Coffee icon hit in S.F.

Fake flyers, glue put on storefronts at 8 Starbucks shops

Chuck Squatriglia, Chronicle Staff Writer. San Francisco Chronicle, August 6, 2003, Page A - 15.

San Francisco -- Vandals slathered glue over the windows of at least eight Starbucks shops in San Francisco early Tuesday in what authorities called a coordinated effort to fool people into thinking the stores had closed.

The culprits went as far as to stick "closed" and "for lease" signs and notices on the stores -- using bogus Starbucks Corp. letterhead -- announcing that "thousands of retail locations worldwide" were closing, and the Seattle- based company was "making room for local coffee bars."

Police said 17 Starbucks shops throughout downtown San Francisco had been vandalized -- some with their locks jammed. But the company said in a statement that the total was eight and that there was no significant damage to the shops, which opened for business.

Police do not know when the vandalism occurred but believe it was after midnight Monday because many of the targeted stores were open until 11 p.m., said police spokesman Dewayne Tully.

In each case, the vandals smeared enough glue on the windows to make it difficult to see inside, Tully said. They also draped the windows with "closed" or "for lease" signs bearing bogus phone numbers.

The vandals posted fraudulent flyers reading "message from Starbucks Corporation" and bearing the name of the company's senior vice president of corporate responsibility.

"The global economy requires a relentless substitution of quantity over quality and shareholder value over human values," it read. "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."

Investigators have no suspects, but the scope of the vandalism -- stores in the Financial District, Tenderloin and South of Market were hit -- suggests a carefully planned attack involving many people, Tully said.

So far, he said, no one has taken responsibility for the vandalism. Police have located at least one witness to the crimes.

Starbucks, which has 62 shops in San Francisco, has been the victim of such campaigns in the past. Vandals jammed the locks at 14 Starbucks stores in Chicago two years ago, forcing employees to turn away customers until locksmiths made repairs.

In November 2000, vandals painted or broke windows and jammed locks at nine Starbucks stores in Seattle on the one-year anniversary of the World Trade Organization meeting that saw widespread demonstrations.

Starbucks long has been a favored target of activists who oppose world trade. Critics argue the company, with 6,802 stores worldwide, engages in unfair labor practices abroad and pushes out locally owned coffee shops at home. They claim just 1 percent of the coffee Starbucks sells is certified as "fair trade," meaning the growers are paid a living wage.

The company counters that it pays growers far more than the average wholesale price for coffee and insists it long has been committed to environmentally and socially responsible business practices. Company officials also said in a statement that Starbucks had donated more than $1 million to nonprofit groups in Northern California.

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