

Starbucking

Chapter Four Rules

“These are your instructions should you choose to follow.”

I developed a need for glasses early in life, but I did not mind them much until I reached high school, after I finally began to pursue girls and quickly learned that I was quite hapless in the dating area. I was socially awkward, for sure, but I also blamed my looks, and a classmate's rather blunt, rather cruel remark, certainly did not help.¹ More than anything, though, I really hated those glasses.

I wore contact lenses throughout college, but at some point they began to irritate my eyes. By 1999, however, technology finally offered a better solution, when the FDA approved the usage of a decades-old technique called LASIK, and as soon as I learned about it, I scheduled an appointment with my ophthalmologist.

Because the procedure had been approved earlier in Canada, the doctor recommended that I travel to Toronto and have the surgery performed at the Bochner Eye Institute. I was working at the time and could not take a long road trip, so had to fly, and I scheduled just one full free day in the city. Later, as I prepared for my flight, I would look into how many Starbucks already existed in and around Toronto, and I immediately wished that I had been able to schedule more time.

By the spring of 1999, Starbucks had been operating in Canada for over a

¹ After more than three decades, I am sure that I am finally over that remark. Yep, definitely, no question about it.

decade, and the Greater Toronto Area already boasted dozens of their cafes². My rushed trip to the area was the first time that I found myself needing to visit more than ten stores per day, and while the idea of driving around to ten to twenty Starbucks per day does not sound that difficult, the task becomes much more of a challenge if drinking coffee from each store is a requirement.

I had adopted that rule a year earlier, but only informally. Remember, when Starbucking was first conceived, the idea came to me in the form of question —“would it be possibly to go to every Starbucks?” During the first year, there were no rules, and my method of recording a store visit was simply to add the store's name to a document—I had no official requirement that I do anything to make the visit “official”.

The next summer, when I began that first long road trip that would finally commit me to Starbucking, I began to think of ways to formalise my visits. Because I have a collecting instinct, my first thought was to collect a business card from the manager of each store, but that idea was short-lived. As I should have guessed, I quickly encountered a store where the manager had no cards.

When I explained my project to her, she told me that every Starbucks has a unique store number, and she suggested that I collect something with the number on it. After looking around, she returned with an empty box and pointed out that the label had the store number. She cut off the label and gave it to me, but as I pondered the idea while I drove west, I eventually decided that sooner or later I was going to encounter a store where the manager was unable, or unwilling, to give me anything to make my visit official. I ended up tossing that box label and settling on something much simpler—I would drink a coffee from every location.

As for already-visited stores, I had been a diehard coffee addict for years and already in the habit of drinking coffee from every Starbucks I saw—no need to return to older stores to make those visits official. I also benefitted from the fact that store counts in the cities I visited on that trip were not yet overwhelming, and with no particular shedule, I was able to drink coffee

² The first Canadian (and international) Starbucks opened in Vancouver, on March 1, 1987, at the Seabus Skytrain station.

from each store without suffering too much.

Toronto was a different story altogether—with so many stores to visit in just two days, I immediately struggled with the caffeine intake. I arrived on a Sunday afternoon and rushed to a slew of stores before nightfall, and when I woke up at a hostel on Monday morning, I had a pounding headache, my first experience with what happens when I shock my body with massive amounts of coffee and then fail to drink enough water during the night to account for the coffee's diuretic effect.

The hostel was downtown, where the concentration of Starbucks was heavy enough that I soon started to feel overcaffeinated. After a break to retrieve my rental car, which had been towed near King Street³, I was once again off to the races and working my way north from the city centre. By mid-afternoon, I had reached the suburbs, and it was at that Starbucks at the Chapters in Woodbridge where I faced my Starbucking moment of truth.

As I waited in line, I was extremely uncomfortable. My skin was tingling, I felt another headache coming on, and my stomach was bloated from the liquid. I could not bear the thought of drinking another cup of coffee, and when it was finally my turn to order, I called an audible and bought a bottle of water instead.

At least I had made a purchase, I rationalised as I walked across the parking lot towards my car. For all my many faults, however, I am a person of integrity, and I literally have never cheated at anything, whether in school, a sport, a game, whatever, and as I walked out to my car, that bottle of water felt like a huge cheat. I stopped in the middle of the lot and stood there, transfixed by the dilemma. I looked down at that bottle, shook my head, and told myself that this wasn't right, that it went against the spirit of the project, and that it would offend the Siren.⁴

I steeled my resolve, walked back to the cafe for a coffee, and that was the moment when when I solidified the First Cardinal Rule of Starbucking...

³ In my rush, I misinterpreted the Canadian NO STOPPING sign.

⁴ The Siren is a mythological being in the Starbucks mythology, and it has been prophesised that when I finally complete my Starbucking quest, she will reward me with untold delights.

*1 - Consume a caffeinated coffee beverage from every Starbucks.*⁵

When I returned to Dallas, I recounted my experiences to my circle of Starbucks friends and baristas, including my struggles with the coffee consumption, and one of them thought to ask “can't you just drink a sample?”

Whoa, I thought—that's brilliant.

I had never actually defined what constitutes a “coffee beverage”, and product sampling is indeed a real thing at Starbucks. Most stores maintain a supply of small 4-oz espresso cups that they use to sample beverages, and it was easy for me to define a sample as a perfectly valid coffee beverage without compromising the integrity of my project.

Alas, my initial attempts to obtain a free samples were met with some pushback, when a number of baristas responding that they were only allowed to sample coffees at scheduled times. I was not yet too concerned about how much I spent on coffee (*though I should have been*), and I stopped asking altogether and resumed ordering coffees in the short size, but only drinking half when I was at my limit.

To this day, I have never broken that rule⁶. I consider it ironclad, and I am so serious about the rule that if for any reason I am unable to drink the coffee, I cannot count the store towards my total until I do. In Seattle, after leaving the Belltown Starbucks, I spilled the coffee all over jeans and pulled a quick uey so I could return to the store. Sometimes my schedule did not allow me to return, as depicted in the *Starbuckin'* documentary, when I spilled the entire cup from the Watsonville store into my cup holder, and I opted to slurp it up with a straw rather than backtrack.

As insane as that scene seems to viewers of the film, I managed to top that a

⁵ Note that “consume” does not necessarily mean “drink”.

⁶ Technically, it is impossible for me to ever know whether some barista has given me decaf by mistake, or even intentionally, as a way of exacting revenge, as rumoured online.

few years later in central Washington. I had visited a store in Yakima, WA, late at night and decided to save the coffee until morning. I overnighted at a rest area, and in the middle the night, I woke up shivering and decided that it was too cold to walk to the bathroom, so I used a cup instead.

But I grabbed the wrong cup, the one with my coffee!!!

The next morning, after the fog cleared from my head, I remembered that I still needed to drink the coffee, but I could not find it in any of my cup holders. I instantly realised what had happened.

“FUUUUCK” echoed through the valley and scared off a raccoon that was poking through a garbage bin.

My schedule did not allow me to return to Yakima, so that store remained officially unvisited until I was able to return. From that point on, I have always been wary of the dangers of saving the mandatory coffee for later, but doing so is a practical necessity given the number of Starbucks that often need to visit in an area in order to keep up.

That allowance, as well as the sample requirement, and others, are included in the following set of subrules of the First Cardinal Rule...

1a – The required coffee beverage can be of any size, but the minimum is a 4-oz sample. It is not required that the sample cup be filled to the brim.

1b – The coffee beverage from a store can be consumed at any time in the future or the past.⁷

1c – Starbucks' VIA Instant coffee meets the requirement, but only if prepared using hot water from the store.

1d – A purchase is not required—the coffee beverage can be acquired by any means necessary.⁸

⁷ The danger of deferring consumption is of course that I might spill or otherwise lose the coffee.

⁸ I admit nothing.

1e – It is not necessary that the Starbucks be open for business, nor that I physically enter the space (some locations do not have lobbies). If I am physically present at the location and obtain (and consume) a coffee beverage, the visit counts.⁹

Almost in parallel to how the First Cardinal Rule of Starbucking has resulted in much physical discomfort, my mind has been wracked with frustration because of the arcane requirements of the Second Cardinal Rule of Starbucking and its subrules...

2 – Only include locations operated by Starbucks itself, or their primary or exclusive partner or licensee in countries where Starbucks does not operate its own stores.¹⁰

2a – Only include Starbucks that are stationary—do not count mobile carts or trucks, nor cafes on a moving vessel such as a train or a ship.

2b – If an already-visited store is later deemed to have been ineligible at the time of the visit, then it must be removed from the official tally.

2c – If a store was eligible at the time of the visit but later switches ownership and becomes ineligible, the visit still counts towards the total.

2d – If a parent company operates multiple Starbucks under the aegis of multiple child companies, include all cafes operated under the same umbrella.¹¹

When I began Starbucking, I was under the impression that the company itself operated all locations.¹² I might have discovered the truth sooner, if I

⁹ After counting it for years, I finally removed the original Starbucks at the Manchester airport from my count because I was not allowed to clear security to visit the store—instead, an official went to the store and obtained a coffee for me.

¹⁰ Italy is an exception, where Starbucks operates one store, the Roastery, while Percassi is their licensed partner for all other stores.

¹¹ In Jamaica, most of the Starbucks are operated by Caribbean Coffee Baristas, but the airport locations were operated by Express Catering, at least initially. However, when I visited in 2019, an experienced partner explained that those stores were still under CCB. When I researched further, I learned that CCB was established by Ian Dear, who is the also the CEO of Express Catering.

¹² I seem to remember a *Newsweek* article from 1995 or 1996 that profile this rapidly-growing company, and it stated that, unlike most similar companies, Starbucks did not follow the franchise model.

had flown out of an airport that offered a Starbucks, but in the 90s, the company was still in the early stages of its licensing program. In the Pacific Northwest, where the company originated, Starbucks had expanded licensing beyond airports, to grocery stores, and late in the summer of 1999 I decided to fly up to Seattle to attend two Lilith Fair music festivals, one in Vancouver, BC, and another at a fantastic venue called The Gorge.

I spent the rest of the time Starbucking, often approaching the limits of my coffee intake, and one afternoon in one of the Seattle/Tacoma suburbs, I walked into an Albertsons grocery store, spotted the Starbucks kiosk, and as I was about to order, I noticed some differences in the menu.¹³ I asked the barista why the differences, and she explained that the kiosk was operated by Albertsons, not Starbucks.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is what we call a loophole.

Starbucking, as originally conceived, was supposed to be challenging, but also fun. The project was never supposed to be an ever-expanding prison of tedium and physical discomfort. My experience in Toronto already had me concerned about how much time, not to mention expense, this project would consume, so suddenly learning about the existence of licensed stores seemed like a godsend. I jumped at the opportunity to ease my burden while maintaining the integrity of the project, and from that moment on, I would define Starbucks operated by the company itself as *real*, and all others as *fake*.¹⁴

Identifying the type of each store was relatively simple at first. Starbucks inside grocery stores are almost always licensed, although I still needed to call and ask, because a number of stores attached to supermarkets like Randalls or Fred Meyer are company-owned. All stores in airports are licensed, but only in the United States and Canada.¹⁵ Military bases, the interior of hotels, university campuses, and hospitals are other types of

¹³ I cannot recall whether the difference was in the pricing, or the absence of the short size.

¹⁴ Or “fugazi”, or “wannabe”, or “bitch-ass”, although once I developed a more feminist sensibility, I stopped using that last one.

¹⁵ In other countries, identifying which airport stores count is quite time consuming, and sometimes I am fooled, like at Istanbul's Sabiha Gokcen International Airport, where I wasted nearly \$4 at a Starbucks is operated by HMHost because I had assumed that it was operated by Alshaya (the primary partner in the Middle East) like the store at Istanbul's primary airport.

locations where Starbucks tend to be licensed, but again, these guidelines are never definitive, and when in other countries, I could not assume anything about ownership. As Starbucks continued to expand more aggressively, and into more countries, identifying which Starbucks were fake became a challenge unto itself.

Starbucks, in their quest for ever-higher store counts (which boosted their stock price), was aggressive about expanding their licensing program.¹⁶ I began to encounter licensed Starbucks in all sorts of places where, in the early days, a Starbucks would have been company-owned. Examples include a store in Ocean City, NJ, that sat on the town's primary road, looking exactly like a real Starbucks, a store attached to a hotel (but not inside) in Rochester, MN, and stores attached to downtown office buildings in major cities like Nashville and Wilmington.

By the 2010s, I had to assume that any new Starbucks could be licensed, and I spent a lot of time on the phone trying to identify ineligible stores, especially if the store was in an out-of-the-way location. Many fakes would get past me, though, and I wasted a lot of time traveling to stores only to learn of their fakistry upon arrival.¹⁷

I also spent time trying to confirm that previously-visited stores had indeed been real. One store, inside the REI in Denver, was quite frustrating because after my visit I was told that it was licensed, but later I was told by another barista that it was corporate, and I finally had to physically return to the store years later to speak to the manager and examine a receipt to finally confirm that, yes, it counted for me.¹⁸

Outside of the United States and Canada, the ownership picture was entirely different, as I would discover at the end of 2005, during a furious holiday blitz across London, Paris, and Madrid. When Starbucks expanded outside of North America, to Japan and Singapore, they established branches of the

¹⁶ Aggressive, yes, but still protective of their brand. I was told by a journalist that Walmart reached out to Starbucks but was rebuffed because Starbucks did not want their brand associated with a lower-end retailer.

¹⁷ Common ways of identifying licensed stores in the United States or Canada are that they will have a different wi-fi network, higher prices, or baristas wearing nametags.

¹⁸ Receipts from licensed stores will look different than standard receipts from company-owned Starbucks.

corporation in those countries.¹⁹ That model changed as they expanded into other Asian markets, where they would often partner with local companies, like the Shinsegae in South Korea or Rustan's in the Philippines.²⁰

Starbucks began its European expansion with the United Kingdom and established a branch to operate stores in that country, but for Spain and France they partnered with VIPS, a local restaurateur. As Starbucks expanded into more countries, I had to spend an increasing amount of time researching ownership, and keeping track of the status of Starbucks stores in any given country at any given time is kind of insane. For example, a few years after entering France, Starbucks bought out VIPS' license and began to operate their own stores. Shortly thereafter, they began to grant licenses to food service companies like SSP, HMSHost, and Autogrill to operate European stores in places like airports and train stations, thus further complicating my trips to France. More recently, Starbucks has granted a license to Alsea, the Mexican company that operates stores across Latin America, to take over existing stores, and open new ones, in four European countries, including France, and, as of this writing, I still do not know which French stores will count when I return.

For Starbucks in international markets, it is often difficult or impossible to obtain a phone number, and I am often forced to wait until I actually arrive and can speak to a manager who can explain which stores are eligible. To make matters worse, in 2013, Starbucks decided to experiment with a new business model—franchising. Beginning in the United Kingdom, Starbucks began to seek out franchising companies (*not* individuals) to expand their operations. Moreover, Starbucks was actively trying to offload hundreds of stores, mostly in markets outside of London, and in one particularly painful instance, the Starbucks at the Bentinck Hotel in Nottingham, which had been company-owned, was taken over by a franchisee a few days after I arrived. If I had driven up to Nottingham immediately upon leaving London, instead of first heading to Birmingham and Scotland, I would have reached Bentinck in time. Unfortunately, I arrived *one day* after its conversion, and thus *the store*

19 Later, Starbucks would begin a licensing program in Japan, but I did not realise this when I returned in 2013 and ended up visiting a number of licensed stores in train stations, which I had to later remove. To this day, I will never be 100% sure that I correctly identified all the ineligible stores from that trip, and thus my exact store count is unknowable.

20 I have never been able to find out the legal distinction between a partnership, a license, an exclusive license, a geographical license, or some of the other terms that I have encountered when researching Starbucks operating modes.

did not count!

That one really hurt.

While the changes in Starbucks ownership models, and individual store designations, created a bookkeeping headache for me, I have actually had to spend much more time dealing with yet another surprise that Starbucks had for me, something I never imagined would happen—*moving stores*.²¹ My guess is that I had my first experience with the relocation phenomenon inside of a shopping centre. The reason was probably an expansion from a kiosk to a full inline store, or building construction that forced the move, and it did not occur to me at the time that Starbucks would soon begin relocating ordinary stores in retail plazas.

Starbucks opened its first drive-thru location in 1994, and by the mid-aughts, they realised that the drive-thru model would become their primary profit model. After an hiatus in North American expansion that followed the Great Purge brought on by the 2008 financial crisis, Starbucks began an aggressive program of relocating cafe stores into drive-thru spaces.²² Such stores would typically move into a standalone building, often in the same parking lot as the retail plaza, or nearby, but in some cases the store would move to a unit at the end of the building, where it was possible to add a drive-thru lane.

These relocations, and variations that I would later encounter, led me to craft the Third Cardinal Rule of Starbucking...

3 – If a Starbucks relocates in any way, whether to a new building or a different unit in the same building, or, if a kiosk moves to a new location or is completely replaced with a new structure, then it counts as a new store.

3a – Temporary locations that operate while the primary store is being remodeled or relocation also count as new stores.

²¹ Starbucking has sometimes been described as being similar to whack-a-mole, and once the company began moving stores around, the comparison took on a literal sense.

²² Even though most drive-thru Starbucks also have cafes, partners tend to refer to stores that lack a drive-thru as “cafe” stores.

Just as discovering ownership is challenging, identifying proper relocations is nontrivial, and I still have stores on my website that should be designated as relocations but are not. For a period of time, Starbucks would create new listings with the word “RELO” in the name, but they have stopped doing that. Sometimes I would remember that another store had been nearby and ask the manager about it, or we would be chatting and she would mention the fact. Other times I would end up at the old location because Starbucks had not updated their website with the new address.²³

Eventually I would learn that I could discover the official store number on the website, and relocations were easily identifiable because they had older numbers.²⁴ That trick does not always work, though, because sometimes the store number will be changed, as in the case of an upgrade to Reserve Bar status or a long delay in the relocation process. Other times, a new listing on the website will be created not because of a relocation, but because of a change to the existing physical structure, like the addition of a drive-thru lane, or an expansion into an adjacent unit.

The most frustrating thing about Starbucks' inability to generate a complete and accurate stream of information about changes to stores is that I have missed an unknown number of *temporary* stores. For example, the kiosk at the Westfarms shopping centre in Farmington, CT, closed down for a few months during remodeling and moved into an empty inline unit. Unfortunately, I did not see a new listing until after a new kiosk was installed, and I missed out on adding that temporary store to my total. Sometimes I get lucky and discover temporary stores from news articles or from managers, but if I had to guess, I have missed dozens or hundreds of temporary locations across the country, and that makes me quite sad.²⁵

So, has your brain exploded yet?

²³ Although Starbucks is a multi-billion dollar corporation with (presumably) abundant IT and administrative resources, the store locator on their website is riddled with errors.

²⁴ Starbucks store numbers are also on the receipt, but once I began asking for free samples, I no longer saw receipts for each store.

²⁵ No, it really doesn't.

After spelling out this ever-evolving set of rules, I want to make it clear that I consider Starbucking to be a personal journey, open to any fan, and I would never insist on imposing my rules on others.

On the contrary, I am quite accepting of alternative rules, such as those followed by Sebastian Birr, a young man from Germany who has been my protégé for over a decade. Sebastian has already visited over three thousand Starbucks during in his own Starbucking journey, and he has defined his own set of rules. All stores, including licensed and franchised locations, count for Sebastian, not just the ones that I consider real. This adds a level of challenge (he is still trying to figure out how to access locations on military bases), but at the same time he does not require himself to drink coffee from each. He also requires that the store be open when he arrives, and on a number of occasions he has been forced to return because the store was closed.

Other Starbuckers have embarked upon projects that have a limited scope, like Toshinao Nakakoji. He travels for business and has decided to visit at least one Starbucks in every Japanese prefecture, although he often visits additional stores. When his travel takes him abroad, he also visits Starbucks in the hopes of seeing at least one in every country and U.S. state.

Even more limited was the stunt devised by comedian Mark Malkoff in 2007. When he contacted me early in the year to find out how many “official” (company-operated) Starbucks existed in Manhattan, I had no idea what he was up to.²⁶ A few months later he posted a video, which quickly went viral, that depicted his attempt to visit every Manhattan Starbucks within twenty-four hours. His was more of a publicity stunt than a true quest, but Mark still had rules. Like me, he only counted company-operated stores, but he skipped those behind secured access (for the sake of time), and he required himself to purchase (or be given) either a beverage or food item from each store and take a sip or a bite before reaching the next store.²⁷

²⁶ Based on many emails that I have received, I have surmised that Starbucks customer service is rather unforthcoming when one asks for specific store quantity information. They simply refer one to their website, knowing full well that attempting to count stores in a large city using their website can be quite difficult.

²⁷ Incidentally, Mark also worked for *The Colbert Report* at the time, and he offered to get me into the show if I was ever in New York, I did travel to the city later that year, and he kept his word, so I ended up watching the show for the first time ever—from the audience.

Also in the Starbucking-with-rules category is Kevin Fusco, who became so fascinated by my project that he decided to try and understand it by doing it himself, following the same rules (company-operated stores plus drinking coffee), even going so far as to sleep in his car. That project was also limited, and when Kevin reached one thousand stores, he stopped.

Complex or simple, rules are fundamental to Starbucking. Creating rules and following them is what makes Starbucking a challenge and gives it a measure of artistic integrity.²⁸ In the absence of rules, the act of visiting a Starbucks and drinking some coffee is not “Starbucking”—it’s just “going to Starbucks”.

I wholeheartedly encourage others to create their own Starbucking projects, and I have long felt that Starbucks itself has missed an opportunity for brand engagement by failing to embrace the Starbucking concept. I have a number of ideas for how they could do this. For example, they could sponsor a yearly contest that asks participants to create their own Starbucking project, to be completed within a specified time span, then submit a video, and the winner could receive a year's supply of Starbucks. Or the company could organise a cross-country race, Cannonball Run style, that requires participants to visit a specified set of stores as quickly as possible. Like the Tour de France, the route could change every year, and Starbucks could select stores in smaller towns, off the beaten path, and even work with local chambers of commerce to promote small town America.

Starbucks could even leverage its own Starbucking app to provide a mechanism by which customers can keep track of how many stores they have visited in their lives, by scanning a QR code on the app at the register. The company could then maintain a leaderboard and award prizes at the end of each “Starbucking season”.

Regardless of whether Starbucks itself ever jumps on the Starbucking bandwagon, I will be quite happy if I ever hear that others have begun to devise their own Starbucking projects.

²⁸ I would like to write more about Starbucking as an art form, but I regret that I am unqualified. I would have enjoyed taking some art courses while in college, but between computer science, philosophy, and a full semester devoted to World War II, I had no more time.

With rules, of course.