

Denise Lee Yohn: Brand Expert, Author & Speaker

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Photo courtesy of Denise Lee Yohn.

Denise Lee Yohn has cracked the code on achieving brand leadership. An in-demand keynote speaker, best-selling author, and brand expert, Yohn inspires business leaders around the world through her captivating presentations, writings, and appearances on major news media outlets. She spoke with *The Edge* regarding the role that culture-building plays in today's business environment, and the importance of adaptation in times of great change.

What led you to become the expert on everything “brand leadership” that you are today?

I love brands! I've always been fascinated by the influence they have on customers, on culture in general, and the value they create for companies. Previously, as head of Brand & Strategy at Sony, I worked on building the brand from the inside out, developing alignment and engagement with the brand among all employees. As I grew my own brand-consulting business, I began focusing more and more on organizational culture and employee

experience as the drivers of strong brands and great customer experiences. Today, as a keynote speaker, I am engaged by clients around the world to inspire and teach their organizations about building great brands and exceptional organizations.

What are a few of the most notable branding and culture issues affecting companies of all types and sizes today?

A large body of research has shown that a lack of employee engagement plagues today's business world. In the new world of remote and hybrid work, engaging, motivating, and aligning employees is more important than ever. Culture-building is a powerful antidote to these unprecedented threats and pressures. A healthy culture helps increase employee engagement, productivity, and the likelihood that employees will stay at your company.

As for brands, competition is fierce. Customers have so many choices, and their expectations have been elevated by the best companies in the world. It is increasingly difficult to sustain product leadership over time and differentiate brands on product features or performance alone. A definitive brand identity expressed through superior customer experiences can help build long-term customer relationships and maintain higher profit margins.

Plus, public scrutiny into companies is at an all-time high, and there is a growing lack of trust in companies among customers and other stakeholders. People are savvier these days, and brand authenticity is difficult to establish. But if you align and integrate your external brand identity and your internal organizational culture — if you fuse the two — then you truly are on the inside what you say you are on the outside, and you inspire people's trust and loyalty.

Many businesses have had to adapt their operations due to the pandemic. What do you forecast the impact of these changes will have on organizations with respect to workplace culture?

These changes make culture-building a lot more difficult and complex! As a business leader, you can address these challenges by embracing culture-building as your strategic leadership responsibility. Great cultures don't just happen. You need to explicitly articulate your desired culture and intentionally cultivate it through your communications, role-modelling, and leadership of the organization.

Also, design and manage employee experience (EX). EX is the sum of all interactions that an employee has with your organization — from the moment they become aware of you as a potential employer through recruiting, onboarding, training, development, and all the day-to-day connections and experiences they have to the end of employment. Employers need to deliberately design all those interactions to equip and empower employees to do great work. Now that many employees are working in their own environments, and there's so much variation in what employees want and need to be successful, we have to recognize that one EX for our entire workforce is not enough. We need to listen to and learn from our people.

What's it like being a keynote speaker during a pandemic shutdown? Has your business pivoted, and do you have any advice for others who have had to adapt?

Although in-person engagements have started to come back, most of my engagements have been virtual.

Agility and resilience have fueled my adaptation — and quite serendipitously — many of my keynotes these days are on those very topics. The more I learn about what it takes to lead in today's challenging environment, the more I'm able to inspire and teach others to do so.

It's most important to remember that change happens, and there will only be more change and faster change in the future. We can try to fight it or ignore it, but we'll be unsuccessful. Instead, we need to embrace it as an opportunity. Because of all this disruption, we don't have to accept things the way they are — we can proactively create the conditions in which we can be successful.

Where can our readers look out for you in 2022?

I will continue to contribute leadership insights to Harvard Business Review, SmartBrief on Leadership, and LinkedIn, and I'll be developing new keynote talks about brand leadership, customer experience, and organizational culture that will enable leaders to thrive and grow. Keep an eye on my site, deniseleeyohn.com, for all this new content.

Carlie Doan | Editorial Assistant