

The Starbucks effect: Committed customers don't like logo redesigns, research finds

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The negative reaction to Starbucks' redesigned logo by the company's self-described most loyal customers may be attributable to the strong connection Starbucks' consumers feel toward the brand, according to research co-authored by a professor at Penn State's Smeal College of Business.

Karen Winterich, assistant professor of marketing at Smeal, and researchers Michael Walsh of West Virginia University and Vikas Mittal of Rice University recently examined how consumers react to [logo](#) redesigns. They found that consumers who are strongly committed to a [brand](#) tend to react more negatively toward new logos, while more casual customers typically view the redesigns as a positive development. Further, the negativity felt by the brand's best customers can spill over and cause them to have a lower attitude toward the brand.

Brands like Starbucks gain much of their strength from consumers who feel a personal connection to the brand. However, it's these same passionate brand fans who react negatively to logo changes, and in the case of Starbucks, took to [social networking](#) websites to express their [negative feelings](#) about the change.

"Most companies presume that their most precious customers -- those having strong brand commitment -- will be more accommodating to changes," the researchers write. "Our results show this is likely a mistaken assumption -- one that can alienate the core, the most committed of a brand's customers."

To test their hypothesis, Winterich and her colleagues examined how 632 undergraduate students responded to logo redesigns for Adidas and New Balance athletic shoes. They had a professional graphic designer create two new versions of each brand's logo, one slightly modified from the original and the second one considerably more so. Each participant was surveyed about their brand commitment and attitude after viewing the original logo and then again after viewing one of the redesigns.

They found that brand attitudes decreased for those strongly committed to the brand and increased for the weakly committed. The researchers believe that committed brand enthusiasts view the logo changes as threatening to their relationship with the brand.

"Those with strong brand commitment will see the original brand logo -- and the associations -- as representing themselves and the integral relationship they have with the brand," the researchers write. "They are likely to view a change in the logo, which affects these associations, as threatening their self-brand connections and relationships. Consequently, such consumers will be negatively disposed to the logo change and likely to evaluate the logo negatively."

Winterich and her co-authors suggest that companies take a nuanced approach to logo redesign. They recommend soliciting input about the redesign from the brand's most committed consumers and perhaps even notifying them before the changes are revealed to the broader public. "Giving the strongly committed such a feeling of being an 'insider' may strengthen their self-brand connection and mitigate the potentially negative effects of logo redesign," they write.

Their study, "Do Logo Redesigns Help or Hurt Your Brand? The Role of Brand Commitment," was published in 2010 in the *Journal of Product & Brand Management*.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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