

Politics and retail a no-win mix

EMILY FREDRIX - Associated Press Writers - Associated Press

Guns. Religion. Abortion. These are the no-win arguments that spoil family gatherings — and the stuff of retailers' nightmares.

Starbucks has found itself in the middle of just such an argument as its stores became forums for demonstrations by both pro-gun and gun-control advocates. All for a firearm policy that hasn't changed and is the same as most retailers': follow the local law. If it's legal to carry a firearm in town, it's allowed in the stores.

In recent months, the "open-carry" arm of the gun-rights movement, which advocates that gun owners carry visible weapons as they go about their daily business, have been exercising their rights. They've been proudly displaying their sidearms in public places, sometimes meeting up in groups.

Starbucks' association with a politically liberal, "latte sipper" ethos, made it a tempting target for gun-control advocates. The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence attracted more than 26,000 signatures demanding that Starbucks "offer espresso shots, not gunshots."

Starbucks' response? It reiterated its policy of following state and local laws and politely asked everyone to leave it out of the debate.

It's frightful territory for a business, which risks alienating customers and losing sales by taking sides on such emotional debates.

"They want you to like them. They don't want to be red brands or blue brands," said Allen Adamson, managing director of branding firm Landor Associates in New York. "Generally, Starbucks wants to be socially responsible and not take stands on divisive issues. Clearly they're being pulled in here because people want to use them to do that."

Starbucks' situation is unusual in that it became a symbol of a debate not of its own making. But other companies have dealt with politically fraught situations where they risk alienating customers no matter what they do.

This holiday season, the Christian group American Family Association urged a boycott of retailers, including The Gap and Old Navy, for not using the word "Christmas" in their holiday advertising. But other customers resent focusing on the Christian holiday.

Marketing experts say standing firm was probably the best option Starbucks had.

Charles R. Taylor, professor of marketing at Villanova School of Business. Changing its position would diminish the company's reputation and alienate people on the

opposite side of the debate.

Some businesses are taking a stand, even if it costs them customers. California Pizza Kitchen and Peet's Coffee & Tea banned customers with guns after open-carry advocates started showing up earlier this year. So has Great American Restaurants, a chain of 10 restaurants and a bakery in northern Virginia.

The company's CEO, Randy Norton, said he decided to ban gun owners from carrying weapons when they planned large gatherings at his chain.

"I'm just not interested in having large groups of gun owners coming in and making a point," he said. "The gun people got enraged and they have made a point of boycotting us, but we haven't felt any economic effect from this."

Such a stance carries risks, though the effects on business are hard to pinpoint. Some who feel passionately about an issue might decide to take their business elsewhere, but those on the other side might give a company more business.

"It's too early to see the real impact right now, but this will have an effect," said Fred Taub, an Ohio consumer advocate who is a consultant to companies on boycotts.

"The Hollywood view is any PR is good. But from a business standpoint, this is a no-win," he said.

Starbucks is hardly unique in following state and local laws that allow weapons to be carried openly, which is legal in 43 states.

Most large retailers, among them Target Corp., Home Depot Inc. and Best Buy Inc., say they follow state and local laws. The world's largest retailer, Wal-Mart Stores Inc., didn't respond to queries, but open-carry advocates also count it among those that don't restrict patrons from openly carrying weapons.

Such policies are "pretty much the majority rule" among large retailers said John Pierce, the co-founder of OpenCarry.org, a gun rights advocacy group.

Jim Snyder, a 59-year-old retired military member in northern Virginia now goes out of his way to visit Starbucks to show his support for its stance. He's not even a coffee drinker, but sips hot chocolate while wearing a 9 mm handgun strapped to his belt.

"Quite frankly, if I saw a sign up there and it said no guns, I wouldn't go in there, even if I wasn't carrying," said Snyder, who has been carrying his weapon in stores and restaurants for about 15 years. "And there's a lot of gun owners who feel that way."

Snyder's opposites in the gun control debate are using the situation as a rallying cry to garner more support.

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Abby Spangler, founder of ProtestEasyGuns.com, asked her supporters to urge Starbucks to declare its stores gun-free zones.

"We just want to drink our coffee and have our children eat their scones in peace," she said.

Matt Wood, 44, a Seattle resident taking a break at a Starbucks in San Francisco's Financial District, sees both sides of the argument but thinks the demonstrations are getting too much attention.

"I mean, who carries a gun into a coffee shop?"

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Bluestein reported from Atlanta. AP Business Writer Laura Impellizzeri in San Francisco and Mae Anderson in New York also contributed.

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