

# Starbucks: What Marketers Need to Know About Implicit Bias



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The problem with [implicit bias](#) is you don't know what you've done until you see the public reaction. Starbucks, Dove and Heineken leaders can all attest to this unconscious offense, which affects the marketers' brand reputation and its customers' experience. But Starbucks is taking a larger step to remedy both problems than previous marketers have done. On May 29, all stores close so employees learn about implicit bias.

In Starbucks' case, the move to train all of its nearly 175,000 employees comes as the result of sustained public outrage about two black men being led out of one of its Philadelphia stores in handcuffs on April 12. Police originally charged them with [allegedly trespassing on private property and creating a disturbance](#). The charges were later dropped.

The two had been sitting in the coffee shop, waiting for someone to arrive. They hadn't yet purchased a product and had asked to use the restrooms, which is against Starbucks' policy — only paying customers are allowed to use the restrooms. A patron recorded video of the incident and put it up on social media, where it went viral.

Many Americans who are terming the incident “racist” say they've used Starbucks' restrooms without paying, as well as remained in the coffee shops without buying products or even waiting for a friend. In this case, they say, implicit bias means the same consumers performing the same activity are viewed differently based on race.

In many of the [#BoycottStarbucks](#) posts on social media, consumers were sharing screenshots showing they'd also deleted the marketer's app.

For marketers who doubt the power of social media, [Sprout Social recently released research](#) showing “71% of people want brands to take a stand on race relations — 43% who believe brands should take a stand no matter what, and 28% who say brands should take a stand if the issues [relate] to their products/services.”

[This black-owned coffee shop brand](#) may be doing well because of its stand on race relations.

## How Starbucks Is Different From Previous Implicit Bias

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But it took Starbucks' move on Tuesday, announcing "[Starbucks to Close All Stores Nationwide for Racial-Bias Education on May 29](#)," for the stock to recover fully.

Closing the stores for that period of time will cost Starbucks \$12 million in revenue, [estimates Tim Rostan of MarketWatch on Wednesday](#). The last time Starbucks closed its company stores was to train staffers on espresso, and that was in 2008, Rostan says.

But Starbucks leaders say in the announcement about the shutdown that it's meant to address implicit bias and improve the customer experience. Improving brand reputation is implied. But they don't mention revenue.

Tuesday's announcement from Starbucks reads:

"The company's founding values are based on humanity and inclusion," said executive chairman Howard Schultz, who joined [CEO Kevin] Johnson and other senior Starbucks leaders in Philadelphia to meet with community leaders and Starbucks partners. "We will learn from our mistakes and reaffirm our commitment to creating a safe and welcoming environment for every customer."

Starbucks partners, the brand's word for its employees, "will go through a training program designed to address implicit bias, promote conscious inclusion, prevent discrimination and ensure everyone inside a Starbucks store feels safe and welcome," says the announcement.

## Dove, Heineken Apologized and Removed Ads

Leaders at Dove and Heineken claimed they hadn't meant to offend consumers or be racist in their ads. So they apologized and removed them after public outcry.

Dove ran an ad insinuating a black person who used the cleaning product became a white person.

The Heineken ad had a light beer traveling past three black people and reaching a light

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In the case of Dove and Heineken, improved diversity on the marketing team may have prevented the offense. In addition to adding people of color to the staff, improving gender and age representation could help, too. As Target Marketing blogger Jeanette McMurtry puts it, marketers tend to hire people like them in order to fit their “culture” when, in reality, that culture may turn out to be young, white and male. Expand.

In the case of Starbucks, the brand does have a diverse workforce. Front-facing employees are the face of the brand and for Starbucks, that’s sometimes been more positive than its marketing.

In 2015, few customers were fans of the “[Race Together](#)” marketing that involved baristas writing race-related thoughts on cups. New York magazine has the campaign listed in its “bad ideas” section. Still, even after its May 29 training, Starbucks may want to take a second look at its bathroom policy — which allows employee discretion on when to call police on consumers.

What do you think, marketers? How often do marketers show people of color, women and different age groups in positive lights, including employees? [Southwest Airlines](#) has a female pilot who is being lauded for safely landing a plane in a difficult circumstance.

Here is a link to an infographic asking consumers ; when should they take a stand?

<http://www.targetmarketingmag.com/article/starbucks-marketers-need-know-implicit-bias/brands-get-real-chart-4-780px/>

Another interesting development is the visibility of lists highlighting minority owned alternatives to Starbucks in the days after the incident.

Here is a link to the web site Shoppe Black that features the Starbucks alternatives.

<https://shoppeblack.us/2018/04/black-owned-coffee-tea-starbucks-alternatives/>

Last but not least I took the implicit bias test sponsored by the Harvard University Education Department this is the link to the test.