

Great Brands Put Culture First

By [Steve McKee](#) Monday, February 10, 2014

The title of this post happens to be the last sentence at the bottom of page 44 of Denise Lee Yohn's outstanding new book, *What Great Brands Do*. Given MWC's decade of [research](#) probing the internal dynamics that bedevil struggling companies, I couldn't agree more.

"Great Brands Start Inside" is just one of seven eye-opening chapters in which Yohn opines upon what makes excellent brands excel. She explains that "true cultural change at your company hasn't occurred until all your employees, whether top leaders or field workers, are using your values to inform their daily behavior—with customers and with each other."

This may be surprising news to troubled companies that tend to focus more on the marketplace challenges they face. But our extensive [experience](#) revitalizing stalled, stuck and stale brands lends credence to Yohn's argument. "Your starting point is cultivating a strong internal corporate culture that aligns and integrates with your brand," she says.

With culture as a foundation, Yohn says that brands can then begin to explore the possibilities, and she outlines six additional concepts on which great brands are built. But they all tie back to her first principle: "The more clearly you can see your brand's external cultural relevance," Yohn says, "the better you are able to align it with your internal culture and with the emotional connection to your customers—and vice versa."

It's all part of Yohn's "brand as business" approach, which emphasizes [authenticity](#) and a comprehensive, all-inclusive view of branding. Put simply, there isn't anything a company does or does not do that won't affect its brand. That can be somewhat intimidating to a company that doesn't have its internal act together, but the upside is compelling indeed. As Yohn puts it, "A brand-based business strategy enables companies to develop valuable relationships with the right kind of customers and produces clarity and conviction for everyone who works on the business."

Indeed. If more companies shared Yohn's "brand as business" philosophy there would be many more [power brands](#). The key is to conceive of branding not as some sort of academic or ephemeral concept, but as real-world business strategy. Or as Yohn succinctly puts it, "Try to remember that your brand is a verb."

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