My Starbucks Idea: An Online Brand Community

My Starbucks Idea is an online brand community where registered users may submit ideas that they feel will enhance their experience at Starbucks, and may view and comment on ideas submitted by other members of the community. They may also view status updates on submitted ideas that have been recommended to company decision makers, and vote for their favorite ideas. A company press release posted on Businesswire.com (Mills, 2013), reports that Starbucks initiated My Starbucks Idea in 2008.

My Starbucks Idea (http://www.starbucks.com/coffeehouse/learn-more/my-starbucks-idea) has received large-scale recognition among business and marketing-focused trade and educational media. Examples of coverage include Convenience Store News (Berk, 2013), IP Watchdog (Quinn, 2011) and EContent (Loria, 2015).

Comments about My Starbucks Idea in trade media are mostly positive with many reflecting opinions appearing in a Harvard Business School Open Knowledge analysis (HBstudent2016, 2015):

> Starbucks creates value for customers by allowing them to voice their ideas and help create a better coffee house experience. Consumers often feel like their individual opinions don't matter when dealing with a large organization. With My Starbucks Idea, customers feel like their voice is being heard and that they can make an impact on the future of the organization, whether it is new products, the in-store experience, or the company’s involvement in the community.

My Starbucks Idea has had limited visibility in traditional, consumer-focused media. An exception was a Motley Fool stock advisors article in USA Today (Kline, 2016), announcing the company’s decision to introduce almond milk as an option in some coffee houses. The article notes that the change is in response to customer requests posted on My Starbucks Idea.

Brandchannel.com (Shayon, 2013) reports that innovations generated by My Starbucks Idea include free WiFi in the coffee houses. Consumer media coverage of this innovation, however, largely ignored the My Starbucks Idea role in the change. The New York Times (Miller, 2010), for example, covered the introduction of free WiFi in the coffee houses from the standpoint of competitive pressures without mentioning that submissions on My Starbucks Idea were part of the decision.

**My Starbucks Idea Has a Moderate Online Presence**

Apart from the primary site, My Starbucks Idea has at least some degree of presence across multiple online outlets:
♦ My Starbucks Idea does not have its own Facebook page apart from the company’s main consumer page. The ideas community has a strong presence with frequent posts on the company page, however – in some cases, by participants trying to rally support for their ideas. For example, a community member posted: “My Starbucks Ideas – Post An Idea: Hey Friends! We need a Starbucks here in Chillicothe! We would love to have a Starbucks come to our rapidly growing Chillicothe Missouri! It would do very very well here! We have to travel an hour and a half for a cup of coffee!!!!” (Anderson, 2016).

♦ My Starbucks Idea is also not a separate social media outlet from the main Starbucks pages on Google Plus and Pinterest, and seems to have less of a presence on these sites than on the Starbucks Facebook page.

♦ My Starbucks Idea is included in a few videos on YouTube, including:
- “My Starbucks Idea,” a short ad spot for the community;
- “My Starbucks Idea: Social Media and Open Innovation at Starbucks,” a presentation by Matthew Guiste, director of global social media for the company;
- “Mondays My Starbucks Idea,” by user Coldergalaxy, a video explaining an idea submitted to the community in order to make the idea better-known.

♦ My Starbucks Idea on Twitter is used largely to remind the 55,000 @MyStarbucksIdea followers of the availability of drinks and food items suggested by the community, and to let them know when implementation of a an idea proposed by the community is underway or imminent: Tweets requiring extensive explanation, such as a spicy breakfast and lunch foods announcement, drive visitors back to the My Starbucks Idea blog (sbx_food, 2016), which may be accessed at My Starbucks Idea by anyone, without log-in.

**My Starbucks Idea Meets the Definition of a Brand Community:**
Jenkins (2006, page 79) introduces brand communities by quoting a definition posited by Muniz and O’Guinn, beginning with:

> Brand communities carry out important functions on behalf of the brand, such as sharing information, perpetuating the history and culture of the brand, and providing assistance (to other users).

The My Starbucks Idea blog provides information to participants in the form of recipes for popular products, information about sourcing of product ingredients, and other items of interest to consumers. And despite likely being familiar with most products, participants may increase their understanding of the brand by activity within the community, particularly if they visit the *Involvement Ideas* sections of My Starbucks Idea, which include:

♦ Building Community;
♦ Social Responsibility;
♦ Other Involvement Ideas;
♦ Outside the USA.

Participants in the community assist each other by voting for their favorite idea submissions, thus increasing the chances of adoption for an individual idea. Ideas reaching the level of consideration are among the most popular, having received the most votes, and/or those viewed as most innovative by the Starbucks Idea Partners review team, according to a Harvard Business School Open Knowledge analysis (HBstudent2016, 2015). Based on the team’s recommendations, company leaders determine the feasibility of ideas and determine which ones to implement.

Additional Muniz and O’Guinn brand community criteria cited by Jenkins (2006, page 79) include:

(Brand communities) provide social structure to the relationship between marketers and consumer. Communities exert pressure on members to remain loyal to the collective and to the brand.

My Starbucks Ideas structures the relationship between the customer and the company by establishing a consistent pattern of communication (submission and consideration of ideas). The site also gives the customer a specific activity with which to engage with the brand, beyond simply commenting on likes and dislikes. As a participant becomes interested in seeing how ideas are selected and implemented, that curiosity and resulting satisfaction with the process may function as a pressure toward loyalty to the community and the brand.

Fournier and Lee (2009) explained that brand communities may function as pools (groups of participants with broadly shared goals); webs (small or large sub-groups featuring 1-1 communication among participants); and/or hubs (groups of individuals who share admiration for an individual).

My Starbucks Idea does not appear to fit the concept of a hub, as there is no primary central figure like the late Steve Jobs with Apple, a presidential nominee, etc. My Starbucks Idea does fit the concept of a pool in that participants have the broadly shared goal of enhancing every aspect of the Starbucks experience.

The web concept is also somewhat applicable in that community participants may focus their activity in areas that interest them under the umbrella groups of Product Ideas (such as coffee and espresso drinks, food, etc.), Experience Ideas (such as ordering, payment, pick-up, etc.) and Involvement Ideas (described above). Within each category, participants can and do interact with others whose ideas they support, wish to tweak – or in some cases, reject. For example, a proposal that Starbucks should make coconut milk without any additives available as an option received 57 comments, including one from user MichaelOps (2015), “Actually I’m fine with most of the additives since it
improves the texture. I just want an unsweetened version.”

Despite the potential for development of “webs,” however, My Starbucks Idea comments do not show evidence of frequent, extended interaction between individual participants. In some sections of the community, especially Social Responsibility, some ideas are heavily criticized by other participants, but without a great deal of arguing back and forth.

My Starbucks Idea Impacts the Company

Jenkins (2006, page 80) also cites Kozinets, noting that participants in a brand community shape the evolution of a company:

Loyal consumers are creating their tastes together as a community. This is a revolutionary change. Online, consumers evaluate quality together. They negotiate consumption standards. . . Organizations of consumers can make successful demands on marketers that individual consumers can not.

Starbucks established a structured situation to enable its customers to engage in a high level of influence over the company, its products and the coffee house experience, utilizing the customers “demands” as ideas for development. The company has also enlisted the community’s aid with some of its challenges, an example being the “Help Us Develop a More Recyclable Coffee Cup – Join the Beta Cup Challenge,” a contest sponsored by the company and posted on the My Starbucks Idea blog (Long, 2010).

In 2015, Giesel reported that My Starbucks Idea had received more than 190,000 ideas, approximately 300 of which Starbucks reported had been implemented. In addition to customers, employees also participate in the community and generate ideas.

My Starbucks Idea, the company’s other social media initiatives and the popularity of its products have combined to bring success to the company. In a Starbucks press release (Damodaran, 2016) the company reports revenues increased 7 percent in the 3rd quarter, to a record $5.2 billion.

References


