A Brand-Builder's Guide to the Universe:
17 Ways to Build a Great Brand Today
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It's a brand new world out there, isn't it?!

A world where a Facebook page is the only prerequisite to start a company. A world where the lines of culture, celebrity, media, and business are blurred. A world where technology has become the ultimate equalizer.

In this world, building a great brand—and sustaining greatness—has become more difficult than ever before. Newspapers and business school case studies are filled with stories of brand failures like TWA and Blockbuster, and many venerable brands, including JC Penney and Kodak, are fighting for survival.

And yet some brands continue to grow in size, profit margin, and customer fan base. We all know the big ones: Apple, Starbucks, IBM. Even smaller companies like Shake Shack and Chobani have managed to create great brands.

How did these brands do it? How have they managed to succeed despite the odds? My investigation into their seemingly mysterious success has led me to conclude that the leaders of great brands understand how much the world has changed. They recognize that brand success today requires more than the traditional branding approaches marketers have relied upon for decades. They've responded to the new world order of business by adopting specific, sometimes surprising, brand-building techniques.

There's a crucial common underpinning to these new methods: companies with great brands conceive of their brands as complete strategic platforms. They identify the key values and attributes that define their brands and then use them to fuel, align, and guide everything they do. Operationalizing their brands in this way produces results because companies aren't simply expressing or marketing their brands—they're using them to ignite their organizations and create real business value.

This manifesto highlights seventeen developments that are influencing brand-building today and what great brands are doing about them.

1 | **Advertising is no longer a reliable method for raising brand awareness and attracting brand prospects.** For every successful advertising campaign, there are at least five that have failed. Blame it on the fragmentation of media or people's shrinking attention spans or the growing popularity of customer reviews—whatever. The current uncertainties of advertising effectiveness have caused businesspeople to look to other brand-building methods, and some are turning their focus inside. They've come to realize that culture change is the necessary first step when they want to define or re-define their brand. Their culture determines whether or not their brand is embraced and then appropriately interpreted and reinforced by employees in customer experiences that shape brand perceptions more powerfully than any advertising ever could.

Great brands know that brands are built not by what you say, but by what you do, and so they make brand culture—not communications—the priority.

2 | **Customers are able to see through the veneer of brand image and expect companies to act with integrity and authenticity.** Thanks to online data and social media, as well as new accounting and reporting regulations, people are now empowered with tools and information that reveal how companies treat their employees and other stakeholders, and how they impact their communities and the environment. And customers no longer tolerate inconsistencies between a company's brand image and the way it runs its business.

In this context, there can only be one set of company values—brand is how those values are manifested outwardly and culture is how they're demonstrated internally. Great brands develop a symbiotic relationship between the two, using their brand identity and values to shape their culture, and leveraging their culture to bring their brands to life in everything they do.

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3 | **People get bored more quickly and easily.** Consistency and predictability were once highly valued brand attributes, and a strong brand was built by presenting it in a tightly focused, steadfast manner. With the shortening of attention spans and more people feeling they've "been there, done that," novelty and creativity are now required for brands to stay fresh and sustain interest.

Companies have responded by relaxing strict branding standards and adopting more flexible branding practices. That's why we see multiple logo renditions, variable tagline usage, and more salesperson empowerment. Great brands embrace this new, more open approach with one important prerequisite—they have clearly articulated their brand values and attributes and locked them in. They know that flexibility only works within a framework and they don't assume that everyone knows the non-negotiables. They rely on a clear brand core to guard against inappropriateness and guide innovation.

4 | **Consumers want companies to stop "goodwashing" and to start having a real positive impact on society.** It takes more than large attention-getting gestures to be truly socially responsible, and consumers have begun demanding a more integrated approach. At the same time, great brands are ushering in a new age by using the power of their brands to inspire real change. Great brands align their social efforts with their brand values and business strategies and operations.

They innovate new business models, design more sustainable supply chains, and ensure they create value for all their stakeholders—internal ones including executives, employees, and investors, and external including suppliers, agencies, strategic partners, industry influencers, local communities, and of course customers. By replacing CSR (corporate social responsibility) with CSV (creating shared value), great brands manage to increase their brand relevance and their profits.

5 | **The difference between fads and trends is fading.** Following trends has made sense for a long time—it's often how managers have been assured that their brands would be noticed and inserted in to the social conversation of the day. But now, products, ideas, themes, and personalities become popular overnight, saturate the collective consciousness, and then drop from fashion as quickly as they appeared. It's difficult to differentiate trends from fads, and if you read the tea leaves wrong, there are serious product inventory and brand image consequences.

The managers of great brands don't operate in a reactive mode, waiting to jump on the next bandwagon. Instead they identify powerful ideas on the horizon and discover ways to advance them. They constantly scan the cultural environment for signs of meaningful, long-lasting change. They keep abreast of technology, demographics, consumer tastes, laws, resource prices, and competitive behavior, and then they identify possible ways to exploit movements in these areas that would be most relevant to their brands. Great brands know that sustainable growth comes from being proactive—anticipating or leading change.

6 | **Vital customer relationships now require ongoing interactions between companies and customers.** A series of episodic, one-way transactions no longer automatically produces valuable customer relationships. People have come to expect regular, meaningful, differentiating, two-way interactions with the brands they do business with. It's the result of the "out of sight, out of mind" syndrome combined with the "what have you done for me lately" mindset.

Brands are learning how a good content strategy can help them meet these new expectations and the best brands are thinking of themselves as media companies. They not only provide relevant, timely, and compelling content, they make content their product. They design and develop content to the exacting standards they usually apply to their products, and deploy it strategically to facilitate relationships.

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7 | **Customer expectations have risen and diversified so dramatically that a customer-service based business can no longer scale.** Growing companies are struggling with the significant opportunity costs they incur when attempting to provide across-the-board excellence in customer service. When they've tried to treat everyone well, they've usually ended up withholding exceptional treatment from their best, most loyal customers.

The managers of great brands, by contrast, have the courage and commitment to nurture their appeal among and focus only on those they consider their ideal customers. They are willing to put their truly loyal and valuable customers at the front of the line, ahead of people who aren't and never will be counted among their fans. They know that the most profitable customer strategies center on the company's brand identity, so they shape expectations and invite like-minded people to engage with them by putting their brand strategy, not customer service, at the center of their businesses.

8 | **Customers no longer fit into simple, tidy classifications.** Segmentation has tremendous power to drive marketing and operations—from channel management to product development to service design. But segmentation research often relies on demographics, purchase behaviors, and dollars spent to identify and quantify the value of different customer groups. These criteria are rapidly losing their meaning in our world of increasing lifestyle diversity and cultural fragmentation.

Business leaders are looking for new routes to customer intimacy and some have found great value in a "needs-based" segmentation approach. Needs-based segmentation identifies several needs—emotional and rational, explicit and implicit—that a single person may have in different situations and provides a much more realistic prediction of buying behavior. Great brands use this approach to connect with prospects whose needs align with their brand value at the moments when those needs are greatest.

9 | **People choose products not only by how well they work, but also by how they make them feel.** Consumerism has taken a new turn. A while back, functional purchases were replaced by symbols of status. Now products are purchased not simply for external expression, they're adopted for emotional fulfillment. People want products to satisfy their emotional needs and/or to offer access to a self-identity that they want to experience.

At the same time, technological advantage and quality superiority have become much more difficult for companies to sustain. Therefore business leaders are seeking to establish brand differentiation on something other than product features and efficacy. Managers of great brands shape their brand identities with emotional values that differentiate their offerings and facilitate deep connections with customers.

10 | **Every brand touchpoint is becoming a moment of truth.** Marketers at P&G coined the term "FMOT" in 2005. It stands for "First Moment of Truth"—the three to seven seconds when a shopper notices an item in a retail environment. According to P&G managers, the FMOT is crucial because in that brief instant a shopper will decide to either pick up a product or pass it by, and so product packaging needs to interrupt shoppers' attention in order to prompt brand consideration.

Now, in these post-disintermediation days, there are so many ways people interact with brands, so many moments of truth in a customer's journey to purchase: a search result, a customer review, a receptionist's greeting, a salesperson's gesture, a product information display… the list goes on and on. Great brands know that each of these touchpoints is an occasion that either enhances the brand's value or undermines it. And with so many choices available to customers, their affections can be won or lost at any point. So great brands continuously seek out opportunities for brand expression in even the finest details of execution and they design their brand experiences down to the last detail.

11 | **Retail store design is the next innovation frontier.** In 2013, Apple was granted a request to trademark the "Distinctive Design & Layout" of its stores. The ruling, which gave Apple the power to force fake Apple stores to shut down, also pointed to the new reality in retail: design innovation is as important in the retail experience as it is in products.

Great brands have leveraged retail innovations as brand development opportunities. Tesco introduced a new service through its virtual subway store; Burberry modernized its brand image through RFID-enabled fitting rooms; Kanye West grew his pop-culture influence through a Yeezus pop-up shop. These and other progressive brands design their store experiences to reflect their unique brand identities as much as their products do—if not more.

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12 | **Businesses can no longer be designed and operated by channel.** Multi-channel retailers used to use their channels to segment customers, develop pricing and merchandising, and set key performance indicators. But any company that relies on such a siloed approach for organizing and operating its business risks losing customers who won't tolerate the disconnects that arise from it.

People no longer think or behave in channel-specific modes and they expect companies to provide a seamless experience. To many, the "e" in e-commerce is a relic of a bygone retail industry; now there is simply commerce—I shop, I buy, I get, anyway I want. Great brands forego the traditional ways of working and adopt a holistic brand approach. They take deliberate steps to align and integrate their customer experiences into a unified brand experience.

13 | **New mass-market brands are unlikely to succeed.** Between Walmart and Amazon, mass retail is saturated. These mega brands are growing their footprints so aggressively and defending their dominance so vigorously, it would be a fool's errand to try to compete with them. This situation can be seen in other sectors, from automotive to airlines.

The inevitable fate of mass-market brands seems to be price competition and product commoditization, so the managers of great brands aren't interested in the masses. They see more growth and profitability in developing targeted brands. Instead of indiscriminately chasing all customers, they actively segment the market and seek out a select customer base that shares an affinity with the brand. This selectivity not only reinforces the brand identity, but also enables organizations to develop products, services, and standards tailored to meet the needs and desires of their most valuable customers.

14 | **The failure rate of brand extensions continues to increase.** Given the high costs of building a new brand from scratch, many companies have sought to launch new products under established brands. But for every brand extension success, there are legion of failures—and the odds of success are only getting worse.

Great brands stack the cards in their favor by establishing deep emotional bonds with customers in the first place. As a result, they enjoy brand appeal that is less dependent on a particular product, so issues of brand fit and credibility are minimized. People give great brands permission to push the boundaries of possibilities in pursuit of new ways to create value for them and connect with them. Managers of great brands constantly address the question "What business are we really in?" to maintain their critical emotional ties to consumers while driving the development of new concepts that break category boundaries and open up entirely new ways of doing business.

15 | **Independent brands are enjoying a comeback.** After years of "Walmartization," some local, independent companies are actually giving large, national brands a run for their money— or at least for customers' hearts. People are seeking out personal, low-tech/high-touch experiences from businesses and favoring companies with ties to their local communities. Forward-thinking national chains are fighting back by combining their brand recognition and market penetration with a local approach. They're using local sources, curating unique product assortments, and

favoring local marketing over national campaigns—all the while relying on their brand's established equity to reassure people of quality and reliability.

The key to succeeding in this new business model is employee-brand alignment. Great brands ensure one clear, consistent, common understanding of the brand among their distributed workforces through deliberate brand training and engagement, and they empower their people with the tools and resources to infuse the brand into their day-to-day decisions and behaviors.

16 | **Few businesses remain standalone entities; most rely upon an ecosystem of organizations to operate and thrive.** Networks no longer distinguish technology companies alone. Many businesses—retail, healthcare, automotive, professional services, consumer goods, you name it—rely on productive relationships with suppliers, distributors, government agencies, and sometimes even customers to deliver their specific product or service.

The leaders of great brands recognize that these entities, like their employees, can build their brand or they can weaken it, so they extend culture building to all their stakeholders. They are willing to trade confidentiality for a common cultural bond and common goals, so they share their brand strategies and priorities with everyone who works for or with their company. They invest in training and tools to ensure their partners are aligned and engaged with the brand.

17 | **Companies are experiencing an employee engagement crisis.** With studies showing that as few as 13% of employees are engaged at work, companies are dealing with employees who are unhappy and unproductive, and who spread negativity like a cancer throughout their organizations. One reason for the lack of engagement is that too many companies fail to help their workers understand what makes their company different and better than competitors.

Great brands know that their brand is the strongest employee engagement tool it has because of its power to connect. Employees who are engaged with the brand connect to customers more effectively because they understand the ultimate value the company produces and delivers to them; they connect to other employees more fully because they are united by common objectives and a common set of values; and ultimately, they connect to the organization's higher purpose and learn that their work holds more meaning and importance because they see their own roles in the broader mission of the brand.

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These are only some of the seismic shifts that are changing the business world today, and things will only continue to evolve. I hope by highlighting the ways great brands operate in the context of these changes, I've demonstrated that great brands think about and do brand-building very differently from most.

My book, [What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest,](#) shows how companies employ specific techniques that elevate brand-building from a niche marketing function to the core driver of the business, turning them into industry icons. My intent is to provide CEOs, COOs, entrepreneurs, and other organization leaders a clear and accessible guidebook to building a world-class brand in this new universe.

The fundamental difference between building great brands and old-style branding becomes clearer every day. With the dramatic changes in the economy and ground-breaking developments in technology and communications, old-style branding may be dead. But brands are now more important than ever.

Organizations must step back from using brands as static, outward-facing, image-oriented objects. No longer is your brand an experience mediated through messaging and marketing communications. Your brand is the experience that is actually delivered and communicated through every single thing you do, every day, around the clock. **That's what great brands do.** ⬚

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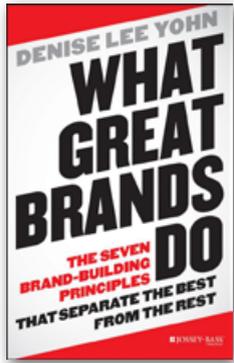
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Blending a fresh perspective, twenty-five years of experience working with world-class brands including Sony and Frito-Lay, and a talent for inspiring audiences, Denise Lee Yohn is a leading authority on building and positioning exceptional brands. Learn more at http://deniseleeyohn.com.

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