

# STARBUCKS THEN AND NOW:

## How the Changing Cultural Climate has Influenced Logo Design

*an analysis by Paige Leland*

When looking at the world around us, it is not very often that we stop to think about visual strategies—how companies are using them to influence customers or how customer influence inspires the visual marketing strategies employed by different companies. It may not be a common first thought to wonder about visual structures when looking down at one's regular coffee cup—clear plastic stamped with a green emblem, filled to the top with vanilla bean Frappuccino and whipped cream—but those visual structures are at work, and they influence us whether we think about it or not.

First opened in 1971, Starbucks skyrocketed to fame because of the company's kept promise of quality coffee and convenience along with, of course, their wide fan base of loyal customers. Though they only offered a range of coffee, tea and spices when they first opened in Seattle, WA, Starbucks now carries a variety of food and drink specialties, along with mugs, travel coffee cups and other novelties in over 65 countries worldwide. Because the company has changed so drastically since its grand opening, their logo has changed with it. Three major changes in company structure and policy were accompanied by three major changes to the company logo.

In the following analysis, I will discuss the rhetorical and visual strategies utilized by the Starbucks logo at each different stage of the company, as well as the reasons behind the changes, as Starbucks has tried to keep up with the needs of a changing cultural context.

### Assessing the Rhetorical Situation

#### The Audience

One of the most important elements to be considered when branding a product line is to whom the product line is going to be marketed to. When marketers sat down to create the Starbucks logo, they had to think about what would convey the best meaning to their intended audience. When Starbucks first opened in Seattle in 1971, their audience consisted of a northwestern, mostly local crowd with an above average median income. They also lacked the credibility that they have today, because back then they were a new company with no reputation. Now Starbucks has a much wider audience ranging across regions and incomes; there are, in fact, over 21,000 Starbucks coffee shops worldwide. Obviously when the audience changes so quickly and drastically, the company and their visuals have to change along with it.



*Starbucks' most recent coffee cup update includes more minimalist design, and doesn't include the name of the company.*

## The Genre of Coffee Shops and Their Logos

Another thing that is important to note is the category that the Starbucks logo belongs to, so that the visual strategies can be better assessed. Not only is the siren visual that is so famous considered to be a logo—or a symbol used by an organization to identify its products—it is also part of specific subgenre of logos used by the institution of coffee shops. This distinction is important because coffee houses use semantic units (the things that express meaning) that are not often employed by other types of companies. Not only is their logo printed on the coffee cups, it is also printed on the bulk bags of coffee they sell, the brown paper sacks different food items come in, their mugs and travel cups, the uniforms for employees, as well as in both print and online advertisements. Because the logo is used in so many different places and the cost of printing is such an important exigency for a big business, it is more profitable for a company like Starbucks to use a simple refined logo. (This principle will be addressed in more depth later in the report.)



*Figure One: The original Starbucks logo created in 1971 uses textual signifiers like coffee, tea, and spices, to aid in audience understanding of the brand. This logo also utilizes a detailed siren to illustrate the mythology to customers.*



*Figure Two: Starbucks' second logo, released in 1987, followed the company's move to serve food items. The association between the color brown and food was unappetizing to designers, so they decided to go with green—the color of money.*



*Figure three: Starbucks' third logo. Mirrored their expansion to global markets in 1992. Used a simpler, closer image of the siren and removed notches from her fins, to create a more cohesive and easier to understand message.*



*Figure four: Starbucks' fourth and most contemporary logo. Removes all text and black coloring. Aligns with minimalist trend and is still effective as audience knows the logo represents the company, even without the textual signifiers.*

## The Visual Strategies Used in the Famous Starbucks Logo

When considering the Starbucks logo through the years, it will be helpful in understanding the changes if the logo is viewed under the microscope of semiotics—or the study of signs and symbols and their use.

Consider the original Starbucks logo first, which is simply an antecedent to the logo we know today. As can be seen in figure one, the logo used the signifiers of “coffee,” “tea” and “spices,” to inform the audience about what types of products Starbucks carried. This was important in the company’s

early stages, because like it was mentioned previously, in the beginning the company obviously did not have any reputation whatsoever. Because of this, the only way the audience could have determined what the brand behind Starbucks was, would be through those textual indicators. Without the signifiers, the logo would have been ineffective with the audience, and it is doubtful that the logo would have increased their revenue and popularity in the way that it did in the 70s.



*Norse mythology depicts sirens as beautiful singers who would lure sailors to their islands, and ultimately, their death. Using the visual of a siren for coffee implies the coffee is delicious, enticing and addictive.*

Additionally, the original Starbucks logo (and every logo ever used by the company since) very cleverly depicts an image of a siren. Sirens are symbols found in Norse mythology. Lore says sirens (that look a lot like mermaids) used enchanting songs to lure sailors to their island, and the sailors would be so enticed by them, they would ignore the rocky island shores and crash to their death. Using the siren is a great signifier for Starbucks because, not only does she match the nautical theme first created by using the name “Starbucks” (which helps to develop the credibility of the company), she also represents desire. Here designers wanted to illustrate to the audience that customers would desire their coffee and be enticed by its flavors. The siren is used well here as a non-literal representation, meaning though the product has elements related to sirens, like attractive and desirable flavors, the product line is coffee and tea, not singing mermaids.

Color is also a visual strategy used effectively within the Starbucks logo. As can be seen in the first logo, the main color originally used to portray the brand was brown—the color of coffee, tea and conveniently a large number of spices. The color contrasts well with the white text and graphics, and also adds additional meaning to the textual signifiers because the audience can easily associate coffee with the color brown.

Because of the changing cultural climate of the world revolving around Starbucks (which will be discussed later on in this report), Starbucks changed the color of their logo from brown to green in 1987. The logo’s color no longer represented the product, but how customers would feel after or because of drinking Starbucks. In many cultures, including ours, the color green signifies wealth, status and money. Here logo developers want consumers to make the association that drinking Starbucks will make them appear more affluent and classy. And just like with the brown, green is also a good contrast and is visually appealing with the white text and graphics.

## Why Has the Starbucks Logo Changed Over Time?

As can be seen from figures 1-4, the Starbucks logo has had a few makeovers since 1971. The color has changed, the text has disappeared and the image of the siren has become increasingly simplistic. Some may incorrectly assume that marketers for Starbucks just enjoy change, because that simply is not one of the exigencies driving the dynamic changes of the logo. Not only has a cultural shift influenced the look of the logo, but so has a shift in the branding of Starbucks and what the logo represents.

Cultural Context:

Where Did All the Words Go?

This concept is what I like to refer to as the “Starbucks on Every Corner” phenomenon. Because Starbucks surged so quickly in popularity in the 90’s and 2000’s, for a while it was nearly impossible to walk down the street in any large city without passing by three or four convenient Starbucks locations. It is safe to say that the majority of Starbucks’ intended audience has seen the famous logo on two or twenty occasions in their lifetime. The company now has a well-established reputation. Where before it was important to denote the type of product Starbucks sold so consumers knew, now it is almost completely unnecessary. Customers don’t need to see the words “coffee,” “tea” and “spices” to know that Starbucks mostly markets coffee products. In fact, customers don’t need any words at all to know that the logo shown in figure 4 means “Starbucks.” Even their website employs a similar strategy of simple is better. If you type “starbucks.com” into a web browser, the only signifier you’ll see that tells you the website belongs to the company is the logo in figure 4 in the top right hand corner of the screen.

What About the Siren?

The siren herself has even gotten a makeover with each new logo design. In the first logo, the siren was more realistic, complete with breasts and seaweed-like hair. Over the years the siren has lost most of these realistic qualities, and now all that can be seen of her is her face, fins, wavy hair and crown. This also boils down to simpler is better. When Starbucks was new, the siren was a symbol for desire and a sense of enticement. Now that customers have experienced the product and understand that, a simpler form of the siren, that is also easier to print as well as identity, still accomplishes the same effect. Also, both the removal of the text and the simplification of the siren fit in well with the minimalist cultural trend that has swept the nation in recent years.

(It is also important to note here that these visual strategies work well in the 65 countries in which Starbucks is a major presence. However, it is doubtful these simple visual structures would work in a country where Starbucks has never been introduced before.)

## Changes in Logo = Changes in Company

Starbucks has also mentioned before that their changing logos reflect the growth and change of the company itself. When the Starbucks logo was brown like in figure one, the company only carried coffee, tea, and spice products. When the company started selling more food items in 1987, this change was signified by the logo’s color change from brown and white to green, black and white. Though brown is a good association for customers to make with coffee and tea, brown isn’t the color customers would like to associate with food—thus the green Starbucks logo was born.



*Since 1971, the Starbucks logo has seen three makeovers in both color and overall design. The demands of trendy design, audience reception and printing costs have all contributed to the Starbucks logo we know today.*

Changes in the logo also foster customer attention. Consider the controversy of the red holiday cup, rather than a cup with more wintery designs. Starbucks had a growth in revenue and social media presence just by changing the color of a cup. The same thing happens when they change the logo. Customers complain about it, or defend the change, and it creates a social network buzz that ultimately leads to increased revenue and publicity for the company. Not only have the logo changes adapted to the cultural climate and the changing company, but they have made Starbucks quite a lot of cash as well.

Lastly, like what was mentioned in a previous section, the cost of printing for such a large business is quite a big exigency. The logo Starbucks uses now (figure 4), costs a lot less to print because of lesser detailing and the lack of text than the original logo would cost. So not only is the visual design of the Starbucks logo helping the company to make money, the design is saving them money as well.

## Conclusion

Overall, it's clear to see that though we may not always think about visual rhetoric and how it affects us as consumers, visual rhetoric is always at play. Companies use visual structures and design to manipulate customers into spending money, time and effort interacting with their products. It is something we fall victim to on a daily basis.

Though the Starbucks logo has changed quite a bit since 1971, their ultimate goal of profit and revenue has guided the logo's visual design every step of the way. It has become simpler because it has adapted to the company's credibility and the audience's needs, but it never could have become so famous without the first detailed brown logo that represented Starbucks when only a few knew what Starbucks even was.

## Bibliography

“Company Information,” Starbucks Corporation. 18 Feb 2016, <http://www.starbucks.com/about-us/company-information>.

Wang, Jaslyn. “Study of Consumer Psychology,” Why Changing Logo—Starbucks. 17 Oct 2012. [pururuwang.wordpress.com/2012/10/17/why-changing-logo-starbucks/](http://pururuwang.wordpress.com/2012/10/17/why-changing-logo-starbucks/).