

How to Build a Rockstar Brand

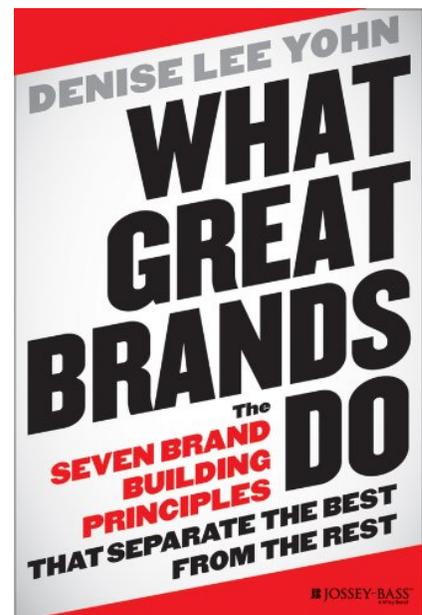
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By Cristi Kempf

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Recently, Denise Lee Yohn found a paper that she wrote in high school about Nike, which proved to Yohn, a brand expert and business book author, that she has been fascinated by brands “forever.” Even back then, she said, she was curious about “how a brand could attract customers and kind of make people, or persuade people, to buy their products. And ever since then, I’ve been a real student of what great brands do — like, how they actually establish that kind of connection with their customers.”

Yohn — author of *What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles that Separate the Best from the Rest* and a new book, *FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World’s Greatest Companies* — will bring that passion about brands to Cleveland and the PCMA Education Conference audience as the Opening Main Stage speaker on June 11. She recently spoke with *Convene* about how she will outline the steps to building a strong brand in order for associations and organizations to manage today’s challenges.



How will you engage the audience at Education Conference?

I will go through seven brand-building actions that all great brands take, and with each of those, there are some questions or some points I will ask the audience to think about so that they can identify, “What is the action that I’m going to take as a response? Now that I’ve heard this, now that I understand this idea, what am I going to do differently, starting tomorrow?”

For example?

The first brand-building principle that I share is “Great Brands Start Inside.” Great brands start brand-building by cultivating a strong brand-led culture inside their organizations. So, I’ll take them through this exercise, “Do you have an overarching purpose for your organization, and is that purpose clear? Is it specific and focused? Is it one idea, and you’re not trying to be all things to all people? Is it differentiated — like could another organization have the same purpose as you?” If so, you probably need to rethink your purpose.

Another principle I talk about is “Great Brands Ignore Trends.” I know that one of the trends in conference programming is to go to these shorter, TED-like talks. And that may be a great idea for your conference, but you really need to ask yourself, “Is that the best way for me to deliver the value that I have to give to this person?” Maybe you should go [in the] completely opposite [direction], and instead of doing 10-minute talks, you have 90-minute talks, where the speaker can really get into it.

How do your brand-building principles resonate with different audiences?

I’m asking people to think differently, I’m not going to give people the answers. I want to give them good questions and good examples, good tools, but they’re going to have to do the hard work to figure out [whether it] is appropriate for [them].

How will you tailor your talk for event organizers?

I think that the challenges that event planners and association event organizers are facing today are the exact kind of challenges that a great brand can help them address — like how to differentiate your event and your organization, how to engage the “right people,” making sure that you’re getting the people who are going to value what you have to offer the most and who are going to contribute the most to the event, creating an experience that is memorable and emotional and impactful. I think it’s a great opportunity for me to share “What Great Brands Do” and I think it will really help this audience a lot.

What is the brand topic of the moment?

It really is the culture piece, because I think that culture has become such a hot topic today. I think a lot of business leaders know that they need to figure out culture in order to attract and retain the best talent, and to make sure that they build a sustainable organization. But many business leaders don’t know how to cultivate that kind of culture — and a lot of the existing rhetoric that’s out there is very misleading.

Can you elaborate?

Well, I think that there are two things. One is you either are given a model like Southwest Airlines — look how much fun they’re having; look how friendly everyone is. So, I think that everyone gets the impression that they need to have this warm, friendly, fun, culture where everyone jokes around and has a good time.

And, the problem with that is that works really well for Southwest Airlines, but for most other companies, it’s just not appropriate, and could actually really backfire.

The other thing that I think a lot of people hear about that’s kind of related to that, is, “Well, here are some perks that you need to have. You need to offer free snacks in your break room and you need to have Happy Hour Fridays.” People think that those tactics are how you build a culture, and those things may be appropriate, but I think that what the research shows is that

what motivates people, what engages your employees, is when they understand and truly believe in your purpose, and they see the connection between what they're doing and what kind of impact it can make on the world and on customers, and then they're given the tools and the resources and then are empowered to actually do a really great job.

Everyone thinks, "Oh. We have to have this one kind of culture," and you really don't. There's no one definition of a good culture. There is a good culture that's right for you.

How does branding connect to culture?

Recently, I've been studying and learning a lot about how brands provide the internal glue for the organization. When I worked at Sony Electronics, setting up their branding strategy group, that's when I really began to realize how important it was for everyone in the organization to share a common understanding of what the brand stood for and everyone to be motivated by the brand and passionate about it and wanting to work with each other to deliver on the brand promise. So, I have developed a whole set of actions and tools that you can use to develop a healthy, sustainable, valuable culture that is completely in sync with your brand.

What's an example of a great brand?

I have to say that I think Amazon is a great brand because I think that they are singularly focused on innovation that serves customers' needs, and it seems like every day they're coming up with a new product or a new service that I didn't know I needed, but once I start using it, I can't live without.

What's the one thing you'd like the Education Conference audience to take away from your talk?

What I understand is that a lot of these event organizers are rethinking their brands and (saying) "OK, well, maybe we should be calling ourselves something different or position ourselves differently." I would say it's important to not just think about your brand as an image, but rather to think about your brand as an identity and the sum of everything that you stand for. It's your purpose. It's your values. It's your differentiation. It's the unique benefit that you deliver to your participants. But really I think the opportunity is to go deeper and [ask], "What is our purpose?" and "What are we trying to do here? What is the unique value that we're creating?" And really take advantage of that opportunity to rethink everything about yourself.

For more on Denise Lee Yohn and brand-building, go to <http://deniseleeyohn.com>