

Learning about America, and about Buying from Starbucks

Professor Bryant Simon is the author of *Everything But the Coffee: Learning About America From Starbucks* (University of California Press, 2009). He presented his key findings to the class and summarizes them here.

I had been watching Starbucks for about a year when I finally figured out just what I was studying. It happened while I sat at the counter of a long, narrow Starbucks on the corner of Broadway and 18th Street in New York City. Behind me was a line for lattes and teas that stretched 30 feet back and out the door. Yet right outside the window in front of me was a cart, selling what it called gourmet coffee for only seventy-five cents a cup.

Right then and there, I learned the most important lesson about Starbucks. It wasn't about the coffee. If coffee, or caffeine, was really what those people in line wanted, then why didn't they go to the cart? Why were they willing to pay the time and price premium to get what Starbucks sold? What, moreover, could waiting in line for expensive coffee explain about those customers, and even more, about the nature of buying in everyday America?

Dupes, Heroes, and Semi-Heroes

Years ago, when hardly anyone wrote about buying, sociologist Don Slater summed up the thinking on purchasing. Consumers, he explained, were portrayed either as “dupes” or “heroes.” On the “dupes” side, buying turns on manipulation, deceit, and subterfuge. Shoppers are like sheep led through supermarket and department store aisles by the subliminal messages and sly come-ons crafted by Mad Men from Madison Avenue. And then there are the heroes. They are upright and self-determined buyers; agents of their own

making. They formulate rational decisions and assert themselves at the point of purchase. They are, to borrow a phrase from Jerry Seinfeld, “masters of their own domain.”

When I began my research on Starbucks five years ago, I suppose I leaned more toward the dupes way of thinking than the heroes way. But as I talked with customers, held focus groups, and sat in cafes, I started to see those coffee customers more as heroes, or more accurately, as agents who shaped what companies sold to them more than the other way around. The Pulitzer Prize winning novelist John Updike noticed exactly what I was seeing. “What you don't realize about a consumer society, Dad,” a 30-something son tells his father in the book *Rabbit At Rest*, “is it's all fads in a way. People don't buy things because they need 'em. You actually need very little. You buy something because it's beyond what you need, it's something that will enhance your life, not just keep it plugging along.”¹ In our current society, products, as Updike observed, are essentially enhancers. Their appeal lies



not in their physical qualities or quantifiable attributes but in their ability to make people feel better and look better. What makes us feel better has more to do with broad social changes and everyday needs than it does with manipulation and subterfuge. Because what we buy reflects who we are and who we want to be, companies are really beholden to us. They can only succeed by matching our needs, by enhancing our lives.

That meant that Starbucks sold enhancers, not coffee. That's why those people stood in line in New York and didn't go to the cart. To be successful, then, Starbucks had to add to, or at least appear to add to, buyers' lives. Otherwise customers wouldn't pay the time and price premium Starbucks charged and the company wouldn't have prospered. But the company did, of course, thrive. In fact, it is one of the great success stories of contemporary American business. In the middle of the first decade of this century, Starbucks opened a new store somewhere around the world every five hours. By 2009, it had more 16,000 outlets in 49 countries and served nearly 50 million customers a week. But even more, because customers were semi-heroes—because people were still spending on things they didn't

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absolutely need—and because Starbucks was successful, studying Starbucks reveals essential truths about what its customers, who represented a large cross-section of the American middle-class, cared about and desired.

Anthropology of the Everyday

I began studying Starbucks—really a study of the value of enhancers—on trains, planes, and automobiles. I traveled to Singapore and Sacramento, Fairfax, Virginia, and Franklin, Indiana, Atlanta and Albuquerque. I went to Starbucks in cities and suburbs, at airports and in college towns. I thought a multiplicity of Starbucks would make clear the worth of Starbucks, but my research design wasn't quite right. Once I slowed down, I realized that everything I wanted to know about Starbucks, and about its broad appeal, was right there in every single Starbucks store. The company's savvy designers and product developers inscribed consumer desires into these places and into the products. I just had to learn how to "read" the spaces and the things there—the floors, signs, cups, tables, and talk.

Products are like books, and they reveal themselves through close readings of the text and what lies between the lines. Reading brands—signs, spaces, and products—then amounts to an anthropology of the everyday, a way to learn what people cared about by paying attention to what they buy and how those items—enhancers—are packaged and marketed.

Predictability

Starbucks customers tend to be middle to upper middle class and they tend to also be on the go. They travel for work and they travel for fun. For some of these same people, constant motion creates a desire for something that doesn't change—like their coffee. Of course, every Starbucks, despite a slight difference here and there, looks pretty much the same. Each features the same signage in the same font, the same

colors, and the same drink choices in the same inflated sizes. That sameness adds up to a promise of predictability; that, in other words, a Starbucks latte will be the same in Des Moines as it is in Dubai. Mobile customers will pay extra for this reassurance and stability.

Starbucks customers, though, want more than just the same tastes and chair designs across the globe. The menu board offers another twist on, and another clue to, the desire for predictability. Starbucks's drinks and muffins, of course, are not cheap. But that is, it turns out, part of their appeal. Elevated prices act as filters. They keep out the poor, the uninitiated, and the elderly, who often told me that they wouldn't pay more than a dollar for a cup of coffee. (This, in turn, allowed Starbucks to appear young—another value.)

Just like in the suburbs, price points created predictability—in this case of people. For much of the last 40 years, Americans have retreated indoors and into their backyards. Trend-watcher Faith Popcorn referred to this as "cocooning" and argued that it was caused by a fear of crime and the unknown. So in order to get these same people out of their homes, Starbucks needed to assure them that the "public" spaces they would enter would be orderly and controlled, filled with "safe" people—people like them. Higher prices helped to do this. The ability to manufacture predictability created clear value, value beyond the drink itself, it created a sense of safety—safety evoked through sameness.

Belonging

In a column for the *Westport News*, Judith Marks-White admitted that she had "flunked Starbucks." Recreating some dialogue, she explained:

Me: "I'd like a small regular coffee, please."

Barista (confirming my order): "One tall espresso."

Me: "No, a small coffee," I repeated. "Not tall."

Barista: "Tall is small," she said. "And, we don't say 'coffee.'"

Marks-White kept the joke going, ending her piece with more back and forth:

Me: "Can't I just have a regular cup of coffee like a normal person?"

Barista: "This is Starbucks. We don't do normal."

While Marks-White made light of this "unfortunate encounter," her column is really about the role of the employee—the barista—and language of what we might call the brand-socializing project. Starbucks officials talk a lot in the press about customer service, but at the store level baristas play a sharper and more decisive role. They are simultaneously language instructors and community gatekeepers.²

Part of what Starbucks sells is belonging, and creating its own language is a crucial part of this process. Several years ago psychology professor Jack Shilkret rightly observed of Starbucks, "People go there and they feel like they're getting membership in a little club."³ Again, language helped to create the club. In order to be a member, you had to speak the right way. That is how insider groups typically work. The baristas make clear whether you fit in or not. That is what that Starbucks employee did with Marks-White—tell her that she doesn't belong. The barista, though, is not simply casting her aside. She is trying to coach the journalist, to give her some tips in talking Starbucks. That is the employee's role in this consumer narrative—to isolate outsiders, but also to give them the tools—words—to belong if they want to join the club. Marks-White declined the invitation and went home to her computer.

So, again, what Starbucks is selling is belonging, something people want in their lives and don't always have. James Twitchell, an astute observer of modern American life, writes: "We will do anything to get affiliation."⁴ Unable to find these connections in traditional places any more—the Cheers-like corner bar or the Kiwanis club or the bowling league—we have started to look elsewhere to fill our needs to belong. Starbucks has consciously tried to meet this desire.

“We all want to belong to something larger than ourselves,” says Scott Bedbury, Starbucks’s one-time chief brander. He added,

In this context, it means that the mere possession of a product can make consumers feel as if they are somehow deeply connected to everyone else who owns that product, almost as if they were together in a family.⁵

Shoppers, then, can join the Starbucks club by correctly ordering a “venti latte no foam with a pump of chocolate.” Membership is easy. By talking Starbucks and shelling out the money for the company’s products, Starbucks regulars, as Bedbury envisions, get the opportunity to define themselves as members of an in-group. As repeat customers, they enjoy the emotional perks of membership: recognition, special treatment, and insider knowledge and information.⁶

Every Day Luxury

For much of the post-World War II era, the middle-class—broadly conceived—shared a common commitment to austerity and thrift. The rich, sometimes joined by drunken soldiers, spent wildly. But the middle class prized frugality, consistency, and efficiency. Perhaps no company embodied the consumer ideals of the men in gray flannel suits and the housewives of Levittown more than McDonalds. Through relentless efficiency and standardization, the Golden Arches offered customers a good product at a reasonable price. In many ways, K-Mart and then Walmart followed in the company’s footsteps. Good stuff at good prices attracted the cautious middle class. They liked saving money—even bragging to friends about how much money they saved. In some social circles, the ability to sniff out bargains translated into social standing and respect. But the same deals that drew the middle classes to McDonalds and later to Walmart also attracted working people and the poor, who went out of necessity. Yet those in the middle didn’t want to look poor, and because in modern America you are, in

many ways, what you buy, they didn’t want to consume like the poor.

Looking to distinguish themselves—to perform their more elevated class position—the upper reaches of the middle class developed in the 1980s (just as Starbucks started to take off) new consumption patterns. Mostly, they looked for luxuries—for indulgences, big and small—that the poor and the working classes could not afford. Cultural critic James Twitchell has called this trend “trading up.” Beginning in the 1980s, Americans, he writes, staged a “revolution,” not of “necessity but of wants.” As things like Prada, Gucci, Lexus, Evian, and Montblanc became a “virtual 5th food group,” the United States became, Twitchell declared, “One nation under luxury.”⁷

Starbucks designed its stores and products to appeal to people with money, education, a taste for luxury, and an impulse to make distinctions. For starters, the company offered a “handcrafted” product, closer (according to company brochures and signs) to the “true” coffee experience. By buying Starbucks, customers were, in theory, demonstrating their good-taste, discernment, sophistication, and ability to pay more for something better.

Nothing was left to chance when it came to going after free spending yuppies. Every inch of Starbucks’s interior spaces spoke to the target audience and its desire to mark off boundaries between itself and the ordinary middle. Twitchell describes the inside of Starbucks stores as almost “inappropriately elegant spaces.” Everything at Starbucks—every table, mural, light fixture, bathroom, piece of flooring, and chair, couch, and upholstery—was there for a reason. They were specifically designed not to simply look functional, efficient, ordinary, or plain.

The best way to view Starbucks, on the surface at least, is to see it as the anti-McDonald’s. The whole store, the whole experience, represents a negation of the “fast food signals,” as a Starbucks official called them, of the Golden Arches.⁸ No one ever described McDonald’s as “inappropriately elegant.” At Starbucks,

there is no smiling mascot. No Formica. No bright overhead florescent lighting. No blaring oranges and yellows. McDonald’s doesn’t hide its rationality. It is built with right angles and straight lines. Starbucks stores, on the other hand, curve and bend. Few outlets are simple squares or rectangles. Some are round. Others look like Ls or slices of pie. Most Starbucks have a nook here and a cranny there. Overlapping circles and ovals hang over the coffee bar. The counters swoosh and roll. Squiggles and loops dance under the tabletops and across the murals on the walls.

Starbucks’s products also talk the anti-McDonald’s talk. McDonald’s accents its speed, efficiency, and functionality. Starbucks uses the strategy of mass customization. To deliver the coffee and make it taste the same in Singapore and Seattle, it relies on rationalization and standardization. But that’s not what company officials talk about. At McDonald’s you get it their way and you it get fast. The food waits on you. Starbucks tells you to wait, to take the time to have your drink custom made just for you. You pick the kind of milk you want. You pick the number of espresso shots. You pick the flavor. Want whipped cream? You got it. Want more foam? Starbucks will do that. By customizing your drink, you have a chance to demonstrate your command of Starbucks speak and your coffee knowledge, but even more important, to show your individuality. Displays of uniqueness, albeit standardized uniqueness, fit the desires of luxury seekers.

Twitchell has described Starbucks as an “everyday ideal ... of deluxe.” In this narrative, he explained, “the chairs are crucial.” Just seeing them—wide, stuffed with extra padding, and covered with coarse, textured fabrics—announces to customers that Starbucks is an upscale place to sit and relax. “Sitting,” he observed, “is itself a modern luxury.” The colors, too, matter. Twitchell liked what the company did with the color green. Most firms, he observed, shy away from this color, thinking, he said, “that it is too emotionally complicated.” But Twitchell thought the

greening of Starbucks added to the company's allure. The color tells customers that they are buying something natural and free of taint. "The purer the product in the luxury economy, the more you can charge," he observed.⁹

Cups and Consciousness

Starbucks sells some 50 million cups of coffee each week. Cups, though, signify more to the company than containers. They are advertisements, not only for Starbucks, but also for those holding the cups. They are communicators, modes of self-expression, and even, valued guilt reducers.

Back to Updike. People pay extra for products that enhance their lives and say something positive about them. Some people want to show that they care—that they are concerned about the world around them and with the less fortunate. Starbucks provides its customers with easy ways to demonstrate concern and other-directedness. All you have to do is buy a Starbucks latte or muffin, and supposedly, you help out others.

Ten percent of every Starbucks cup comes from recycled material. At the bottom of those same cups, are often found the words: "Help us help the planet." In a sense, the company implies, if you do this, you demonstrate you care about the environment, and have done a small part to help save it.

If you care about coffee farmers, Starbucks will help there, too. Beginning around 2009, as the idea of fair trade gained currency, on the back of its cups, Starbucks declared:

YOU.

Bought 228 Million Pounds of Responsibly Grown, Ethically Traded Coffee Last Year.

Everything we do, you do.

You stop by for a coffee. And just by doing that, you let Starbucks buy more coffee from farmers who are good to their workers, communities, and planet. Starbucks bought 65% of our coffee this way last year—228 million pounds—and we're work-

ing with farmers to make it 100%. It's using our size for good, and you make it all possible. **Way to go, you.**

Starbucks indicates that you can help, and at the very same time, you can get the exact customized, handcrafted drink that you want. What is more, you get to believe that you are not part of the problem; you are part of the solution. That guilt-free feeling has value.

In fact, Starbucks often overcharges for that feeling. Starbucks's bottled water, Ethnos, costs \$1.80 for 20 ounces. Out of that price, the company donates five cents to international water projects. But for that same water, they are charging customers 15 to 20 percent more than other companies for the same products. In other words, they charge customers to feel good about themselves. But that doesn't mean that they are always doing what they say they are doing.

On those cups, Starbucks claims that it ethically sources all of its beans. Yet it quite deliberately doesn't say exactly what that means. Only about 10 percent of Starbucks coffee is Fairtrade certified coffee.¹⁰ So what does that make the rest of the beans? Not clear. The lesson here: there might be value for *you* in looking like a better *you*, but that doesn't mean that the company cares or is straight up about what it does (and doesn't do). To be a truly committed consumer, you have to go beyond corporate promises, and look to see what a company really does. Consumer literacy, in the end, is in your interest as a buyer and as an engaged citizen—though not necessarily in the corporation's interest. So to be informed, you need to increase your array of sources, to look past the ads on cups and Facebook and read books, blogs (with a weary eye), and news articles.

Some Final Thoughts

Cups, colors, chairs, chatter, and chai tea are things that can be "read" at Starbucks. Really, they are just the beginning. There are napkins, signs, bathroom fixtures, murals, and music. Everything the com-

pany does is there for a reason—to provide customers with an enhanced sense of self. But the company doesn't invent those desires as much as it caters to them. That's why reading the everyday things we buy can provide a window into the lives and thoughts of customers. Buying, in the end, is a lot like voting. We choose the best option, given the information we have and the choices that are given to us. Candidates and companies craft their messages to meet our desires and wants—however, genuine or misguided. Reading them back, with the help of some outside sources, can then teach us a lot about who we are and what we care about the most. 📖

Notes

1. John Updike, *Rabbit At Rest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996): 379.
2. Judith Whites-Mark, "IFlunked Starbucks," *Westport News*, January 27, 2010.
3. Jeff Horseman, "The Battle for Coffee Drinkers Bubbles to the Surface," *The Capital*, March 13, 2004.
4. James B. Twitchell, *Living it Up? America's Love Affair with Luxury* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 106.
5. Scott Bedbury, *A New Brand World; Eight Principles for Achieving Brand Leadership in the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 89-90.
6. David Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 91.
7. Twitchell, ix, xi.
8. Brad Stone, "Grande Plans," *Newsweek*, December 27, 2004.
9. Interview with James Twitchell by author, July 20, 2006.
10. According to Starbucks, in 2009, purchases of Fairtrade certified coffee amounted to 39 million pounds out of total coffee purchases of 367 million pounds (10.6% of the total). See www.starbucks.com/responsibility/sourcing/coffee. The vast majority (81%) of Starbucks coffee is procured under the company's CAFE Practices system of sourcing. This is a coffee bean sourcing system developed by Starbucks for Starbucks. It is, therefore, not the same as fair trade certified products with its reasonably well-developed system of independent oversight (and only 10.6% of Starbucks coffee is so certified). While CAFE Practices encourages environmental sustainability and pays a decent price for beans, it is not, like fair trade, a system that exclusively or even predominantly relies on small growers. In fact, it relies more on large to medium-sized growers, middlemen, and seasonal workers.