

Concept Application # 3

Field Observation – Starbucks

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New York City has more than 17,000 coffee shops and bodegas. The ability to get a cup of coffee is not only easy it is swift and efficient. One can typically be in and out of a shop in under three minutes. I recall watching the coffee guy in the local shop setting up his take-out cups in an assembly line ready to load with black, regular or regular no-sugar. Coffee is a staple, part of the morning routine, and it is truly hard to get a bad cup of coffee in New York. However, coffee is not always rushed. There are times when one sits down and gets a cup or two. It is rare one needs to wait for a refill because the professional wait staff is usually roaming the floor with a hot pot in hand “warming” up customer’s cups.

In 1973 while in high school, I began visiting Greenwich Village to take photographs. I came across my first real “coffee shop.” Café Reggio is an Italian café on McDougal Street around the corner from New York University. It has been in existence since 1927 had been the hangout for local, beatniks, hippies, and the magnates of the art world for decades. Not more than 750 feet square it boasted embossed tin ceilings and an enormous imported espresso machine. The aroma is heavenly. What was even more inviting were the small tables, large tables and the plethora of independent thinking people that are the patrons. Within moments, one knows they are in the center of the art and literature and academic world. All dressed in appropriate NYC black wardrobes! Conversations about everything from politics to ink strokes, to the latest book, painting, or article in the New York Times are making their way through the air. Whenever I was in the Village, I found a few minutes to relax, put down my camera bag and get a cappuccino. After dates, no matter where in the city I would make our way to Caffè Reggio. And, to this day when in the city and near the Village, I find my way to this little coffee haven.

I open this Field Observation with the story of Caffè Reggio because it is the standard by which I have always compared coffee shops. This is a dangerous place for a researcher to be

because it imbues a personal bias. Over the years and with as much travel as I have done I have learned to accept that few coffee shops will ever evoke the feeling I have when I think of Caffè Reggìo. I have had to adapt to modern coffee shops for that—coffee shop feeling. However with close to 12,000 Starbucks in the U.S., it is hard to consider Starbucks a coffee shop.

Starbucks as has become a marketing tool that instills a false sense of sophistication in its customers. It does this by giving cup sizes Italian names such as *Vente* or *Grande*, and coffee bean names that boggle the mind of coffee aficionados. The Starbucks menu is full of dozens of customized coffee drinks that can range from a reasonable \$2.25 cup to blended, mixed concoctions that cost as much as \$8.00 each. When I visit Starbucks, it is usually to meet someone for a brief meeting or as a courtesy of picking up some beverages for friends. On occasion, I will get a Starbucks coffee in an airport if nothing else is readily available. Starbucks is not the first choice, and when compared to other brands of coffee, Starbucks flavor is frankly not that good.

For this Field Observation, I selected Starbucks in Lake Havasu City, Arizona as the location with two questions in mind. Who visits Starbucks and what can I learn about them? To do this I had to limit my exposure in such a way as to prevent my bias for Caffè Reggìo, and my bias against Starbucks to interfere with the observation recording. To set up my observation, I first used the location to have a brief meeting with a colleague. At the conclusion of the meeting, I remained and began the observation. The transcribed notes follow.

Joel Silverstein
Field Observation

Field Notes

The date of observation is Friday, April 15, 2016, at 12:30 PM. Starbucks Coffee Shop 55 Lake Havasu Avenue at Swanson Avenue, Lake Havasu City, AZ. This Starbucks is in a strip mall with AT&T and Sprint cell phone stores next door. Also, the location has a jewelry store, a bank, and a Chipotle fast-food restaurant. Parking is crowded, and the traffic flows through two entrance/exits at each end of the lot.

The shop is approximately 1,700 square feet with about 1,200 usable for customers. The main entrance is a single door on the right of the plot. It opens with a pathway to the sales counter that includes a first case of food items behind a glass case, two cash registers surrounded by point-of-sale add-on items, and then the coffee machines with a small counter at the end where customers pick up finished product and then are required to turn and find condiments. From here one chooses to sit at one of the dozen tables with chairs or make their way back to the exit and leave. [this is an uncomfortable layout]

I take a seat on the far left wall at the 2nd table that provides a point of view that allows for a reasonable view of the entire floor. I have a bottle of water on my table, a notepad, and a smartphone with ear buds connected to appear as though I am listening to something, even though I am listening to the surroundings.

Definition: Barista, a person working behind the counter who makes hot /cold coffee beverages.

- Ten customers at various tables – some in dual person conversations, others sitting alone. The loners are drinking some kind of beverages; two are reading newspapers, the others are reading their smart phones.
- two female customers at bar Barista in overly loud voice welcomes them to Starbucks and asks how they are doing.
- one customer waiting at pick up counter
- barista hands cup to customer and she walks out

- back at bar – woman one orders a Frappuccino – Barista asks Venti or Grande?
- other woman at bar still looking at menu
[both women dressed in “banking” business clothing]

- four more people walk in, two are together, the other two are alone and make way to counter
[counter seems crowded with this many people as there is a long table immediately behind the people standing at the counter]

- male barista (late 40s) is enthusiastic with greeting – takes order from first couple swiftly

[eight minutes has elapsed and of six people no one has received product]

- original ten customers still sitting at tables still engrossed in the same positions they were in eight minutes ago.

-- ANNIE PICK UP --- SUSAN PICK UP is shouted by barista

[we now know the women’s names -- they pick up their beverages and some food item and sit at a table near me]

-- one man reading newspaper gets up and leaves.

[I recognize the man, we make eye contact and nod in acknowledgement]

--Annie and Susan start a conversation that discusses a problem at work with a co-worker who has been coming in late and then spending long periods of time in the bathroom.

-- Susan moves the straw in her drink up and down as if to mix the drink

-- ROBERT PICK UP is shouted by barista - Robert picks up and leaves with person he is with.

-- door on microwave close with a thud, blender making high pitched sound

12:42 store becomes busy with 8 more people coming in. Four are teens, two women in their 20s and two men in their 30’s they are not together

-- barista less engaging but moving faster paying attention to each customer, 2nd barista steps to counter – orders are taken quickly as the women and men order

--- teens stop and secure a table before going to counter to order

-- Ellen PICK UP

-- Annie and Susan still having conversation next to me, they start looking at photos on smart phone

-- two more newspaper readers get up and leave

-- Bill PICK UP

[seems last few pairs of people who order place orders under one name - this could be to save time]

[interesting how the last few orders were all for cold beverages, most with whipped cream on them]

-- teens order a smoothie, a Frappuccino, one bottled drink and another drink --- one teen pays for the entire order with a Starbucks card

-- Shannon PICK UP

[shift focus from counter to people sitting at tables]

- teens are actively engaged in a conversation about some other kid in school who is being looked at by Harvard and Princeton for football

[small town I know who they are talking about but do not recognize these teens]

-- Shannon picks up and joins her friend at table to the right of me

[Annie and Susan still talking]

-- Darlene PICK UP

[this is the teens order]

12:55 [it has taken 13 minutes for orders to be completed – why have consumers become complacent with waiting this long for drinks?]

-- Shannon and her friend lean in close to have conversation, speaking in low voice

-- seven more people come in – tables are getting filled – men who were sitting solo have left – large chairs along back wall are now available

-- two women in the seven order tea

-- one man orders four Americano, hot, black

--- Shannon tells her friend she met someone the other evening at the Flying-X and had sex with him in the bathroom.

--- Billy PICK UP

[four Americanos – this order moved through in 6 minutes]

[its clear when someone makes a simple order it can be completed quickly]

-- Teens at Darlene's table have moved off the football discussion and have moved into talking about a party this weekend at one of their houses and who they did not invite.

--- Shannon still talking to her friend telling her about the guy and that they have a date this Saturday. She says she does not want to go back to the X with him but they are going to Laughlin.

--- two more people come in and one is a friend of mine, we wave, they go to the counter and order –

-- various other orders have been coming out but nothing significantly different than before

[I scan the room to see if anyone has changed position and to pick up on any new conversations]

1:05 ANNIE and SUSAN get up and leave

[they had been in shop over 30 minutes – this may have been their lunch break]

-- my friend had ordered and then came over to my table – [I had closed pad] she asked me what I was up to, how school was, and when I would be finished, I responded with I had just had a short meeting with Cortney and decided to take a break and catch up on some e-mail

[there was no reason to disclose my purpose]

We had some further innocuous conversation and she said we would catch up another time as she was having lunch with her co-worker.

-- Ellen PICK UP -- the two women finally got their tea and moved past me to the large chairs in the corner.

[I glanced over at the pick up station some people waiting appear to be anxious, looking at phones multiple times (I assume to look at time) one man looked at watch]

1:10 most of the tables by now had people sitting at them. Some still solo and others with some pairs that had been there for at least 40 minutes.

[no observation of refills or additional purchases]

-- teens talking loudly as they get up and toss out their empty cups and leave.

-- Shannon and her friend get up and leave leaning into each other as if telling something private and then Shannon laughs as they exit

-- two men who had been sitting alone get up and leave

-- counter seems quiet now – no one waiting at pick up counter

[looks like the 45 minute rush is over]

1:15 with the shop quiet and no conversations in progress it is time for me to go.

[I packed up my pad and put it in my bag, tossed the ear bugs in as well and put the phone in my back pocket]

-- i stopped by my friends table, said hi to her friend and said we would catch up after Kathy got back from Florida this week.

1:18 Observation terminated

Comments on Field Observation

What I learned from this brief observation is that the people that come in to this Starbucks are town's people, most who engaged in conversations felt some sense of security as they discussed some private information with the assumption no one was listening. Most people ordered cold beverages with toppings on them; few ordered hot drinks. The average order took over 8 minutes to complete. Some took as much as 12 minutes and only one order for the four black Americano Coffees took less than 5 minutes. The people who sat down spent an average of 20 minutes in the shop. The traffic flow allowed for anyone who wanted a table to get one. Things that were missing from the experience was the smell. I was unable to determine if any of the coffees made had any smell at all. I knew they were coffee because of the tapping sound to clear out the espresso machine but at no time was I able to get the aroma of coffee into my nose. Perhaps if I sit closer to the coffee making counter I could get that smell, perhaps the air handling systems are too efficient. Further observations with specific data collection could reveal additional information about the customers and their preferences for beverages.

Note: Other than the first person whom I nodded too, and the other person who I knew directly, all of the persons I observed were strangers to me