

The Impact of Employee Engagement on Brand Identity: Q&A with Denise Lee Yohn

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Explore insights from brand leadership expert Denise Lee Yohn on how employee engagement and culture are the keys to shaping a brand identity that fuels long-term success.

Denise Lee Yohn's fascination with brands began in high school. She was intrigued by what drove people to wear the Nike logo and wrote a school paper on the topic. That interest in how consumers make product and brand decisions blossomed from there and led her into market research after college.

She worked with brands including Jack in the Box and Sony early in her career during transformative times for both companies and saw firsthand the power of brand. From there, she started her own consulting business and today is one of the foremost experts on brand-building and a passionate champion for the importance of culture, employee engagement, and the convergence of customer and employee experience.

She's written several books, including bestsellers *What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles that Separate the Best from the Rest* and *FUSION: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies*, and is a frequent keynote speaker and the go-to source for major media outlets when the topic of brand comes up.

I recently had the chance to speak with her, and we explored the role employee engagement and culture play in creating a brand that customers love.

Stoessel: Brand can mean many different things to different people. Is there a way you simply describe or define what it is? Or isn't?

Yohn: I take a pretty expansive view of brand. Your brand is what you do and how you do it. In business school, they'll teach you that your brand is the bundle of values and attributes you deliver to customers and how you actually deliver that. It's very much what you do and how you do it.

Your brand is not your name. It's not your logo. It's not your image. It's your identity, like in the full sense of what you stand for, and what that means to people.

Brand can also be tricky to measure and something not everyone sees as directly impacting the bottom line. Does it — and how do you explain it to someone who may not see that?

Yohn: At the most basic level, brand can drive your price elasticity and your ability to retain customers. Those are probably the two most basic and most direct or obvious manifestations. If you have a powerful brand you can have the same product as others and charge a lot more.

A primary example is Starbucks. Before Starbucks came out people wouldn't pay more than a dollar for coffee. Now you go to Starbucks, and it's like 6, 7-plus dollars, and everyone's fine paying it. That's your price elasticity — your ability to charge more.

And then having a strong brand increases the likelihood that your customers continue to choose to buy from you. Not only because your brand is available, or your product is available, or because it's the lowest price, but people are actually choosing to buy from you over and over again.

Those are the most obvious outcomes of having a strong brand that you can see on your bottom line.

You've worked with many iconic brands and Fortune 100 companies. Is there a common thread or something you see them all doing that's helped them develop their brand identity and made them so successful?

Yohn: I actually wrote a whole book about what great brands do with seven brand-building

principles. The number one thing — and it's the first chapter in the book — is that great brands start inside. They start brand building by ensuring they have a strong brand-led culture within their organization. Without a depth of brand alignment and engagement among all the people who are responsible for delivering on the brand identity, it can be like putting lipstick on a pig. It can be very surface-level. And today's consumers see through that. I always say that your brand is not just a promise — it's a promise delivered. You have to deliver on what you say you're going to do. The only way you can do that is if everyone in your organization understands what your brand stands for, is motivated to deliver on it, and is then equipped and empowered to do so.

So brand identity starts with culture?

Yes! Culture doesn't just happen. You have to cultivate it. Every organization has a culture, whether or not it's the one you want depends on whether you build it or not. This is where the idea of fusion, of brand and culture, comes into play. If you want to be known as an innovative, groundbreaking brand, then your culture needs to promote attitudes and empower behaviors like risk-taking, learning, and pivoting. Or if you want to be known as a real service and hospitality brand, then your culture needs to emphasize kindness, empathy, and humility. Otherwise, you can't expect your employees to deliver to customers what they don't experience themselves.

One of the aspects of building your culture is to look at your employee experience as you would your customer experience and work through the same processes that you do to develop and manage your customer experience. Identify different segments of your employees and create journey maps for your employees to understand the critical points for engagement. Implement measurement tools, so that you know how well your people are engaged and how the experience you're creating is. Is the experience you're creating cultivating the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that you want your people to have? Are you equipping your managers to create a great day-to-day experience that keeps your people engaged and contributing to the brand that you're trying to build?

It's fascinating to me sometimes when people will differentiate between culture and employee experience and say, 'Oh, you know, our culture is one thing, but then our employee experience is about benefits or the perks we give.' Those things are a part of the experience, but it's the day-to-day experience that people have that you want to align and integrate with your brand and your culture. Your employee experience is a manifestation of your culture.

How does human resources play a part in driving employee engagement and the overall employee experience?

Yohn: The traditional functions of HR are a part of the employee experience, but they're only a part of it. Employee experience also includes IT, communications, facilities, and everything that an employee sees, hears, touches, feels, tastes, and smells. In the past HR has driven some of that, and in some organizations, HR has been growing and expanding to encompass these other areas. So it might make sense that HR is leading employee experience.

But we're also seeing more organizations have chief experience officers where they bring all these different disciplines together to create the employee experience.

Do employee and customer experience overlap? Should the chief experience officer lead both areas?

Yohn: Whether it's your external customer or your employee, you need to understand the wants and needs of both, while also understanding everyone's different. You need segmentation, or some sort of grouping, because not all employees and customers are the same.

That market orientation is critical to an experience officer role. I wrote an [article about this in the Harvard Business Review](#) a few years ago — about how ideally you have one chief experience officer who is in charge of both customer and employee experience because they need to be so integrated. I know that that can be difficult for many companies, but that is the ideal.

That person or department would have this real market orientation to understanding who are the people we're trying to serve. What are their wants and needs? What are the differences among the different groups within the larger group? They would be working with the functional areas of the organization to develop strategies, programs, and tactics that then deliver on the desired experience whether for the customer or employee. They're kind of like the hub of the wheel bringing all these different components together.

For organizations looking to build their brand, where and how do you start? Could you share a simple tip that can make a big difference?

Performance reviews and performance management are so important to employees. They want to understand how they're being rated and what kind of money they will get as a result of that rating. If you can infuse your desired culture and core values into your performance evaluation, that's where I'd start.

But I'm also tempted to just say it's the little things that matter the most. Take a look at some of your rituals like how you run meetings or the food you serve in your cafe. They can be very tangible and relatively easy things to fix, or maybe not necessarily fix, but to better align with the brand you're cultivating. Those things go a long way. Go for small wins first.

Learn more about the impact of employee engagement on brand identity from Denise Lee Yohn in our webinar, Building a Company Culture That Delivers on Your Brand Promise.

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As Medallia's VP of Communications, Eric leads all content initiatives that showcase Medallia's deep expertise and passion for customer and employee experience.