



SUPERBRANDS USA 2020 BRANDING LEADER

ANNE BAHR THOMPSON

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Branding

This edition of Superbrands USA was written at the onset of COVID-19, during a time when social responsibility could not be more important. We asked award-winning author, brand strategist and global do-gooder Anne Bahr Thompson to set the stage for our Branding Leaders features section.

INTRODUCTION

A brand is the human face of a business. A proxy for the people and culture behind a company, a product or a service, with whom we identify, like and trust (or not). It’s the thing people relate to and form a relationship with. Branding is the manifestation of the brand – it’s the brand’s presence and personality expressed. And excellent branding has always cultivated a relationship based on trust – on aligning an organization, product or service with its purpose and values, and ensuring that its communications reflect the experience it actually delivers. It’s also been about helping brands have the courage and confidence to be their best, true selves.

Anne Bahr Thompson

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Anne Bahr Thompson

Brand Citizenship Pioneer
Founder, Onesixtyfourth
Author, *DO GOOD*

Anne Bahr Thompson is the author of *DO GOOD*, which explains her pioneering model of Brand Citizenship®. Named Trust Across America 2018 Top Thought Leader in Trust, she works with business leaders, social entrepreneurs and impact investors to align purpose and profit. A former executive director of strategy and planning and head of consulting at Interbrand, Anne founded Onesixtyfourth, a strategic and creative consultancy that helps leaders activate purpose across their brands, business strategy and corporate culture. Anne's writings have been published in *Brands and Branding* (Economist Books), *hbr.com*, *Journal of Brand Strategy*, *Bloomberg News*, *The Guardian*, and many other industry publications. She's been interviewed on numerous podcasts, radio shows, and *Fox Business*, and spoken at business schools, conferences internationally and the United Nations. Anne holds an MBA from the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia and has been an adjunct professor at New York University Stern School of Business's London campus.

BRAND CITIZENSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS

By Anne Bahr Thompson, April 23, 2020

Across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a pivotal moment for companies and their brands, which are their human faces, to redefine success in terms of actively participating as citizens in society: in terms of their commitment to humanity and the greater good alongside generating profit. The global crisis is accelerating the call, which has been growing over the past few years due to increasing awareness of climate change and inequity in society, for businesses to step up and solve our individual ME needs and desires alongside delivering added value to society: the collective WE.

For decades, social connection and cultural belonging have been key to creating demand, whether demand for a product or service, or demand to work for or with a business. And an essential stage in cultivating these drivers is creating a sense of community. As I re-examine the five steps of my ME-to-WE continuum of Brand Citizenship® in light of COVID-19, I see the interplay between Community and Contribution growing — and these factors becoming strongly important to building Trust. Brands that do not live up to their claims of being purpose or values based will be called out.



As the crisis continues, brands that have significantly invested time and money into building trust will shape our 'next normal'. More companies will find ways to use that trust to help bring us together, to restore community cohesion. This will be both through communications and through new, unexpected programs and experiences — virtually and physically (once we emerge from sheltering in place in our homes). We are all learning so much about enhancing experiences as we explore new ways of being together virtually.

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While I hope that the pandemic is a great reminder of how we're all interconnected as humans and a part of — not separate from — the natural world, I also fear that it is encouraging the worst and that divisiveness, especially in the U.S. will grow. Brands have an important role to play here, reminding us of our shared humanity and how we all fundamentally look out for one another and care about nurturing our communities. Creative, retail and hospitality brands will have a responsibility to reframe physical spaces, making them more organic in feel to restore the physical connections that we as humans crave. Indeed, they will have to create their 'next' to motivate many to move beyond the fear of human contact.

People will remember brands for their acts of doing good during the coronavirus pandemic. Some brands that faltered will be forgiven, and those which behaved irresponsibly, showing no empathy and only self-interest, will not. Although much of government policy has focused on the economy versus health, for most people the issue is one of 'and/also' not 'either/or' — it's about saving lives and livelihoods. In my research that resulted in my model of Brand Citizenship, it emerged in part that trust stemmed from selling products and services at a fair price for fair value. The crisis has extended this notion to be about more than the intrinsic elements of a product or service for many people. Fair value now also includes efficacy of purpose — how companies support employees, local communities, supply chains, marginalized populations and the environment. Responsibility alongside Enrichment, in the language of Brand Citizenship. People will demand greater transparency, and brands will have to demonstrate behavior that is sincere, aligned and material.

Beginning in 2011, my research indicated that people desired business to step in and help progress society in the absence of their trust in politicians to do so. Business leaders have seen this call steadily growing over the past decade, and now exponentially with a demonstrable breakdown in trust with politicians during the first few weeks of the COVID-19 crisis. It's exciting to see the growing number of leaders who genuinely care and are willing to be brave, creating financial and social value that shapes a better 'next normal'.