

Have it your way in more than just burgers

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The latest trend involves consumers designing their own products. As the demand for individualization increases, a number of companies are letting clients have a greater say in what they want made and how. Here's what's already here: T-shirts that say what you want them to say, shoes that you design yourself and soda bottles with your photos on them.

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, the 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," she said.

People also want more control over what they use and wear, said Kirk Olson, a senior consumer analyst at Iconoculture, a trend research firm that calls this trend "fingerprinting."

For example, the T-shirt company Threadless.com runs a T-shirt design contest where visitors to the Web site are urged to submit artwork, which is then rated by other customers. After a week, the highest-scoring designs are printed on T-shirts and sold.

Shoe designer John Fluevog's company encourages customers to submit shoe designs for others to vote on, so that he can design the models people want.

The Jones Soda Co. lets visitors to its Web site submit photographs they've taken and vote on photos they like. Pictures with the most votes appear on bottle labels.

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 several agencies worldwide that analyze the latest consumer developments that create a buzz.



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This concept is different from customization, said Kathy Baylor, a New York "spotter" who identifies trends for the company. Customization, Baylor explained, is when a client adjusts an off-the-shelf product 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 that 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 10 years, Ramanathan said, 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," Ramanathan said. "It's going to happen increasingly. It's moving from a one-way relationship to a two-way relationship."

People are also 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. Such sites as epinions.com or the comments section of Amazon.com are customer-created initiatives.

Trend watchers interpret what goes on in society so that companies can better market their products. Agencies such as Trendwatching.com and The Intelligence Group rely on a network of spotters worldwide. The Intelligence Group has 5,000 spotters in America, as well as spotters in 20 international cities. Trendwatching.com claims more than 4,000 spotters in more than 70 countries, about 1,500 of whom are in the United States. Spotters give feedback on 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 Trendwatching.com in 2002. His latest newsletter spotted 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, Ikea, a furniture design chain, held a contest in which customers submitted designs for home media furniture.

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

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