

# INTRODUCTION

I always thought the idea of reaching ‘a certain age’ was that we would be able to lean back in our reclining chairs and bask in the wisdom and knowledge accrued over the years, occasionally imparting the odd nugget to a grateful younger generation. So much for theory, because instead of us teaching them, it’s them teaching us! Watch any eight-year-old sending a text message and he or she can do it in less than a minute. Ask a mature person to send the same text message and it takes us the entire *EastEnders* omnibus, and occasionally runs over into *Songs of Praise*.

Modern technology can be so bewildering. For a start, there’s so much of it – LCD, LED, PDA, DAB, DVD... FFS! In our day, advanced technology began and ended with whether or not we could get a signal from Radio Luxembourg. Now no sooner have we mastered one skill than that’s out of date and there’s something new to get our heads around. It’s little wonder we look old. Digital this, digital that, PINs and pods, electronic timers that you have to keep programming, SatNav, mobile phones, not to mention anything to do with the ruddy

Internet. And why do banks, airlines, utility companies and so on automatically assume that everybody has Internet connection? Did I miss the day it was being given out free?

The major reason why modern technology is so baffling to us is not that it is necessarily complicated in itself, but because it is wrapped in such incomprehensible jargon. The Da Vinci Code is easier to unravel than most instruction manuals. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a recent survey among adults revealed that one in five gadgets remains unopened in the box. At least there it can’t hurt us.

But it’s not only gadgets that make life today so frustrating. Try finding a bank with real people in it, a company that doesn’t have one of those wretched call centres on the sub-continent, or understanding a single word that a teenager says after you have politely asked him not to stand on the bonnet of your car. Youngsters have a language all of their own, a trait they unfortunately share with most people in middle management who talk about singing from the same hymn sheet, pushing the envelope, touching base, and running it up the flagpole. Then there’s political correctness, which basically prevents us from saying anything that hasn’t been passed by the thought police. When Louis Armstrong sang ‘What a Wonderful World’, he had reckoned without political correctness.

There are so many things to remember these days – weighing letters before you post them, security codes, passwords, which utility or phone company you’re with, and so on. It’s not helped by the fact that none of these companies seems to have a sensible name – npower, T-Mobile, onetel, E.ON, EDF, O2.

Oh, for the days when firms had proper names like Brown & Polson, Crosse & Blackwell or Mr Whippy.

There are two ways of dealing with modern life. Either you can try to ignore it and hope that it will go away – rather like some people did when Stephenson unveiled his *Rocket* and when decimalization was introduced – or you can try and pick up the odd skill without showing yourself up in front of the younger generation. You don't have to embrace new technology as such; a peck on the cheek will suffice.

To this end, you may find the occasional piece of useful advice in this book – although if you do, it will be more by luck than design. For if you don't know your WiFi from your HiFi, your BlackBerry from your Burberry, Bluetooth from *Blue Peter*, or a JPEG from a clothes peg... join the club.

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## HOW TO ORDER AN ORDINARY COFFEE IN STARBUCKS

**W**hen you walk into a fast food restaurant chain and ask for a simple plain burger by itself, it's as if you had asked for a return ticket to Jupiter. The staff seem incapable of getting their heads around such a straightforward request and immediately assault you with a list of options to make your meal more complicated. 'Do you want a double, a triple, a quarter-pounder, a double quarter-pounder, a cheeseburger, cheeseburger with bacon, double cheeseburger, double cheeseburger with bacon, triple cheeseburger, double quarter-pounder with cheese, happy meal, unhappy meal, slightly irked meal, Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, Fanta Orange, Fanta Lemon, small, medium, large...?' And when you assure them that, no, all you want is a simple, plain burger by itself, they ask, 'Do you want fries with that?'

Sadly this malaise has now spread to the world of beverages, due to the global expansion of Starbucks, which currently boasts over 13,000 stores in forty countries. Soon there will

even be a hundred and fifty branches in Romania. There is no escape.

Starbucks has developed a language of its own – like Greek but marginally less penetrable. To speed communication between employees, the customer's choice is announced in a strict order. First, whether or not the drink is iced, then whether it is decaffeinated, the number of shots of espresso (if it differs from the standard recipe for that drink), the size of the cup, any added flavourings, the type of milk requested, any additional customizations, and finally the name of the beverage. When you hear the waiter rattle it off, your first thought is, 'Did I really order that?'

The menu at Starbucks is not just comprehensive, it's positively intimidating. Who would think there could be so many variations on a cup of coffee? Latte, Toffee Nut Latte, Americano, Mocha, White Chocolate Mocha, Mocha Valencia (with orange syrup), Cinnamon Spice Mocha, Cappuccino, Caramel Macchiato, iced versions of all the above, Espresso, Espresso Macchiato, Espresso Con Panna (whipped cream), Frappuccino, Mocha Frappuccino, White Mocha Frappuccino, Caramel Frappuccino, Java Chip Frappuccino, Espresso Frappuccino, Decaf, Half-Caf, non-fat milk, low-fat milk, soy milk, organic milk, breve, dry (more foam), wet (less foam), extra hot, extra espresso shots, extra caramel shots, extra flavour shots. You can even have your Caramel Macchiato served upside down, which sounds uncomfortable for the waiter but actually means the drink is inverted within the container so that the caramel mixes more thoroughly. And

when you have finally decided what you want in your cup, you have to choose one of four sizes – short (236ml), tall (354ml), grande (473ml) and venti (591ml). To confuse matters further, in Canada the short is called a piccolo and the tall is known as a mezzo, and you can't get a venti in China. Aaaaaaaaaaargh!

Oh, for a simple cup of coffee – not something that gurgles away in a manner suggesting that a swamp monster is about to emerge from the cup; not something with so many calories that you dare not eat for another week; and not something that leaves you with so much foam around your mouth that you look like a rabid dog. The key word to getting an ordinary cup of coffee is 'regular'. To most of us, 'regular' describes someone with enviable bowel movements, but in corporate catering speak it means plain. So if you just ask for a regular coffee – black or white – you should survive the Starbucks experience without the embarrassment of hearing your waiter yell, 'one Iced Decaf Triple Grande Vanilla Non-fat with whip Latte.'