



## GREG SCHNEIDERS

# When it comes to branding, Starbucks' cup runneth over

Starbucks' chairman Howard Schultz recently told his top executives that they may be "watering down the Starbucks experience [and] soul." If the Starbucks "experience" and "soul" have anything to do with coffee, Schultz may be right that books, CDs, movies, stuffed animals, and egg, bacon, and cheese sandwiches distract from that soulful experience. What's fascinating to me is how Starbucks has managed to display this diffused branding in the most public of places – on its coffee cups.

Starbucks' cups, of course, were never just containers. They are also large, sorry, grande billboards. On one side is the ubiquitous Starbucks' logo – the wavy-haired, large-breasted woman in the green circle. But the real branding begins round back where, on my particular cup today, a musician named Dan Zanes envisions in "The Way I See It #193" a "21st Century America where families, friends, and neighbors gather together at the end of each day... to tell stories and jokes, to sing and dance with wild abandon."

This is a branding hat trick. First, Starbucks endorses open speech and wants to connect their customers with the trendsetters of today. Second, there's Zanes, who is, presumably, cool (which I have to take on faith because he exists only in the world of Starbucks, not iTunes). Third, if you do want to hear Zanes' music, you are told to go to "Starbucks Hear Music" on XM Satellite Radio. More cool. By now, Starbucks is already way too cool for me.

But, wait, this cup overflows with even more branding. The cup also tells us that it is "made with 10% post-consumer recycled fiber." I'm not sure what

that means. Post-consumer is a little scary, even apocalyptic sounding. The fiber part is, hopefully, not nutritional information. Anyway, this reminds us that Starbucks is not only cool, but also responsible. Cool and responsible is a little oxymoronic, but the company seems to pull it off. So, at this point, Starbucks has done as much branding as can be done on a single cup – even a grande one.

Now, it's the lawyers' turn. Lest anyone think that Starbucks' actually endorses Zanes' zany vision, we are told that "this is the author's opinion, not necessarily that of Starbucks." Are there really lawyers in Seattle who think I'd sue the company just for endorsing a silly, utopian idea? I know our judicial system is messed up, but I can't imagine that suit would go very far, even in "21st Century America." However, if while reading Zanes' world view I spill scalding coffee on my crotch, I damn well would sue. But that's covered, too. The cup warns, "Careful, the beverage you are about to enjoy is extremely hot." In other words, you won't enjoy it in your lap.

You've got to hand it to Starbucks. It has carefully parceled out the real estate on its cups to the branding department, the music promotion department, the legal department, and the department of silly ideas. Cool, very cool. ■

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