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What Great Brands Do

By Denise Lee Yohn

Most businesspeople have a limited definition of a brand as marketing “asset” — a tool for communicating with people outside the company, according to marketing consultant Denise Lee Yohn. For Yohn, a brand is much more than a company’s name, logo, and image or even its personality, attitude or reputation. “Your brand is what your company does and how you do it,” she writes in her book,

What Great Brands Do. Branding isn’t about showcasing a business through logos or marketing campaigns. Instead, Yohn explains, “The brand is the central organizing and operating idea of the business.”

This is what Yohn calls “brand as business.” It is the brand that guides every strategic decision, that drives the company’s culture, its operations, and its customer experiences. Yohn urges brands to be used “as management tools to fuel, align and guide every person in the organization and every task they undertake.” Companies, she writes, must “operationalize” the brand.

For example, the REI outdoor sporting goods chain has a clear brand identity built on outdoor excitement and adventure. This brand identity guides every process and decision involving the company, including the design of its retail stores. No matter where the store is located, customers are surrounded by adventure as soon as they walk in — and even before (check out the ice pick handles on the doors they just came through). Climbing walls and faux mountainsides rise up to help customers test out their outdoor footwear. Need to test a sleeping bag? Walk-in freezers recreate the cold of a mountain night. If there’s room, there are areas for trying out gas cookers and setting up tents. Every graphic, signage and fixtures expresses and reinforces the REI brand of outdoors and adventure.

The REI example is drawn from a chapter called “Great Brands Sweat the Small Stuff,” which is the fifth of seven

principles of great brand building that form the core methodology of the book. Through these principles, which include tools, exercises and case studies, Yohn turns the theory of brand as business into real-world practice. Her seven principles include, in addition to “Great Brands Sweat the Small Stuff”:

Great Brands Start Inside. For Yohn, creating a brand-building culture is the first step in putting the brand at the heart of the company’s strategy and operations. Every stakeholder — not just employees, but also external stakeholders such as vendors, distributors and strategic partners — must embrace the notion that everything they do needs to align with and express the brand.

Great Brands Avoid Selling Products. Companies must not depend solely on products, even great products with superior attributes. They must find ways to connect emotionally with customers.

Great Brands Ignore Trends. Trends are tempting but short-term. The best companies anticipate or even help to create broad and important cultural movements. The United States was known around the world for its weak coffee, until Starbucks came along.

Great Brands Don’t Chase Customers. A brand that tries to please everyone inevitably loses its brand identity, according to Yohn. Focus on your best customers and the unique value you bring to them.

Great Brands Commit and Stay Committed. It is very tempting to veer from one’s brand identity in the pursuit of short-term growth and profits. The goal is to gain your competitive edge through a brand platform from which you never compromise.

Great Brands Never Give Back. With this unexpected principle, Yohn argues that great brands don’t need to “give back” to society because they never “took” in the first place. “Great brands manage to use the power of their brands to inspire change and have an overall beneficial impact on society,” she writes.

What Great Brands Do is a revealing how-to guide for any business that covets the success of the great brands in our world today, and has been wondering perhaps with some frustration: “how do they do it?”