

Starbucks 'Race Together' Campaign:

An Assessment of Starbucks' Attempt to Discuss Race in America



Why Starbucks' Race Together Campaign Failed

Source: Eater

Angelie Tran

Final Project Case Study

November 19, 2023

1. Introduction

In 2015, amidst the escalating tide of racial injustice in the United States, Starbucks found itself at the epicenter of a societal conversation led by CEO, Howard Schultz. Recognizing the imperative for corporate engagement, Schultz initiated a courageous dialogue within the company, stressing the importance of addressing issues of race openly. "We at Starbucks should be willing to talk about these issues in America," Schultz emphasized during discussions with the company's partners at its Seattle headquarters, emphasizing that silence was incongruent with the ethos of Starbucks (Starbucks Corporation, 2015).

Consequently, Starbucks organized forums where a diverse spectrum of corporate and partner representatives shared personal narratives of racial injustice. Over three months, more than 2,000 Starbucks partners participated in these open forums nationwide, showcasing vulnerability and courage in recounting their individual stories. The consensus among attendees was clear: these gatherings not only underscored Starbucks' mission and values, but also illuminated the partners' collective desire to effect positive change.

In March 2015, Starbucks embarked on a bold initiative named "Race Together," one of its most extensive campaigns to date. This initiative aimed to catalyze a national conversation about race relations by having baristas across the company's 12,000 U.S. stores inscribe the phrase "Race Together" on Starbucks cups. However, the campaign faced severe backlash from both the media and society. It not only required employees to engage customers in conversations about race but also featured "conversation starters"

published in USA Today. The fallout was swift, with the campaign garnering massive negative attention on social media, accumulating 2.5 billion impressions in less than 48 hours, and resulting in the temporary closure of Starbucks Sr. VP of Global Communications, Corey DuBrowa's Twitter account (Carr, 2015).

This essay aims to dissect the reasons behind the failure of Starbucks' Race Together campaign, scrutinizing various contributing factors, including the intricacies and sensitivity of the topic of racial inequality, the challenging role assigned to baristas, and the company's response to criticism. The evaluation will delve into the campaign's dynamics, the subsequent public backlash, Starbucks' crisis management, alternative strategies for handling the situation, and propose future steps to prevent similar challenges.

2. Assessment

The Race Together campaign, rooted in a sensitive and intricate subject like racial tension, faced inherent challenges in effecting meaningful change, particularly within the brief and superficial interactions typical of a coffee shop setting. Attempting to catalyze discussions about race in the fleeting moments customers spent ordering coffee from baristas proved incongruent with the nature of such a profound and complex topic. Starbucks, although well-intentioned, chose a less-than-ideal context for engaging in meaningful conversations about race.

In a video statement, Starbucks CEO, Howard Schultz expressed his aspiration for the campaign to be a catalyst for a national conversation on racial tension, highlighting the company's commitment to societal progress (Harlen and Contrera, 2015). However, the lack of

adequate training and guidance during the campaign's planning and execution phases resulted in a barrage of negative criticism. Employees, expected to embody the company's beliefs on race, were ill-prepared to navigate such sensitive discussions with customers (Abitbol, 2018).

While internal forums provided employees an opportunity for in-depth discussions about race, translating those deep, intimate conversations into brief customer interactions proved challenging. The absence of training not only burdened baristas with an unexpected role but also forced customers into uncomfortable and unintentional conversations. Effective internal communication was crucial, yet the oversight in preparing employees for their frontline roles left the campaign vulnerable to misinterpretation.

The misalignment between Schultz's values and the perceived job description of frontline employees during routine encounters with customers ultimately undermined the campaign's legitimacy (Abitbol, 2018). While the company's intention to contribute positively to the dialogue on race and unite the nation was commendable, the forced and untimely nature of customer interactions, coupled with the lack of employee training, resulted in mixed reactions that reverberated widely on the internet. In essence, the discrepancy between the company's noble aspirations and the practical realities of implementing a campaign on such a complex issue underscored the need for a more thoughtful and well-executed approach.

3. News Media and Public Reactions

Despite the considerable criticism Race Together received in the news media, the campaign did find pockets of support. Advocates argued that contemporary consumers are drawn to companies that actively embrace their social responsibilities and appreciate brands aligned with causes deemed significant. In the eyes of supporters, Starbucks' entry into the race relations

debate was commendable, with optimism that the campaign could potentially instigate positive societal change (Logan, 2016).

However, the campaign was not without its detractors, and the criticisms echoed in the news media were varied and pointed. Some argued that Starbucks lacked the moral authority to initiate conversations on race due to the company's own perceived shortcomings in addressing racial issues. Critics questioned the appropriateness of a corporation tackling such a sensitive societal matter, dismissing the campaign as an exercise in the neoliberal commodification of a social issue aimed at boosting coffee sales. Additionally, concerns were raised about the burden placed on baristas, who were ill-equipped and untrained to engage the public in discussions on race. Logistical challenges further fueled negative commentary, with a public relations industry trade publication stating that Starbucks' attempts to spur conversations about race had "backfired miserably" (Logan, 2016, as cited in Schwartz, 2015).

On social media, particularly on Twitter, the sentiments mirrored those expressed in the news media. The hashtag #RaceTogether became a platform to criticize Starbucks, highlighting the company's alleged lack of presence in black neighborhoods. Some tweets questioned the sincerity and legitimacy of the Race Together campaign. Moreover, there were instances where the hashtag was co-opted by critics advancing overtly racist discourses, interpreting the campaign as an attack on white individuals and using #RaceTogether to amplify messages related to #whitegenocide. While these perspectives may be extreme, they underscore the complexity and diverse viewpoints within the national conversation on race (Logan, 2016).

5. Starbucks's Response to the Backlash

In a letter addressed to employees on March 22, 2015, Schultz announced the discontinuation of baristas writing "Race Together" on cups, sparking speculation that public backlash had compelled Starbucks to reverse course (Logan, 2016). While Schultz acknowledged the criticisms leveled against the campaign, he asserted that the decision to conclude the cup-writing phase was part of the scheduled plan. Despite external scrutiny, Schultz emphasized that the broader Race Together campaign would persist, signaling that the public backlash had not influenced the company's actions. Expressing gratitude to employees for their involvement, Schultz clarified the ongoing nature of the initiative. He outlined a series of planned Race Together activities in the coming weeks and months, including additional partner open forums, collaborations with USA TODAY for three more special sections over the next year, continued dialogues with police and community leaders nationwide, a sustained focus on employment and education for young people, a commitment to hiring 10,000 opportunity youth in the next three years, expansion into urban communities, and new partnerships aimed at fostering dialogue, empathy, and bridging racial and ethnic divides within society (Starbucks Corporation, 2015). Closing the letter, Schultz reaffirmed his unwavering commitment to equality and opportunity, asserting that his dedication to these principles had never been stronger. This communication aimed to convey Starbucks' resilience in the face of adversity and its sustained dedication to fostering meaningful conversations on race and societal divides.

7. Conclusion

The Starbucks "Race Together" campaign, launched in 2015, set out with the ambitious goal of sparking conversations about race by having baristas write the phrase on coffee cups. However, the campaign encountered criticism for its perceived poor execution, with concerns raised about the potential for superficial and forced interactions. Acknowledging these issues, Starbucks decided to end the cup-writing aspect of the campaign earlier than initially planned, recognizing the necessity for a more deliberate and considerate approach to addressing complex social issues. This initiative brought to light the inherent challenges that companies face when venturing into discussions about sensitive topics such as race.

In a reassessment of the Starbucks "Race Together" campaign from a public relations standpoint, several strategic adjustments could have been implemented to enhance its reception and effectiveness. Firstly, a more thorough research and planning phase would have been essential in gauging potential public reactions and concerns. This might have involved the inclusion of focus groups or pilot programs to test the concept before a nationwide launch. Clear and comprehensive internal communication would have been vital to ensure that all Starbucks employees were well-informed about the campaign's goals and methods. Targeted training for baristas on how to navigate sensitive conversations could have been instrumental.

A refined communication strategy could have emphasized inclusivity and unity, steering away from singling out specific issues, and aligning the initiative with Starbucks' broader commitment to social responsibility. Collaboration with experts on race relations and diversity, along with engaging community leaders and organizations, would have provided valuable insights and support. Crafting messaging that highlighted the campaign's commitment to

fostering understanding and dialogue, rather than promoting a divisive agenda, would contribute to a more positive reception.

Furthermore, creating a platform for diverse voices within the campaign, featuring stories and perspectives from various communities, could have added authenticity and resonance. Providing resources and support for Starbucks employees engaging in potentially challenging conversations, coupled with a commitment to adaptability and responsiveness to public sentiment, would have demonstrated a dedication to both the initiative's success and its sensitivity to public concerns.

Measurable goals, transparent progress updates, and a willingness to apologize and learn from any unintended offense would have rounded out a more thoughtful and inclusive approach to navigating such a socially charged initiative. This reflective and adaptive approach could have better positioned Starbucks to facilitate meaningful conversations on race while respecting the complexities and sensitivities surrounding the topic.

Works Cited

- Abitbol, A. (2018, September 6). *#RaceTogether: Starbucks' attempt to discuss race in America and its impact on company reputation and employees* | *Institute for Public Relations*. <https://instituteforpr.org/racetgether-starbucks-attempt-to-discuss-race-in-america-and-its-impact-on-company-reputation-and-employees/>
- Carr, A. (2015, June 6). *The Inside Story of Starbucks's Race Together Campaign, No Foam*. *Fast Company*. <https://www.fastcompany.com/3046890/the-inside-story-of-starbucks-race-together-campaign-no-foam>
- Harlan, C., & Contrera, J. (2023, April 9). Starbucks baristas: 'Race together' campaign never found its course. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/starbucks-baristas-race-together-campaign-never-found-its-course/2015/03/22/90b2c854-d0d4-11e4-8fce-3941fc548f1c_story.html
- Logan, N. (2016). The Starbucks Race Together Initiative: Analyzing a public relations campaign with critical race theory. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 5(1), 93–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147x15626969>

Schwartz M (2015) 3 PR lessons from Starbucks' #RaceTogether campaign. PR News Online, March. <http://www.prnewsonline.com/water-cooler/2015/03/18/3-pr-lessonsfrom-the-starbucks-brouhaha/>

Starbucks Corporation. (2019a, January 27). *A Letter from Howard Schultz to Starbucks Partners Regarding Race Together - Starbucks Stories*. Starbucks Stories. <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2015/a-letter-from-howard-schultz-to-starbucks-partners-regarding-race-together/>

Starbucks Corporation. (2019a, January 27). *What "Race Together" means for Starbucks partners and customers - Starbucks Stories*. Starbucks Stories. <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2015/what-race-together-means-for-starbucks-partners-and-customers/>