

Denise Lee Yohn: An interview by Bob Morris

Blending a fresh perspective, twenty-five years of experience, and a talent for inspiring audiences, **Denise Lee Yohn** is a leading authority on building and positioning exceptional brands. She initially cultivated her brand-building approaches through several high-level positions in advertising and client-side marketing. She served as lead strategist at advertising agencies for Burger King and Land Rover and as the marketing leader and analyst for Jack in the Box restaurants and Spiegel catalogs. Denise went on to head Sony Electronic Inc.'s first ever brand office, where she was the vice president/general manager of brand and strategy and garnered major corporate awards.



An influential writer, Denise enjoys challenging readers to think differently about brand-building. She regularly contributes to Harvard Business Review, Forbes, and Seeking Alpha, and also appears on FOX Business TV. She penned the best-selling book ***What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles that Separate the Best from the Rest*** (Jossey-Bass). With her expertise and personal approach, Denise delivers an array of inspirational workshops, presentations, and keynote addresses to business leaders in all industries. When she's not writing or speaking, she serves as the brand director for TEDx San Diego and sits on the board of directors for a branch of the YMCA.

Morris: Before discussing ***What Great Brands Do***, a few general questions. Years ago, was there a turning point (if not an epiphany) that set you on the career course you continue to follow? Please explain.

Yohn: I've always been fascinated by brands. In the early years of my career, I collected the skills and experiences that I needed to work on brand-building. I didn't recognize that at the time, but when I started working for Sony Electronics, as their first ever brand leader, everything came together. I was working on a world-class brand in my dream job and quickly learned that brand-building needed to start on the inside. In my role at Sony, I learned the principles and developed the tools and methodologies that I now use with my clients and that I write about in my new book, ***What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest*** (Jossey-Bass).

Morris: To what extent has your formal education been invaluable to what you have accomplished in life thus far?

Yohn: I don't think my actual studies taught me a lot. I did learn research methodologies from my psychology classes (I was a Psychology and Political Science double-major) but for the most part, my years in school mostly taught me how to think critically and how to express myself in written and verbal communications.

Morris: What do you know now about the business world that you wish you knew when you when to work full-time for the first time? Why?

Yohn: I wish I had known how valuable people and relationships are. I was pretty self-centered and selfish when I started out and viewed people primarily only in terms of the value they created for me or in my work. Doesn't that sound awful?! I think I was that way because I lacked confidence in my own value and felt like I had to earn people's approval, so I tended to treat other people that way. Over time I've come to see the people I work with as a tremendous blessing and I try to get to know them as people (not just colleagues) and help them and build them up,

Morris: Here are several of my favorite quotations to which I ask you to respond. First, from Howard Aiken: “Don’t worry about people stealing your ideas. If your ideas are any good, you’ll have to ram them down people’s throats.”

Yohn: This resonates with me because too often I hear from business leaders that they’re afraid someone is going to steal their idea – and often I have to tell them the sad truth, that most people don’t care about their idea. And it’s usually because their idea isn’t all that new or different in the first place. There is so much more to be gained by sharing ideas and working collaboratively than by worrying about being copied.

Morris: From Isaac Asimov: “The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds the most discoveries, is not “Eureka!” (I found it!) but ‘That’s odd....’”

Yohn: I’ve found that the wisest, and most interesting, people are those who look at the same things everyone else is looking at but who see something entirely different. I’d like to develop those kinds of observation skills and the curiosity to pursue things that seem “odd.”

Morris: Finally, from Peter Drucker: “There is surely nothing quite so useless as doing with great efficiency what should not be done at all.”

Yohn: I’m a big fan of Peter Drucker and this quote is just one of his many gems. It reminds me of that adage, “don’t just do things right, do the right things” and I try to live by it.

Morris: Now please shift your attention to ***What Great Brands Do***. When and why did you decide to write it?

Yohn: I had been thinking about it for many years and had even submitted book proposals to publishers 5-6 years ago. But I just didn’t have the concept quite right. Later I learned that was because I was trying to write the book I wanted to write instead of the book that people would want to read. About 2 ½ years ago, I attended 800 CEO Read’s Pow Wow (an author’s conference) and that got me re-motivated to work on the book and connected to an editor who helped me reframe the book concept.

I wrote the book because I wanted to share my insights about brand-building with a far larger audience than is possible for me to reach as an independent consultant. There seem to be so many misconceptions about what it takes to build a great brand and I wanted to de-mystify the process and inspire and teach people how to do it themselves.

Morris: As I indicate in my review of the book for various Amazon websites, there are dozens of passages throughout your narrative that caught my eye. For those who have not as yet read the book, please suggest what you view as [begin italics] the most important point [end italics] or [begin italics] key take-away [end italics] in each of several passages.

First, The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Power Great Brands (Pages 10-14): Which of them seems to be the most difficult to [begin italics] sustain [end italics]? Why?

Yohn: I’ll answer this question in two ways. As far as individual principles, I’ve observed that companies have the most difficulty sustaining “Great Brands Don’t Chase Customers” and “Great Brands Commit and Stay Committed.” The former is difficult because the push for growth and/or the greed to make as much money as possible usually causes people to want to go after as many customers as possible. The latter presents difficulties because it often involves saying “no” to doing things that seem attractive in the short-term and making unconventional choices.

Above the individual principles, though, I’ve found that it’s most difficult for leaders to keep following all of the principles over time. It’s much easier to focus on one or two, but great brands apply all of the principles as an indivisible, integrated whole – and consistently employ the complete “brand-as-business” management

approach.

Morris: Putting Internal Brand Culture First (21-35): What specifically does this mean?

Yohn: Great brands start brand-building by cultivating a strong, brand-led culture. They ensure that their brand values are embraced and appropriately interpreted and reinforced by everyone who works on the brand. And then they turn their attention to expressing and promoting their brand in communications and marketing.

Morris: Emotions Trump Efficacy (49-58)

Yohn: People make purchase decisions based how products and services make them feel or on the identities they enable them to experience and express. Product features and claims of efficacy are of secondary importance because they're expected and usually not very differentiating. So great brands seek emotional connections with their customers instead of pushing products on them.

Morris: A Strong Brand Identity Attracts the Ideal Customer (105-114)

Yohn: People find great appeal in brands that are clear about what they stand for and what value they provide. When a brand embraces and celebrates its core identity, values, and attributes, it attracts customers who are like-minded and more likely to be loyal to the brand. Instead of squandering brand equity by chasing elusive customers, great brands draw the right people to them.

Morris: Valuing the Customer Experience (132-140)

Yohn: Most people fail to appreciate how much impact the entire customer experience has on brand perceptions, thinking instead that product or service quality or marketing are the main drivers of brand image. But great brands know that all aspects of a customer's interaction with their brand matters – and so they design their brand experiences down to the finest details of execution. And they seek out ways to bring their brand to life in every aspect of their customer experiences.

Morris: Commitment Creates Focus (160-175)

Yohn: I've observed that the pressure to produce short-term results and the pull to imitate the successful practices of others induces many companies to lose focus. They end up trying to do a lot of different things with varying success. Great brands know the best defense against this is a firm commitment to setting priorities and then ruthlessly sticking to them. So they drill down to the core of their brand identities and lock them in. Then they execute on their brand focus in everything they do so that over time customers learn exactly what the brand stands for and come to trust that the brand will deliver it.

Morris: Creating Real Business Value (213-215)

Yohn: Great brands don't just do CSR, corporate social responsibility – they do CSV, they create shared value, value that is shared by customers, employees, investors, and communities. CSV involves making a positive social impact through the design and operations your business. When you look at and operate your business holistically, participating in ad hoc programs to "give back" make little sense. Instead, great brands identify ways to create value for all their stakeholders by grounding their efforts in their brand values and attributes from the start.

Morris: The Challenge of Brand Leadership (219-220)

Yohn: Leaders at the top of their organizations must assume responsibility for brand-building. That's what the leaders of great brands do. They ensure their organization delivers the brand identity and core values through everything they do, every day, all day. They use their brand to drive every aspect of their business and inform, inspire, and instruct every one of their stakeholders to do the same.

Morris: Today, when there are still so many people who are unemployed or underemployed, how can they become an “exceptional brand” and thereby succeed in their search for appropriate career opportunities?

Yohn: People can indeed be brands and in my book I reference some celebrities including Lady Gaga and Oprah who have built themselves into great ones. When most people talk about “personal branding,” they tend to focus on your image, your resume, or your Facebook or LinkedIn profile.

But the way I see it, those things are the equivalent of advertising a brand — which, as I explained, is what great brands do only after they’ve built a strong brand internally. So I would advise anyone who is seeking a new career opportunity to apply the brand-building principles in my book to themselves, beginning with “Great Brands Start Inside.”

Make sure you have clearly identified your purpose and values (your brand identity) and that everything you do reflects these. Follow other principles such as “Great Brands Don’t Chase Customers” — focus your efforts on targets (recruiters, hiring managers, companies, etc.) who share your values and who are most likely to value what you have to offer, instead of trying to appeal to anybody who seems remotely relevant — and “Great Brands Avoid Selling Products” – seek to make meaningful, emotion connections with your targets and use your skills and experiences to support your appeal. As I write in my book, your brand is who you are and what you do — not just what you say about yourself.

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Denise cordially invites you to check out the resources at these websites:

Her [website](#)

[What Great Brands Do](#)

Her [blog](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Speaker’s Kit](#)

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