

Fusion: Integrating Brand and Culture

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By Cynthia Forstmann

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An Interview with Denise Lee Yohn

Last month, I had a chance to welcome [Denise Lee Yohn](#) to our latest episode of *CultureTalk at Work*. Denise is an author, speaker, and consultant on building great brands and enduring organizations.

The interview that follows is based on Denise's latest book, titled, [Fusion, How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies](#) which was just released.

You can check out our complete conversation in the video below, or catch the highlights in the transcript that follows. Enjoy!

Is there a culture crisis?

Cynthia:

Denise and I had a chance to connect recently and one thing I learned about the project that still has me marveling is that you started the research and finished the book within one year.

Denise:

It was kind of crazy I think.

Cynthia:

What was the urgency in undertaking this book as a 12-month project?

Denise:

Well, first of all I really do think there is a kind of culture crisis going on – at least in corporate America if not in businesses around the world. There are so many instances of sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement. There are corporations struggling with diversity and equality, and then there is just a widespread lack of engagement among employees. And so, I feel like the timing was right to have this conversation.

Having a good culture is the wrong goal.

Cynthia

Denise, you were talking about a culture crisis. Culture is becoming the ‘must-have’ conversation. Our experience with future of work trends, the Internet and social media are giving so much visibility to what’s happening inside an organization.

You say it this way in the introduction to Fusion,

“Until recently culture and brand were seen as the ‘soft stuff in business’ – often relegated to human resources and marketing efforts. Today many leaders are starting to recognize that culture and brand are the nuclei of their organizations, the biggest drivers of hard results.”

That’s a pretty bold statement – can you tell us more about that?

Denise

As I wrote, because they are kind of difficult to understand and difficult to measure, oftentimes people think of culture and brand as soft and maybe incremental nice-to-haves. But what we are discovering is that both from a talent and organizational effectiveness standpoint internally, as well as customer relationship and customer value externally, that culture and brand are creating real value and real results.

I say that culture and brand are **hard**, not only because they are hard to work on, but because they produce hard results.

Cynthia

Can you give us an example?

Denise

I start the book off with Amazon. Amazon’s business results are unquestionable in terms of growth. For a long time, they were willing to operate unprofitably, but now they turn the corner on that. But in terms of growth, in terms of productivity, in terms of innovation, they are off the charts. And while a lot of things have contributed to that company’s success, I would say the most important thing or the key driver has been the culture of that organization.

Everyone in that organization is singularly focussed on innovation in service of becoming Earth’s most customer-centric company. And because of that they have a culture that is tightly aligned. It is very challenging and competitive. It thrives on high performance standards that they are able to achieve because everybody follows these leadership principles and is aligned and working together on them.

Cynthia

I’m glad you brought up Amazon because you also talk about how the Amazon culture is not for everyone. If you look at employee feedback, there are those who totally thrive in that culture and those that don’t.

You used that story to make the point: *There's no such thing as the right culture or the best culture, rather you talk about distinct cultures.*

Denise

I think there's a lot of rhetoric about culture that makes it seem like you need a culture where everyone feels like family, where it's warm and fuzzy, where it's nurturing and supportive. And that's just not true. Amazon is great example of that.

I fear that many business leaders feel like they need to have one kind of culture, but it's more about the uniqueness of your culture. When you think about the integration of your external brand identity and your internal culture – of course, it needs to be unique. You would never want to copy someone else's brand, so why would you want to copy someone else's culture? Having a good culture is the wrong goal; having a unique culture is the right one.

What is Culture-Brand Fusion?

Cynthia

The core concept of the book is Culture-Brand fusion – the ideas that what's going on internally with the culture and externally with the brand need to be fused together. Explain that to us.

Denise

I think a lot of companies get into trouble when those two things are not in synch. You don't have to look any further than what happened with Wells Fargo last year. The revelation that these employees were opening false accounts and false credit cards without a customer's permission. That alone was very disturbing and obviously, the company took a big hit for that.

But I think it was even more surprising because these employees were doing it because their managers were pushing them to meet impossible standards and I think they had really had created this kind of toxic culture in the organization, very unhealthy, very unproductive and it led to these illegal behaviors.

That's so different from the wholesome, old-fashioned brand image of Wells Fargo. You know they've been around for years, they kind of weathered the financial crisis by being a very steady, reliable organization. And then here we find out, well no, actually, they're operating very differently internally from how they're presenting themselves externally.

So that kind of disconnect is particularly damaging for companies because you can't restore your customer's trust so quickly. You might be able to turn your business around in the short term, but getting people to trust you again and to feel like they want to be in long-term relationships with you, that takes a lot longer to recover from.

Cynthia

You bring up another really strong point about why this is so important in terms of the connection between the reputation of a brand, ROI and value. So for leaders looking

to manage their reputation, to really get a handle on their culture is one way to be thinking about that.

Denise

That's a great way to put it.

Core values that describe and prescribe

Cynthia

Your book has two major parts. One part looks at the foundational pieces of brand-culture fusion, how to start. Part two, once you get the foundational pieces in place – are strategies. I found it to be like a manual a business owner could follow in terms of teaching a process. I also found on your website a lot of helpful activities, exercises that people could bring into businesses to do this work.

I want to start with a question around one of the foundational pieces – the establishment of core values. One comment you made that I really took away is about the role of core values in shaping in behavior.

Denise

There are two types of core values out there. There are category values and then there are core values. Category values are things that as a business, in order to compete and be a viable player in your category, you need to value in your organization.

Fast food restaurants need to value speed and quality and good taste. If you were to say speed or agility is a value for you as a fast food organization, you are not really saying anything different about how you are operating. I mean every fast food organization needs to do this.

What you want to do is have core values which distinguish you as an organization that prescribe and describe the unique ways that you want your people to work together; the mindset and the attitudes that inform those behaviors. Oftentimes when business leaders go to set up core values, they feel like they need to say those category values and they don't. What employees will value the most and what will help them produce the results they are looking for are those more unique values.

The other point I would make is that you can't just write them down or say them or put them on your website or create a little business card sized thing that you deliver to your employees and say "Ok, these are our core values". Just telling someone something is not going to make a difference.

First, you need to make sure that everyone knows and understands what your core values are, and then you need to attach them to specific behaviors and specific standards: *When we are executing on this value – this is what it looks like and this is the result it produces*. Then people really understand that and can adapt it into their own behaviors.

Cynthia

You use an example in your book about a church organization.

Denise

A megachurch in Cincinnati Ohio has core values that describe everything they do; they actually operate more like a business than a standard church. So, they have core values and one of them is authenticity. That's not the most unique value out there, but the way they hold themselves to it, how they live out their core value is unique.

Unfortunately, they had an incident several years ago wherein one these elaborate productions they stage, one of the performers died. It was a terrible accident that really freaked out not just the church, but everyone on the staff. At some point after the incident, they held a healing service where they brought everyone together, the church community came together to process what happened.

The head pastor got on stage and was very open about how the incident had challenged his own beliefs: *Why would God allow something like this to happen?*

He was being very authentic, he was processing something the way you would expect. But it was very different, not just from leaders in general who usually put up a front, but from a pastor it was particularly surprising.

A reporter later asked him about it. The pastor explained that he had to be authentic because it was part of their culture, part of their values. He also admitted that it had turned some people away. He said if the church community was going to live out their values, he needed to be real.

That's the value of values. When you have a crisis moment like that – it really reveals whether you are going to behave in a certain way and whether you live your values or not.

Cynthia

You call that 'core value congruence' and you are touching something that we are experiencing as well. People don't expect culture in organizations to be perfect, but when it's human and it's real and it's congruent – it creates an environment where people know what to expect and it's more powerful than being falsely something.

Denise

Hypocrisy is probably one of the biggest damaging factors for leaders, particularly with their values. Because when they say, this is what we believe in – this is what's important. And if you see them acting in a different way, employees think—*this is not important*, it's just talk. It means they question your authenticity as a leader.

Culture as an input and an output

Cynthia

Let's jump to the second part of the book, part two covers *Five Strategies for Achieving Fusion*. I'd really encourage people to read the book – there's great content in this section in terms of tackling culture-brand fusion, really taking it on.

But I love Chapter 4 in particular – the title is *How to Organize and Operate on Brand* – and

what you really get at here is how to turn culture and brand into strategies that drive performance, that drive change.

You quote a study by Booz Allen Hamilton and the Aspen Institute that show most CEOs think of culture as affecting reputation, recruiting and retention. You call it a little bit of a chicken and egg problem.

Denise

Right, as we were talking about before – I think one of the biggest mistakes you can make is to think we can say what we want our culture to be and then it will happen. Even as important as talking about your culture and modeling your culture are – if you don't set up your organization in terms of its design and its processes to create an environment where your culture can thrive – you can role model all day and it's not going to happen.

So, I talk about two things – your organizational design (structure, roles, hierarchy, standards) and operational processes – not just HR processes like recruiting, training and development, but I'm talking about your core, day-to-day business processes, like sales planning and budgeting. If you can use those two things – organizational design and operational processes – to create that environment, then your people naturally start behaving in the ways that you want them to.

One of the things I write about is that culture is often considered an *input* to your organization, meaning I want to have a good culture so I can achieve operational excellence, and culture definitely helps in that way. But culture can also be an *output* in the sense that if you design your organization in a certain way and you run it in a certain way, you end up with a certain kind of culture.

One of the companies I talk about in this chapter is Natura. Natura is a Brazilian beauty care company. They wanted to reclaim their brand identity as an innovative brand. And so, they didn't just set out values and provide training and communication around it. Rather, they created new product development processes that would help them become more innovative.

So, not just looking at something that existed, but having something more destructive, more ground-breaking has created multiple streams of innovation for the company. Doing something like that reinforces the mindset and behaviors you are looking for from your employees.

If you want to connect with Denise, you can check out her website at www.deniseleeyohn.com. You can learn more about her keynotes, purchase her books and access a number of other brand and culture-building resources.
