Trouble Brews for S.F. Starbucks

Seventeen of the coffee shops are vandalized in what appears to be a political statement.

By Lee Romney, Times Staff Writer. Los Angeles Times, August 6, 2003.

SAN FRANCISCO — In the 11 years since Starbucks opened its first outlet here, its green siren for some grew to symbolize dot-com excess, high rents, the homogenization of America and the pitfalls of globalization.

In the predawn hours Tuesday, someone in town struck back.

Police say as many as 17 of the Seattle-based chain's stores were vandalized — windows clouded with glue, "For Lease" signs pasted on their facades and some of their locks jammed.

The pranksters also posted a notice on faux Starbucks letterhead regretfully announcing the closure of "thousands of retail locations worldwide."

The "message from the Starbucks Corporation," which company officials dismissed as fraudulent, turned Starbucks' highly touted social responsibility program on its head, saying its lofty goals "to promote a sustainable social, ecological, and economic model for the production and trade of coffee" had failed.

"The global economy requires a relentless substitution of quantity over quality and shareholder value over human values," read the statement, which was signed with the name of the company's actual senior vice president of corporate social responsibility.

"At our current market level, Starbucks cannot in good conscience guarantee all of our beans meet both our rigorous quality standards as well as our commitment to social responsibility. We are moving over and making room for local coffee bars."

There was no serious damage to the stores, which cleaned up and opened for business as usual Tuesday morning.

In a statement, the chain's real spokespeople did not shrink from their do-gooder philosophy. They stressed that the company, which has 6,500 stores, remains "committed to contributing positively to the communities where we do business and has been giving back to San Francisco and the Bay Area since we opened stores here 11 years ago."

Kristine Hung, the company's marketing and community relations manager for Northern California, said the strategy has paid off. "I believe we've been embraced by San Francisco," she said. " We do well in the neighborhoods where we currently exist."

But in a city where a mayoral candidate once sent out mailers featuring a crumpled Starbucks cup, there were some supportive reactions.

Some local entrepreneurs have referred to the chain as the "Green Giant."

North Beach, an enclave crammed full of home-grown Italian cafes and restaurants that have persisted for generations, became one of the few neighborhoods in the country to successfully keep the chain out a decade ago.

Told of the faux shutdown of the coffee emporiums, the neighborhood's Chamber of Commerce chief said: "That's pretty funny."

A main complaint is Starbucks' tactic of offering above-market rents to storefront owners, driving up other commercial rents and often forcing locally owned stores out, said Marsha Garland, executive director of the North Beach chamber.

But, she said, "The primary thing that we hate is the homogenization of America."

Hung said Starbucks could only confirm that seven stores had been vandalized, but San Francisco Police Department spokesman Dewayne Tully said investigators had received reports from 17 locations, mostly near the city's touristy Union Square and its financial district.

The vandalism occurred between 11:45 p.m. Monday and 4:45 a.m. Tuesday, he said.

No suspects have been identified and police are not aware of any organization claiming responsibility.

But police said they believe "a group" is responsible.

Although Tully said "the motive is a mystery at this point," the posted notice, titled "A Case for Corporate Downsizing," hints loudly at one.

Several organizations across the country have launched campaigns against the coffee giant, accusing it of "greenwashing" by claiming to act globally responsible while failing to do so.

While those groups condemned the vandalism Tuesday, they concurred with the perpetrators' core message.

San Francisco-based Global Exchange, an international grass-roots organization that advocates for corporate accountability, said only 1% of coffee purchased by Starbucks is certified as "fair trade."

That certification ensures that farmers supplying the beans are well compensated.

"We are still very disappointed in Starbucks. They're not setting the standard they should be," said fair-trade organizer Valerie Orth, who added, "We don't vandalize companies and want to make it perfectly clear we had nothing to do with this."

Hung could not confirm the 1% figure, but said all Starbucks coffee "is purchased at a much higher price than what is currently traded in the commodities market, in order to create

sustainable growth for farmers in origin countries."

San Francisco County Supervisor Aaron Peskin also wagged a finger at those responsible, saying, "I don't think there's a member of the official family of San Francisco who would condone property damage or untoward activity.... The appropriate place to express these things is at the Planning Commission or before the Board of Supervisors."

Still, he said, the city has a history of neighborhood fights against chains such as Rite Aid, McDonald's and Starbucks, and recently enacted legislation that gives residents more advance notice when chains wish to move in.

"There's a pretty pervasive sentiment among the citizens here that they don't want to become Anywhere, USA," he said.

That may be putting it mildly. Garland, like other San Franciscans, vowed that she would "never, ever, ever" buy a cup of Starbucks joe.

Residents find it no surprise that the company was part of Dr. Evil's empire in the second Austin Powers film.

Other chain stores opened in North Beach in recent years, only to fail when locals boycotted them.

But elsewhere in town, plenty of people are buying.

Starbucks boasts 62 corporate-owned locations in San Francisco. Only two opened in the last two years, but dozens sprang up during the city's dot-com heyday. Outside one of the vandalized Starbucks in the city's Financial District on Tuesday, some customers were effusive.

"If somebody's offering cheaper goods and better quality, I don't have a problem if it's a chain or a monster corporation," said 28-year-old Michael Gutkovich. He and his office mate often visit another Starbucks nearby.

"That's another good thing about it," he said. "Convenience."

Times staff writer John M. Glionna contributed to this report.

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