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From Starbucks 'Bar Bucks,' coffee chain's plans to sell beer and wine rattle faithful

Gloria Goodale | The Christian Science Monitor | Mar 28, 2012



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Starbucks has been working hard on new beverages to sell, including energy drinks and a line of fresh juices, but the strategy that is generating the most buzz – both good and bad – is the Seattle-based coffee house’s move to sell alcohol.

The popular corner café company, ubiquitous across the world, has been cautiously rolling out a plan to sell beer and wine in select locations, beginning with a handful in Seattle. Plans are underway to put the beverages on menus in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Atlanta by the end of 2012.

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“We announced this because our customers requested it,” says Zack Hutson, a spokesman for Starbucks. He says the company wants to provide a “transition” environment, where customers can “relax and connect” on their way home from work.

“The feedback from our Seattle coffeehouses have been very positive,” he adds.



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But responses from both advocacy groups as well as customers at non-alcoholic locations in southern California suggest that not everyone approves.

“This is just a way for Starbucks to turn into bar bucks,” says Michael Scippa, public affairs director for Alcohol Justice, a northern California non-profit based in San Rafael that seeks to protect communities from “the alcohol industry’s harmful practices.” He points to what he calls the sobering statistics on alcohol-related damage, including everything from spousal abuse to driving fatalities and incarceration costs for DUI-related crimes. His group conducted a study four years ago that put that figure at some \$38 billion annually.

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The move to post wine and beer on the daily menus alongside hot chocolate and milk “normalizes alcohol consumption” in what has been up until now a very family friendly, social setting, Mr. Scippa says. “We consider this a very damaging message to send to young people who will see this when they come in with their friends and parents,” he adds.

Interviews with morning patrons at the corner Starbucks in Sherman Oaks, Calif., show mixed reactions, if slightly negative to the announcement that beer and wine might soon be served.

“If it turns into a bar atmosphere, we definitely won’t bring him anymore,” says Elisha Larson, sitting with her 18-month-old son and her husband Joel, a minister, who come as a threesome about once a month. “It will surprise me if it becomes that. People don’t think of Starbucks for wine

and beer,” she says.

“I want to come here for quiet and to get away,” says Alexandra Gomez, an international exchange nanny from Bogota, Columbia. There, she says, the famous coffee shops are Juan Valdez, and they don’t serve beer or wine.

“My initial reaction to the announcement was negative, but I’m guessing it won’t change the nature of this place in the morning,” she says, reading a textbook with sunglasses. People don’t drink beer and wine in the morning. If it changes the atmosphere here, I won’t come.”

The after-school safety factor is of concern, says advice expert April Masini, who writes the “Ask April” online advice column.

“While kids used to hang out with laptops to do homework between the hours of 3 p.m. and closing time, there will now be adults drinking and getting buzzed or drunk at the next table,” she says via email. “People who get buzzed loosen their inhibitions and this isn’t conducive to mingling with the middle school and high school crowd,” she says, adding that Starbucks that serve alcohol will no longer be as safe a place to send children after school.

Mr. Hutson is quick to point out that not all of the more than 19,000 Starbucks cafés worldwide will offer wine and beer, adding that the alcoholic items will only be introduced in stores that are situated in the appropriate demographic areas, such as at shopping malls with many restaurants.

“We are responsive to our customer feedback,” he adds when asked if the company is concerned about negative pushback.

But, points out Ms. Masini, there are problems beyond family atmosphere concerns.

Another problem is that many Starbucks, like the one in Calabasas that is being targeted for alcohol sales in California, is situated by a freeway entrance and exit as well as near several schools. “Drivers who stop in for a drink and then pop back out onto the freeway are putting themselves and others in danger in a way that chugging a latte and hitting the road doesn’t,” she says.

Market researcher David Henkes, who does beverage alcohol research for Technomic, a leading food and beverage consulting firm in Chicago, says the market may prevent Starbucks from expanding alcohol sales too widely. He notes that quick-service restaurants that have introduced alcoholic beverages have typically seen them account for “no more than one to two percent of sales.”

But branding is an issue for a popular chain such as Starbucks, points out PR strategist Anthony Mora, CEO of Anthony Mora Communications, Inc, and author of the PR/marketing books, “The Alchemy of Success,” and “Spin to Win.”

He notes that the company could take an image hit regardless of whether all the cafés actually sell alcohol. Beyond that, he says, the chain may be on tricky grounds for the simple reason that 75 percent of its customers come in for take-out, a no-no for alcohol sales.

“These customers will have to stay and enjoy their beverages in-house,” he notes via email, adding that getting customers to change behavior is much harder than inducing them to try a new drink.

Staff writer Daniel B. Wood contributed to this story.



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