

Are You Making Excuses for Not Building Your Brand or Are You Embracing Its Potential?

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“Our competitors are much bigger and better resourced than we are.” “Our category isn’t exciting.” “We have to deal with regulatory issues.”

These are the kinds of comments I sometimes hear from CEOs when I speak to them about focusing on building their brands. “Our situation is different,” they claim as they try to explain why brand-building isn’t relevant or possible for them. But more often than not, these explanations are simply excuses for not having the commitment, discipline, and focus to build a great brand. And what they say they “can’t” do is actually only a result of thinking they have unique challenges, when they really don’t.

Some executives are convinced they drew the short stick on differentiation. One person told me it was easier for an energy drink brand to differentiate itself from the competition than it was for his company, a hospitality brand, to stand out. By focusing on the similarity of products in his category (i.e., slot machines and hotel rooms), he failed to see how all the elements of his guest experience provided opportunities to differentiate his brand. In practically every industry, product differentiation has become harder to achieve, and even harder to maintain. But a brand can stand out based on its environment, customer service, added value services, sensory experiences, marketing, communication, and more. Customer experience differentiation can be a powerful lever for most every brand.

When business leaders face challenges in generating brand appeal, they use their “boring,” “technical,” or “un-sexy” business as a scapegoat. Selling widgets to B2B customers may indeed be harder than selling sneakers to teens, but that doesn’t mean certain companies must compete on a rational basis. Research has shown that decision-making is an emotional process, so an emotional appeal — whether based on trust, self-expression, aspiration, or any other decision driver — can be effective for any company. Every business will have more success imbuing its brand with attributes and values that resonate emotionally.

It’s also easy to blame tough competition for brand-building limitations. When competitors are bigger, better established, or have some other edge, companies tend to settle for playing second fiddle. But being an underdog doesn’t have to be an disadvantage. Apple challenged Microsoft and IBM when it was a long shot in the computer business; Chobani unseated market leader Dannon without any advertising. Smaller, newer, scrappier, under-valued brands may not be market share leaders but they can be thought-leaders. They can generate awareness and attract customers by not accepting the status-quo and positioning themselves as formidable challenger brands.

Another common excuse for brand resistance is the presence of a third party, like franchisees, regulators, gatekeepers, etc. Executives often believe that these groups don’t care about brand strength or that they detract from brand-building efforts. But great brands design their business models to create value for all stakeholders involved in their business. And they engage their stakeholders with their brand, inspiring them with it and informing



and instructing them about it just as they do with their employees. Third parties can actually be a brand's strongest ambassadors, as are the franchisees at Popeye's Louisiana Kitchen and the local governments for Royal Caribbean.

Business leaders also think customer price-sensitivity prevents them from establishing brand preference. They believe their customers make purchase decisions in their category based solely on price so brands don't play a role. While brand influence does vary by product and industry, some companies from Starbucks to Egghand's Best have managed to change their categories' value equation and increase the influence of drivers other than price — including brand. The opportunity is to not see the role of brand as fixed, but rather to recognize and pursue its potential.

A brand is a powerful value creator for any business. Whether leaders hear of proven brand-building approaches and think of all the reasons why they don't apply to them, or they figure out their relevance and do the hard work to implement them, they're masters of their own destiny.

About [Denise Lee Yohn](#)



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 on building and positioning exceptional brands. Denise is the author of the bestselling book [What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles that Separate the Best from the Rest](#) (Jossey-Bass, January, 2014.) Read more by Denise at <http://deniseleeyohn.com/bites/best-bites> .

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