

# Your Brand Is What You Do, and How You Do It



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Whenever people try to say what a brand is, it makes me think of the elephant parable in which different blind men describe an elephant based on what its different body parts feel like. Plenty of disagreements arise, and the discussion often ends in confusion.

I used to bristle over the ambiguity and long for a definitive description, but I now realize that a brand is, indeed, comprised of many elements, and while the different parts may seem as disparate as an elephant's big, thick trunk and short, curly tail, they combine to create a substantive, powerful force.

I came to this realization while doing research for my book, *What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest*. I looked at some of the world's greatest brands, including Starbucks, Apple and Google as well as smaller but powerful and profitable brands such as Basecamp, Shake Shack and Wegmans. I discovered that great brands are made out of four building blocks:

**Company strategy:** The value that an organization creates, who it creates it for, and how it creates it are the core strategic elements of a brand. Without them, a brand lacks definition and substance, but with them, a brand establishes its reason for being. Great brands are grounded in strategies that are relevant, meaningful and valuable to their targets, and they specify how the organization establishes and maintains differentiation from competitive brands.

**Corporate culture:** Brands reflect the values and beliefs that drive the people who work on them. If the culture of an organization is unfocused, adverse or mundane, it's unlikely that its brand will be anything but. A unique, inspired and dynamic culture, however, gives a brand energy and momentum. That's why great brands start brand-building inside: Their leaders cultivate and steward a strong internal culture.

**Customer experiences:** A brand is conveyed through customer touch points, made up of all of the experiences that customers have had with the brand. Advertising and marketing—the standard ways to create brand impressions—now comprise only a fraction of how people experience a brand today. Every touch point embodies a brand aspect or attribute, and the managers of great brands ensure that their customer experiences make their brands truly remarkable.

**Communications:** Great brands create compelling communications because what an organization communicates, and how it communicates it, also are elements of the brand. Each social share, sign, sell sheet and speech is an expression of the brand, and communications are becoming an increasingly powerful way for companies to differentiate their brands and create value for customers.

A brand is what a company does, and how it does it. It's not what the customer thinks it is or what people say about it, or a feeling that people have about it. Those are merely perceptions of the brand, and while brand perception is critical, great brands don't operate by outside perceptions. They make strategic choices about what they will and won't do, they use their internal values to shape their outside image, they carefully design and manage their customer experiences, and they use their communications to create engagement and connection.

Stop trying to come up with a single, pithy definition for your brand. It's far more important to recognize all of the different elements that comprise your brand and to ensure that each makes a strong impact.

*With 25 years of experience working with brands including Sony and Frito-Lay, Denise Lee Yohn now is president of San Diego-based brand consultancy Denise Lee Yohn Inc. and author of [What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest](#).*