

## Chapter One:

# Customers



*“If it weren’t for the caffeine I’d have no personality whatsoever.”  
– Anonymous*

**S**tarbucks customers are a special breed. You understand this whether you’re a customer or not. If you are, then you know how you are when you visit Starbucks. You have to have your drink just so and if you don’t get it, well, we won’t talk about that.

If you’re not a customer then you’ve still, undoubtedly, spoken with those who are and know what they are like. You’re also probably aware of the stereotype that has been bestowed upon Starbucks customers by the media and the masses. You know – the pretentious, high spending, spoiled, caffeine addicted automatons that we all are.

Not so fast. I don’t think that’s entirely accurate. Sure, a lot of us are addicted to caffeine, \$4 lattes can be expensive if you have to have them three times a day, and many of us do want what we want; but pretentious? I don’t think so. Besides, customers don’t

fit into a neat little stereotype because we're all different. We're all individuals visiting Starbucks for our own reasons.

So who are Starbucks customers? I've identified ten different quirky and amusing categories of people that I've seen on a regular basis – my own stereotypes, if you will. You might not fit into one of them but there's a really good chance that you do. You may even fit into a couple of them.

## The Starbucks Maven

Have you ever met someone who knows everything about a particular topic? Italian wine, *Star Wars*, the 1963 World Series, or whatever it is? I'm talking in a freakish kind of way. If they were on *Jeopardy*, and their special topic was a category, you know they'd be cleaning house.

Mavens aren't only knowledgeable about *their* topic; they're savvy about it. One spring day, when I lived on the South Shore of Massachusetts, I wanted to buy a new car. While speaking with the car salesman I soon realized that I was speaking with a maven. Not about cars though. This guy was a different kind of maven. He knew everything about *deals* on the South Shore.

He'd say "Now, the Clarion Hotel serves warm chocolate chip cookies in the lobby on Wednesdays at 2pm...Sunday afternoons Joe's restaurant has free wings in the bar lounge. I used to go down there every week...if you take the ferry on Sunday mornings they only charge you half price." I listened intently as this guy laid down unadvertised deal after unadvertised deal in the local area. Forget the car. What hotel has free cookies? Where are the best priced chili dogs? This guy was a maven of deals. Too bad he didn't tell me where the best deal for my car was.

Mavens know everything about their topic. They're connoisseurs. Although many customers would like to think that they're mavens, there are very few who actually are. To be honest with you, if they're not a former partner, I have no idea how they know this much about Starbucks. You might be tempted to call it an obsession or a fascination. I suppose it is.

Mavens are generally every day customers, have read all of the Starbucks books, keep up to date on Starbucks news, and ask the partners lots of questions. Some own stock and many have a friend working for Starbucks. They're usually pleasant to speak with.

If there's a breakdown somewhere in a maven's knowledge it usually comes within a specific product offering. There might be a pastry or a piece of merchandise that they're unaware of, but they usually know more than the average barista about what's happening with the company from a macro perspective. I'd find myself learning from mavens who visited the store. They'd leave and I'd think to myself, "How come I didn't know about that?"

## Partners

One day a customer comes into the store and orders an iced, quad, tall, one pump raspberry, four pumps Classic, nonfat, three melted raw sugar, shaken latte. Whoa. Hold everything. Something is amiss. Customers don't order drinks like that. That drink doesn't even make sense. Sure enough that customer is actually a partner in disguise, visiting on vacation.

As you may imagine, partners and former partners are avid customers. Most were customers before they were partners. Some are even mavens. There is one thing that is readily identifiable with a partner. It's that they really know how to make a drink and

they're particular about it. Not particular like customers, particular like partners.

When a partner comes into the store and orders you know immediately that they're a partner. The first clue is that they order their drink with a million different modifiers. The second is that they order obscure modifications. Many times they're modifications that I've never heard ordered. You can only come up with modifications like this if you've had the opportunity to endlessly experiment with making drinks. The third clue is that they order it perfectly and without hesitation. By speaking their modifications in the correct order, and with fluidity, they're way too polished to have never worked at Starbucks. It's a dead giveaway.

Let me give you another example. Sometimes I like to have a Coffee Frappuccino. For me, the standard recipe is too thick and too sweet. To modify both of those this is what I order: decaf, tall, milk to the top line, smoothie size scoop of ice, one pump of base, in a grande cup, Coffee Frappuccino. Ahhh, just the way I like it. I'm always pegged as a partner when I'm in a new store. Customers don't order their drinks like that. Well, maybe you will after reading this book.

You're going to read about, or have read about, all of the modifications that I list and recommend. With those in mind, come back to this and you'll better understand what I'm talking about.

### Buddy-Buddy

Some partners and customers go fishing together, some share books, others take yoga classes together, and some babysit for each other. Heck, I even invited customers to my wedding.

Many customers are real buddy-buddy with the partners. When

you're working at Starbucks you get to know some of the regulars really well. You even become friends with them. It's a risky proposition for store business because the friendship could always have a falling out. At the same time, that's life. So I embraced it.

Every store has at least twenty customers who know every partner by name. Everyone is happy to see them and anxious to chat with them. It always seems that there's so much to talk about when they visit. That's because they share their lives with you. They don't see the partners as just another bunch of employees at another place of business. They see them as friends. They often hang out and talk about topics that go far beyond your average chit-chat. Since many customers are in the store every day, and many partners work there for years, strong friendships develop naturally. Many of these people, and the daily interactions with them, are a part of who, and what, I miss most about working at Starbucks. In my mind's eye I can still picture regular customers walking into the store and being greeted: "Norm!"

### Mom

Many times a vehicle would pull up to the drive-thru speaker and there it was: a car full of screaming kids.

"I want a Frappuccino!"

"I want chocolate milk!"

"Can we get cookies?"

Now don't get me wrong, I love kids. But I was also happy that I wasn't on the other side of that speaker. When they would pull up to the window all I could do was laugh and offer my condolences. Mom obviously has her hands full today.

Moms are a big part of the customer base. Usually they visit the store at lunchtime or right after school gets out. They often visit the drive-thru, because it's easier, but sometimes they can be seen pushing their strollers inside Starbucks' shoebox-sized stores.

I have this mental image forever ingrained in my mind of a mom, in her van, reaching back to deal with her raucous kids. To this day I still laugh when I think about that.

Here's what I think happens. Mom, and sometimes dad, has responsibility for the kids; but she has to have her Starbucks. Maybe they're at home and she loads everybody in the car, or maybe she's just picking them up from school. Whatever it is, they've made their way to Starbucks.

At this point it's hard not to buy them something. That's part of the deal, isn't it? "Be good and I'll get you something." Yeah, it doesn't always work.

I couldn't always see into the back of the van so I didn't always know how many kids were actually in there. Sometimes it seemed like I was passing an endless parade of drinks out the window, just wondering where they were all going. There must've been a soccer team in there or something.

Other times mom was dead silent as the kids screamed away. She'd given up. I could see the look of defeat on her face. She silently paid, took the drinks, and passed them into the back of the vehicle without ever looking. You can only smile at that. If you're a parent then you've probably been there.

This was a far more common occurrence in the drive-thru than in the café. Kids who are in the café are usually better behaved. I guess if your kid is a little out of control on that day then you usually won't bring them inside. I can't say I blame you.

### Mr. / Ms. Exact Change

Have you ever been standing in line and seen the customer in front of you approach the counter, immediately hand over their money, take their drink, and leave? No words were spoken except “Thank you.” You marvel at what just took place. Before you even order you have to ask the barista, “Who was that guy?” Obviously he has to be someone important.

The barista tells you, “Oh, that was just John. He gets the same thing every day and always pays with the exact change. He’s usually in a hurry so we prepare his drink as soon as we see him walk in.”

The morning is the busiest time for most stores. It’s also when customers are in the biggest hurry. Many will craft their visit so that it’s as time efficient as possible. They do that by getting the same drink every day, employing minimal, or in some cases zero, conversation, and paying with exact change. Because their beverage is always the same, it’s constructed as soon as they’re spotted. If it costs \$3.52, then every day they pass exactly \$3.52 across the counter.

They’re a well oiled machine. They’re efficient by their own standards and a pleasure to the customers in line behind them, as they keep the line moving fast.

Sometimes that \$3.52 is the only cash they’re carrying. So when price changes take effect, everything stops. Sometimes they don’t have enough to pay. Of course, they’ll always be notified of the price change and then considered paid in full. Nevertheless, it’s awkward to stop a well oiled machine.

## Classic Guy

I can still remember the first day he came in. He set two Harley Davidson to-go cups on the counter and from behind his dark sunglasses and leather jacket said, "Fill'em up." I filled them right to the top. When I put the lids on the coffee spilled down the sides. I can still picture him saying to me "I don't care. I like 'm like that." He walked out of the store, got on his bike, and was gone. Classic.

I call this category *Classic Guy* because it's almost exclusively men who occupy it. They come into the store almost every day. They're the kind of guy who's a real man's man. They almost don't even want to admit that they go to Starbucks because their manly friends may poke fun at them. They counter that by stating that they come in for the bold coffee. Of course they do. They might add cream and sugar but many times they take it black. They don't want anything to do with lattes, Frappuccinos, or any drink that they consider to be "foo-foo."

When asked about any of those drinks they respond, "I don't know anything about that other stuff," or "I don't like that other crap. Just give me the high-test." I love those guys. Many times they don't even care what coffee you give them. They just want coffee.

Before working at Starbucks I was one of them. But over the course of five years I've slowly broken down. Today, I drink as many "foo-foo" drinks as I do drip coffees.

## The Runner

Some customers aren't customers at all. They're sent to get drinks for someone else. I like to call them *runners*. When they approach the counter they usually say something like, "Here are some drinks.

I don't know what they are," as they hand over a list. Sometimes they don't say anything. It's kind of like they're spellbound.

I can almost hear a barista shouting across the store, "We've got a list!"

The truth is there are two different kinds of runners. There are those who are regular customers themselves and those who have never stepped foot inside a Starbucks except as a runner. The two couldn't be more opposite.

The former kind of runner is high energy and employs sales skills. They're a commander of sorts. They may have volunteered to pick up the drinks for the office, hair salon, or wherever they came from. You can picture them persuading their friends and colleagues to buy a drink. "Starbucks is great. I can't believe you've never had it. You know what you should try? Get a ..." Then they'll turn their attention to the next person - "What are you getting?" It's a caffeinated conversation.

Once, a movie was being filmed down the street from my store. A runner from the crew would come in and get twenty or thirty drinks for her coworkers. You have to be a commander to pull off a list like that.

The latter kind of runner delivers their list with great trepidation. I feel for these individuals. They must feel like a lamb in the lion's den. They just hand over their list and pay, afraid to even speak. They don't normally get a drink for themselves. More often than not, while they're waiting for their drinks, they'll ask something like, "So what's in a cappuccino anyway?" I've tried to offer free drinks to them but they don't usually bite. They might not have a list for a group of people. Many times it'll be a husband picking up his wife's drink.

## High School Kids

High school kids. They're hyper, loud, and travel in packs. It's not an issue, but I'm just saying. You know how they, or you, are. We've all been there. I think when the final bell rings they pack into the car of the kid who has a driver's license and race off to ransack the local Starbucks.

On the flip side, they make a good recruiting pool. Many are passionate customers who have an interest in becoming baristas as well. I've had many competent high school kids work with me.

Now, I said that they travel in packs. That doesn't mean that they all order drinks. If there's a group of five then maybe two or three of them will order. Some don't have any money and some borrow from their friends. "You can have my lunch tomorrow." They scrap together \$4 just so they can come in with their friends and get a Frappuccino. Ahhh, those were the days.

That's the other thing: they love Frappuccinos. Every weekday afternoon from two to four o'clock is Frappuccino mania. Starting in the springtime, and especially when Starbucks runs its Frappy Hour promotion, it can get so busy that it's almost unbearable. And it's mostly high school kids. Three or four groups of three or four high school kids ordering Frappuccinos can put a lot of stress on the partners who are working. Frappuccinos aren't easy to make and, in quantities like that, things can bottleneck in a hurry.

High school kids only drink three things: Frappuccinos, sweetened iced teas, and sometimes hot chocolates. These kids love the sweet stuff. That's why they like these drinks. Most of them haven't developed a palate for coffee yet. I guess that comes during college.

### Regulars

Most customers are regulars. They visit Starbucks on some kind of a regular basis. That could be three times per week or three times per day. However often it is, these customers are the ones who make up the vast majority of Starbucks' business.

Some regulars like to think that they're unique because they visit Starbucks every day. For some it's a matter of pride. I've never had the courage to tell them that most customers are regulars. Partners get close with regulars and therefore tend to get possessive of their relationships. I would visit other stores and see some of my regulars there. "You're cheating on me?" I would quip.

For some customers Starbucks is a luxury; for regulars it's a necessity. In fact, there's another name for regulars: addicts. Don't deny it. It's caffeine people. I say that with all of the love in the world. Most will admit that they have some form of an addiction to their drink. It might be the caffeine, the sugar, or maybe the social interaction that happens when visiting the store. Some are simply addicted to their routine. Without it, their whole day is thrown off. But most come for the caffeine.

Regulars get the same drink most of the time, if not all of the time. They may or may not know a lot about the menu but they certainly know "their drink." They have to have it to function. I once had a customer who liked her drink with twelve Splendas. She wanted to cut back so she started getting eleven and a half. She was serious.

Another lady was so addicted to caffeine, and Starbucks, that she would sneak VIA instant coffee packets into her religious retreat, where caffeine wasn't allowed. She said the packets were just the right size for this covert operation.

At one store we had a large clientele of au pairs. They would come in at different times with their host families. During the same period we also had a Wednesday night knitting circle. On any given Wednesday evening there would be seven to twenty knitters who would gather for a couple hours of socializing and knitting. One fateful Wednesday evening, more than twenty au pairs decided to have a meeting at Starbucks. I'll leave the ensuing melee to your imagination.

### Avid Customer

Once I was helping a customer and noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that she had a peculiar handbag. Upon further inspection I realized that it was entirely made out of Starbucks gift cards. Wow. Not only did this lady need to be crafty to pull this off, she had to be an avid customer.

Some customers love Starbucks so much that they have to have everything Starbucks. They only drink Starbucks coffee, collect Starbucks mugs and Bearistas (don't ask), their coffee or espresso maker has to be Starbucks, and the perfect gift for their friend just happens to be from Starbucks. Maybe you've received one.

Avid customers have a real affinity for merchandise. They love to collect items. The most popular collectibles are certainly the Starbucks city mugs – mugs with pictures of cities from all over the world. Bearistas are a popular collectible as well. Okay, okay, I'll explain them. They're simply stuffed bears that come in various themes, such as Halloween, Christmas, or Valentine's Day.

Outside of the holiday season Starbucks doesn't sell a whole lot of merchandise. However, a large chunk of what it does sell is purchased by avid customers.

## CUSTOMERS

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These customers certainly drive a lot of business for Starbucks. That's not only because they spend more but because they act as spokespeople. They talk about how much they like the brand and you see it when visiting their homes. When speaking with avid customers I picture a room in their home with vast shelving that contains bearista... after bearista... after bearista.

