

The Seven Brand Building Principles – Denise Lee Yohn



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When you are easy to use, when you make people's lives simpler, when you delight someone with the simplicity and streamlined experience that you provide, I think that really bonds people to your brand because they feel like the sense that you are on their side. You understand them. You get them. You know exactly what they need and you're giving it to them so there's definitely a discipline that needs to come into play. Yes, you can do these ten things but which one thing should you do?

Welcome to another episode of Step Up! We're going to have Denise Lee Yohn on today. She is a brand building expert. She's involved in quite a bit of activity in the branding strategy world. She's constantly on Fox Business. I've actually seen her on Fox Business in the discussions with the Varney guy. And what really makes this interesting is that this branding business has become something we have to deal with a lot now with our local clients and, to me, the big issue is or the big story here is to become somewhat elegant in the way that you present yourself, not overcomplicate it. Everybody's got so many buttons and bells and knobs and they have to put 15 different things into one page these days to try and get their explanation out to you where in all reality, we need to think about strategy of how do we have a really clean and efficient brand that brings people through the process. We do some other discussions in this podcast about some of the things that was on my mind about just kind of life and philosophies so enjoy. Here is Denise.

Matt Coffy: Okay, so we got Denise Lee Yohn on today and she is what a person would like to probably know more about her, which is brand building. What's really cool is she has been featured in the news. She has a book. I mean there's all these sort of fun things that are going on with Denise. We have her on the show today but I want to ask the real question, which is what this namesake of the podcast is stepping up. So, Denise, what would you suggest to someone who's an entrepreneur or who's like myself or maybe an agency owner or someone who listens to this podcast. What can they do to step up in their life to really step into their greatness to really get to the next level?

Denise Lee Yohn: I love the phrase "step into their greatness" because I do think that we all do have our inner greatness and I think for me the thing that has been most helpful, most instrumental in trying to become my best self is to be very clear about what my values are and then to design my life around those values. In the book I wrote, "What Great Brands Do," I talk about how brand building needs to start inside, inside an organization. The same way I think that when you are developing yourself, you need to start inside and start with what you really believe in and then as I said, design your life in order to live out those values.

MC:I think that's really interesting because it sounds easy but really it's not because the choice of trying to even distill, how to come around what I would consider the "why" of the brand. We think of big brands as Nike and Apple and so forth and they really come to a conclusion on simplifying the process. I think that you mentioned a couple of things there which is to get that purpose out. Talk a little bit more about that.

DLY: For a person, I think that you need to spend time whether it's meditating or praying or whatever your spiritual discipline might be and really be very thoughtful about what are you doing here in this world. One of my colleagues, Sally Hogshead, said "If you're not adding value, you're just taking up space." No one wants to just take up space. We were created for a purpose and so I think each of us has the responsibility to discern what that purpose is. It can be very specific like for a particular stage in your life, your purpose might be to just to be a superb father to your child or it can be something very broad about really trying to create peace or to instill happiness in your community or whatever it might be but I think that there needs to be an overarching purpose that allows you to identify, "Okay, so I'm going to achieve that purpose or I'm going to fulfill that purpose. What are the values I need to live by in order to do so?"

MC: Wow. A lot to think about there.

DLY: (laughs)

MC: You mentioned family and father and stuff like that. My son asked me last night, he said, "Dad, what's the meaning of life?" And I kind of came up with something that related to him but it took him by surprise.

DLY: What did you say? Do you mind sharing?

MC: Yes. I told him to get to get to zero lag time in Minecraft.

DLY: (laughs) I'm sure he loved that, right?

MC: Well, no, it really threw him for a loop and I said that's really the secret of life is to get to zero lag time. And I don't know if you know what I'm talking about but there's a lot of gaming that goes on with children and Minecraft is probably the biggest of them all and the screens are always lagging because there's so many players on these servers and there's so much activity going on and there's so many calculations that the screens lag and you can't really keep up with it. It's a constant problem and it's not necessarily related to the computers. It's just the network itself and the technologies not kept up with the amount of people and server capabilities. But what I really meant by that was getting what you want in life and I think that was my whole purpose for him to understand that what you really want is you want to get things you want to get. Obviously you need to turn around and provide the value. It's funny we're having this discussion because I write down a daily blog post or daily journal entry which will hopefully be publicized at one level but I had written that there's really kryptonite and future pull today. And I think the kryptonite is what holds us back and the future pull is figuring out what your why is and this overreaching purpose. I think it's not something that is a defined moment or defined thing. I think it's a journey. What's your opinion on that?

DLY: It might be helpful for you to say more about that. So when you say it's a journey, tell me what you mean by that?

MC: I think the reality is that we're all trying to get to a level of existence where there's an ease and a feeling of connectiveness with the people and places and things that we want to get to. I think in the case of what I heard from you which is to think about the overreaching or overarching purpose, is that within that sort of rainbow of overarching purpose, there are different segments and the journey of those segments as you go along are different pieces laddering up to get to the higher purpose as you go along your life's journey. Does that explain what I meant?

DLY: Yeah, I think so. I like the idea of these segments because I do think that you could get kind of bogged down and you know "what is my purpose?" and then how do you operationalize that purpose, right? And so kind of thinking about, the different aspects of your life and how those different aspects might bring to life that purpose. I think it's really important. But what you said I think is so smart in that it is a journey. I don't know if the point is necessary to

arrive at the destination somewhat as to be very intentional and very responsible about going on that journey and identifying what are those segments and again thinking very thoughtfully about what your purpose is and then really living out the values, the things that you really want to define who you are and how you do things. The journey is probably more the point than the destination or arriving at some higher state. I hope that sounds hopeful and not pessimistic. (laughs)

MC: No, it's true. I think what I was trying to get my head around as I mentioned before when I was asked this question what the meaning of life is by someone who's very young and you explain it to him in a more philosophical or a more elegant way than basically trying to say, you know, it's those small steps going up the chain of things that you want and you grow every moment that are rewarding and the rewards are really, you know, at the end of the day, you can say I have all the money in the world but am I happy? I think that's two different dialogues, right?

DLY: Right.

MC: And so, are you fulfilling your overarching purpose? And as you move up the ladder, are you fulfilling those purposes? And are you enjoying the process? Because I think a lot of people get stuck in entrepreneurship and this is just sort of part of the brand strategy, which I'm struggling with as well, which is that, what do you want to become? What are you inevitably doing or is this just the pathway to a better branding strategy? We as a digital agency and marketers have small, mid size companies that are really always just trying to figure out what they want to be when they grow up. Because they'll come to us with one idea and one purpose and "Let's do this" and then within six months, it's like "Well, I'm not sure if that's the right model." Even myself changing from our original brand, which was Customer Bloom which is our retail to Agency Bloom which is our wholesale. There was a fight in my mind that maybe I should just have one brand. But then I said, "well, what's the purpose? I'm not fulfilling what I think is important from a value perspective if I'm not really advocating sort of the agency model that we provide to our current wholesale clients which is to provide a community of people that support digital marketing." To that point, I really wanted to understand from a branding perspective what you think we get back into the purpose of this model of breaking down how brand building is really done because to me, I'm fascinated with how to do this properly.

DLY: One thing that I thought while you were talking is the minimum viable brand idea. You and your listeners maybe familiar with the "The Lean Startup," a book written by Eric Ries in which he introduced this idea of a minimum viable product. The whole idea was that you want to be able to test your product hypothesis quickly and be able to gather feedback and make refinements as you go. It allows you the flexibility of making changes and responding to the market as opposed to feeling like you have to lock something in and get it to perfection and then launch which is often going to lead to failure. For any startup, I think The Lean Startup and minimum viable product is a really important concept to grasp. I've adapted that to the development of a brand in that I think that there are certain elements of your brand foundation that comprise a minimum viable brand. I think you need to have those in place before you launch. I think some people maybe tempted to think "Oh, I got this great product idea. Let me just kind of stick it out there and see what people think." I think that really underestimates what is necessary to get real traction in this very cluttered and competitive marketplace. You need to have some brand foundation that establishes your differentiation, your relevance. But then to the point of being able to move quickly and be agile. You don't need to have a fully flushed out brand platform in all of the richness and dimension that kind of these larger established brands have. That can come later after you've really learned and established yourself. This minimum viable brand idea helps. The framework I've developed for the MVB involves six questions you need to ask yourself which you need to answer. The very first one is "What do you stand for?" Some people call that "What is your purpose?" Some people call it as your essence or your mission. I don't really care what you call it. It's more like what is that foundational idea. That along with the other five questions really provides a compass for you to say, "This is the core of what we're creating." Now there's a lot of flexibility outside of that core that allows us to change and to grow and evolve. It's just in a way that you evolve from Customer Bloom to Agency Bloom. Thinking about what is a minimum viable brand and then what can we build out later is really important when you're thinking about starting out

MC: You mentioned "What do you stand for?" and I always thought of this as a quest. If you were to go on a quest and there's no money involved but you had to get on a quest, what would your quest be? I think that's where I came

up with the Agency Bloom model because I thought there's so many people who need help and we're coaching people now and I really see that once you start to peel back the onion, you see the economy across the globe that's just absolutely in need of these services that we provide. But what's more in need is for people to be educated, to be able to integrate these needs into people's educational processes. The people who we work with who might be, let's just say, selling ice manufacturer in Australia. How do they educate the consumer and then get that through the process of getting them up to speed in getting success? I saw that there's this massive need. There's not a lot of people that are fulfilling from a perspective the level the community that we find out there. There's not a lot of these roles that we're taking so I figured "Well, maybe that's my quest."

DLY: I like what you just said because I think what you have seen is that there's a role that is very much needed or a value that is very much needed and you're in the perfect spot to fulfill it. More power to you. I think that's great.

MC: What I'm really interested is, how did you get your quest started and how does the whole motivational thing because obviously you're a smart cookie.

DLY: (laughs) I play one on TV, right?

MC: Right, I'm trying to figure out how the heck did you get to where you got to because you are a very regular contributor to Harvard Business and Forbes. These are big name magazines and you've been on TV doing lots of commentary and you're smart as a whip on these TV interviews and I'm thinking "How the heck did she get to this level where people are asking her like we need your intelligence on these discussions." Can you just give us a few seconds about why this is your personal quest and why you're stepping up into this?

DLY: I love brands and I love studying them as a professional. I love interacting with them as a consumer. It's funny, about a half and a year ago, my husband and I moved houses and so we were going through lots of old stuff and I found a box of old papers from high school. Even back in high school, I had written a paper about Nike and what a great brand it was. This is something that I've been passionate about and interested in for 25 years or longer than that. I think that's actually going back to this whole thing about purpose. You need to be doing what you love. You need to be doing what you're passionate about. This is just something that comes very naturally to me and I'm always reading and talking to people about brands. I think that's what's motivated me and I've just been really blessed to have some great experiences where I've learned the methods and the principles and the strategies on how to build a great brand. Overtime I've been able to use those experiences to then position myself as sources for the media.

MC: Interesting. What are you doing now? What does Denise do when she gets up in the morning? Is she going to try to contribute to some Harvard Review or are you in demand that you're kind of looking for your schedule to get on to? I'm fascinated because what really interests me is that this quest that we've talked about for you and I'm interested in is you've highlighted yourself as a segmented expert in branding. Where does that emulate from? We've talked about your experiences and so forth but are you getting contacted directly from the press to speak about this or are you working with a team? What are you doing today?

DLY: How do I make a succinct answer because we could talk about this for ages? I'd say that now most times, the media is reaching out to me although for example when the Super Bowl happened and that was the same week that Shake Shack had their IPO, both topics I'm very passionate about. I actually did some outreach to some of the journalists that I know. But really, most of the time now they're seeking me out and asking me for my point of view. But Matt, that's after having worked for over 10 years to develop myself as a credible source. I think the first message I would say is that this is not something that happens overnight. Persistence is probably my best quality in the sense that once I decide I want to do something, I will do it and I will do whatever it takes to do it. To go back to one of your questions, I'm an independent consultant, speaker, and writer and so I think that pretty much captures how I spend most my time like in thirds or about a third of a time I'm actually consulting. Doing project engagements for clients, primarily in restaurant and retail industries but really it's a broad range. And then I do quite a bit of speaking both at national organizations and conferences as well as for corporations. And then the last part is the writing that I do. I have these four bylines, contributor gigs as well. I have my own blog and I have my own newsletter then I write for

other people as well so that's how I kind of divide my time. But really, what has driven a lot of what I do now is the sense that when I started, so I used to work for Sony Electronics about eleven years ago. I quit and started my own business and when I did that, I realized the world does not need another brand consultant. There are plenty of great people out there and I have had the opportunity to work with many of them in my prior roles. So what I need to do, what I advise your listeners to do, is really think very carefully about what is the unique value that you contribute? What are the things that you do or that you know or the skills that you have or the experiences that you can leverage that no one else does? In my case, it came from the fact that I had spent 15+ years on the client side of the business before starting my own practice. The unique value that I brought is, "Okay, once you have this great vision for what you want your brand to, which lots of brand consultants can help you do, how do you actually operationalize that? How do you actually make it happen? How do you work within an organization so that your brand transfers from vision to reality?" And so I really position myself in the space of brand building that had to do a lot more with cultivating brand like culture and designing your company operations and strategies and then developing compelling customer experiences that all bring your brand to life. By really being very specific about the kind of brand consultant I wanted to be and then also in a more specifically position myself in the restaurant and retail sector which I had had some experience in prior to this, really kind of established a base for me to say "I'm developing expertise here". Like I said over time, over 10 or 11 years, I have developed some expertise that then people are interested in hearing. Hopefully, that helps a little bit in terms of kind of what my process has been.

MC: I think what you're really saying, you've got to tell your story and become an authority if you want to drive any of this activity to become relevant because of all the noise. It's very interesting because obviously you've dealt with a lot of large ended brands and there's a lot of different level thinking with different directions that those brands multi, sub brands and so forth. But for the middle-of-the-road, for the small to mid-sized companies that's just trying to become on top of their competitor from just a general standpoint, I really do think and you could probably say unequivocally, I think design is the new brand. I really do think that design is becoming a most important thing because people are reacting to authority in design.

DLY: When you say design, tell me what you mean by that?

MC: The way I'm trying to point this is that, when we work with clients and we work with any business, we're trying to get there head around the thought process around having frictionless design and having a clear and consistent message for their brand. And designing it properly is probably the hardest thing to do because everybody wants to jam as much information as they can into their thoughts, right? It's like "Look, we do this, we do what, we do this. We do all these things." No, you don't want to tell everybody all that. You want to have this seamlessness, kind of transfer of knowledge so that people are elegantly pushed into the direction they need to go. From the very beginning, you look at some of these brands like Apple and even new brands like Fitbit who've just got an amazing, elegant story. I think it transposes down to the small, mid-size business level where there's a lot of congruity that needs to be placed into the thought process if people start to design out there look and their feel, their website, and their marketing.

DLY: One of the principles I talk about in my book, "What Great Brands Do," is that great brands sweat the small stuff. I talk about how great brands understand that everything they do communicate. Every touch point matters and so what great brands do is they really design their brands experiences in the finest details of execution because they know that that's how brand impressions get formed. I think that's what you're talking about in terms, sometime when small and mid-size business are resource constrained, they tend to maybe skip a few quarters or not apply the strict standards that they would have the luxury of doing if they were bigger. They might let a few things slide or they might just try to do way too much and not realize that they're actually detracting from the experience. There's a real need to sweat the small stuff and to really think about how people are interacting with your brand and all the different ways that they do. Is there a coherence? Is there a consistency? Is there a really compelling value that you are fusing everything you do with? If that's what you mean by design, then, yes, I couldn't agree with you more. I think that that is really what's really separating the brands that thrive and really create these valuable, sustainable customer relationships from those that don't.

MC: I think the utilitarian aspect of the brand from a perspective of where we find most businesses are right now, it's

just so overdone. That's what I'm talking about from a design perspective is trying to attract and retain the eyeball or the mental eyeball by creating the experience from the get-go. It's very difficult to translate that vision onto other businesses because it's relatively in the scope of things, a difficult sell because of the utilitarian mode of most people have got, like "Hey, we got ten different things. We need to make sure ten different things are there. We need to have all this cascading information." and we're trying to tell people the reason why Apple and companies like that succeed is because of the minimalist approach and I don't mean like nothing. I mean the superior experience that they're getting from the brand is driving the sales process so think about that when you're building your website or your marketing material. Think about the ease of use factor that needs to come in as opposed to the utilitarian side of the world. I think that's what I'm really trying to emphasize.

DLY: I think that when you are easy-to-use when you make people's lives simpler, when you delight someone with the simplicity and streamlined experience you provide. I think that that really bonds people to your brand because they feel like the sense that you are on their side. You understand them. You get them. You know exactly what they need and you're giving it to them. There's definitely a discipline that needs to come into play. Yes, you can do these ten things but which one thing should you do? And really being disciplined about restricting yourself.

MC: There's some authenticity that comes into this discussion. I think there's another level and maybe you can talk more about it. As you move down this pace of trying to become a better steward of customers intentional purposes because, obviously, we deal with a lot of websites and so forth we have to build for customers. I think the authenticity gets lost a lot with some of these strategies especially since we do a lot of healthcare. We've had to think about authenticity and how do you provide an experience that has integrity beyond, as I mentioned before, sort of streamlined the thought process on and embracing the strengths of putting simplicity and ease of use into the brand. What would you say about that?

DLY: I agree. I could add more to it really. What I love about this conversation, Matt, is you have a very distinct point of view. I think that's probably one of the most important things that an agency or any brand can have and that is a very particular point of view about how the world works and what you should do as a result and really what is your role in that world. I think without that kind of strong opinion, then, you get pulled into a lot of different things. You get pulled into all the different directions and that can really be the downfall of small businesses because you just don't have the resources to do everything. I'm really appreciating this conversation to some of that level.

MC: We've just designed hundreds or thousands of websites at this point. I don't even know what the number is but it's a lot. We came back to the same conclusion that when we made the design of Agency Bloom, we just made it elegant, simple and truthful. I thought that what the whole internet needs. There's so many people trying to clog it up with trying to provide too much information and I thought of it as like, "Look, think about your mom trying to use your website which is lost. Would she like it? Would she understand what to do?" Because you have to think at this next level where specially from a tiny perspective, you've got that five-second, sort of like, you get on to the site, how are you are carrying this person through in giving them a delightful experience immediately? I think Apple took care of the thought process right away with its devices, obviously. This is the type of discussion that leads me into these more creative environments where we play into this space but to the level of where your branding expertise comes to. I'm always interested in who influenced you.

DLY: Wow. I'm a voracious reader of business books and books about brands and brand building and branding so I'd say that probably some of the more formative books that I've read and people, authors have influenced me. Dave Aaker is just one of probably the founders of modern day brand strategy. He's written several very foundational texts that I refer to all the time even now, twenty-five years into the business. Dave Aaker. There's a guy Adam Morgan who wrote a book called "Eating the Big Fish." He actually just came out more recently with a new book called "A Beautiful Constraint" and his thinking in his approach to positioning and brand strategy was also very foundational. Again, I continue to think a lot about his principles. And then probably not surprising like Jim Collins. People always talk about his book "Good to Great" but I actually think the book that he wrote beforehand with Jerry Porras, "Built to Last," is probably more foundational for me because it was really about how do you build a company. How do you build a brand that is going to be around a hundred years, 200 years. Those are a few of the people and the books that have

influenced my thinking.

MC: Good stuff. I mean Jim Collins is just stuff that's required reading today. Let me ask you what you think is the biggest challenge for brands today from a perspective, let's take it down to a level where a lot of these listeners might be relevant to know the small, mid-size business. What would you say is their biggest challenge to overcome in your mind? I know we've discussed a couple but if I wanted to get your opinion.

DLY: I would say most business leaders whether they're at small, medium or even large enterprises, I think about brand building and think about their brands as an external activity. We need a beautiful logo or we need a streamlined website or we need a great tagline or a good name, a catchy name in order to appeal to our customers. I think the challenge as well as the opportunity is to recognize that great brands and brand building really just starts inside. It starts with having very clear values and purpose that we've been talking about so it extends into making sure that everyone who works on your brand shares an understanding of what your brand stands for and how they are to interpret and reinforce it appropriately. I would say the challenge is not to just jump to the easy stuff about branding and say "Oh, you know. As long as we have these cool things, we're going to have a great brand." But it's really just do the hard work of cultivating a distinctive culture and aligning your company operations and strategies so that they are designed to actually deliver the value that your promising to people in these external messages and to really do the hard work of breaking down organizational silos or to overcoming resource limitations and designing great customer experiences. All of that is internal business operations and strategy work that needs to be done before you ever get around to running a marketing campaign or thinking about how you're going to express yourself externally.

MC: Really what we came back to the very beginning here is what do you stand for. That's I think the first question to start it with the brand it seems like to me.

DLY: Yes and then to stick with that. Yes.

MC: Great. So this has been an awesome conversation. I have really enjoyed it. I'm very much into the brand strategy. We eat it all day because we create brands for a lot of these customers. Unfortunately, they don't have branding and we try and sell them on the things that we somehow meet in the middle. One of the things I wanted to ask you is where are you going to be next and is there anything you'd like to talk about, besides obviously your book, and maybe some places where you might be speaking next.

DLY: Yeah. I have quite a few speaking gigs coming up. I'm actually most excited about one that's in Columbia. I'm speaking in Bogota in May at the Expo Marketing Conference. I think it's like the biggest marketing conference in the Central American region. Jonah Berger is going be there. I think last year Seth Godin was there so it's a really great conference and I'm very excited about that. What I really enjoy about speaking is the interaction that I have with the people who are in the audience because I have ideas I'd like to share but I also like to hear questions and other people's ideas and their own experiences. I would just encourage if you ever see me speak somewhere, please come up and talk to me and let's have a conversation or follow up with me afterwards. But to your point, I think the most important thing for me right now is to continue get as many people exposed to my book, "What Great Brands Do," and you can go to my website either deniseleeyohn.com or whatgreatbrandsdo.com and learn more about the book and download materials from the book. Let me know what you think. I look forward to getting feedback and interaction.

MC: Awesome. It's been wonderful talking to you and again, I'm looking forward to seeing you on CNBC or Fox News or you'll show up somewhere "I talk to Denise. I know her." Alright. Great.

DLY: Thanks a lot, Matt.

MC: Take care.

Thanks so much for listening to today's episode of the Step Up! Podcast with your host, Matt Coffy. We'll see you next time!