

How COVID-19 Changed Coffee

You know, when I hoped for great social change, this is not what I had pictured. Before the pandemic, my days consisted of class early in the morning, then straight to my job at Starbucks. Typically, my store is moderately busy, but our atmosphere is definitely a lot more relaxed than some higher volume stores. We're located right next to an Options for Youth, so our cafe was always full of kids hanging out or working on homework (or being way too loud). This is the first steady job I've ever had, and I was just beginning to feel like I knew every drink and all the regular customers by name. Although our drive thru typically moved at a steady pace, our cafe was always full of people. Looking back now, I envy how easy it used to be for customers to move in and out of our parking lot, or even just find a space to park their car at all. We have a pretty small parking lot since we're jammed in the middle of a small cluster of storefronts. When things first started closing down and people started staying home more, our business faltered and all my partners were beginning to worry about the stability of our jobs. That lasted maybe a week, it that.

One of the most surprising things about the pandemic in terms of being an essential worker in food service is how drastically the atmosphere of our job changed. The first phase we employed was simply limiting the amount of tables and chairs in our cafe, but still allowing customers to come inside and order. This was a very calm time, everyone seemed quieter and more polite, we were all scared of what the future held. The next phase was for our store to completely gut our lobby, no chairs or tables at all, and customers weren't even allowed to pass pleasantries after grabbing their drinks. What was different about this phase was the fact that many cafe stores were beginning to shut down, and my drive thru was picking up the slack. Even though we had no tables or chairs, the lobby would still fill with people, all impatiently waiting

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for us to crank out their orders. I am greatly appreciative that I work for such a supportive company; while many of my friends were fired without notice, my job gave us the option of taking catastrophe pay or taking paid leave for the first month of the total stay in place. Other stores that couldn't staff enough partners shut down, but my store was lucky enough to stay open. At this point our lobby was fully closed, and we moved to drive thru only. This is where the atmosphere took a severe turn for the worst.

The crowds were different now, and there was no way for us to track and plan for a peak because people were coming at all hours of the day, sometimes multiple times a day. We have a tiny parking lot, and a drive thru entrance with two entrances as we sit on a corner. This has been a huge source of anger among our customers who never learned how to form a line properly in grade school. The cars would spill out on both sides of the street, both lines fighting to cut off the person turning in next to them. Then they get to our window only to scream in our face and tell us to go outside and manage the traffic, even as they saw us scrambling to keep up with the massive influx of orders. Our drive thru times stayed low typically, no one was waiting very long once they got to the order screen. The issue was that there were too many people bored in their homes wanting to go get coffee just to have something to do. This lasted the entire month of April and a bit into May, until many stores in the area reopened. Right now, we're preparing for the next phase of dealing with this pandemic while still serving our customers as best we can; we're going to be reopening our cafe with limitations. This obviously brings with it a lot of fear and anxiety on our ends, not just for our partners but also for our customers. However, I can only hope that this will help us get back to some level of normalcy within our store, and maybe lighten the load on our drive thru a bit.

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There have been countless hardships faced by essential workers because of the pandemic, and being one during this trying time has really opened my eyes to the importance of something as simple as coffee. Many of my customers thank us for coming to work because this is the only moment of normalcy they get to have now that everyone has moved to stay in place. I know my store and the way we connect with customers will never be the same even after we've found a cure for COVID-19. Still, being able to continue providing service even when the entire world feels like it's been flipped upside down is something I would volunteer for again and again, even if the most I can do is provide food and caffeine to those suffering because of the dramatic societal effects of this virus.