

Insider Perspectives: Brand Expert Denise Lee Yohn on Culture

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Jeff Toister March 13, 2018

I recently had a chance to speak with brand leadership expert, Denise Lee Yohn about her new book, *Fusion: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies*.

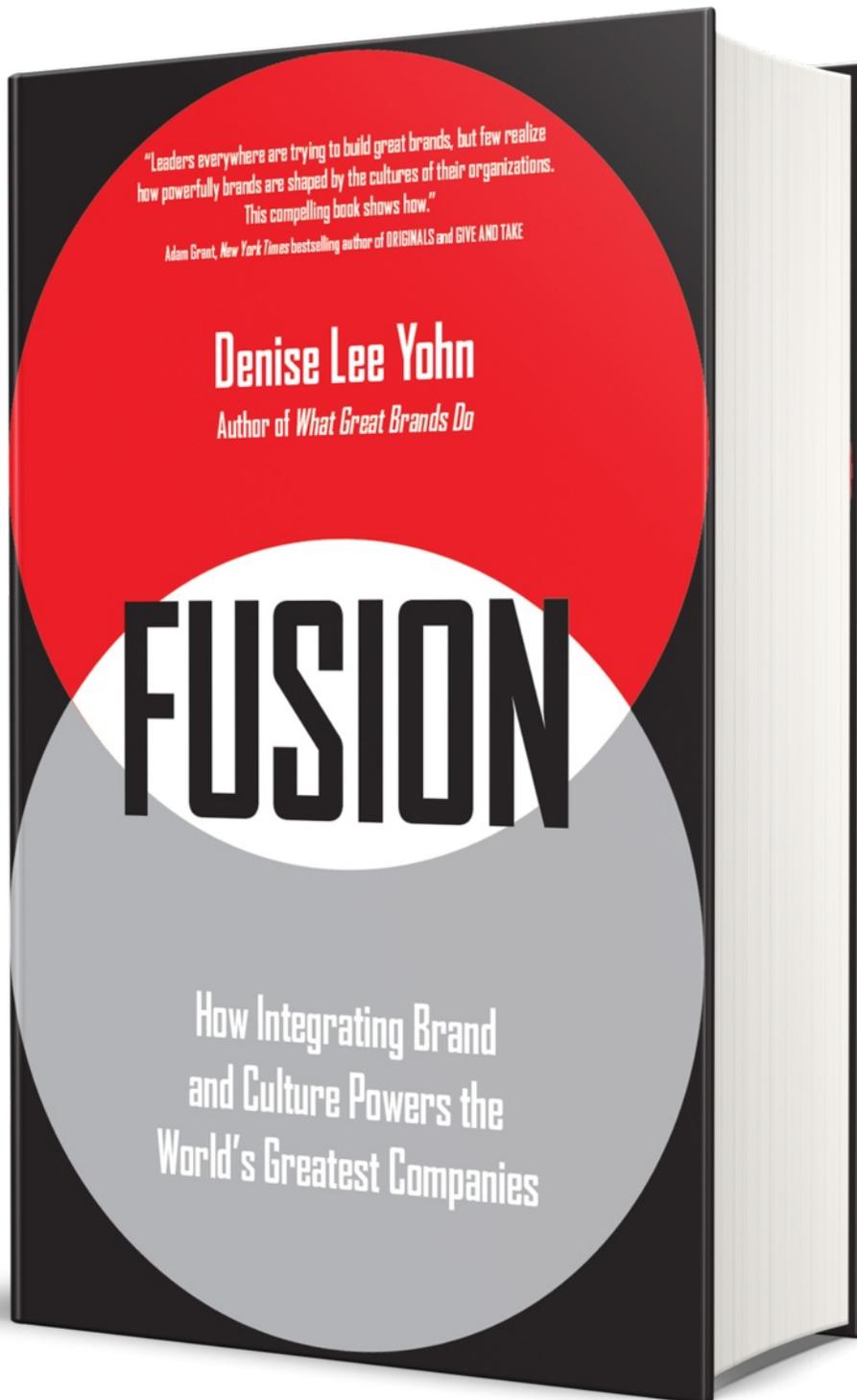
Fusion is a wonderfully practical guide to aligning your company's brand with your organizational culture. The book makes three primary arguments why this is essential:

1. Employees work more efficiently when they share a common goal.
2. Fusing brand and culture makes a brand more authentic.
3. Aligning brand and culture leads to better brand execution.

You'll find plenty of real-life examples to illustrate each concept and many helpful exercises that result in concrete action steps.

The book is now on sale through leading retailers such as Amazon and Barnes & Noble. I took a few pages of notes when I read *Fusion* and I highly recommend it.

It's always fun to talk about culture, especially with an expert like Denise. Here's her perspective on brand-culture fusion.



Q: A lot of leaders point to the importance of culture, but I don't know if we're always talking about the same thing. How do you define it?

"In the most informal way, culture is the way we do things around here.

"A more formal definition is the way people in your organization act and the attitudes and beliefs that inform those actions.

"One client I'm currently working with is a large technology company. They have a very process oriented and hierarchical culture, so the interactions between employees are more formal, structured, and preplanned. Another client, a senior living center company, has a nurturing and empathetic culture, so their employees are very concerned about how others are feeling and if they are growing and being cared for."

Q: What is a brand-culture fusion?

"*Fusion* introduces the concept of fusing brand and culture together so they are well-integrated and tightly aligned within an organization.

"Many companies focus on brand and culture separately, which can create silos where a brand doesn't really reflect the culture.

"The greatest companies fuse both of these together so they are working together.

"The culture and brand at Airbnb, the hospitality company, are one and the same—they're both about belonging. Airbnb wants customers to feel like they belong anywhere, wherever their travels might take them. It also wants employees to feel like they belong at the company, so its employee experience is all about community and comfort."

Q: This seems like a straightforward idea. Why don't more organizations do this?

"A couple of reasons come to mind.

"One is I think there's a misperception about what makes a good culture. Business leaders often cling to this idea that there's a right culture that focuses on things like being nice and supportive.

"That's just wrong. There isn't one right type of culture for every organization. For example, Amazon is known for being an incredibly customer-focused brand. They also have a challenging culture that's difficult for many people to work in because expectations for being customer-focused are so high. Amazon succeeds because it has a distinctive culture, but that culture is clearly not the right culture for everyone.

"I also think most leaders at the top would consider culture to be a human resources function and branding to be a marketing function. So it becomes dysfunctional where each department is doing its own thing and there's a lack of leadership to bring these functions together.

"A lot of executives tend to misunderstand both culture and brand. Many think of branding as just advertising or a logo. Culture can be the same way where executives liken it to ping pong tables or free beer Fridays. It becomes something that's tactical where you can just check it off

the list rather than something that's fundamentally ingrained in your organization's core values."

Q: What's the connection between a brand-culture fusion and customer service?

"In *Fusion*, I outline nine general brand types.

"One type of brand is Service, which are companies like The Ritz-Carlton that use service to differentiate their brand from competitors. So a service-focused culture becomes critically important for these organizations.

"But all companies need to provide good customer service, even if it uses luxury, value, or another brand type besides service to differentiate itself. It's essential for all companies to have a brand guide or toolkit that helps all employees bring your brand values to life in all facets of the company.

"This helps people align their decisions with the brand and culture, such as how to interact with a customer."

(Note: You can learn more by taking this [Fusion Assessment](#).)

Q: What is the one thing you really want people to know about the brand-culture fusion?

"Just one?! A few come to mind!

"The top one might be that your culture needs to be as unique as your brand. It's not enough to just be generic like friendly, supportive, etc. You need a distinctive culture to really produce specific results that are on brand and motivate employees to do what we need them to do.

"It's also important for people to understand there's a difference between simple and easy when it comes to culture-building. I think the concepts behind brand-culture fusion are simple, but culture is not easy!"

Fusion is a must-read for anyone interested in marketing, branding, or service culture. It's available in [e-book and hardcover formats](#).

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