

Extraordinary Experiences



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How do some stores and restaurants break through the clutter; compete with bigger, online competitors; and manage to grow and thrive when so many others fail? This question is what led me to research and then write the book, *Extraordinary Experiences: What Great Retail and Restaurant Brands Do*.

If you're like me, you have your favorite stores and those restaurants that we keep going back to. Some restaurateurs and retailers have managed to cultivate our loyalty and we love going to them. We tell our friends about them, we "like" them on Facebook, we gather groups to accompany us to their stores.

Even with all the pressures and competition that retailers and restaurants face today, there are some brands that stand out. I wanted to show how business leaders address the unique challenges and exploit the unique opportunities of the physical retail world to build great brands.

In my first book, *What Great Brands Do*, I introduced the seven brand-building principles that all great brands apply to inspire true customer loyalty, increase their profit margins, and build sustainable businesses. *Extraordinary Experiences* profiles seven popular, powerful restaurant and retail brands — each exemplifying one of the principles.

You might be surprised by the brands you'll find in the book. Some of them you might not have ever heard of – yet

— including the one featured in this excerpt. But their remarkable stories, and even more remarkable results, speak for themselves. Read on.

Jason's Deli Is Committed to Its Core

The success enjoyed by Jason's Deli may seem to come from its trailblazing approach to its business.

The Beaumont, Texas-based chain offering fresh food with natural ingredients was founded in 1976, making it one of the first, if not *the* first, fast-casual restaurants. 2009 brought another milestone when the company became the first major American restaurant chain to ban high-fructose corn syrup from its food. A year later, it eliminated artificial dyes and colors from the menu, a change that industry titans such as Pizza Hut and Taco Bell didn't get around to until five years later.

The chain, with more than 240 locations across 28 states today, has the second highest per-unit revenue in the quick-serve restaurant category. It grosses \$2.6 million, behind only Chick-fil-A at \$3 million and ahead of McDonald's and Panera Bread.

But despite these firsts and others like them, Jason's Deli's success is more appropriately attributed to the fact that it is stuck in its (good) ways. The company innovates and pursues growth as every company must, of course. For example, because of the increased volume it can generate with drive-thru service, it is building out that part of its business, making that capability a key consideration in the real estate choices for new units.

But company leaders, including founder and Chairman of the Board Joe Tortorice Jr., don't allow these pursuits to distract the organization from the brand's core. The values and principles that Joe established when he first started the company still drive it today.

He and his team use them to set and stick to their priorities, even when it means making difficult choices or doing things differently from most.

Committing to Culture

The culture at Jason's Deli itself is different. The company's stated core values are not all that distinct — among them are “A Great Place to Work” and “Only the Highest Quality Food” — but the level of commitment to them and the consistency with which its leaders have nurtured them for over 40 years is.

Joe described how the company applies its values: “We uncovered these; we didn't hire a company to tell us what would be nice values to have. Over the years, we've determined that these are the values we stand for. We have preached and taught those core values throughout the system on a continuous basis. That's formed the foundation for us, and then we're constantly searching for feedback to see how we're doing relative to those core values—in both metrics and anecdotes.”

Since 2005, the chain has run a “Core Values Workshop,” a two-and-one-half day program for employees and vendors. Its “Leadership Institute” offers free classes for managers on topics from money matters to marriage issues, conflict resolution, and the brand's core values.

Jason's Deli's commitment to its values can also be seen in how it approaches growth. When it opens in a new market, it transplants managers from existing restaurants to ensure the culture can be quickly replicated. And unlike many franchises with aggressive growth plans, expansion is controlled by personnel readiness.

“We're going to only grow as we have people to grow with,” Joe said. “Our growth isn't mandated by some analyst on Wall Street. It's not mandated by a bank. It's not mandated by anyone. We're going to grow only when we feel we can grow. That has allowed us to be effective and to put our leadership in positions that facilitate our growth.”

Rob Tortorice, the chain's president and one of Joe's sons, told me that the company has stayed committed to its core values because, "It is just in our DNA and that has not been diluted in 40 years. The owners were all third generation Italians who grew up in family grocery businesses in very competitive markets. There was an Italian grocery on every street corner in Beaumont, so building relationships and providing value was an inherent differentiator. They learned from their fathers to do 'whatever it takes' for the customer to obtain and keep the business. Over these 40 years, our core values have been ingrained in the leadership, all of whom grew up in delis."

Core Navigation

In my work with clients during the past 25 years and in conversations I've had with executives around the world, I've found that the importance of committing and staying committed to a few foundational elements is usually well-acknowledged, but poorly embraced.

and yet they still often find themselves in danger after reaching for growth, imitating others, or chasing trends. Sometimes short-term temptations or pressures to stray are just too strong.

And to be sure, all organizations must evolve in some way, to some degree, in order to remain relevant and competitive. But Jason's Deli operates by the brand-building principle **Great Brands Commit and Stay Committed**. By committing and staying committed to what makes it unique and compelling, Jason's Deli has built a great brand.

Extraordinary Experiences: What Great Retail and Restaurant Brands Do profiles seven great retail and restaurant brands and shows how they earn customer love and loyalty by creatively designing and consistently delivering great retail customer experiences.

Learn more at <http://deniseleeyohn.com/extraordinary-experiences>.

Blending a fresh perspective, twenty-five years of experience, and a talent for inspiring audiences, **Denise Lee Yohn** is a leading authority on building and positioning exceptional brands. An influential writer, Denise is the author of the best-selling book *What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles that Separate the Best from the Rest* (Jossey-Bass). She enjoys challenging readers to think differently about brand-building in her regular contributions to *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, *Seeking Alpha*, and the well-regarded monthly column *Brand New Perspectives* to *QSR Magazine*. [Read more about Denise Lee Yohn from her bio.](#)



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