

LESSON Examining Corporate Messaging: Are the Claims True? Debra Plafker-Gutt

Lesson Objectives:

1. Students explore consumer literacy and “read” corporate and consumer behavior through the collection of “artifacts” from retail outlets and examining critiques of Starbucks.
2. Students participate in a tailor-made survey and qualify and quantify their relationship to Starbucks.
3. Students examine excerpts from an ethnographic study, Professor Bryant Simon’s *Everything But the Coffee: Learning About America from Starbucks* (2009).
4. Students analyze whether Starbucks plays a public or private role in our society.
5. Students evaluate the role of Starbucks in our communities and articulate questions to pose to company C.E.O. Howard Schultz.

Introduction Procedures:

1. In advance of the lesson, prepare a survey through the free website, www.surveymonkey.com. Questions can:
 - encourage students to provide open-ended responses regarding what they think of Starbucks and what the company wants them to think;
 - focus students to quantify how often they consume Starbucks products and/or go to the outlets and rate their enjoyment of the company;
 - inspire an evaluation of whether they think Starbucks is a good company.
2. Students will be “urban anthropologists” or modern day *flaneurs*, when they visit a Starbucks, observe the environment, and collect artifacts such as a cup, a napkin, or printed material. If possible, students should visit a variety of establishments and compare the patronage during different hours and their habits.
3. Assign students to read the cover interview from *Everything But the Coffee: Learning About America From Starbucks* at: www.rorotoko.com/index.php/article/bryant_simon_book_interview_everything_but_coffee_learning_america_starbuck. To focus the students’ reading, have them imagine an opportunity to sit down with the author of the book and develop questions for him to clarify or expand on the material.
4. Students will conduct an Internet search and uncover sources that critique, mock, or defend Starbucks.

Lesson Development Procedures:

Note: This lesson can be conducted in a large class format or in small groups. If executing in smaller groups, prepare handouts with the following discussion questions.

1. Share or post the following information about Starbucks (at the time of publication of *Everything But the Coffee*) with the class:
 - there are 17,000 Starbucks in 50 countries and they serve almost 50 million customers each week;

- Starbucks sells 3.2 billion pounds of coffee each week;
- Starbucks coffee is the most caffeinated; two times more than most coffee;
- there are an estimated 1,200 *new* Internet posts about Starbucks in each week.

2. Students will share the artifacts and information they collected as “urban anthropologists.” Lead a discussion in which the students analyze the language employed by the company with respect to their: (a) environmental work; (b) community involvement; (c) philanthropic efforts. Have students analyze the meaning behind Starbucks’s slogans such as, “Everything we do, you do.”

3. Students will define “Starbuckspeak.” Elicit definitions for: “tall,” “grande,” “venti,” “barista.” Ask the students:

- Why do you think Starbucks employs this terminology?
- What image is projected through this language?

Student responses might refer to the generous sizes of Starbucks coffee cups and their caffeine content, the fostering of an elite, “insider” culture that suggests a European aura to the American coffee outlet.

4. Students will identify other coffee companies in the United States such as Dunkin’ Donuts, McDonald’s (whose coffee consistently wins taste tests over Starbucks coffee), Seattle’s Best (which is also owned by Starbucks), and others. Students will compare and contrast the image projected by Starbucks versus these other companies and analyze how Starbucks projects its image. Student responses may include—the higher price of Starbucks products, the locations of its outlets, the deliberate music, décor, and mood of its stores.

5. Students will assess Starbucks’s record on the environment. Ask the students to evaluate Starbucks’s commitment to the environment through their artifacts. Discuss whether Starbucks encourages the use of reusable mugs? Why/why not?

Expansion Procedures:

1. Pose writing prompts to the students during a follow-up session or for homework. Questions can include:

- How was your image of Starbucks and large companies affected by the class discussion?
- Who shapes American consumption? The corporations? The consumer?
- If given the opportunity to interview Starbucks C.E.O. Howard Schultz, what would you ask him?

Encourage students to support their positions with examples.

2. Allow time and space to share these responses. Push back against cynical screeds against the company. Challenge students to consider the agency of both the corporation **and** consumers in purchase power and decision making. Ask students to consider whether some level of honesty and product quality is paramount to earning consumer loyalty or not.

Resources:

Everything But the Coffee

www.everythingbutthecoffee.net

Professor Simon’s website provides his postings and encourages community feedback. “Conversation Starters” includes a variety of articles related to consumer culture.

Survey Monkey

www.surveymonkey.com

This is a fantastic resource for middle and high school teachers. It

is a free website where teachers can develop a series of questions and poll students through opened-ended, multiple choice, and rating questions or offer open-ended writing prompts.

Independent Lens: Black Gold

www.pbs.org/independentlens/blackgold/film.html

This website allows students to uncover the business practices of coffee companies and determine if Fair Trade practices are upheld. “The Economics of Coffee” explains the commodity value of coffee and how it impacts large corporations and pickers in

Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

PBS: The Persuaders

www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders

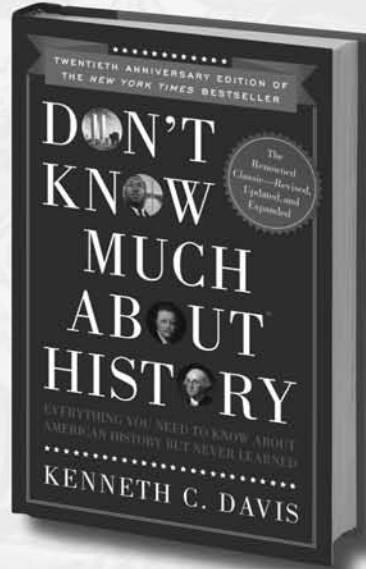
This 2004 Frontline documentary and accompanying Teachers’ Guide examine the impact of marketing practices on American culture. In concert with Frontline’s “Merchants of Cool,” which explores the purchasing power of adolescents, this viewpoint can encourage students to think about consumer and media literacy.

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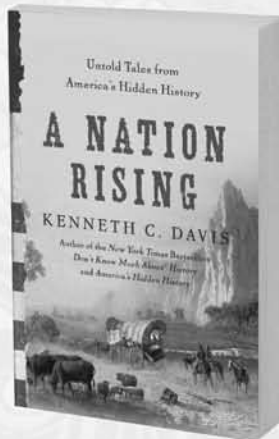
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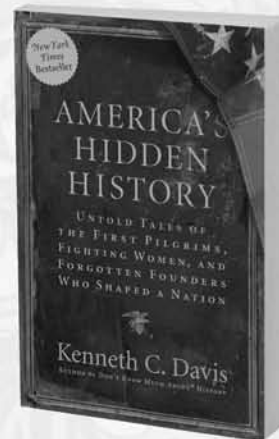
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