

**The Information Behavior
Of the Barista**

Team 7

Katie Blake, Aimee Buchholz, Jane (Jie) Pan, Colleen Kelly

University of Washington

Professor Harry Bruce / LIS 510

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Literature Review

One out of every four workers in the U.S. is part of the service industry, yet little is written about the information behavior of the people in this field. Much is said about how to improve things like quality of work life or productivity, but there continues to be a lack of research on the information needs and wants of those workers. The consensus is that they themselves are a company-cultured world of human automatons programmed for the specifics of the job. Therefore, their information needs have already been met by the initial training. The limited amount of literature that speaks about the information behavior of the service industry would suggest otherwise.

Chatman's small-world theory is one that applies to this group. The theory says that a community will show willingness to accept some information, while rejecting or viewing other information as trivial. The mentality is that they themselves are the insiders (locals) versus the outsiders (tourists). This shapes their information flow in that the locals are more willing to accept and, importantly, trust, information from one another within their community. This need for trust is central to the small-world concept.

There is a consulting hierarchy within that structure of trust: who or what the worker will go to first if they are given a choice. Managers and supervisors tend to accumulate information and disseminate it to their employees. Even though they are at the top of the hierarchy, they might not be the most supportive in terms of social cost. If an employee asks how to perform a task, the manager might think the employee's abilities are lacking. The result of this interaction may spend some of the value associated with that worker and their internal knowledge. That cost may be seen for example when another co-worker needs to know how to perform the same task. It would be most expedient to ask their co-worker. However, if they heard the question asked earlier, they might believe that person's answer to be untrustworthy and settle on another source.

Managers navigate through many problems daily. Their information behavior is influenced by the need to assign responsibilities within the hierarchy of their community. They must take into account individuals' places within the company as well as trust that this placement is best for the whole group. Their tendency to be the information magnets of their small-world means that to make the group operate smoothly they build a "cognitive savings account" (Mackenzie, 2003), an archive to be drawn upon as needed. Their network for information exchange is directly influenced by their trust in their workers to function as required by the small-world's culture.

Most service industry jobs tend to be fast-paced and non-technical. The small number of formal resources combined with the time constraints for service workers, leave them with little choice but to rely upon one another to pool information. They feel the urge to interact with one another, to reciprocate trustworthy exchanges. They take their place in the community seriously and feel that reciprocity, although not tangible, is a means of showing social and affective support. Their personal value increases as they utilize exchanges of this nature within the work community.

This way of earning and giving value sometimes has an unattractive cost. Sloan talks about Hochschild's (1983) theory that workers in the service sector are thought to be particularly restricted in their expression of negative emotions. Since company policies put friendly service foremost, it requires that workers must not only suppress anger but express positive emotions that they are not necessarily feeling. Still focused on their place within the community, they will set aside negative feelings for the good of the whole.

Since we found no research on the information behavior of baristas specifically, we examined the information behavior literature for nurses. Nurses and baristas are often categorized as service sector workers because both jobs require social interactions with customers (patients are the nurses' customers). Training differs for nurses and baristas. Nurses are required to have higher education, and they must take continuing education classes in keeping with certification laws. The continuing education requirement is an information need that influences a nurse's information behavior. Both nurses and baristas are finitely skilled in their jobs, but they and the work they do often goes unrecognized by their patrons. In addition, both nurses and baristas have a consulting hierarchy within their world. When the exchange only involves themselves and a patient, the nurses are the chosen source. However, when a doctor arrives the nurse becomes a secondary source. This example is similar to interactions between a barista and a customer; the barista becomes less visible when a manager or coffee expert arrives join the interaction. This deference in the hierarchy is influenced directly by social norms and the insider/outsider model for both nurses as well as baristas.

Despite the few articles on the service sector and the complete lack of barista-focused information behavior literature, we can still see a picture emerging from within the small-world framework. We believe baristas, and others in the service industry, have specific patterns of information behavior which inform their daily jobs and their interactions with the public. We also believe their information needs and uses are no less important than those of "professionals."

Field work

In studying the service sector, we focused on one particular job: the barista. Baristas make coffee for the masses, listen sympathetically to the woes of their customers, and maintain conducive environments for information flow.

We interviewed five baristas. All were former or current Starbucks employees. In addition, we conducted multi-hour observations at different times of day at several local coffee shops: Starbucks, Cafe Javasti, Seattle's Best Coffee, and Diva Espresso.

The length of time our interviewees had been working as baristas ranged from four months to six years. Despite the disparate length of time employed, they all listed similar job duties: making drinks, keeping the store stocked with supplies, cleaning, and providing customer service. Information needs ranged from the obvious - how to make drinks, knowing what new products there are, details about different coffees, details about store promotions – to the less obvious - facts about customers' preferences and how to improve customer service by being aware of their body language.

How do baristas' information behaviors exhibit themselves? We examined this by asking the two key questions in the small-world theory. First, does how frequently social network members interact with one another influence their willingness to exchange information and social support? Second, does the composition of the social network influence the type of information exchanged?

Interestingly, most of the baristas we interviewed said they sought information primarily from their manager or in-house documents made available from their company. Upon observation however, none of the baristas were seen consulting any kind of manual or paperwork; they relied upon their co-workers. In every case, the baristas had access to the various publications from headquarters, such as manuals and binders describing their products. Employees were encouraged to read these so that all the drinks and answers about the products would result in a similar experience for the customer. Some stores used communication logs that helped to link different shifts' knowledge. Other sources of formal information were their schedule, company website, and calling other stores or company headquarters. Even with all these available sources of information, overall the baristas tried to memorize everything because having to stop and ask a question, or worse to look something up in a book, would slow down the process of getting drinks made. This

'good memory' is the main way of managing information for many baristas. Social exchanges were the mainstay of information flow although every barista was well aware of how to locate other more formal sources should it become necessary to use them.

When the flow of information is initiated by the customer, generally it comes out as a demand. They know what they want and how they want it. The negotiation of trying to discern what the customer is actually looking for rarely comes into play. There are some occasions when this does occur such as if the customer wants to try a new drink or has ingredient questions because of dietary restrictions. Common questions such as how drinks taste, what products are available, store hours, directions, details on future drink promotions, etc. are asked daily. Though it was referenced by only one of our baristas during interviews, we also observed most of the baristas watching for non-verbal cues. An example of this was when a gentleman asked for a drink but kept shifting on his feet, until finally he moved around the counter. Even though he didn't say anything, the worker watched him wandering about, near the cashier, poring over the desserts display. The barista finally asked him if there was something else she could get for him and she was able to fulfill his other needs. Baristas need to know that their customers might not always verbalize everything they want so it's important to watch out for non-verbal cues.

For most of our baristas the job was not intended to be long-term. Many were looking for better pay and benefits, or seeking to find jobs considered by their outsider peers as more professional. How does this affect their information behavior, especially in terms of the small-world theory? Would they choose to learn as much about their customers and their products if it was only temporary? We found that the temporary status of the job did not make a difference to those interviewed. They were all eager to learn as much as they could to improve the efficiency of their stores and the relationships with their customers. They felt strongly about doing the best they could to make the experience fun not just for the customers but also amongst themselves.

There were a few instances of information avoidance. Especially in circumstances that involved rude customers, we found that some baristas would say either they didn't know the answer or would suggest the customer look for themselves at available product descriptions within the store. Other such instances were when baristas felt uninterested in a product or did not trust a product; they would avoid learning about it. Two of the baristas didn't like coffee and allowed this to shape how much they learned about the products. At least one stated that when asked about a coffee, she simply memorized the product's description and hoped that would suffice.

During observation we noted how well baristas and customers know each other played a part in information sharing. Those who knew each other well shared extensive information about families and activities. When the relationship was less established, the depth of information exchange reflected this.

Information flowed in every direction, regardless of topic. The triad of exchange moved from barista to barista, barista to customer, and customer to customer. This social network is inherent to the function of a coffee shop, but how it is achieved is what information scholars will be interested to study.

Many coffee shops are aware that their small-world is viewed as a 'third place' (or information grounds; Pettigrew, 2005) and they do their best to nurture this view. Beyond the formalized drink menus, all observed coffee shops maintained various informal information resources for their clientele. Among these items were local newspapers, community bulletin boards, local art, dictionaries, poems, and kids books. Although the stores' primary focus is to make and sell drinks, by keeping these other items available they set an inviting tone and ambiance, which encourages people to stay awhile. The outcome of the small-world environment is that the locals entice the tourists into repeat business, and in turn, tourists give word of mouth recommendations to other outsiders.

Since service work requires few skills widely esteemed by other professions, service workers are often looked over (or treated poorly) by their customers and even their counterparts. The truth is that these baristas know their jobs and set about their work with a fluidity that makes the work appear easy to perform. The unnoticed skills necessary in these undervalued jobs include physical adeptness, endurance, negotiating, dealing with customers, and multi-tasking. Even if the company mandates did not require it, the small-world culture rewards those who make the operation run smoothly. As part of that, customers who move beyond demanding and become rude or denigrate the employee find themselves dealt with by the group. If one employee's soft skills are better than another's, or perhaps the manager is brought in to use his or her negotiating skills, the customer would see a system of support in place to take care of the issue.

Baristas are the bartenders of caffeine. They are often confided in and hear sensitive information. One interviewee said, "Coffee is a truth serum. People relax and tell you so much. I know so many secrets. People start telling more as they know you more and you have to listen: it's part of your job." Generally this particular kind of exchange is not reciprocated, nor is it

encouraged to be by the baristas. The willingness to counsel could be attributed to the baristas' small-world norms, a sort of social façade overlying their information behavior. They learn your name and your drink not so much because they are your friend, but because it makes their job more efficient. Baristas tend to keep a light-hearted banter in the foreground while they are making drinks and preparing product in the background. When this is accomplished with dexterity, the stress levels for all the workers are lessened, making it the goal each day and each shift.

It is important for baristas to know how to do their job correctly. However, in the big picture only a very few of the most ardent coffee consumers would argue that the results of a barista's job error is life-altering. This differs significantly from the outcomes that could result from errors a nurse might make on the job.

Similarities among the interviewees were partially attributed to the fact that all had at one time or another been imbued in Starbucks' company culture. Small-world theory supports this. So that, despite the differences in other companies' policies, the baristas would, across the board, have similar behaviors. We observed this during our field work at the three non-Starbucks coffee shops. The insiders' world is their business environment. Since all baristas share a common need with their homogenous social group, which are their coworkers, they tend to look for information within this specific social context. We believe there would be many similarities with any insider worker who interacts regularly with outsiders such as grocery store clerks, retail clerks, waiters, and waitresses.

Service workers are in a work environment a bit more simplistic than nurses or other professionals. However, they have information needs as well. Sometimes they need information immediately, and sometimes they just accumulate it slowly for future use. Service workers are interesting in that a huge percentage of their information behavior is social in nature. Those employed within service industries account for the largest working group in the U.S. and its members have too often been treated as simpletons. These people seek, find, and use information to make their jobs easier and more efficient, and also to provide better service to the rest of us. More research should be done on the information behaviors of the service industry both to help them realize their importance in the working world and to help them understand and improve the processes by which they seek, find, manage, use, and give information.

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Information Behavior of Baristas – Interview Questions

Barista name:

Name of coffee shop:

Warm-up Questions:

1. How long have you been working as a barista?
2. What do you do as a barista/ what are your duties?
3. How many coworkers do you work with at a time?
4. How were you trained for this job?
5. What have you had to learn since you were trained/educated (if at all) at work? Was it adequate?

Resources for Information:

6. What kinds of information needs do you have about your work?
 7. Where/ how can you get good (valuable) information from?
 8. How do you keep track of different sources of information? Do you?
- Optional: What kind of technologies do you use when you seek information?
What do you do when you're having trouble finding information?

Critical Event:

Think of situation that occurred within the past month where you needed to find out about something or learn something for your work. Does such an incident come clearly to mind? I'd like you to walk through this event by describing what happened step by step. Let's start by hearing what prompted the need. Can you tell me what was going on at that time?

Critical Event Probes:

9. Where did you get the information?
- Optional: Did you have to think about where to get it before you started to look?
10. Would you use this source again?
 11. Why would you use it again? What's the frequency?
 12. What else do you think might have helped?
- Optional: Did you seek this information openly or discreetly? Why?
13. Did anything stop you or hinder you from finding out the answer?
- Optional: Was there ever a time you avoided getting or receiving an answer?

Information Giving:

14. Describe an instance in which you gave information to somebody.
(If the person asked for the information...)
 - a) Was it the first time they came to you? (Do they ask often?)
 - b) Do you exchange information with this person regularly?
 - c) Is this person a peer, boss, subordinate or customer?

(If you gave information without being asked...)

- a) How do you discern they had a need? (Body language cues, etc.)
- b) Was the person a peer, boss, subordinate, or customer?

Wrap-up:

15. Is your job as a baristas a long-term career?
16. Is there anything else you want to talk about?

Optional questions (if there is time):

- What is the most common question you are asked by your co-worker? Boss?
- What is the dumbest thing you have been asked at work by customer, co-worker or boss?
- Why do you think it was dumb?
- What is the dumbest thing you've ever asked about work?
- What made you feel it was dumb to ask?
- What do you believe it cost you to ask that question?
- If you haven't asked it, why not?

Thanks for your time!

Information Behavior of Baristas – Observation

Date:

Time:

Location:

Length of observation:

Observers:

Observer Role: (unobtrusive or participant)

Number of participants/customers:

Number of staff/baristas:

Description of setting (physical locale, weather, how people arrive, furniture, lighting, etc)

Description of informational notices and any other information:

Description of participants (age, gender, dress, etc) (baristas especially, but customers as well):

Do participants know one another well?

How many people stay and how many leave immediately after being served? For those who stay, how long do they stay?

For each information sharing event:

Who was involved?

Who said what?

Who initiated the exchange?

How did people react to the exchange?

Did another information event occur as a result?

What types of emotions were attached to the exchange?