

Be the Brand

READ

Why Brand?

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We live in an age where nearly perfect, ubiquitous information allows buyers to accurately predict the experience and quality of products and services. People today rely less on cues or promises of quality (like brand names) and more on the opinions of experts and other consumers. People no longer need a familiar name and logo, a creative advertising campaign, or an attractive message to help them decide which product to buy. The influence of brands on purchase decisions seems to have diminished.

But this doesn't mean that brands have become less important—ask the executives at Starbucks, IBM, Apple or IKEA. The brands at these companies remain integral to their success because they develop and use their brands as more than mere signals of quality. These and other similar great brands conceive their brands differently. They use their brands as management tools to fuel, align, and guide everything they do.

Brand building looks very different the way great brands do it.

Priority target group: internal, before external

Great brands start building on the inside. They first engage the people who work on the brand before turning their attention to those they hope will buy it. They know that employees and other internal stakeholders must understand and embrace the brand before they can be expected to appropriately interpret and reinforce it to customers. Whether defining a brand from the very beginning or re-invigorating or re-directing a misguided one, brand-building is first an internal task.

Driver of differentiation: purpose, more than promotion or products

Great brands distinguish themselves through more than discounts and clever promotions. They know that special pricing can serve as an attention-getter, but discounts rarely sustain customers' interest once the promotional period is over, and they rarely build brand equity. Similarly, they know that when it comes to brand differentiation, marketing campaigns, sponsorships, and other promotional activities are best viewed as a means to an end—not the end itself.

The purpose of the organization provides a more effective source of differentiation because it is more meaningful and more sustainable. Now that customers can see through to companies' inner workings, *why* and *how* companies do things has become as important as *what* they do. And, given that companies no longer sustain a monopoly on features or technology, they must differentiate on something other than products alone.

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Manifestation: culture, then communications

Organizational culture is the primary way great brands are manifested. Employees' attitudes, actions, and daily decision-making speak volumes about a company's true nature and the value it seeks to create for customers. With great brands, the defining brand values and attributes are experienced and expounded by the people working inside the company well before they are expressed to people outside.

Success metric: integrity, not impact alone

Brands can no longer declare success when they manage to make a splash in the marketplace. Awareness and attention are no longer the most valuable social currency in today's information-intense environment—trust and affinity are. So great brands emphasize brand integrity and root out the gaps between their brand promises and customer reality. They measure themselves by whether or not what they actually do aligns with what they claim to do, because they know that's how customers measure them.

Leadership: management, not marketing

Ultimately, great brands know that the new demands on brands require responsibility for stewarding and guiding their brands at the highest levels of their organizations. Brand-building must shift from a silo function to enterprise-wide orchestration, with company leaders setting direction and facilitating implementation across all operations and all stakeholders. Great brands have elevated brand-building from a niche marketing responsibility to the core driver of their business.

When you think about and build your brand the way great brands do, your commitment is not to *express* your brand—it is to *embody* it. You understand the most important way to address the new information landscape is to BE THE BRAND.

Denise Lee Yohn has been inspiring and teaching companies to grow their businesses for 25 years. She is the author of [What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles that Separate the Best from the Rest](#) (Jossey-Bass.) Read more by Denise at deniseleeyohn.com/bites/best-bites.