KILL DULL™ INDEPENDENT MARKETING JUDGMENT

PUBLISHED READING NO. 05

STARBUCKS

WAS STARBUCKS RIGHT TO MAKE CONVENIENCE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE COFFEEHOUSE?

A window that sold more coffee.
A coffeehouse that had to be rebuilt.

SUBJECT	JUDGED ACROSS	AS OF	STATUS
STARBUCKS	4 PS · 12 STANDARDS · 3 LENSES	13 NOVEMBER 2026	SIGNED · ISSUED

BEFORE YOU READ

What you're reading.

A PUBLISHED READING

A Published Reading is Kill Dull's judgment of a marketing decision a company has already made, out in the world. It is built from the public record alone: what the company has said, what it has done, and what independent sources have measured. Every source is listed.

The decision goes through the full interrogation: its consequences across the four Ps, twelve Standards, three lenses, the strongest case on each side, and what we don't know. AI researches and argues both sides. Every finding and the verdict are human judgments. Then it is published, so the judgment is on the record for anyone to read and challenge.

This Reading was made without a word from Starbucks.

HOW MUCH DEEPER A PRIVATE READING GOES

A Published Reading only sees what a company chose to show. A Private Reading starts from the inside, before the decision is made.

You make the case: the commitment, why you believe in it, and the evidence that matters, including the research, numbers and plans no outsider sees. We interview the people closest to the decision. If something material is missing, we ask. Every Standard is then tested against your evidence, not against assumptions from the outside.

You receive more than a verdict. You receive the reasoning: what the evidence supports, what it doesn't, what remains uncertain, where the judges agree and where they don't. Signed, confidential, and yours, while there is still time to change course.

HOW THE INTERROGATION WORKS

Every commitment puts different things at stake. We follow the consequences through twelve lines of inquiry, each applied once, across the four Ps. Not every Standard matters equally every time. That's why judgment matters.

THIS READING

THE DECISION	Starbucks said yes to building its US stores around speed of access, drive-thru, mobile order and pickup, ahead of the seated coffeehouse. It formalised that order in June 2020; from October 2024 it began to reverse it.
THE BET	People want their Starbucks faster more than they want somewhere to sit, and the app and the drive-thru can carry the brand.
THE RISK	Without the coffeehouse, Starbucks is an expensive cup of coffee in a queue, and easier to replace.
WHERE IT STARTS	In Place. Its consequences reach Product, Price and Promotion.
JUDGED	As a decision made on 10 June 2020, prepared from 2015, extended in September 2022 and partly reversed from October 2024, as of 13 November 2026.

01 · THE CASE

Faster. Then fewer seats. Then back.

TOWARD CONVENIENCE	YEAR	BACK TO THE COFFEEHOUSE
	1996	A cozier redesign; stores called “third places”
	2007	Schultz memo warns of “commoditization”
Mobile Order & Pay nationwide, after a 2014 test	2015	
First Starbucks Pickup store, New York	2019	
Up to 400 US closures; Pickup and drive-thrus accelerated	2020	
Reinvention plan: pickup, delivery, drive-thru-only formats	2022	
	2024	Back to Starbucks: “fundamentally change our strategy”
	2025	Mugs and condiment bars back; Pickup to be sunset
	2026	Its COO: “Connection and convenience are not tradeoffs”

THE DECISION

On 10 June 2020 chief executive Kevin Johnson and finance chief Patrick Grismer announced up to 400 US store closures in 18 months and faster growth of drive-thrus and pickup-only stores, the foundation for “a more transformational phase”. It built on Mobile Order & Pay (2015) and was extended after cafés reopened, in the 2022 Reinvention plan. From October 2024, Brian Niccol’s Back to Starbucks reversed the order of priority, not the channels.

THE CONTEXT

Starbucks grew as a coffeehouse it called a “third place”. In 2007 Howard Schultz warned that gains in “speed of service and efficiency” had removed “much of the romance and theatre”. In late May 2020, over 90% of US company-operated sales came through the drive-thru and mobile order, against roughly 60% before COVID-19.

WHERE IT STARTS

In Place: which stores close, which get a drive-thru, how many seats remain. What the store is for then shapes the drinks, what the price is paid for and what the marketing says.

COMPETING EXPLANATIONS

Price rises, a boycott from late 2023, discounting and slow service, from staffing, sequencing and complex drinks, could each explain the 2024 decline; the recovery coincides with a price freeze, more labour and new software as well as seats. No public source separates them. The Reading judges the ranking on its logic and evidence, not the sales curve alone.

02 · THE FOUR Ps

One decision. Four places it lands.

The decision starts in Place. Its consequences reach the product Starbucks makes, the price it asks and the promotion that brings people in. The four Ps mark where the consequences fall; the Standards judge them.

P · FIGURE	CONSEQUENCE	EVIDENCE	TENSION · UNKNOWN
PRODUCT **30%** of menu items to be cut by the end of fiscal 2025 (January 2025)	**Convenience reshaped the menu: drinks built in the app, customised, made for the cup holder.**	Mobile orders: 31% of US transactions by December 2023, up from 25% two years earlier, and more complicated: add-ons pay more and take more barista time. From 2024 Starbucks cut the menu and brought back mugs, the condiment bar, refills and names on cups.	TENSION The customised drink to go grew the business and slowed the bar. UNKNOWN How much of the slowdown was drink complexity, not order volume.
PRICE **−5%** US comparable transactions, fiscal 2024; ticket +4% (Starbucks)	**Convenience sold at a coffeehouse price; as the coffeehouse thinned, the price had less behind it.**	Price rises in October 2021 and January 2022. Fiscal 2023: ticket up 6%, transactions up 3%. Fiscal 2024: transactions down 5%. Starbucks then pledged to hold North American menu prices through fiscal 2025, dropped the non-dairy charge and had 40% fewer discounted transactions in that year's first quarter. Fiscal 2026: transactions up 3.4%, ticket up 3.0%.	TENSION Customers paid more for less, then came less often. UNKNOWN How much of the fall was price, how much experience.
PLACE **1,700+** coffeehouses "uplifted" with seating, North America, by end of fiscal 2026	**Where it starts: closures, drive-thrus, pickup-only stores, fewer seats.**	June 2020: up to 400 US closures, faster Pickup and drive-thru growth. July 2025: uplifts are meant "to quickly replace thousands of seats we removed"; the 80–90 pickup-only stores to be sunset in fiscal 2026. 627 stores closed in the 2025 restructuring. Roughly half of customers use the drive-thru.	TENSION Seats are rebuilt while half of customers use the drive-thru. UNKNOWN Whether uplifts pay back; Starbucks reports a lift, no figure.
PROMOTION **≈60%** of US company-operated revenue from Rewards members, fiscal 2025	**Convenience moved marketing into the app: member offers, often discounted.**	US Rewards 90-day active members: 32.6 million in 2023, a record 36 million in 2026. In October 2024 the chief executive said marketing had to reach beyond Rewards and "tell our coffee story". "Hello Again", February 2025, declared "a return to our roots".	TENSION The most valuable channel taught customers to wait for an offer. UNKNOWN What brand advertising added to the recovery.

Comparable sales, transactions, ticket and mobile order share are Starbucks' US company-operated measures, by fiscal year (ending late September or early October); for fiscal 2020 (Americas) and 2023 to 2025 (North America) Starbucks reports the region and the US together.

03 · THE INTERROGATION

Twelve Standards. Every side argued.

Each Standard ends in an interim finding, not a verdict; the findings inform one judgment and are never added up.

STANDARD 01 OF 12

Relevance

Does this matter to the people we need to matter to?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

Does speed of access matter to the people Starbucks needs?

EVIDENCE

Roughly half of customers use the drive-thru (October 2026). Mobile order rose from 25% to 31% of US transactions in two years to December 2023. Delivery revenue more than tripled in five years. In the pandemic, convenience channels carried over 90% of US company-operated sales.

THE CASE FOR

Convenience is what most Starbucks customers use. A company that ignored it would have lost them to the drive-thru down the road.

THE CASE AGAINST

Relevant to the commute is not relevant to everything. Ranking convenience first made Starbucks less relevant to the people who came to stay.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

How many customers use both the café and the drive-thru, and which they value more.

STANDARD 02 OF 12

Distinctiveness

Does this make the company easier to recognize or easier to replace?

INTERIM FINDING

DULL.

HERE

Does convenience make Starbucks easier to recognise, or easier to replace?

EVIDENCE

Starbucks called its stores “third places” from the 1990s. Rivals built on speed: Dutch Bros, a drive-thru chain, grew to 1,136 shops in 2025, with same-shop sales up 5.6%. In 2025 Starbucks judged its pickup-only format “overly transactional, and lacking the warmth and human connection that defines our brand”.

THE CASE FOR

The app and Rewards are distinctive at scale; few rivals can match them.

THE CASE AGAINST

A drive-thru window looks like every other drive-thru window. Convenience is what rivals can copy most easily; the coffeehouse was what they had to answer.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

Whether customers still see Starbucks as different from faster, cheaper rivals.

STANDARD 03 OF 12

Value

Does this build perceived value or spend it?

INTERIM FINDING

DULL.

HERE

Did convenience build what people think Starbucks is worth, or spend it?

EVIDENCE

Price increases in October 2021 and January 2022, with more planned. Fiscal 2023: US ticket up 6%, transactions up 3%. Fiscal 2024: ticket up 4%, transactions down 5%. Starbucks then pledged to freeze North American menu prices through fiscal 2025 and cut discounted transactions by 40% year on year in early 2025. In October 2025 its chief executive said value perception strengthened “across all generations”.

THE CASE FOR

Convenience saves time, and time is value. Fiscal 2023 shows customers paying more and visiting more.

THE CASE AGAINST

The price was built on the coffeehouse. Selling the same price through a window spent the reason for it; visits fell when prices kept rising.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

How much of the fall in visits was price and how much the experience the price bought.

STANDARD 04 OF 12

Credibility

Will people believe this from us?

INTERIM FINDING

HMM.

HERE

Can Starbucks claim the coffeehouse while organising itself around the window?

EVIDENCE

In June 2020 Starbucks said fewer crowds would improve the “sit-and-stay” experience for “third place” occasions. In January 2025 it ended its open-door policy, reserving cafés and restrooms for paying customers, and said its role as a “third place” was unchanged. The 2025 campaign promised “the Starbucks you love is ready”.

THE CASE FOR

Starbucks never claimed to abandon the coffeehouse, and is now rebuilding it in the open: 1,700+ uplifts are visible proof.

THE CASE AGAINST

Seats removed while the language of the “third place” stayed. A promise of warmth meets a pickup counter.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

Whether customers believe the return to the coffeehouse; no public measure exists.

STANDARD 05 OF 12

Delivery

Can we deliver what this decision asks people to believe?

INTERIM FINDING

DULL.

HERE

Could Starbucks deliver the speed it promised?

EVIDENCE

Mobile orders crowded the counter: Howard Schultz described an 8 a.m. visit as “a mosh pit, and that’s not Starbucks”. The union asked for mobile ordering to be switched off during promotions. In October 2024 the chief executive estimated that about half of transactions took under four minutes; by October 2025, over 80% of US stores averaged four minutes or less in the café.

THE CASE FOR

The drive-thru delivered: average peak times of 3 minutes 20 seconds by July 2025. In January 2025 Starbucks said order sequencing, more than capacity, was the bottleneck: execution, and fixable.

THE CASE AGAINST

It worked once Starbucks added more than half a billion dollars in labour and new sequencing software, years after it put convenience first.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

Whether the decision failed, or only its execution.

STANDARD 06 OF 12

Coherence

Does this make the company add up better?

INTERIM FINDING

DULL.

HERE

Did Product, Price, Place and Promotion add up to one company?

EVIDENCE

Place: closures, drive-thrus, Pickup stores, seats removed. Product: customised drinks for the bag. Price: rising. Promotion: app offers to members. The Reinvention plan in 2022 spoke of “expanding the Third Place experience beyond the physical store”. In October 2025 the chief executive said Starbucks went most “off-brand” in “the cafe and the way that we handled mobile orders”.

THE CASE FOR

Each P pointed the same way: speed, access, personal convenience, all at a premium.

THE CASE AGAINST

They pointed at a different company from the one the price and the name promised. The premium was a coffeehouse premium.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

Whether customers saw one Starbucks or two.

STANDARD 07 OF 12

Ownership

What about this can genuinely become ours?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

What did convenience build that Starbucks genuinely owns?

EVIDENCE

The app and Starbucks Rewards: 36 million 90-day active US members in 2026, nearly 60% of US company-operated revenue in fiscal 2025. Mobile Order & Pay since 2014. A sequencing system, Smart Queue, built for every channel at once.

THE CASE FOR

Convenience gave Starbucks an asset few rivals have: a direct, daily relationship with tens of millions of customers, on its own platform.

THE CASE AGAINST

The relationship is with an app. It is only as loyal as the next offer, and it taught customers to wait for one.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

What members would do without offers.

STANDARD 08 OF 12

Identity

Does this make the company more itself or less itself?

INTERIM FINDING

DULL.

HERE

Did putting convenience first make Starbucks more itself or less?

EVIDENCE

Starbucks grew as an Italian-inspired coffee bar and called itself a “third place”. In 2007 Schultz warned of the “commoditization of our brand”. In 2024 the new chief executive said the company had to “get back to our core identity”. In 2025 it called its pickup-only stores “lacking the warmth and human connection that defines our brand”.

THE CASE FOR

Starbucks was always also about the cup to go. Speed is part of it.

THE CASE AGAINST

By the company’s own words, the decision made Starbucks less itself, and it has spent two years, 1,700 uplifts and a restructuring that closed 627 stores becoming itself again.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

Whether a Starbucks that customers use mostly from the car can still be a coffeehouse.

STANDARD 09 OF 12

Precedent

What will this yes make easier to say yes to next?

INTERIM FINDING

HMM.

HERE

What did putting convenience first make it easier to say yes to?

EVIDENCE

Delivery with Uber Eats (nationwide by 2020) and DoorDash (from 2022). Drive-thru-only and delivery-only formats. Discount-driven offers, later cut back as “proven ineffective”. The 2007 memo shows an earlier yes to efficiency the company later regretted.

THE CASE FOR

Each yes widened access. Delivery and the app are now growing channels the coffeehouse alone could never have built.

THE CASE AGAINST

It also made it easier to say yes to discounts, to fewer seats, to a menu that kept growing. Starbucks has said yes to efficiency over atmosphere twice, and twice reversed.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

What Starbucks will refuse in the name of the coffeehouse.

STANDARD 10 OF 12

Compounding

What happens if we keep doing this?

INTERIM FINDING

DULL.

HERE

What happened as Starbucks kept putting convenience first?

EVIDENCE

US comparable transactions: down 21% in pandemic fiscal 2020, up 3% in 2023, down 5% in 2024 and 4% in 2025, up 3.4% in 2026, after the reversal began. North America operating margin (Americas in 2019): 20.7% in fiscal 2019 and again in 2023, 19.8% in 2024, 11.5% in 2025, 12.0% in 2026 (13.6% before restructuring charges).

DEEPER

In September 2022 Starbucks targeted US comparable sales growth of 7–9% a year to fiscal 2025. It grew 9%, then fell 2% in each of the next two years. Over calendar 2024 and 2025, Dutch Bros, a drive-thru chain, grew same-shop sales 5.3% and 5.6%.

THE CASE FOR

Convenience compounded for years: more mobile orders, more members, more drive-thrus, record sales in 2023.

THE CASE AGAINST

The costs compounded too: crowded counters, tired baristas, a union, lost visits. It took two years, closures and lower margins to turn the curve.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

How much of the recovery the coffeehouse earned, and whether it lasts.

STANDARD 11 OF 12

Alignment

What else has to move for this to work?

INTERIM FINDING

DULL.

HERE

What else had to move for convenience to work?

EVIDENCE

Labour, equipment and store design had to move with the volume. Union organising began in 2021, with burnout partly fuelled by the app; by November 2025 the union said it represented more than 600 stores. From mid-2025 Starbucks committed more than half a billion dollars of extra labour hours and new sequencing software; in 2022 it had promised equipment that could halve service times. North American coffeehouse operating costs rose from 51.4% of company-operated revenue in fiscal 2024 to 56.4% in 2025, and stayed there in 2026.

THE CASE FOR

Starbucks has now moved the rest: labour, software, equipment. Convenience and coffeehouse can run side by side.

THE CASE AGAINST

For four years the rest did not move. Volume moved to the app while the bar, the labour and the layout stayed built for a café.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Whether the union contract, unresolved in our record, changes the economics.

STANDARD 12 OF 12

Stewardship

What must we protect while we change?

INTERIM FINDING

DULL.

HERE

What should Starbucks have protected while it moved to convenience?

EVIDENCE

The seats, by its own account: uplifts are meant “to quickly replace thousands of seats we removed”. The open-door policy, introduced after the 2018 Philadelphia arrests, was ended in 2025. The 2026 target: more than 25,000 café seats added across the US. Both turns cost money: $258 million of Americas store write-downs in fiscal 2020; $592 million of store-closure charges in 2025; $490 million more in North America in 2026, not broken down, as about 250 more coffeehouses closed.

THE CASE FOR

Starbucks protected the coffee, the brand and its customer data. Seats can be put back, and are being put back.

THE CASE AGAINST

It let the coffeehouse go where it was cheapest to let go. Putting it back costs about $150,000 a store and two years of trust.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

What Starbucks now treats as untouchable.

04 · THE THREE LENSES

Human Nature. Conditions. Time.

The twelve Standards judge the decision. Three lenses then test whether that judgment will hold: with people, in the world around them, and over time.

People, and the world around them

Evidence can tell us what people did.

It can't guarantee what people will do next.

The world moves too.

LENS

Human Nature

What will people actually notice, want, believe, remember, resist or choose?

INTERIM FINDING

HMM.

HERE

What do people notice, choose and remember?

EVIDENCE

Roughly half of customers use the drive-thru. Visits from non-Rewards customers fell first in 2024; in July 2025 they grew again for the first time since the pandemic recovery. The new prototype store has 32 seats and a drive-thru.

REMOVING FRICTION	**Sometimes removing friction creates value.** The app and the drive-thru remove the queue, the wait and the order at the counter. For the commuter that is real value, and they used it: mobile order rose to almost a third of transactions.
THE FRICTION IS THE VALUE	**Sometimes the friction is the value.** The coffeehouse is friction: a seat, a mug, a name written by hand, time spent. Starbucks removed some of it and then paid to put it back. In our judgment, that is what it learned the coffeehouse was worth.

THE CASE FOR

People choose convenience every morning, and Starbucks gave them more of it.

THE CASE AGAINST

People remember how a place made them feel. A crowded pickup counter is what they remembered.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Whether convenience and the coffeehouse attract different customers or the same customers on different days.

LENS

Conditions

The world moves too. Culture, economics, technology, politics, the planet.

INTERIM FINDING

HMM.

HERE

What in the world made convenience the right or wrong choice?

EVIDENCE

A pandemic closed cafés: in the last week of May 2020, over 90% of US company-operated sales came through the drive-thru and the app, against roughly 60% before COVID-19. Condiment bars removed in the pandemic returned only in January 2025. Prices rose with inflation into 2022. US tariffs reached 50% on Brazilian coffee in 2025, removed in November. Several US cities have banned new drive-thrus.

CULTURE	**What could change what this decision means?** Remote and hybrid work changed where and when people want coffee, and how much they want a place outside home and work. Whether the “third place” matters more or less after 2020 is not settled.
ECONOMICS	**What changes when people feel richer or poorer?** When customers feel poorer, a premium cup through a window is the first thing to feel expensive. Visits fell in 2024 while ticket rose; Starbucks pledged to freeze menu prices through fiscal 2025.
TECHNOLOGY	**What could technology change about this decision?** Technology made the decision possible and is now its repair: Smart Queue sequences café, mobile, drive-thru and delivery orders; Starbucks will test AI at the drive-thru from fiscal 2027 and is exploring recognising customers on arrival.
POLITICS	**What could politics or policy change?** Cities restricting new drive-thrus, labour law and a union seeking a first contract, and tariffs on coffee all reach the convenience model first: it depends on cars, labour at peak and cheap volume.
PLANET	**What could the physical world change about this decision?** Drive-thrus have been restricted partly to cut emissions; single-use cups come with every order to go. A seated coffeehouse with ceramic mugs is the lower-waste format, though no public source measures the difference for Starbucks.

THE CASE FOR

In June 2020 convenience was survival. Few companies would have chosen otherwise.

THE CASE AGAINST

The pandemic ended; the priority did not. Conditions that justified a turn did not justify a ranking.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

Whether the shift in work and commuting since 2020 has changed coffeehouse demand for good.

Over time

Some consequences take longer to show themselves.

Years. Sometimes decades.

LENS

Time

What strengthens, erodes and compounds? How far can it change? What does it make possible next?

INTERIM FINDING

HMM.

HERE

What does time do to the ranking?

EVIDENCE

Convenience growth from 2014 to 2023; decline in 2024 and 2025; recovery in 2026 with both: uplifts and drive-thru, Green Apron Service and Smart Queue.

STRENGTHENS	**What strengthens?** The app, Rewards and the drive-thru: each channel is larger in 2026 than when the decision was made.
ERODES	**What erodes?** The coffeehouse, while it is ranked second: seats, time, the barista's attention, the reason for the price.
COMPOUNDS	**What compounds?** Customer data and habit compound in the app. So did the strain on the bar, until Starbucks added labour and software.
HOW FAR	**How far can the company change without becoming less itself?** Far enough to sell half its coffee through a window. Not so far that the coffeehouse becomes optional: that is where, by its own account, Starbucks became less itself.
WHAT NEXT	**What does this decision make possible next?** An integrated business: café, drive-thru, mobile and delivery on one sequencing system and one loyalty programme. That is possible because of the convenience it built, and works, so far, because it brought the coffeehouse back.

THE CASE FOR

Time has kept every convenience channel growing; even Back to Starbucks builds new stores with drive-thrus.

THE CASE AGAINST

Time showed what convenience erodes without the coffeehouse: visits, warmth, the reason for the price.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Whether the 2026 recovery holds as price rises again.

Dull rarely happens all at once.
Neither does density.

05 · THE JUDGMENT

What carried the most weight.

1 **Starbucks' own verdict on its own decision.** Identity. Established: Starbucks called its pickup-only format "overly transactional" and "lacking the warmth and human connection that defines our brand", and said it went most "off-brand" in the café and in how it handled mobile orders. It weighed most because Starbucks acted on it; a new chief executive's verdict on his predecessors is evidence, not proof.

2 **Fewer visits at higher prices.** Value. Established: US transactions fell 5% in fiscal 2024 while ticket rose 4%. Inference: the price had been paid for an experience the stores were giving less of. Price rises are a competing explanation; we cannot separate the two.

3 **A promise the stores could not keep.** Delivery and Alignment. Established: crowded pickup counters, a union drive partly fuelled by the app, and more than half a billion dollars of labour and new software needed later. Convenience became a promise of speed the bar was not built to keep.

4 **The cost of putting the coffeehouse back.** Stewardship. Established: 1,700+ uplifts to replace seats removed; 627 stores closed, with $592 million of store-closure charges in fiscal 2025. What was cheap to let go was expensive to rebuild.

5 **Convenience itself was right.** Relevance and Ownership, against the verdict. Established: half of customers use the drive-thru; the app and Rewards carry nearly 60% of US company-operated revenue. That is why the verdict is on the ranking, not on convenience.

THE STRONGEST CASE AGAINST

Did convenience save Starbucks rather than hurt it?

In May 2020 convenience kept Starbucks trading: over 90% of US company-operated sales came through the window and the app. It built the app, Rewards and a drive-thru half of customers now use; fiscal 2023 was a record. Back to Starbucks keeps every channel; its COO says "connection and convenience are not tradeoffs". On that view only execution failed: thin staffing and, by Starbucks' own account, badly sequenced orders. The evidence meets this in part: convenience was right, the ranking was not. Execution explains a slow bar, not thousands of seats removed. The company that says the two are not tradeoffs is the company that, for four years, traded one for the other and called the result off-brand. Unproven: how much of the 2024 decline the ranking caused, against prices, a boycott and slow service.

WHAT AAH, HMM AND DULL MEAN

AAH.	The commitment deserves to be made.
HMM.	Something consequential remains unresolved.
DULL.	The commitment does not deserve to be made in its present form.

WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT WE INFER, WHAT IS OPEN

ESTABLISHED	REASONABLE INFERENCE	UNRESOLVED
Up to 400 US closures and faster Pickup and drive-thru growth announced 10 June 2020.	Ranking convenience first eroded the experience the premium price was paid for.	How much of the 2024 decline was price, boycott, service or format.
Mobile order rose to 31% of US transactions by December 2023.	The return of the coffeehouse contributed to the 2026 recovery.	What uplifted stores earn against their cost.
US transactions down 5% in fiscal 2024, down 4% in 2025, up 3.4% in 2026.	In our judgment, convenience and the coffeehouse work together only when the coffeehouse is not second.	Whether the 2026 recovery holds as prices rise again.
Starbucks called its pickup-only format “overly transactional” and is sunsetting its 80–90 such stores.		Whether Starbucks and the union reach a first contract.
1,700+ uplifts to replace seats Starbucks says it removed.		Whether post-2020 work patterns have shrunk coffeehouse demand for good.

FIFTEEN INTERIM FINDINGS

01	Relevance	AAH.	02	Distinctiveness	DULL.
03	Value	DULL.	04	Credibility	HMM.
05	Delivery	DULL.	06	Coherence	DULL.
07	Ownership	AAH.	08	Identity	DULL.
09	Precedent	HMM.	10	Compounding	DULL.
11	Alignment	DULL.	12	Stewardship	DULL.
	Human Nature	HMM.		Conditions	HMM.
	Time	HMM.			

Interim findings, not verdicts. Nothing is scored or added up: the verdict is one human judgment across the whole decision.

WHAT WOULD CHANGE OUR MIND

- Evidence that uplifted coffeehouses earn no more than stores left as they were.
- Evidence that the 2024 decline was almost entirely price or the boycott, with no link to the format.
- Evidence that the recovery came from labour and software alone, not from the return of the café.
- A sustained recovery led by drive-thru and mobile with café use still falling.
- Evidence that customers who use only the drive-thru are more valuable and more loyal than café customers.

06 · ONE VERDICT

The four Ps deserve one verdict.

Convenience deserved a place at Starbucks. It did not deserve first place.

What it does for customers. Convenience gave customers a faster Starbucks: the app, the drive-thru, the order waiting on the counter. Roughly half of them use the drive-thru today. But making convenience more important than the coffeehouse took something away from the same customers: the seat, the mug, the name, a counter that was not a crowd. In our judgment, they paid a coffeehouse price for a pickup window, and in 2024 many came less often.

What it does to the company. It built something Starbucks owns: an app and a loyalty programme that carry nearly 60% of US company-operated revenue. It also made Starbucks easier to replace, strained its baristas and, by the company's own account, took it off-brand. Undoing the ranking has taken 1,700 uplifts and a restructuring that closed 627 stores, with $592 million of store-closure charges in fiscal 2025.

What weighed most. Identity, Value, Delivery, Alignment and Stewardship. The heaviest is that Starbucks judged the decision itself, and paid to act on it: "overly transactional", "lacking the warmth and human connection that defines our brand". Against them, Relevance and Ownership: convenience was right, and the verdict is not against it. It is against putting it first. As we read it, the June 2020 turn was defensible in a pandemic; keeping the coffeehouse second after it, and extending that order in 2022, was not.

What remains unresolved. Whether the ranking, rather than prices, a boycott or slow service, caused the 2024 decline; no public source separates them. Whether the uplifts pay back. Whether the 2026 recovery holds. Whether the union reaches a contract. Credibility, Precedent, Human Nature, Conditions and Time remain HMM. Distinctiveness, Value, Delivery, Coherence, Identity, Compounding, Alignment and Stewardship are DULL.

AAH. HMM. DULL. 2026

DULL

KD INDEPENDENT MARKETING JUDGMENT

SIGNATURE

Peter Buck

FOUNDER & CEO, KILL DULL

DATE OF JUDGMENT 13 November 2026

Sources

Built from the public record: every source was published by, and opened on, 13 November 2026. AI researched and argued both sides; every finding and the verdict are Kill Dull's.

1 Starbucks experience diluted, warns chief (Schultz memo of 14 February 2007), Associated Press via The Herald, 23 February 2007
https://www.heraldnet.com/business/starbucks-experience-diluted-warns-chief

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WAS STARBUCKS RIGHT TO MAKE CONVENIENCE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE COFFEEHOUSE?

From 2015 Starbucks built its US stores around the drive-thru, the app and the pickup counter, and from 2024 it began to bring the coffeehouse back. This Reading argues every side of that decision from the public record before the verdict.

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