

9-1-2023

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Recommended Citation

(2023) "Lessons from the Pumpkin Spice Latte," *Journal of the Macomb Dental Society*. Vol. 61: No. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.ada.org/macomb-ds-journal/vol61/iss2/2>

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Lessons from the Pumpkin Spice Latte

by T. J. Daws, DDS



The pumpkin spice latte turned 20 years old this Fall. I know it is hard to imagine, but there was once a time when it was a novelty to find pumpkin flavored products, even in the Fall. According to Starbucks, the powerhouse flavors in the latte game twenty years ago were chocolate and caramel, with peppermint making an appearance in the wintertime. Eager to find a new fall flavor, Starbucks began surveying customers about what they were most likely to purchase. Over and over, these well-known flavors were picked by consumers over lesser known flavors like pumpkin. But pumpkin caught Starbucks' eye due to one specific survey result. It scored highest in the category of "uniqueness." A different coffee company may have overlooked this, but Starbucks had built an empire on taking a basic product and infusing it with exactly that: uniqueness.

In *The Starbucks Story*, author John Simmon's summed up Starbucks' success by saying, "Starbucks is actually one of the purest examples of a brand that we have. It starts with a commodity product – coffee beans – and invests in them with extraordinary added value by creating an experience that transcends the simple act of drinking an unnecessary beverage." Coffee at a Starbucks was no longer just coffee, and consumers were willing to pay for these exceptional and unique experiences. In keeping with their organizational mantra, Starbucks rolled the dice on a pumpkin flavored latte and the gamble paid off with hundreds of millions of drinks sold over the last 20 years.

Now some may look at the Starbucks story with disdain. It is easy to paint them as a villain who has invaded the coffee landscape at the expense of the mom and pop shops. But that is only half the story. A closer look at Starbucks' effect on coffee culture shows that its meteoric rise has driven an overall expansion of the coffee market. Premium coffee beverages like the Pumpkin Spice Latte became a part of our culture, and coffee is now enjoyed by 16-year-old high school kids as much as working adults. They brought a new cohort of customers to coffee while simultaneously expanding what existing coffee drinkers were willing to spend on their morning beverage. In fact, the overall market for coffee

expanded so much that now we see separate Starbucks stores surviving within the same neighborhoods, alongside other types of coffee shops.

Dentistry has also seen an explosion of innovation and an expansion of our scope of practice over the last twenty years. However, a variety of economic and social factors are working to bring dentistry closer to being viewed as a commodity by the public. Direct to consumer marketing of dental products, insurance companies pushing patients to in-network providers, and the commoditization of medicine have certainly played a role. We each bring a unique skill set, personality, technology, and mindset to our patient's care. However, regrettably, value in dentistry doesn't quite stimulate the senses like a freshly brewed coffee does. And the degree of skill required to perform high-quality dentistry is tough to convey to those that haven't been through dental school.

So perhaps it is time to take stock of the uniqueness within our dental practices and make sure our communities know what we have to offer. What are the Pumpkin Spice lattes of your office? More importantly, do your patients know the ways in which you go above and beyond to provide an exceptional dental experience? You might be exceptionally delicate during your injections, or perhaps you invest ample time in thoroughly informing the patient about all their available choices. Consider finding effective ways to communicate these distinctions to your patients. Making sure patients understand all the things that make your office special is not about beating your competition. It's about maximizing our profession's value in the public consciousness and protecting it for generations to come. It's about making more people value dentistry the way they value a premium coffee, a pair of Nikes, or the newest iPhone. Remember, Starbucks approaches every day with a mission to make their customers feel they are unique. And we are vying with them for the values and attention of those very same customers.