

Interview: Denise Lee Yohn – Author, ‘What Great Brands Do’

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Over a 25-year career including running Sony’s first ever brand office as the vice president/general manager of brand and strategy, Denise Lee Yohn has established herself as an authoritative voice in the world of branding.

As a lead strategist for major brands such as Burger King, Frito Lay and Land Rover, Yohn cultivated a wealth of experience that she distilled into her highly-acclaimed 2014 book, *What Great Brands Do* –which was named one of the Top 10 Marketing Books by [Inc. Magazine](#) on their annual list.

This past November she released a new book, *Extraordinary Experiences: What Great Retail and Restaurant Brands Do*, that narrows her brand focus on a segment where firms are struggling to establish and maintain relevance in an arena exploding with consumer options both online and off.

Branding in Asia recently caught up with Denise at her office in San Diego for an extensive conversation about her new book and her take on the current world of branding. She’s engaging, on top of her game, and a great conversation that could have went on for hours.

Tell us about the new book

It’s called *Extraordinary Experiences: What Great Retail and Restaurant Brands Do*. It profiles seven great brands from the retail and restaurant categories and talks about how they’re able to create experiences that consumers love and that inspire their loyalty.

What drew you to focus on the retail and restaurant industry?

A few things. First of all, retail is under tremendous pressure these days. There is so much growth in the online and mobile shopping space that, I think, brick and mortar stores are struggling to figure out how they can maintain relevance and appeal, given that there are so many shopping options out there. I wanted to take one of the hardest hit, or most pressured, industries and show that brand-building really works and that it can be done even in that situation.

Second, I have previously written *What Great Brands Do*. The feedback I got for the book was that it was very powerful, practical, very helpful, and I wanted to continue that momentum with examples from companies that people could really relate to on a very visceral, or a real, level.

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I thought “Everyone shops, everyone goes out to eat.” Sometimes it might be easy to look at Apple or a Nike against these great brands and wish that “There’s no way that my little mom & pop deli on the corner can be like that,” but I wanted to show that in these stores and restaurants that we all experience every day; that brand-building does work. Finally, most of my experience is in the restaurant retail category, so I wanted to share from my actual experience not

just the research that I've done.

In your new book you profile seven different retail organizations. Can give us a few that you hold up as examples that others should follow?

They're all great. I think that the ones that are maybe the most intriguing or interesting – I've heard a lot of people comment about my chapter on Costco. There are millions of people who love Costco and walk through the warehouse club doors every day, and I think that people maybe don't realize how strategic Costco has been about their customer strategy.

I write about them in the chapter, about how great brands don't chase customers. What I explain is – again, this is based on the research in my own experience of shopping at Costco – is that Costco is not trying to be a mass market discount brand. They're not trying to be like a Walmart, even though that Sam's Club, which is another warehouse club brand, they're very selective about who they target as customers.

They want these upper middle-class savvy customers who have not only the disposable income to be able to afford the shopping there, but have this mentality or mindset that, really, the shopping experience at Costco appeals to them.

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I talk in the book how Costco has this mix of “triggers and treasures” in their product assortment. Triggers are those basic items, like toilet paper and rotisserie chicken that you just *need* to go pick up, and that triggers a visit to Costco. But then there are these treasures which Costco has, like the \$1,000 foosball table that you happen to stumble upon as you're roaming the aisles of the warehouse, or the \$200 oversized stuffed teddy bear that “Oh my gosh, I just have to get that as a gift for my niece, or whatever.”

These kinds of products, both the triggers as well as, more specifically, the treasures, appeal to that kind of customer who's like, “Oh my gosh. I didn't know that I wanted this, I didn't know that I needed it, but now that I see it in such a great price and it's such a great product, I have to have it.”

There's a real, I think, smart strategy behind how Costco appeals to its customers.

So, with companies like Costco, there is a leading of the consumer, where the customer doesn't know exactly what they want?

Absolutely. I think that that is actually what most great retailers do – they create desire. I think the best retailers really curate or edit their assortment so that you are really speaking to these unknown or unfulfilled needs that people have.

I think Costco does it well in terms of finding these very high-quality name brand, like designer handbags and \$3,000 TVs, and they make them very affordable price-wise to the point where, as a customer, you really can't say no. You're like, “I would be stupid to pass up a deal like this.”

Any other brands that you admire?

Another brand in my book is a fairly unknown brand. It's called [Sweet Green](#), a fast casual restaurant chain. It started in Washington, D.C. and has expanded into a few other markets. They're a salad-based healthy, fast casual kind of

restaurant.

I put Sweet Green in the chapter about how great brands never have to give back. The term “give back” has become, I think, very popular these days: “Our companies want to give back to the community and be a good social, corporate citizen.”

But what I’ve discovered is that great brands don’t view making a positive social impact as something that they do on the side, like, “We’re going to do a cause marketing initiative,” or, “We’re going to make a charitable contribution.” They actually design their business at their core to make that positive impact, and Sweet Green is an excellent example because it was started by these three college students who were really distraught over the fact they could not find healthy fast options for food.

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They were going to school in Washington, D.C. and there was nothing for them, so they built this concept where rather than just thinking about “We’re just going to build this restaurant that serves great salads,” they thought about “How can we make the most impact on people’s lives?”

Not only do they ensure that their buildings are [LEED-certified](#) and very sustainable in the way that they operate their kitchens and their restaurants, but they also work with the local community to educate students on growing and making and enjoying great food.

Again, not in the sense of “We’re going to just do this little school program so that people think that we’re doing something good with the community,” but they really believe that they’re on a mission to help young people understand the value of healthy eating.



They say that their mission is a combination of passion and purpose – this idea of passion for greater food and this purpose for changing the world and helping people eat healthier. They serve as a great example of a company that is making a positive social impact in the way that they run their business.

What kind of advice would you give to CMOs out there looking to enhance their brands in the retail space?

I think that CMOs are in a very unique and important position in the organization to affect change, internally as well as externally, the way that the brand is used and perceived. I think CMOs need to reframe their roles so it’s not just marketing and little “m” marketing, but big “M” marketing – how do you actually help the organization create products and services and create demand that makes a positive impact and that creates value for customers? How do you engage your customers so that they can really experience that?

Without sounding judgmental – this is totally not meant to be that way – but I think, sometimes, CMOs view their job as too small. I’d love to see CMOs really embrace this idea that they can be champions for building great brands within their organizations.

They’re not always going to have the direct lines of influence or the direct roles of responsibility, but because they

know so much about customers and they know so much about how to create great customer experiences, they know so much about how to connect with customers, they can really impact the way that a company does business.

Are there any particular branding trends out there now that you like?

There are a couple of things. One, I think, there's a lot more emphasis on internal culture in companies. While that may not seem like a branding trend, I see it as very much an impact on the brand, because the way that I see great brands operate is that they are the same on the inside as they are on the outside; that they actually start brand-building, by cultivating this really strong culture internally so that everyone in the organization, everyone who works in their brand, understands what their brand mission and values are and works to bring those to life in everything that they do.

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This emphasis on company culture, I think, is a great trend in brand-building right now. I'd also say that there's a lot of emphasis on authenticity. I almost have a love/hate relationship with the word 'authenticity', because I feel like it's so overused, but I do think that companies are more aware that they need to operate with authenticity, with integrity that what they say they do is what they do and what they do is what they say.

The accountability that companies are placing on themselves to operate in responsible ways and to be honest and open with their customers, that's another trend that I think –and I wouldn't even call it a trend, I really think it's a movement, I think, that benefits companies as well as customers.

Going the other way, are there any branding trends you'd like to see dead and buried?

I'm not so sure I would say one particular thing. I'd say that, in general, there is so much cool technology and cool ways to connect with people these days, and I love seeing brands just explore new ways to get out there and to be connected with their customers.

I do worry sometimes, though, of the shiny new object syndrome where people are gravitating towards "We have to be on Snapchat," or "We have to be on Vine," whatever the latest social network or media technology is, without really thinking about: "Is this right for our brand? Is this right for our customers? How can we use this to really create value?"

I won't to say that there's any particular trend that I would like to see go away, but I'd like to see more emphasis on how are these different technologies and different social networks are really adding value to people's lives.

You can visit Denise Lee Yohn on the web at www.deniseleeyohn.com

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