

Customers designing products is hot trend

Web sites let people submit ideas, which are voted on by other online visitors.

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Consumer-designed products are a growing trend. Here's what's already here: T-shirts that say what you want them to say, shoes that you design yourself and soft drink bottles with your photos on them.

According to people who study trends, globalization and the growth of the Internet have made the world's 6 billion consumers more aware of choices across the planet. They are demanding to put their stamp on what they use and wear.

Part of this shift toward individualization is a reaction to the success of global brands such as Starbucks and Gap, said Barbara Coulon, vice president of trends at The Intelligence Group, a marketing and trend forecasting company in New York.

"There's been a rise of the creative class, and creative pursuits have become more important," said Coulon. Producers are therefore seeking greater customer input.

People also want more control over products they buy, said Kirk Olson, a senior consumer analyst at trend research firm Iconoculture, which calls this trend "fingerprinting."

Take, for instance, T-shirt company Threadless.com in Chicago. Visitors to the Web site are urged to submit artwork, which is then rated by other customers. After a week, the highest-scoring patterns are printed on T-shirts and sold.

Then there's shoe designer John Fluevog (fluevog.com), based in Vancouver, British Columbia, whose company encourages customers to submit shoe designs for others to vote on, so that he can design the models people want.

Meanwhile, the Jones Soda Co. in Seattle lets visitors to its Web site (jonessoda.com) submit photographs they've taken and vote on photos they like. Pictures with the most votes appear on bottle labels. People also can mail photos to the company.

Perhaps the best known example of this trend is the iPod. Not only can people inscribe their own messages on the devices, but on the Web site iPodlounge.com, users discuss what they would like the next model to do and look like.

These four developments are examples of "customer-made," a trend identified by Trendwatching.com, one of a number of agencies that analyze consumer developments that create a buzz.

This concept is different from customization, said Kathy Baylor, a New York "spotter" who identifies trends for the company.

In customization, Baylor explained, a client gets an off-the-shelf product adjusted to meet a particular specification, like an inscription. With customer-made, the customer participates in the design process, often before the product goes on sale.

"Consumers have a right to say what they want," Baylor said. "If it doesn't exist, then make it, because we want it."

Experts say this desire to differentiate oneself, while growing, is not new. What's different in recent years is an explosion of choice, said Suresh Ramanathan, an assistant professor of marketing at the Chicago Graduate School of Business.

Over the past decade, said Ramanathan, who researches consumer behavior, companies began realizing that they couldn't just add new features to existing products. Instead, they had to give the customer something special.

"Customers are going to create value with producers in co-designing something, co-creating," said Ramanathan. "It's going to happen increasingly; it's moving from a one-way relationship to a two-way relationship."

People also are moving away from simply giving feedback. Trendwatching.com noted that marketing has become a conversation, not between a specific corporation and its customers, but among millions of consumers worldwide about manufacturers themselves. Sites like epinions.com or the comments section of Amazon.com are customer-created initiatives.

"Technology is making this degree of customer control possible," said Iconoculture's Olson. "As it's made possible, it becomes an expectation."

Trend watchers interpret what goes on in society so that companies can better market their products.

Agencies like Trendwatching.com and The Intelligence Group rely on a network of spotters around the country and worldwide. The Intelligence Group has 5,000 Americans giving feedback on what's new, and spotters in 20 international cities.

Trendwatching.com claims more than 4,000 spotters -- about 1,500 of them in the United States and the rest in more than 70 other countries. These people e-mail company headquarters about new business ideas, consumption patterns and advertising campaigns they notice.

"Call it the democratization of trend watching as an industry: nonstop, cutting edge, fully global, accessible to large and small companies, and thriving on citizen-spotters," said Reinier Evers, who founded Amsterdam-based Trendwatching.com in 2002.

His latest newsletter reported "customer-made" items from around the world. In Brazil, Kaiser Beer asked its customers to submit their taste preferences to create a new premium brand. In Sweden, furniture design chain IKEA held a contest in which customers submitted designs for home media furniture.

So what's next? Evers' team has noticed that people increasingly want to leave their mark in public. At the Tate Britain Museum in London, for instance, visitors are asked to write captions for works of art. Selected contributions are then displayed next to these paintings.

Evers has coined a name for this: "gravanity," or the merger of graffiti and vanity.

"Hundreds of millions of individuals are craving immortality, or at least some public attention," he said.