

Use Brand to Attract Top Talent: Q&A With Denise Lee Yohn

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Insights



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Brand expert Denise Lee Yohn has developed her expertise through working with diverse companies including Frito-Lay, Land Rover, Unilever, and Sony. In addition to her experience helping companies build valuable brands, she has also seen how aligning internal workplace culture with external brand identity can help build powerful organizations that attract and engage top talent. Yohn explores this connection in her new book *FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies*.



I spoke with Yohn to get her insights on the connection between culture and brand.

One interesting piece of advice from the book is that companies building their brands should identify their core values—and that these values should be ones that another company might disagree with. This jumped out at me because I think it would seem almost counterintuitive to a lot of people. Could you explain why this is important?

Your core values—the essential and enduring principles and priorities that prescribe the desired mindset and behavior of everyone who works at your company—should be unique. Values such as integrity, respect, and teamwork are so overused that they have little meaning. And if you articulate values that are the same as any other company in your market, you will get performance that is the same as any other company.

Your core values should express the specific ways your employees should think and act in order to produce the specific results you're seeking. They should embody what makes your company uniquely “you”—what makes you stand out from others. The words or manner in which you choose to describe them must be distinctive.

One way to determine whether or not a core value is truly unique is to ask if another company would select the opposite of your company's value as its own. That way you know if you are really putting a stake in the ground and differentiating your organization. For example, some companies might have a value that says “Done is better than perfect,” while Google believes “Great just isn't good enough.” Both positions are valid—and valued by successful companies. If the opposite of your value is one that an organization would find inspiring or instructive, then that value you've identified can distinguish you in a powerful way.

You talk in the book about the importance of hiring job candidates who have value alignment with the company, and give some examples of how companies can assess job candidates for value alignment. How can organizations hire for value alignment while avoiding unconscious bias and the tendency to hire people who have the same race, age, gender, or even alma mater of the people doing the hiring?

It's true that people with similar backgrounds tend to share similar values, but that doesn't mean that your values can't or don't resonate with a wide range of people. That's one reason why Airbnb's approach to hiring stood out to me.

At Airbnb, candidates are asked to participate in two interviews reserved exclusively to assess their fit with the company's core values. The company founders select the employees who conduct these “core values” interviews and they work outside of the function for which a candidate is interviewing. Bringing in more and different people into the hiring process helps to mitigate unconscious bias and promote diversity.

The most important point is to prioritize values in the recruiting process.

You discuss in the book former CEO of GE Jack Welch’s philosophy to let go high-performing employees whose actions don’t align with company values in favor of keeping and coaching mediocre performers whose actions align with the company. This suggests that performance can improve, but that an employee’s value alignment can’t be changed. Do you think it’s possible to coach an employee for value alignment?

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Thanks for allowing me to clarify because I didn't mean to imply that performance can be coached while value alignment can't. In fact, I believe that one of leaders' key culture-building responsibilities is to enroll and engage as many people as possible in the desired culture and core values. This is a must, really, for any existing organization that seeks to clarify or shift an existing culture. While founders of start-ups have the luxury of building an organizational culture from scratch, most leaders must guide and coach an existing workforce to change.

These leaders should clearly articulate their desired culture and then cultivate the desired mindset and behaviors in the way they design their organizations and processes. They need to develop and manage employee experiences; institute rituals, artifacts, policies, and procedures; and facilitate employee brand engagement. I explain each of these strategies and provide tools, methods, and examples for each in *FUSION*.

What Jack Welch was referring to—and why I discussed it in the book—is what to do if, despite all these efforts, someone still remains misaligned and unengaged. At that point, that person needs to be let go not only so that they don't detract from the company's efforts, but also so that everyone else in the organization knows how important the core values are.

How is employee engagement different from employee experience, and why is employee experience important?

Employee experience (EX) and employee engagement are related, but the former is the means to the latter. Great experiences produce engaged employees. By carefully designing and managing employee experience, you produce strong employee engagement.

Unfortunately, many companies focus on the end result (employee engagement) without understanding how to produce it (employee experience). They deploy regular employee engagement surveys and track changes in results. They use the results to evaluate managers and departments and may even use them to determine managers' compensation. But efforts to change the results are limited (using carrots and sticks) or they're misdirected (emphasizing perks and parties.)

Employee experience is comprised of everything employees experience throughout their connection to the organization—every employee interaction, from the first contact as a potential recruit to the last interaction after the end of employment. It must be carefully designed and deliberately managed, just as you would customer experience.

According to Jacob Morgan, author of *The Employee Experience Advantage*, organizations that invested most heavily in EX were not only included 11.5 times as often in Glassdoor's Best Places to Work and 4.4 times as often in LinkedIn's list of North America's Most In-Demand Employers, but they also were 28 times more often listed among Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies, 2.1 times as often on the Forbes list of the World's Most Innovative Companies, and twice as often in the American Customer Satisfaction Index. Most important, he finds that "experiential organizations had more than four times the average profit and more than two times the average revenue. They were also almost 25 percent smaller, which suggests higher levels of productivity and innovation."

So there's a clear case for adopting employee experience as a top priority.

If you could sum up in two sentences or less your advice on fusing culture and brand, what would it be?

When you create an interdependent and mutually reinforcing relationship between how your organization thinks and acts on the inside and how it is perceived and experienced on the outside, you create great power for your organization. So instead of operating with culture in an HR silo and brand in a marketing silo, companies must integrate and align culture-building and brand-building

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