QSR's Denise Lee Yohn Talks Great Brands

Branding expert Denise Lee Yohn spent 25 years acquainting Americans with some of today’s most well known brands, including Sony, Land Rover, and New Balance. In the quick-serve industry, she has worked with leaders such as Burger King, Dunkin’ Donuts, and Jamba Juice. Equipped with a toolbox of brand-building techniques that grow a company from the inside out, Yohn took her show on the road as a speaker, consultant, and writer, penning QSR’s Brand New Perspectives column and her forthcoming book, What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles that Separate the Best from the Rest. Yohn shares how she got her start in branding and what quick serves can learn from her seven principles.

How did you get started in branding?

I’ve always been fascinated by brands as a consumer and asked, Why do I make the product decisions that I do? Why do I like certain brands? Why do I like going to certain restaurants? As I have researched and worked in the field, I’ve really learned not only the power a brand has to influence customers, but also the great value they contribute to companies. So it grew from a personal journey of being curious to professionally discovering the real power.

What experience does your expertise come from?

I’ve been in the business for about 25 years and have worked in a range of industries, not only fast food, although a large chunk of my experience has been in fast food with brands like Jack in the Box, Burger King, Jamba Juice, Dunkin’ Donuts, etc. I’ve also worked in apparel and accessories, in consumer electronics, and in health and fitness; and in pretty much every job I’ve had and now as a consultant, I find that there are some universal truths about brand building that apply to all businesses.

Why did you decide to distill all your knowledge into a book?

The value-creating potential of a great brand sometimes is not understood and needs to be unleashed, and I feel like there are so many companies that waste their time, money, and energy on trying to develop the cleverest marketing campaign or the coolest logo. I really wanted to share my insights about how great brands build their brands, which has very little to do with those things and so much more to do with culture and customer experience and the core operation.
Because I'm an independent consultant and work with only a select handful of clients every year, my ability to share those insights is limited. I felt like a book would be a great way to share more of that and build on some of the audience that I've enjoyed through [my work].

**How did you develop your seven principles?**

Research and analysis on a range of great brands from both the more well known names like Starbucks, Nike, and Apple to some of the more emerging or smaller companies like Shake Shack or Chobani Yogurt. I started investigating the things that these brands have in common. From there, I developed hypothesis that then turned into principals. There were a lot more than the seven, but I felt these were the most defining, distinctive characteristics of great brands.

**How can a quick serve brand in particular achieve greatness?**

The very first way is to be very clear about why they exist and what they stand for. What is the unique value they offer to people? Having that core identity and building a business out from that is the way you achieve greatness. It's not necessarily starting with a hot product or a great location or even a cool concept. It's really about those main values and purpose that gets people off on the right foot.

**What should struggling brand do to turn things around?**

Much the same way, by going back to the core of what they stand for and what they believe and stripping away the things that detract from that. Part of the challenge is to be both differentiated and very relevant and valuable. There are many temptations that pull brands off track from that basic, fundamental core of what they stand for. If you just go back to that foundation, that can help refocus and revitalize a brand.

**Do you think a brand can do that in the current economy without spending a lot of resources?**

The typical ways of brand building that involve running advertising campaigns or running promotions that can be quite expensive—those things cost a lot more than developing a strong culture and identity. You can work on the core operation so that you operate with excellence and deliver a customers experience that shows those values. Those are costs of running a business that everyone incurs; it's just a matter of being focused and deliberate about it.

**Your book details seven key principles of branding—if you had to narrow that down to one golden rule, what would it be?**

Most brands’ efforts involve creating an image to serve as the face of a company like an external message. Building a brand is more about development from the inside out and using a brand as a strategic tool to fuel, align, and guide everything that you do.

QSR’s Tamara Omazic spoke with Yohn about the story behind her book, to be released January 27.