

12 Most Surprising Things Great Brands Do

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“Brand” may be the most misused, misunderstood term in business today.

A brand is often perceived as a tool for appealing to external audiences — a name, logo, image, advertising, look and feel, reputation, or trademark. But the fact is, none of these is a brand. These are merely manifestations, symbols, or expressions of a brand. By limiting the definition and application of a brand to this external, surface level, its full value-creating power goes unrealized.

Great brands, however, avoid this mistake by conceiving of their brands as strategic platforms. Their brands comprise the values and attributes that define and distinguish the value they deliver to people through entire customer experiences and the way they do business. They use their brands as management tools to fuel, align, and guide everything they do.

This leads great brands to employ some quite surprising brand-building practices:

1. Great brands start inside

Great brands cultivate a vibrant corporate culture around their brand because they know their culture determines whether or not their brand is embraced by employees and other stakeholders, and appropriately interpreted and reinforced with customers. So, they start brand-building by cultivating a culture grounded in their core essence, purpose, and values.

2. Great brands communicate last

People are becoming more knowledgeable and discriminating about their spending decisions. Their brand preferences are formed less by slick advertising and cool promotions, and more by what they actually experience when they do business with companies. So, great brands first ensure their culture is expressed clearly through customer experience — and they save their marketing communications for later.

3. Great brands avoid selling products

Great brands develop superior emotional connections with customers through their product rather than promote their product quality and features. The managers of great brands know that people don't rationally assess products when they make purchase decisions. They seek to influence people instead of merely impacting them; seduce instead of sell.

4. Great brands transcend their categories

Thinking too narrowly about a brand can render it obsolete when people's needs shift or new technologies arise. So, great brands constantly address the question, “What business are we really in?” in order to innovate new concepts and tap into profitable opportunities outside existing product lines. Defining their business by their brand is how great brands grow while nurturing valuable existing customer relationships.



5. Great brands ignore trends

Tapping into hot categories and riding the wave of popular trends are how brand managers can be assured that their brands will be noticed and talked about. But great brands challenge trends instead of following them. They don't operate in reactive mode; they seek to anticipate what people will want. And the most successful ones actually identify broader cultural movements that they can advance and build on to their advantage.

6. Great brands embrace competition

Great brands believe competition is a good thing. They know that competitors' efforts often serve to educate customers about a category and increase demand for all the brands in it. Plus, people need a mental file folder in which to place a brand — competition helps create that classification by serving as a reference point. Ultimately competition helps brands get better. Just as John McEnroe made Jimmy Connors a better tennis player and vice versa, even the fiercest competitors spur each other on to greatness.

7. Great brands don't chase customers

Great brands hold fast to their brand values and positioning and accept that their brand isn't for everyone. Instead of squandering their precious equity trying to appeal to elusive audiences, they embrace and celebrate what they stand for and project their brand identities intensely, consistently, and saliently, so they attract the people who are destined to be their most loyal customers.

8. Great brands sweat the small stuff

Great brands view each consumer contact as an occasion enhancing their brand image or undermining it, and they know every interaction matters, every touchpoint communicates. So they design their customer experiences down to the last detail so they make a positive brand impression and convey their brand identity in the finest details of execution.

9. Great brands let design do the talking

Because well-crafted design elicits emotional responses, great brands form strong, sustainable bonds with people through design. They use packaging design to convey the unique meaning and value of their brand. They use product design to differentiate their offering and appeal to the senses. They use experience design to make an unmistakable, memorable impression on their customers. Great brands know all the little things they do through design out-communicate all the big things they claim through mass media.

10. Great brands commit and stay committed

Great brands don't allow competing priorities, organizational politics, and the usual managerial imperative to reach for short-term revenue goals to distract them from their priorities. The leaders behind great brands drill down to the core of their brand aspiration and lock it in. And then they execute on it relentlessly so that customers, over time, will learn exactly what their brand stands for and come to trust that the brand will deliver on it every time.

11. Great brands sacrifice the sacred

Great brands often defy conventional wisdom in order to preserve their defining brand values and attributes. They are willing to sacrifice short-term profit and growth if it threatens to dilute their brand or alienate their existing customers. They favor building a long-term brand image and are willing to make the tough decisions needed to do so.

12. Great brands never have to “give back”

In lieu of charitable contributions and one-time donations, great brands create value for themselves and for all their stakeholders by pioneering positive social change. Some modify or redesign their products while others change their suppliers or standard operating procedures to address social issues. Great brands don't have to take with one hand and “give back” with the other — they create shared value.

There is one common underpinning to all of these surprising brand-building practices. Great brands employ a cohesive management approach that elevates brand-building from a niche marketing function to the core driver of the business — and that is what has turned them into industry icons.

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Blending a fresh perspective, twenty-five years of experience working with world-class brands including Sony and Frito-Lay, and a talent for inspiring audiences, Denise Lee Yohn is a leading authority and popular speaker on building and positioning exceptional brands. Denise is the author of the book *What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest* (Jossey-Bass).

