

Starbucks Green:

An analysis of modern ecological marketing

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Introduction

Life magazine dubbed Ecology the “New Mass Movement” back in 1970.¹ The momentum has not waned since, and companies large and small have taken up the language of ecological concern in their advertising campaigns. The present essay will analyse the green language used by the Starbucks Corporation on their website with the “Man from Mars” (Kwast) and the “Text-based” (Lynch) methods. Both will be compared and contrasted before concluding with insights gained from the exercise.²

Kwast’s “Man from Mars” Tool

Behavior: What is done?

- Sharing customers’ commitment to environment
- Believing in importance of caring for planet
- Living in the world
- Doing the right thing
- Making big progress to big recycling challenge
- Trying to develop environmentally friendly cups
- Working hard to expand recycling program
- Working to become more energy efficient
- Evaluating store design, equipment & operations to use less water
- Using building materials and designs necessary to make stores as green as possible
- Pursuing strategies to address climate change problem & help farmers mitigate impact

Values: What is good or best?

- Commitment to caring for the environment/planet
- Progress toward meeting challenge of making waste
- Friendliness toward the environment
- Lesser amounts of waste

¹ John Pekkanen, “Ecology, the New Mass Movement”, *Time* 68(3): 1970, 22-30.

² Starbucks Corporation, “Environmental Stewardship”.

<http://www.starbucks.com/responsibility/environment> (accessed 4/10/2010); Lloyd Kwast, “Understanding Culture” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: a Reader*, Eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), C-3 – C-6; and Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 148-9.

- Natural resources (water)
- Green stores³
- Strategies addressing climate change

Beliefs: What is true?

- There is an urgent need to care for the planet, reduce waste, impact the planet less, and help others to do so
- Natural resources are extremely valuable
- Climate change poses a serious threat to humanity and the planet

Worldview: What is real?

- The crisis-ridden environment/world/planet
- Starbucks, its product, and its customers

Lynch's "Text-based Approach"

1) Convert text into written form.

(Statements on website already in written form)

2) Reflect on wider associations of words/phrases.

'Belief' and 'commitment' can be in or to many things, such as justice, human nature or a g(G)od. Phrases like 'environmentally friendly', 'energy efficient', 'renewable sources', and 'environmental footprint' are widely used in ecological discourse.

3) Break text into specific linguistic elements – note recurring elements.

At every point the 'we' and 'our' statements reflect community and identification with humanity.

4) Identify 'subjects', the actions ascribed to them, constraints on actions and relationships between.

Again the 'we' is key. The community of Starbucks is 'working hard/carefully' and 'aggressively pursuing'. 'Big challenges' and 'serious threats' seem to make their striving admirable and any delays in progress understandable.

5) How do descriptions/relationships 'address' reader. actions, views or warnings implied?

The readers are addressed as fellow planet-preservers who care deeply about the environment. They are reminded that they can 'help' (paying for a reusable tumbler instead

³ On the impact of the use of "rainforest green" in the Starbucks logo, see the discussion in Greg Dickinson, "Joe's Rhetoric: Finding Authenticity at Starbucks", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 32(4): 2002, 13-4.

of using disposable cups) and are repeatedly invited to 'learn more' about the issues and initiatives.⁴

6) Identify wider discourses reflected in texts version of reality & tensions between these discourses.

The discourse initiated by Starbucks reflects those of similar large corporations.⁵ It is part of a larger concern with consumerism/capitalism and its effect on the environment. Whilst many would hold that capitalism can never do good for the environment, others (such as McDonalds and Ford Motor Company; and likely Starbucks as well) suggest that 'Green Alliances' and/or 'greening' capitalism can help solve rather than contribute to the crisis.⁶ There is (not surprisingly) a marked distinction between the detailed and specific issues explored in these wider conversations and the specific popular and generalised discourse that Starbucks initiates.

7) Think about cultural roots of discourses & how they've become 'natural' accounts of world.

Starbucks is linking into a global ecological movement which has become normative. It doesn't get any more 'natural' than nature.

8) Reflect on way the discourses support/subvert certain social institutions.

The very fact that no social institutions are mentioned evidences that they have not been invited into the discourse. Conversation is limited to those who identify and act as a part of the collective body of Starbucks customers.

9) Identify potential positive/negative effects (who benefits/loses? What is gained by supporting/challenging?).

Though the language is not explicit, the implication is that we have the very planet to lose or gain. A challenge to Starbucks' approach is not entertained – support is assumed.

⁴ Cf. the language of 'experience', 'conversation' and 'the tradition of the coffeehouse' from a 2000 version of their website; quoted in Rudolf P. Gaudio, "Coffeetalk: Starbucks and the Commercialization of Casual Conversation", *Language in Society* 32(5): 2003, 675.

⁵ Timothy W. Luke, "SUVs and the Greening of Ford: Reimagining Industrial Ecology as an Environmental Corporate Strategy in Action" *Organization Environment* 14(3): 2001, 311-35; "We don't do it because it looks good. We don't do it for the publicity. At Ford Motor Company, we work to help protect the environment everyday because it is the right thing to do." (Quoted on p. 323)

⁶ See Sharon M. Livesey "McDonald's and the Environmental Defense Fund: A Case Study of a Green Alliance", *Journal of Business Communication* 36(1): 1999, 5-39; Kim Fellner, *Wrestling with Starbucks: Conscience, Capital, Cappuccino*. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2008, 42; and Andrea Prothero & James A Fitchett, "Greening Capitalism: Opportunities for a Green Commodity", *Journal of Macromarketing* 20(1): 2000, 46-55. For an attempt to combine 'radical unionism and ecology', see Jeff Shantz, "Radical Ecology and Class Struggle: A Re-Consideration" *Critical Sociology* 30(3): 2004, 691-710.

Comparison of Models

Kwast's "Man from Mars" model is useful for many reasons. Distilling the analysis to four steps makes it simple and memorable. And for all its simplicity, it accounts for the whole picture from actions to worldview. It is also a compelling model in that it gets to the heart of the matter; the most basic question which can be asked of a culture: what is real? Albeit with some interpretation, we are thus able to appreciate the pantheistic and humanistic shades of the worldview expressed; at the heart of reality is the wounded organism, the cosmos, and the hard-working rescuers, humanity. It is also a flexible model that can be used with both text or non-text based issues or content.

The weakness of this method would be its brevity. One is left to discern and ask follow up secondary questions of detail within each level of analysis. Also, there is no (explicit) cross-cultural analysis or (as in Lynch's model) appreciation for the relationship between a culture or text and social institutions.

The usefulness of Lynch's text-based model rests on slightly different reasons. It is thorough and alerts one to the secondary, deeper questions that need to be asked for a full, robust appreciation of what is behind a text or issue. Whilst Kwast's model only focuses on one culture or text, Lynch's prescribes inter-cultural comparison as well. We are thus better equipped to discover similarities and tensions with other related discourses such as business, rhetoric, political alliances and capitalism. This is the primary advantage of this model over Kwast's. The secondary advantage is that it is a ready-made approach for text-based content such as ours. And the first step allows it to be used easily for non-text content as well.

The main difficulty will be the initial step of translating non-text media into text. Lynch is well aware that even his text-based methods alone cannot tell us how a text actually impacts its audience.⁷ However, as far as mapping how the text functions in terms of the ideas it makes use of and interacts with, it is a solid and comprehensive method.

New Understanding of Issue

⁷ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 160-1.

The exercise of using these two tools to analyse the 'green language' of Starbucks helped me to appreciate much about both the approach of Starbucks to this issue and how it relates to the wider popular green movement. Through reflection on the questions raised by both models, I was provided with an impetus for not merely seeing the text, but also recognising the ideas, values, foundational assumptions behind it, as well as the ethical imperatives implied by it.

Through looking at wider discourses, I learned that Starbucks is but one corporation which wants to communicate to the public that it shares their concern for ecological issues, all the while seeking to remain a competitive, growing corporation – without any critique of the assumed capitalist economic macro-structure. I observed that the discourse Starbucks initiates is between itself and their customers as a part of general humanity (assumed to share their ecological concern), which leaves other social institutions, except those whom Starbucks enters into strategic partnership with, outside of the discourse.

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