

The Brand Reflected in the Mind of the Consumer. Conceptual Map of the Starbucks Brand

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Abstract

This study aims to highlight the main elements associated with the Starbucks brand from several perspectives (benefits, attributes, attitudes). Through a qualitative research based on a semi-structured interview that also includes questions related to the ZMET technique, it is intended to obtain a reflection of the Starbucks brand from the consumer's mind materialized in the realization of a conceptual map.

Key words: brand associations; concept maps; ZMET technique.

J.E.L. classification: M30, R59, Z18

1. Introduction

The issue of defining the concept of brand is becoming more common and more intensively studied (Denegri-Knott, 2006, p. 950). Despite the growing importance of this concept, a generally accepted single definition is hard to find, so as to fully cover the complexity of this concept (Phillips, 2020, p. 135). The brand is positioned at the intersection of the following key words: differentiation, innovation, connection, creativity, uniqueness and interest/attraction. In this context, the identification and determination of network associations that occur in the mind of the consumer as a result of branding strategy, is the main pillar in strengthening and crystallizing brand image and also creating an identity on the market like a business card.

The importance of knowledge regarding the brand and its influence on the consumer buying decisions have been extensively studied and published in a variety of research (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 18). It is important to comprehend the substance and the structure of this knowledge because they influence to an expansive degree what information comes to the mind of the consumers when they are thinking to a certain brand - for instance, in response to the marketing activity of that particular brand.

The success of long-term relationship of the consumer with the brand is conditioned by a set of brand associations from the consumer's mind. Identifying and measuring these associations is the main concern for the brand managers. The existing methods are available rather to practitioners from sociology and psychology field than those in the marketing field, since these associations are subject to cognitive processes from the mind of the consumers. One of these methods, which have been simplified in such a way so that it can be accessible for the marketing field, is the construction of conceptual brand maps using brand association from the consumer's mind. These maps are the visual representation of the words associated by consumers with the brand, and also the way they are interconnected between them.

2. Literature review

Currently, the brand is the most important component of the company's assets, while the most important are intangible assets such as: company's name, patents, logos. A study conducted in 2000 shows that, in the case of the best twenty performing companies in the world, only 20% of their resources were tangible, while the rest of them being intangible assets (Paek, 2012, p. 3).

A method of classifying associations would depend on the level of abstractedness (Phillips, 2020, p. 135) meaning the information content of association. Keller (1993, p. 21) proposed three types of brand associations: attributes, benefits and attitudes.

Attributes are descriptive traits that characterize goods and services. They represent a way through which competitors from a market differentiate their products or services. As Keller (1993, p. 21) indicated, we consider the classification of attributes depending on their type of relationship with the performance of goods and services. Product related attributes - are envisaged ingredients/components necessary for operation of the product or services needed by clients (direct). Non product related attributes - outside parts of the product or service related to the consumption or acquisition (indirect). To understand better, they are classified into price information; packaging information; user imagery; usage imagery.

The benefits are the values that consumers assign to the goods or services - simply put, what consumers think they will use the product or service for. The benefits are favorable results for the consumer, due to the advantages that the products or services can offer; basically, it is what consumers buy. It can be identified three types of benefits (Novak, 2006, p. 175): functional benefits, experiential benefits, symbolic benefits.

Attitudes are defined as the overall assessment of the consumer brand. Attitudes are important because they favor the formation of consumer behavior. Attitudes may be accounted for the convictions about attributes which are identified with the product itself and to the functional and experiential benefits reliable with the perceived quality. Equally, attitudes may also be reported to beliefs about attributes which are not related to the product, supporting the idea that attitude has an expression function of value which allows individuals to express their own concepts. Being difficult to identify all the attributes and benefits, the researchers included in the multidimensional models of analysis, a general attitude towards the brand (Denegri-Knott, 2006, p. 950) because it can bring to light important insights for analysis. Moreover, attitudes are formed through a process of decision-making which does not involve a long process of thinking.

It is important to mention that brand associations characterize brand image, creating its multidimensionality by importance, intensity, uniqueness.

Associations are different between them in the manner of assessing their importance. Actually, this term refers to the value of a certain brand association in the buying process. Thus, consumers will not appreciate an attribute or benefit as being good or bad if it makes little difference to them. Also, not all formed associations will have significance relevance in the buying process. For example, many times consumers have already formed in their minds associations related to the product, color, aspect. Although these associations will facilitate brand recognition or awareness of its existence, they will not necessarily constitute an important factor in the purchasing decision. For example, when a consumer does not have very much time, speed and efficiency of servicing can be more important factors than if the consumer is not rushed.

Associations may also be characterized by the intensity of connections between brand nodes from the consumer's mind. The quality of these associations relies on upon how data is seen by consumer and how it remains stored in memory as a feature of the brand image. Intensity is based on both quantitative functions - how much a person is thinking to the information from memory and qualitative function - the way a person thinks about the information received. The associations created in the minds of consumers will be even more powerful since it will think more of the meaning of information related to the product or service.

The uniqueness of brand associations is related to the position of the brand, meaning that there is a sustainable competitive advantage which gives the consumer an important reason to buy a particular brand. The existences of strong and significant associations that are unique to a particular brand, implying superiority over other brands are indispensable critical factors of success of that particular brand. Thus, when a brand wants to stand out from other brands from the same category, as a result

of a property with a decisive role, the phenomenon will depend on the uniqueness of the brand profile, reflected by the unique combination of brand associations formed in the consumer's mind.

The conceptual map (graphic organizer) is a technique of visual representation of concepts and the links between them (Novak, 2006, p. 175). Conceptual maps which are also called cognitive maps, are defined as an image of the way of thinking, feeling and understanding of the consumer who elaborates them, at first simplistic, then more and more complete, becoming a working procedure in different disciplines, but also inter- and transdisciplinary (Campbell, 2002, p. 208). Concept maps or "argumentation forms" emphasize the relationships that are established between the knowledge that the consumer has and on how he organizes his experience, ideas, but also how to apply them. The thorough learning of the new concepts depends on the concepts already existing in the mind of the consumer and on the relationships that are established between them (Ausubel et al, 2001, p. 1107).

Concept maps are used in Marketing visually presenting the perception of customers or potential customers. They are usually done to identify the position of a product, a product line or a brand in relation to the competition. But they have also successfully entered the practice of Marketing research. Qualitative research consists of practices and interpretative materials that make the world visible. These practices turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memoirs. This means that qualitative research studies things in their natural context, trying to understand or interpret the phenomenon in terms of the meanings that people bring (Novak et al., 2006, p. 175).

ZMET is a hybrid method, based on various fields, including verbal and nonverbal communication, visual sociology, visual anthropology, literary criticism, semiotics, mental imaging, cognitive neuroscience and phototherapy (Christensen et al. 2002, p. 477). The method involves semi-structured, in-depth personal interviews centered on visual images that the informant brings to the interview. Validation studies of ZMET applications indicate that 4 to 5 deep interviews that focus on identifying and understanding the main topics can determine 90% of the information available from a large set of interviews (Christensen et al. 2002, p. 477).

3. Investigation of brand associations using the ZMET technique

The purpose of ZMET is to obtain metaphors and constructions and to establish relationships between constructs, using both verbal and non-verbal stimuli. In addition to the concept map, ZMET produces non-verbal sensory dictionaries to accompany each construct. These user-friendly dictionaries are made up of images and sensory data that different clients use to transmit constructs. Dictionaries provide a basis for obtaining visceral feelings, since the relevance of each image to a particular construct is described by the voice of the customer. Moreover, customers' digital images provide visual images that integrate their important constructions. Many images also convey the reasoning of the connection between constructs.

Several important types of constructs can be drawn from the literature. First, non-verbal communication is more widespread than verbal communication. Second, visual images are entry points for access to people's knowledge structures. Third, photography is a powerful tool for accessing consumers' visual images. Fourth, research documents the importance of visual images in marketing communication. Finally, most market research tools are based on verbal communication. That's why researchers have developed the ZMET technique, a methodology that relies on visual sensory images and other metaphors to obtain customer constructions.

A total of 20 clients were recruited to participate in the study. After qualifying for participation in the study (based on selection), clients receive a set of instructions and guidance on this research topic, e.g., a brand name, service concept, product use, or a design. a product. They are instructed to take photos and/or collect pictures from magazines, books, newspapers or other sources that indicate what the subject means to them. The personal interview involves a guided conversation that we believe yields more valid, more reliable, and, more importantly, more relevant perspectives than traditional structured interview approaches.

In order to apply ZMET technique we used 10 techniques. Below we will list and explain each step:

Step 1. **The story based on the pictures** - the participant is asked to describe in as much detail as possible the chosen image.

Step 2. **Omitted images** - the participant is asked to communicate what other images he would have liked to bring, but, for various reasons, he could not obtain them and explain their relevance.

Step 3. **Survey of the metaphor** - the participant was asked to sort the images according to his preferences. At this stage, the main concepts regarding the perception and feelings of the participants regarding the proposed topic are established.

Step 4. **Choosing the triad** - the interviewer chooses 3 images at random from the set of images, and the participant is asked to explain how any two of the images are similar to each other, but different from the 3rd.

Step 5. **The most representative image** - the participant chooses the most representative image. He also has to think further, beyond the limits of photography and say what he thinks could fit into this image.

Step 6. **Opposite images** - the participant is asked to describe images that show the opposite of the task.

Step 7. **Sensory images** - expressing opinions through sensory images.

Step 8. **Mind map** - the participant creates a mind map based on the results obtained.

Step 9. **Summary of images** - in this stage the basic ideas from the collage are identified, the participant is accompanied by a specialist.

Step 10. **Concept map** - finally, researchers need to identify the key concepts highlighted and establish relationships that form between them. In order to create the concept map, they have to follow the frequency with which the same concepts were repeated in several participants and make various connections based on the attributes discovered.

4. Research methodology

In our first base of the research, we set out to identify the specific Starbucks brand associations. Using the identified associations, we will build a conceptual map of brand association representative for the Starbucks brand starting from the respondents' own conceptual maps. The creation of the Starbucks brand maps will take into account the three types of associations mentioned by Keller (attitude, benefits, attributes), identifying the main similarities and differences between these concept maps.

The objectives assumed in order to achieve the proposed goal are:

- 1) Identify the attributes associated with the Starbucks brand
- 2) Identify the benefits associated with the Starbucks brand
- 3) Identify the attitudes associated with the Starbucks brand
- 4) Identify representative images associated with the Starbucks brand (according to ZMET)
- 5) Identification of sensory images related to the Starbucks brand (according to ZMET).

The chosen method was the semi-structured interview in which the questions specific to the ZMET technique were included. The interview guide included questions on the three types of associations indicated by Keller, which totaled eight subdivisions.

Respondents, 20 in number, qualified after three filter questions designed to select only subjects who drank coffee from Starbucks at least weekly. The resulting sample consisted of 15 women and 5 men aged between 25-35 years, from Iasi.

To carry out the research, we followed two stages. The first stage consisted of applying an in-depth interview with a number of 12 open-ended questions, which had the role of generating associations, mentioning situations, specifying certain elements regarding the product, highlighting services specific to the Starbucks brand. These open-ended questions combined several types of projective techniques, namely: sentence completion test (question no. 5), word association test (questions no. 1 - 4), imaginary situations (question no. 6), drawing images (question no. 7), cognitive questions (questions no. 9 - 10); emotional question (question no. 11); conative question no. 12.

In the second stage, we performed the ZMET technique on the same sample of 20 people who also answered the in-depth interview, in order to obtain as much information as possible from each respondent for the construction of the conceptual map of associations for the Starbucks brand.

For the realization of the conceptual maps, the rules of their composition were taken into account, according to the BCM (BCM - Brand Concept Maps) model (Böger, 2017, p. 90).

Table no. 1 Rules for making conceptual brand maps adapted to the BCM (Brand Concept Maps) model

Stages	Indicators	Rules
1. Identification of core brand associations.	Frequency of mention of associations.	Inclusion of associations that have been mentioned in at least 50% of the individual maps.
	Number of interconnections.	Inclusion of associations that have been mentioned in at least 40% - 49% of individual maps, if the maximum value plus the minimum divided by two of the indicator - the number of interconnections - is equal to or greater than that of the previously selected essential associations.
2. Identifying first level associations.	Frequency of mentioning first level associations.	The ratio between the frequency of mentioning the associations on the first level and the frequency of mentioning the associations - the value equal to at least 50%.
	The ratio between the frequency of mentioning associations at the first level and the frequency of mentioning associations.	
	Type of interconnections.	Inclusion of more superordinate than subordinated interconnections.
3. Identification of lines for basic associations.	Frequency of connections between associations.	Identification of the turning point which represents the equality between the number of interconnections and the number of pairs of associations. Inclusion of links between associations that correspond to or are greater than the inflection point.
4. Identification of lines for secondary brand associations.	Frequency of links between associations.	Inclusion of associations that are related to the basic ones, respecting the condition of the inflection point mentioned in the previous stage.

Source: (adapted after Roedder-John, Loken, Kim and Basu, 2008)

5. Findings

The first step was to identify the main associations that will be found on the consensus map. Thus, the main association, as expected, was Starbucks = coffee. The brand has managed to establish itself and be known as a brand that sells coffee. We took into account only the associations that were included in approximately 50% of the individual maps, but also associations that appear with a frequency of 40 - 45%, because they are representative for the present research.

Other important elements associated were the words "relaxation" and "smell of coffee". Most respondents perceive the place as a place to relax, where you can enjoy your favorite drink and smell the strong coffee. We can also mention that the names of favorite drinks have appeared among the associations.

Among the products or services associated by the respondents of the brand the most common were product - coffee, service - coffee preparation and "excellent" evaluation. It follows that people who drink coffee at Starbucks perceive the brand as a coffee-focused one, and when you come across a smiling face full of enthusiasm to serve you, this experience stays in your mind for a long time,

making you come back again and again to experience this feeling of satisfaction. Because Starbucks relies more on service delivery, it invests heavily in employee training, which is why the barista concept is very sophisticated, not everyone can become a barista.

The map of associations that folds perfectly with the Starbucks brand and that customers have found appropriate brings together the following concepts:

Elements - green (logo, design), logo, coffee smell, prestige, popularity, niche (addresses a certain audience), customers, view, ambiance, eco-friendly brand, professionalism, friendly staff, bright place, comfortable chairs, agglomeration, bad writing, too much coffee smell, crowding.

Situations - business discussions, building relationships, consistent and deliberate in the experience with consumers.

Products - cream, syrup, donut, flavors, vanilla, sweet/salty taste, quality products, glasses.

Services - coffee making, pleasant atmosphere, good mood, comfortable chairs, smiles, expensive, professionalism, wonderful experience, "before you took your coffee at the office, now, since there is Wi-Fi at Starbucks, you take your office for coffee.", relaxation, relaxing environment.

Local - pleasant ambiance, central location, spacious, brand, logo, quiet, clean, wood, light, simple, free Wi-Fi, relaxing atmosphere, bright, comfortable, green, simple.

Clients - active, diversified, beautiful, undecided, relaxed, happy, rich, energetic, creative, comfortable, fast, honest, involved, determined.

Serving - cumbersome, pleasant, quality, standard, pleasant, impeccable, different, demanding (takes a long time), princely, excellent, professional.

Barista - pleasant, professional, friendly, kind, calm, attentive, joking, smiling, nice, original.

Coffee - Pleasant, aromatic, delicious, strong, natural, black, roasted, full-bodied, unique taste.

Menu - attractive, clear, diverse, limited, attractive, gloomy, playful, too many prices.

Complementary products - thermos, tea, cups, glasses, thermos, packets of coffee, cakes.

The test of completing the sentence gives us an image beyond physical limits, a psychological interpretation that is based on the experience lived on a conscious or unconscious level by the individual. Thus, the people who drink coffee from Starbucks are active, creative, full of life, young, faithful, business, rich, romantic and in trend with fashion. It follows that these people have a much higher self-image index than other regular coffee consumers.

Regarding the vision towards the brand, it is scored in the following form: innovation, top brand, brand no. 1, global brand, second home, place to relax, coffee universe.

The elements related to the personality of the Starbucks brand are unique and original: a friend who visits him less often, strong personality, strong brand, connection between the communities, strong competitor.

Following the discussions, one last question of the interview was based on the changes/modifications that consumers would like to make to the brand. Few people want to adopt new changes, most love the brand as it is and do not want radical changes. On the other hand, we also have people with an innovative character, so the main proposals have been folded in price, hiring more bartenders to avoid creating queues, more vivid colors, different arrangement of products, would start to make personalized coffees (there is a device in China that draws the person's face, instead of bunnies, flowers, etc.), the logo (assimilation of jellyfish, octopus-woman).

Associated attributes:

In general, the notion of attribute refers to a conclusion of a characteristic of an entity or substance. In our case, an attribute (research) is a characteristic of an object, thing, word, phrase, or clause that modifies a noun. When I refer to attributes for the present research, they take a new form, namely, attributes that refer or do not refer to the product, in order to make as many differences as possible between the two characteristics of the brand and to identify direct or indirect influence on the brand.

Participants expressed their thoughts and feelings about features that are not directly related to the product, such as:

- price (14 out of 20 consider the price to be too high);
- packaging (perceived positively by words such as 'attractive', 'personalized', 'cute packaging', 'beautiful');
- product information, interior, advertising display;
- images of use, users;

- the attributes of the brand personality (unique, young, fantasy, extravagant, full of color, giving a feeling of familiarity).

Among the attributes related to the product, two emerged in order as very important: serving and coffee itself. Consumers saw the Starbucks service as only "average" or "good," being limited. According to the participants, the level of service of Starbucks is not high, but it is acceptable: "it is not special", "it is limited only to taking the order at the counter". The coffee was not noticed as special either (neither bad nor good, so-and-so), but it was still appreciated for being fresh and strong.

Associated benefits:

Participants expressed a sense of prestige or superiority when consuming Starbucks products. Some participants stated that: "I feel like I belong to a higher class", "feeling of superiority", "rich", "distinguished from other people", "proud and self-confident", "I feel that I am in a high-class environment", "feeling of superiority", "pleasant", "makes me feel good". Interestingly, the study showed that more loyal participants showed more experiential benefits when consuming coffee at Starbucks. Meanwhile, participants who frequented the venue showed more symbolic benefits when they were at Starbucks. For example, several of the participants in the discussion and in-depth interviews described Starbucks as "modern" and "stylish."

Associated attitudes:

The majority of respondents, namely 18 out of 20, showed a positive attitude towards the Starbucks brand. Cognitive, affective and conative questions related to attitudes, highlighted very well-marked features about the Starbucks brand. Participants pointed out that the overall quality of the Starbucks brand is generally good. As for the place, it is comfortable and the brand image is positive, although the price is quite high. Most attendees knew exactly what the home country of the Starbucks brand was and said they felt relaxed when they were at Starbucks. Finally, many participants, especially younger consumers, considered Starbucks to be their favorite coffee brand. All concluding that he intends to return and buy more.

ZMET technical interpretation:

To make the ZMET technique we used a set of already predefined images that illustrate the two locations in Palas, Starbucks at the entrance to Palas Mall and the ground floor with terrace. Thus, the respondents were asked to choose a representative picture based on which to describe the main feelings invoked.

The first step focused on building a story around the chosen image, a way in which each respondent had the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about what they see, feel, think, what they once experienced. It is a combination between the feelings experienced at a given time and the ability to go through this state once again.

Each image created a story and conveyed a feeling. Respondents' favorite images were one from Starbucks in the upstairs room (an image of the crowded venue) and one below (an image of the empty venue). The feelings / attitudes that were the basis for choosing these pictures were:

1. The feeling of satisfaction that generated the repetition of the purchase.
2. The feeling of loneliness, peace before the opening of the place, which generated the idea that Starbucks is a place of refuge, the second home, the place where you feel at ease.

The second stage folded on the idea of feelings and thoughts that could not be transmitted through images. This stage had the role of identifying what is really in the minds of the respondents, feelings that are in "conflict" with the real world, or what they want to see, but have not yet had this opportunity. Following the analysis, we identified a series of such ideas that could not be reproduced through images: sad customers, a children's playground, a street man, a poor man, etc.

The third stage was based on probing metaphors. As the literature says, the metaphor is the understanding and experimentation of one thing in relation to another. Only through metaphors can we better understand the client's thinking and behavior. Many metaphors are mental images, and most of them are visual. When I refer to the survey of metaphor, I want to highlight the extension of the image collection framework, the enlargement of the picture in all directions, which would see and help the respondent to understand what the role of Starbucks in their life is. For some it is

"pampering time", for others advertising is a factor that determines them to consume coffee; staff attitude; care for nature - recyclable glasses; relaxation etc.

ZMET's main objective is to identify the main sensory metaphors associated with a particular brand, in our case, Starbucks. The five characteristics (sound, color, taste, smell, touch) are associated by each respondent with the brand. Upon hearing the name Starbucks, customers associated it with "the sound of the coffee machine", "slow songs" or songs that have the word coffee as lyrics. When you say Starbucks and ask what color it is associated with, the color green and white automatically comes to mind, which was demonstrated by the answers given by the participants. The unmistakable aromatic and strong taste is predominant in 16 out of 20 cases and of course the smell cannot be associated with anything other than coffee (20 answers). As for the tactile sensation, it is associated with finesse, it results from touching the hand with the fine glass of coffee.

The stories that hide behind a coffee are always shared with colleagues, older friends, close people, where memories and thoughts have free rein, and relaxation is the predominant feeling felt by respondents. They stated that they go to Starbucks only accompanied by someone, never alone, which shows that Starbucks is associated with the idea of family, friendship, memories.

The collage of images hides many meanings behind, I will illustrate only a few of them, to see how the respondents thought them and what were the keywords attributed to each image and the general idea behind the collage. We used a set of 5 predefined images, and the respondents had the opportunity to choose them according to their preferences. They were the same images for everyone, because I wanted to see what feelings an image can arouse for a certain person and whether there will be similarities or differences between them among other respondents.

The stories summarized by cognitive maps are exemplified below:

- 1) "It is morning, and the sun has just risen. Employees got to work and began to prepare their workspace. I arrived shortly after and ordered a latte. A pretty young lady wrote my name on it and offered it to me. Before I left, the place was crowded, and I went to work."

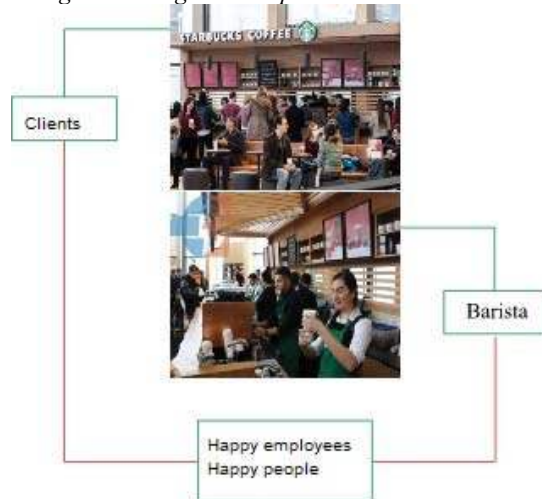
Image no. 1 Cognitive map 1



Source: personal organization

- 2) "The speed with which the products are prepared. Happy customers, who have a friendly discussion and enjoy a good coffee, some "lucky" ones sitting on chairs, and others are eagerly waiting for their order to be taken. "

Image no. 2 Cognitive map 2



Source: personal organization

6. Conclusions

This way of building conceptual brand maps is an important tool in brand management decision making. It offers the opportunity to know the way information is stored in the consumer's mind and the system of relations within it.

Starbucks = coffee, the brand has managed to establish itself and be known as a brand that sells only coffee. Because Starbucks relies more on sensory marketing, emotions are the backbone of the brand-consumer relationship. Regarding the vision towards the brand, it is scored in the following form: innovation, top brand, brand no. 1, global brand, second home, place to relax, coffee universe.

According to the respondents' answers, the smell of coffee is one of the strongest elements that attract them locally and that has the power to generate an addiction that is difficult to control. The decor of Starbucks cafes is also welcoming and warm, and the smell of coffee is unique. Starbucks is one of the first brands to resort to sensory branding, using a special device that keeps the strong smell of coffee.

The elements related to the personality of the Starbucks brand are unique and original: a friend you visit less often, strong personality, strong brand, connection between the communities, strong competitor. Our research has resulted in a number of recommendations for an entrepreneur who would like to open a coffee shop, based on the experience of the Starbucks brand:

- Create an identity before you open your own place, this is a very important thing, people will know about you before you appear in a certain place;
- Location is very important for your business; choose a good, well-transited area, if you want people to associate you with quality, then choose a place that suits you (eg Starbuck has chosen a place associated with prestige and high quality);
- Sell quality products and highlight this (Grains collected on plantations in Kilimanjaro, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Cameroon, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua), thus adding value to your brand;
- Stay up to date with all the news, be careful what the competition does, do what they do too, but much better;
- Implement new marketing concepts (Starbuck is the first company to implement sensory branding), be one step ahead of the competition, learn from the best;
- Quality employees, if your employees will be satisfied, then be sure that you will have happy customers; focus and try to make work a passion for every employee, it takes effort, but it's worth it (barista - Starbucks);
- Try to make your place a place to relax, where customers feel at home, offering both quality products and facilities (Wi-Fi, comfortable sofas, relaxing music, pleasant smell, relaxing colors, open space, airy etc.);

- Adapting products for several categories of customers, not only for premium ones, even if you aim somewhere high.

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