

Denise Lee Yohn on How to Achieve Rock Star Brand Status

We're super excited about our Oct. 15 "Girl Talks West" event in San Francisco, which features short, passionate presentations delivered by powerful women leaders. To register, [click here!](#)

Denise Lee Yohn, author of "What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best," is a featured speaker at Girl Talks, where she will detail how attendees can achieve rock star brand status. Denise was also nice enough to sit down with the *Inner Circle* this week to tell us a little about herself.

Inner Circle: Please tell us about yourself and your career.

Denise Lee Yohn: Remember Spiegel catalogs? As a research analyst there and at Jack in the Box restaurants, I learned how to figure out how customers make decisions and how to appeal to and connect with them. I also worked as a product manager, which taught me the skills and experiences of developing new products and bringing them to market. I then had an opportunity to work at a couple of advertising agencies in New York, where I learned how the creative communications process works. When Sony Electronics hired me as its first ever brand leader, I was able to integrate all of that knowledge and experience and apply it to brand building.



Eleven years ago, I resigned from Sony and started my own firm. I now contribute to my clients' successes and to the broader conversation and practice of business as a consultant, speaker and writer. My first book, "What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best," came out last year, and I'm about to launch a new book, "Extraordinary Experiences: What Great Retail and Restaurant Brands Do." I love brands – I love studying them, learning about them, and sharing my insights about them.

IC: Tell me about your book. You identify seven principles that separate the best from the rest. Can you discuss the principles briefly?

DLY: In my research, I identified the seven most distinctive, defining characteristics or principles of what great brands do:

- **Great brands start inside.** Cultivate a strong brand-led culture inside your organization.
- **Great brands avoid selling products.** Seduce people through emotional connections.
- **Great brands ignore trends.** Advance your own cultural movements.
- **Great brands don't chase customers.** Operate like a lighthouse and attract like-minded customers.
- **Great brands sweat the small stuff.** Design your brand experiences down to the details.
- **Great brands commit and stay committed.** Lock in the core of your brand and say "no" to everything that detracts from it.
- **Great brands never have to "give back."** Make a positive social impact through your business.

There's actually an eighth principle, which is the most important, powerful one: great brands adopt the brand-as-business management approach and use their brands to drive, align and guide everything they do. You can learn

more about the principles and download a free chapter from the book [here](#).

IC: Why do you think proper branding is such an important part of business success?

DLY: Most “branding” efforts involve creating an image for a company – e.g., developing a look and tagline to promote a business or launching a new advertising or social media campaign to reinvigorate it. However, these activities simply serve to express a brand; great brands execute their brands. They elevate their brand from an external-facing message to a strategic tool for managing the business. They use their brand to shape their culture, focus their core operations and design their customer experiences. That’s why great brands have so much power and value.

IC: Can you talk about any companies that have had great success rebranding?

DLY: Lane Bryant caught my eye with its [#ImNoAngel](#) campaign. The effort was born out a need to revive the business and make the brand more relevant, but in addition to reinvigorating the brand, the campaign sparked a change in the conversation about women, beauty and plus-sized bodies. My sense is that it helped women feel more confident about themselves and challenged everyone’s stereotypes about sexiness. It’s a terrific example of advancing a cultural movement and making a powerful emotional connection – two of the principles that great brands live out.

IC: Are there any women retail leaders you can identify who have done a good job of branding their company/products?

DLY: What Angela Ahrendts did at Burberry was quite remarkable – turning around an old, overexposed brand and creating a technology-enabled brand experience that’s truly breakthrough. Now that she’s at Apple, I understand she’s been focused on aligning and energizing that brand’s nearly 100,000 employees and setting up Apple stores to be community centers that influence and serve customers. I can’t wait to see the results of her efforts.