

Starbucks Turnaround Grinds to a Halt

**CUSTOMERS ENDURE GRANDE
LINES AND WAIT TIMES**
NOVEMBER 2025



**STRATEGIC
ORGANIZING
CENTER**

Starbucks Turnaround Grinds to a Halt

**CUSTOMERS ENDURE GRANDE LINES
AND WAIT TIMES, NOVEMBER 2025**

ABOUT THE STRATEGIC ORGANIZING CENTER

The Strategic Organizing Center (SOC) is a mission-focused center developing strategies and implementing tactics on transformational campaigns that confront corporate power. We partner with workers and our affiliates — the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Communication Workers of America (CWA), and the United Farmworkers of America (UFW) — who are united in building a strong, vibrant labor movement through organizing workers hungry for change. The SOC acts with workers and unions driving strategies and tactics that support many of the largest organizing initiatives being conducted in the United States today.

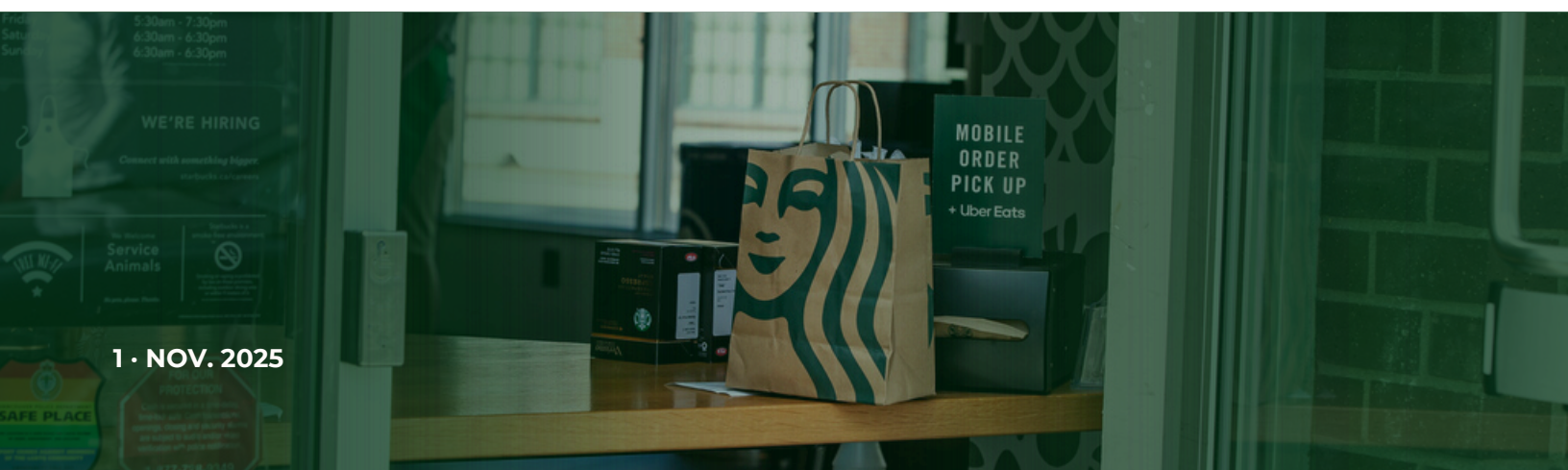
Learn more at thesoc.org

In September 2024, when Brian Niccol was tapped to lead Starbucks, becoming the fourth CEO in nearly as many years, the company was faltering.¹ In the previous year and a half, Starbucks had experienced slowing customer traffic, its stock had lost over 22% of its value and the company faced pressure from activist investors.² Dubbed a “turnaround expert,” Niccol was tasked with revamping Starbucks.³ As CEO, Niccol promised to deliver premium-priced, customizable drinks in a third-place coffeehouse with top-notch customer service, all at a fast-food pace.⁴

Niccol rolled out a number of corporate initiatives to transform Starbucks, including an updated mobile-ordering algorithm, changes to its staffing model, new mandates around baristas writing names and notes on cups, a new barista uniform policy, menu simplification, and restricting bathroom and water access to customers who make in-store purchases.⁵ Despite these initiatives, Starbucks continues to face serious performance problems. Starbucks shares have fallen over 17% in the last twelve months.⁶ US foot traffic continues to be down.⁷ And Starbucks has posted flat or declining US sales for seven consecutive quarters.⁸

In light of continuing Starbucks operational problems, this report highlights findings from an August 2025 survey of US Starbucks consumers conducted by Nielsen research, one of the country’s preeminent consumer polling firms. The survey focused on Starbucks customers’ in-store experiences and attitudes toward the coffee giant. It also assessed the impact of the recent corporate policy changes on the customer experience. In the survey, Starbucks customers reported that long lines and wait times not only persist but are resulting in fewer visits.

In addition, the report includes comparisons of the 2025 consumer survey results with those of a nearly identical survey of Starbucks consumers conducted by Nielsen 19 months ago, in January 2024. This comparison shows that despite the myriad corporate initiatives that have been implemented in the last year, the share of Starbucks consumers reporting that long lines and wait times have reduced their visits to Starbucks stores is largely unchanged, suggesting that the coffee giant’s initiatives have not moved the needle on rectifying the in-store pain points for Starbucks consumers.



METHODOLOGY

In August 2025, Nielsen conducted an online survey of Starbucks customers across the United States. The survey, which was conducted online from August 22nd to August 30th 2025, included 3,002 respondents from all fifty US states and Washington, DC. This survey followed a nearly identical survey of Starbucks customers conducted by Nielsen in January 2024. This prior survey, which was conducted online from January 12th to January 18th 2024, included 2,002 respondents, again, from all fifty US states and Washington, DC.

For this report, the survey respondents will be referred to as either 'Starbucks customers,' defined as respondents who indicated they had visited a Starbucks in the past 30 days⁹ or 'frequent Starbucks customers,' who are those who go to Starbucks once per week or multiple times per month.¹⁰

KEY FINDINGS

The 2025 survey conducted by Nielsen asked consumers about the issues they have experienced at Starbucks – issues such as wait times, product prices, restroom cleanliness – and how those issues impact the frequency of their visits to the coffee giant. High and increasing prices were the top issue for Starbucks consumers and also the top reason Starbucks customers have not returned to the company. That said, several in-store issues were also identified as significant pain points for customers, impacting how likely they are to visit Starbucks locations. Chief among these in-store complaints were long wait times in-store and long lines at the drive-thru. The results from the 2024 survey conducted by Nielsen were nearly identical. This report focuses on these in-store operational issues and analyzes their impact on the customer experience.

Long lines and wait times continue to plague the customer experience.

Since becoming Starbucks's CEO, Niccol has publicly promised customers that they will get "a brewed cup of coffee in less than 30 seconds," other in-store orders in under 4 minutes, and Mobile Order and Pay orders in 12 minutes.¹¹ In the Spring of 2025, Niccol indicated that the company was implementing policy changes intended to improve speed by improving its mobile ordering algorithm, simplifying the menu, and adjusting staffing via a new service model.¹² However, these changes do not seem to be having the desired effect.

In the August 2025 survey, Starbucks customers were asked whether they encountered various in-store issues at Starbucks stores; the identical question appeared in the January 2024 survey. Specifically, customers were asked if they experienced any of the following issues: long wait times in-store and long lines at the drive-thru, inconsistent hours of operation, drink theft, incorrect orders, the bathroom being unavailable or not clean, and pre-ordered drinks not being ready when the app indicates they are.

Table 1 shows the share of Starbucks customers who reported having encountered these issues at their Starbucks stores in the 2025 survey.

Table 1: Share of Starbucks Customers Indicating Encounters with In-Store Issues, August 2025 Survey of Starbucks Customers (n=1,055)		
In-Store Issue	Share of Customers (%)	n
Long wait times in-store and long lines at the drive-thru	33%	346
Starbucks doesn't have what I want in stock	18%	187
Incorrect orders	15%	161
Pre-ordered drinks are not ready when the app says they are	12%	129
The bathroom is unavailable or not clean	10%	110
Drink theft	9%	97
Inconsistent hours of operation	6%	62
Other	1%	12

In August 2025, a third (33%) of Starbucks customers reported experiencing long wait times in-store and long lines at the drive-thru. In fact, in August 2025, among those who had encountered issues at Starbucks, more than one in five (21%) Starbucks customers said long wait times were the biggest in-store issue at Starbucks.

Starbucks customers said wait times were the biggest in-store issue.



Further, despite introducing a suite of corporate changes at the store-level, the survey results demonstrate that consumer concerns around long wait times in August 2025 were little changed from January 2024.

In 2024, 36% of Starbucks customers reported experiencing long wait times in-store and long lines at the drive-thru. Also similar to the 2025 results, the 2024 Nielsen survey results also indicated long wait times were the biggest in-store issue at Starbucks.

Despite Starbucks top executives' highly-touted implementation of changes to in-store operations in the last year, 78% of Starbucks customers who reported encountering issues at Starbucks say that long wait times have remained the same or worsened since the spring of 2025.¹³ Moreover, 86% of *frequent* Starbucks customers who have reported encountering issues at Starbucks say that long wait times have remained the same or gotten worse since the spring of 2025.

More than 3 in 4 Starbucks customers who reported issues say that long wait times have remained the same or worsened since the spring of 2025.



Despite the company's implementation of a new mobile ordering algorithm, the results of the survey also suggest that delays customers encountered when ordering drinks in the Starbucks app have not improved over time. In August 2025, 82% of Starbucks customers who have encountered issues at Starbucks say that the frequency that drinks were not ready when the Starbucks app said they would be has gotten worse or remained the same since the spring of 2025. Importantly, a whopping 97% of *frequent* Starbucks customers who reported encountering issues at Starbucks said that the frequency that drinks were not ready when the app said they would be has gotten worse or remained the same since the spring of 2025.

Nearly all frequent Starbucks customers who reported encountering issues said the frequency that drinks were not ready when the app says they were has gotten worse or remained the same since the spring of 2025.



Long wait times result in fewer visits.

The Nielsen survey also included questions about how in-store issues affected the frequency with which Starbucks customers visited Starbucks stores. The findings suggest that long wait times result in fewer visits to the company's stores. In August 2025, 32% of Starbucks customers who had encountered issues at Starbucks reported going to Starbucks stores less often because of long wait times in-store and long lines at the drive-thru.¹⁴ Importantly, in August 2025, 42% of *frequent* Starbucks customers who had encountered issues at Starbucks are going to stores less often because of long wait times.

Nearly 1 in 3 customers who encountered issues reported going to Starbucks stores less often because of wait times and long lines.

The survey results suggest that the lines and long wait times at Starbucks are alienating customers, resulting in less frequent visits to the coffee giant. This is consistent with the company's reports of slowing customer traffic that has afflicted the company for years, including during Niccol's tenure.¹⁵ In Starbucks's full fiscal 2025 results released in October 2025, the company reported that "North America and U.S. comparable store sales declined 2%, driven by a 4% decline in comparable transactions."¹⁶ In September 2025, Starbucks announced it was closing over 500 North American stores and laying off thousands of baristas and corporate workers.¹⁷ Niccol said Starbucks was shuttering these stores because there was no path to financial performance in these locations.¹⁸ Placer.ai, a consumer analytics firm, reports that the closed urban locations never regained the foot traffic they had pre-pandemic.¹⁹ These results show that long wait times are likely contributing to slower traffic and underwhelming sales at the company.

Photo by Sergiy Galyonkin

Staffing is critical to solve operational issues that cause long wait times.

The Nielsen survey also included questions about the various actions the company could take to address consumer issues and how these actions would impact Starbucks consumers' likelihood of visiting the chain's stores. In August 2025, over half (54%) of Starbucks customers said they would be more likely to visit Starbucks if the company added staff to reduce wait times. In fact, this is the top in-store fix that customers indicated they would like to see in order to return to the company.

Over half of Starbucks customers said they would be more likely to visit stores if the company added staff to reduce wait times.



This call for increased staffing at Starbucks stores does not just come from customers. Starbucks baristas have been raising issues with understaffing for years, highlighting the impact of inadequate staffing on both the barista and customer experience. According to Starbucks employees, five years ago, the average Starbucks store had 24 employees. Today, despite repeated and persistent calls for more staffing to serve customers, the average store only has 18 employees – a 25% decrease in staff.²⁰

Further, in September 2025, Starbucks Workers United and the Strategic Organizing Center released a survey of Starbucks baristas and shift supervisors. That report found that a stunning 91% of Starbucks worker respondents indicated that they experienced understaffing at their store in the past three months.²¹ In addition, 88% of Starbucks worker respondents reported that understaffing at their stores had resulted in an unsustainable work pace and/or unsafe working conditions for baristas and other staff.²² Moreover, the results showed that baristas recognize that understaffing directly impacts the customer experience. More than nine in ten (93%) Starbucks worker respondents agreed that “in the past three months, my store has been understaffed, resulting in long wait times for customers in the store and/or drive-thru.”²³



Photo by LancerE

Even Starbucks store managers agree with customers and baristas that understaffing is a reality across the system and that it negatively impacts the customer experience. When *Fast Company* asked store managers at the “Starbucks Leadership Experience” one thing they needed from Niccol to improve stores, they said “More staff.”²⁴ When testing service and labor model changes at one of the busiest Starbucks locations in Chicago, District Manager Alisha Townsend reported to corporate that “extra staffing” was the key to bringing down wait times and providing the customer service the company desires.²⁵ And although Brian Niccol agrees that quicker service will bring customers back to Starbucks, his promise to “put in the additional one, two, three people” does not fully address the core need for more workers behind the counter to improve operations.²⁶

CONCLUSION

Overall, the Nielsen survey results suggest that long lines and wait times continue to frustrate customers and deter them from visiting Starbucks. These facts are turning people away from Starbucks, despite the barrage of policy changes implemented at the corporate level.

Although analysts and market watchers suggest that pricing and inflation are drivers of why customer traffic is down at Starbucks, many agree with this report’s finding that long wait times are also a key driver of the slowing customer traffic.²⁷ Deutsche Bank Research found in its August 2025 survey of Starbucks customers that 21% would be more “encouraged” to go to Starbucks if the company had “quicker service,”²⁸ an increase from just five months earlier when 18% reported the same sentiment.²⁹ *Tasting Table* reports that “after Niccol’s implementation of Smart Queue in July 2025,” customers have had to “wait as much as 30 uncaffeinated minutes” for their drink.³⁰ And Placer.ai, a premier location intelligence company that provides foot traffic data, has shown that “regular customers are coming less often than before Niccol took over.”³¹

In the past year, customers have been driven further away from Starbucks.³² The results of the 2025 survey suggest that the company’s turnaround plan has yet to make an impact on the most significant pain points at the store – long wait times and long lines at the drive-thru. And although many analysts have expressed patience with Niccol and his plan, as his one-year anniversary was marked in September 2025, even enthusiastic analysts are growing impatient, with writers at *24/7 Wall Street* even naming potential CEO replacements.³³ With their reported personal experiences characterized by long queues, slow service and an overwhelming pace of work, customers and baristas alike are getting impatient too.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.foxbusiness.com/business-leaders/history-starbucks-ceos>
- 2 <https://fortune.com/2024/08/13/starbucks-shares-jump-20-after-company-poaches-chipotle-ceo-brian-niccol-chipotle-falls-9/>; <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/starbucks-ceo-change-chipotle-1.7293038#:~:text=X-,Starbucks%2C%20struggling%20with%20weak%20demand%20and%20disgruntled%20investors%2C%20said%20Tuesday,serve%20as%20its%20interim%20CEO.>
- 3 <https://www.businessinsider.com/brian-niccols-career-taco-bell-chipotle-starbucks-ceo-2025-3>; <https://archive.is/bfotZ>
- 4 <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/starbucks/starbucks-lays-off-hundreds-of-washington-workers-after-store-closures/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/09/business/starbucks-turnaround-brian-niccol.html>; <https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/companies/starbucks-ceo-brian-niccol-explains-why-he-s-not-worried-about-a-cash-strapped-middle-class-hurting-sales/ar-AA1MJ3zO>; <https://archive.ph/OKNsL>
- 5 <https://fortune.com/2025/01/29/starbucks-new-ceo-reveals-plans-to-overhaul-strategy-slash-menu-items-and-double-stores-in-the-u-s/>; <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/06/15/starbucks-news-turnaround-plan-focuses-on-employees.html>; <https://www.reuters.com/business/starbucks-ceo-details-brand-reset-plan-turnaround-efforts-drive-sales-beat-2025-07-29/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/30/business/starbucks-customers-brian-niccol.html>; <https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/15/business/starbucks-dress-code-baristas>; <https://about.starbucks.com/stories/2025/updating-our-dress-code-for-a-more-consistent-coffeehouse-experience/>; <https://www.businessinsider.com/starbucks-workers-bathroom-water-policy-might-not-work-new-ceo-2025-1>
- 6 From October 31st 2024 to October 31st 2025
- 7 <https://d18rn0p25nwr6d.cloudfront.net/CIK-0000829224/b419c19a-61e6-4726-979b-c4e584cae4d2.pdf>
- 8 <https://d18rn0p25nwr6d.cloudfront.net/CIK-0000829224/b419c19a-61e6-4726-979b-c4e584cae4d2.pdf>; <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/09/09/starbucks-ceo-brian-niccol-starbucks-turnaround-plan-one-year.html>; <https://finance.yahoo.com/quote/SBUX/history/>; <https://www.reuters.com/business/starbucks-close-some-stores-part-restructuring-plan-2025-09-25/>; <https://www.wsj.com/business/hospitality/starbucks-roller-coaster-week-of-job-cuts-and-store-closures-ebdf5d8e>; <https://www.restaurantdive.com/news/starbucks-ceo-brian-niccol-by-the-numbers-anniversary/759515/>; <https://www.placer.ai/free-tools/chains/starbucks>; <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/starbucks-sbux-reports-q3-revenue-172314770.html>
- 9 2025: 1,055 respondents; 2024: 978 respondents
- 10 2025: 656 respondents
- 11 <https://www.fastcompany.com/91396661/inside-brian-niccols-bold-starbucks-redesign>; <https://fortune.com/2024/12/06/starbucks-ceo-brian-niccol-coffee-wait-time-30-seconds/>; <https://archive.is/0tpyd#selection-887.1-887.73>
- 12 <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/09/business/starbucks-turnaround-brian-niccol.html>
- 13 <https://fortune.com/2025/01/29/starbucks-new-ceo-reveals-plans-to-overhaul-strategy-slash-menu-items-and-double-stores-in-the-u-s/>; <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/06/15/starbucks-news-turnaround-plan-focuses-on-employees.html>; <https://www.reuters.com/business/starbucks-ceo-details-brand-reset-plan-turnaround-efforts-drive-sales-beat-2025-07-29/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/30/business/starbucks-customers-brian-niccol.html>; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/sep/07/starbucks-brian-niccol-union>; <https://www.restaurantdive.com/news/starbucks-ceo-brian-niccol-by-the-numbers-anniversary/759515/>; <https://www.wsj.com/business/hospitality/starbucks-barista-training-sales-b1f11395>; <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/baristas-should-sound-like-humans-not-bots-script-e33e4c8f>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/09/business/starbucks-turnaround-brian-niccol.html>
- 14 73% of Starbucks customers encountered **any** issues at Starbucks.

ENDNOTES

- 15 <https://www.reuters.com/business/starbucks-close-some-stores-part-restructuring-plan-2025-09-25/>;
<https://www.wsj.com/business/hospitality/starbucks-roller-coaster-week-of-job-cuts-and-store-closures-ebdf5d8e>;
<https://www.restaurantdive.com/news/starbucks-ceo-brian-niccol-by-the-numbers-anniversary/759515/>;
<https://finance.yahoo.com/news/starbucks-sbux-reports-q3-revenue-172314770.html>;
<https://finance.yahoo.com/quote/SBUX/history/>
- 16 <https://d18rn0p25nwr6d.cloudfront.net/CIK-0000829224/b419c19a-61e6-4726-979b-c4e584cae4d2.pdf>;
<https://www.reuters.com/business/starbucks-close-some-stores-part-restructuring-plan-2025-09-25/>;
<https://www.wsj.com/business/hospitality/starbucks-roller-coaster-week-of-job-cuts-and-store-closures-ebdf5d8e>;
<https://www.restaurantdive.com/news/starbucks-ceo-brian-niccol-by-the-numbers-anniversary/759515/>;
<https://finance.yahoo.com/news/starbucks-sbux-reports-q3-revenue-172314770.html>;
<https://finance.yahoo.com/quote/SBUX/history/>
- 17 <https://www.fastcompany.com/91432205/starbucks-store-closures-update-us-locations-list-bigger-estimates>;
<https://www.reuters.com/business/starbucks-close-some-stores-part-restructuring-plan-2025-09-25/>;
<https://www.wsj.com/business/hospitality/starbucks-layoffs-corporate-restructure-b9dee2d3>;
<https://www.wsj.com/business/hospitality/starbucks-roller-coaster-week-of-job-cuts-and-store-closures-ebdf5d8e>
- 18 <https://about.starbucks.com/press/2025/message-from-brian-an-important-update/#:~:text=What's%20next,chairman%20and%20chief%20executive%20officer>
- 19 <https://www.reuters.com/business/starbucks-close-some-stores-part-restructuring-plan-2025-09-25/>;
<https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/26/business/starbucks-stores-closing-brian-niccol>
- 20 <https://www.fastcompany.com/91396661/inside-brian-niccols-bold-starbucks-redesign>
- 21 <https://thesoc.org/resources/staffing-trouble-brews-at-starbucks/>
- 22 <https://thesoc.org/resources/staffing-trouble-brews-at-starbucks/>
- 23 <https://thesoc.org/resources/staffing-trouble-brews-at-starbucks/>
- 24 <https://www.fastcompany.com/91396661/inside-brian-niccols-bold-starbucks-redesign>
- 25 <https://www.wsj.com/business/hospitality/starbucks-barista-training-sales-b1f11395>
- 26 <https://www.fastcompany.com/91396661/inside-brian-niccols-bold-starbucks-redesign>
- 27 18 September 2025 Deutsche Bank Research Brew Tracker: August 2025
- 28 18 September 2025 Deutsche Bank Research Brew Tracker: August 2025
- 29 23 April 2025 Deutsche Bank Research Brew Tracker: March 2025
- 30 <https://www.tastingtable.com/1972021/starbucks-changes-customers-baristas-unhappy/>
- 31 <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/sustainable-finance-reporting/nine-months-starbucks-ceo-faces-tall-order-turnaround-2025-07-09/>
- 32 <https://archive.is/za60f#selection-775.18-775.20>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/09/business/starbucks-turnaround-brian-niccol.html>
- 33 <https://archive.is/za60f#selection-851.0-858.0>; <https://247wallst.com/investing/2025/10/07/these-executives-could-replace-starbucks-ceo-niccol/>; <https://archive.ph/SC1nM>