connections with customers through your products and services, rather than pushing product features and technology, the way Nike inspires people to feel like athletes. While others may simply follow trends, discover how you can get out in front and advance cultural movements that resonate with your brand values, as Chipotle has done with its sustainable food practices. Practice Red Bull's brand-building approach by refusing to chase customers. Instead, identify your best target customers and focus on attracting them by projecting your brand identity intensely and consistently.

To *execute with excellence*, sweat the small stuff of your customer experiences. Design your brand experiences, as retailer REI does, down to the last detail and appeal to as many senses as possible to bring your brand to life in a focused, memorable way. Drill down to your core aspirations, lock them in, and then execute on them relentlessly so that over time people come to know what you stand for and trust you to deliver it every time – that’s the way Southwest Airlines has remained so profitable while its competitors struggle to stay afloat. And understand that great brands like Starbucks make their social and cultural contributions by creating shared value for all stakeholders, including their communities, not just by trying to “give back.”

Brand leadership

If you are in a leadership role at your organization, or aspire to hold one, your goal should be to adopt your brand as the driver of every aspect of your business. Shift brand-building from a strategic or messaging function to an orchestration function, facilitating on-brand implementation across all functions, all stakeholders. You must use your brand to nurture a culture that differentiates your company, convey value beyond any single product or service, and form a valuable, lasting bond with employees and customers. Your brand needs to be owned by you and others at the highest levels of the organization. It can’t be delegated to your marketing department or your advertising agency. It must be driven—and embraced—as an enterprise-wide approach.

That’s what great brands do.

[Denise Lee Yohn](#) has been inspiring and teaching companies how to operationalize their brands to grow their businesses for 25 years. World-class brands including Sony, Frito-Lay, Burger King, and Oakley have called on Denise, a brand-building expert, speaker, and writer. She 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).