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### Customization

The artist steps away slowly from his canvas. The work seems to illuminate his squinting, analytical eyes, which focus in on the piece so intently one would think he was using his very mind to make changes to his masterwork. Slowly, a smile creeps over his face, a smile of sweet satisfaction. It is finally finished. This is his ultimate creation, an expression of himself so complete and pure that his image is nearly reflected back at him. The master and the work are one, inseparable in quality and character. But before he throws up his hands in triumph and announces his brilliance to the world, he clicks the "Buy" button and enters his 16-digit Visa number. His customized Dell Dimension XPS Gen 4 PC will arrive in 6 - 10 business days.

Twenty-inch high chrome rims with spinners and faux-neon lighting. Light up cell phone covers that are practically a laser show in one's hands and snap on with no more trouble than the user has dialing. Plexiglas window kits to let enterprising enthusiasts see the inside of their personal computer. One would think we were all novice artists with the amount of equipment, accessories, options, and choices available to the casual buyer. All in the name of that magic development of modern consumerism, mass customization. All that needs to be done to get a product as individual as the person who buys it is to visit the Internet, wave the mouse, provide a billable name and number, and it appears at

one's doorstep. The product seems as flawless and fluid as if the manufacturer had made all their products to your exact specifications.

As with most modern conveniences, it was not always this way. I remember my aunt calling in monogrammed T-shirts and named coffee mugs from catalog companies, risking baffling and embarrassing misspellings through fuzzy, 800 number calls. But a customization was not its own market, but rather the market itself.

Take shoes for example. In the 1830's one could buy a pair of standard shoes, but if one wanted a pair that actually fit, they would visit a cobbler. Jack Larkin, resident expert at historic Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, explains: "You might have your shoes made for you by a "custom" shoemaker, who would measure your feet and shape your shoes and boots to fit.... You might also be able to choose the special piece of leather the shoemaker would use." To obtain a manufactured good in this early era, one would attend a master craftsman to create it, or ask them to make minor changes to a product already created to match their exact specifications. If you could not afford such work, then you bought something plain and either did with what you had or changed it with your bare hands. Customization was not a market; it was just a part of the hand making of every product you bought.

This changed with the times and the technology. Though the ideas go as far back as the shipyards of Venice hundreds of years prior ("Encyclopedia: Assembly Line"), Eli Whitney is attributed with, among other things, the creation of systems of interchangeable parts, the assembly line, and the general American mass production system of manufacture (Wilson). This changed everything. Suddenly products no longer needed to be made to order, they could be built en masse. Not only that, but this method

of standardization of products became profitable for manufacturers. Henry Ford made a point of proving this with his introduction of the Model T, which could be competitively priced because of the manufacturing techniques Ford used ("The Life of Henry Ford"). Production of goods became booming business because manufacturers could rely on a few simple templates, some cheap and unskilled labor, and eventually an automated assembly line to churn out identical, easily replaceable products to consumers who did not care that their several hundred-dollar buggy was identical to the neighbors'. Or they didn't for awhile anyways.

When a market is flooded with the same thing repeatedly, it creates a problem. This easily manufacturable, low-quality, grey plastic and stainless steel flood of production sameness builds in a consumer's mind, eventually sparking a backlash. This newfound wave of customization could be dismissed as just a response to seeing the same thing over and over. It is important, however, to look at mass production's main pro and con to see a much closer relation to customization: sure, the products people wanted are now cheaper and easier to obtain than ever. But they are all just like each other. People don't want identical items to their neighbors, they want something that is distinctly their own. They want to be able to tell it apart from other products.

This is the root concept of customization. People do not want their things to be confused with someone else's; after all, they worked hard for the money to buy this stuff. Customization acts as a sort of defense mechanism against thieves. No one would be dumb enough to steal a custom hot rod and drive it around. Anyone that saw it might be able to say "Hey, there's Steve's car. I wonder why he isn't driving it?"

Most American schoolchildren, at least of my generation, also have the concept drilled into them by elementary counselors and teachers that they are a unique and special snowflake with individual needs and important desires. On a base level this is true, and it is another reason customization is useful; it caters to special needs and allows the addition of extra features to a standard product.

Modern customization, however, has started to become less about personalization and more about being better than the last serial number to roll off the line. Customization has become a competition sponsored and publicized by the largest of corporations. It is all over TV. Look for the shows about Biker Build Offs, Hot Rod Build Offs, or Trading Spaces. Then there are shows like Pimp My Ride, Overhaulin', Town Haul, Extreme Makeover Home Edition, and even Queer Eye for the Straight Guy which are all, arguably, about creating the best customization possible in the least amount of time. The Discovery Channel's most popular shows are American Hot Rod and American Chopper, the latter of which pulls in about 2.2 million viewers on average (Frey) and both of which are documentaries about custom builders.

With this sort of stuff on TV, one had better believe that American consumers are opening their wallet to get a piece of it. Keith Naughton, Detroit consultant for Newsweek magazine, cites that "American drivers spent a record \$29 billion in 2003 accessorizing their cars with big rims, mesh grilles, neon cupholders - you name it. That's twice what we spent upgrading our wheels a decade ago." And this sort of thing is hardly limited to cars or anything else on TV for that matter.

In the past decade, the Internet has become a tool for the consumer. Not only can one research and find the product or style most desired, more often than not it seems one

can just outright build exactly what they want. Amey Stone, a writer for Business Week Online, explains that "What's changed is that, thanks to the Web, a broader variety of custom products have become more accessible and affordable. For many goods, the extra fee is only \$10 to \$20, and delivery time is usually up to four weeks. In the past, customization was necessarily a high-end item. No anymore." Customized goods have become just as easy and available as those that are mass-produced.

On the business end, this is something new. Some companies still charge a premium for a custom product, like software companies for example. Companies with lines of mass production, however, have been able to modify their methods of assembly to change a certain product at a certain point for a certain buyer. David Rowan, writer for The Times of the United Kingdom, gives insight to the business standpoint of this new trend: "Mass Customization[.] It's the retail buzzword that we kept hearing. To keep your customers loyal, treat them as individuals, even if you are a multinational brand. That means finding ways to let them customize your products at not much more than the standard price." Minor changes to production mean bigger profits from an expanded market where people get exactly what they want. It is a winning situation on all sides.

Not entirely. With customization becoming more and more popular, things are starting to get a little hazy as to why we customize and to what ends. Doubtless, customization has become much more superficial. On the MTV show Pimp My Ride for example, I have personally seen only one time that the motor was even looked at, let alone changed, modified, or upgraded. Only the car's external appearance was important. My father loved the show until he watched an entire episode. "They didn't do anything to the car." He claimed in a mildly annoyed tone. "They didn't even bother with the

engine." I often wonder how long a car battery would last with four TVs and fifteen subwoofers running off it, but it is a matter never addressed. This sort of superficial modification can hinder or even destroy the product's functionality, making it useless beyond being eye candy.

There is another, growing problem with modern customization closely related to the last, the pompous, individualist attitude associated with it. Gary Barnett, a director of research for Ovum, delivers a beautiful analogy on the idea relating to his field of information technology (IT), but just as easily applied to the world of customization.

In the world of NASCAR, it's assumed that it'll take a pit crew of experts to keep a NASCAR racer going, and NASCAR teams expect to replace gearboxes and rebuild engines on a regular basis. But NASCAR is the exception. Very few regular folk would relish the thought of rebuilding the gearbox and resetting the suspension after every trip to the Stop & Shop. In the world of IT, it is almost impossible to find a standard, uncustomized and untinkered-with business application, in part because we've all convinced ourselves that our need is unique - that we're NASCAR - when in truth most of the things we do with technology are closer to Stop & Shop than they are Daytona. (qtd. in Dickerson)

As much as people like to think their needs are completely different from those of others around them, more often than not they aren't. No one needs this sort of advanced uniqueness, even if it is almost commercially available. Barnett continues with perhaps the ultimate truth on social and personal limits to customization: "One of the hardest but most important things that we all need to learn is when we want some thing plain, reliable, and cheap and when it makes sense for us to pimp things up."

These days, one is able to customize their things in nearly any way they want with a little money. You want a different picture to show up when a different person calls on your cell phone? Done. You want just one or two movie channels on your cable service instead of the entire package? Sure. You want televisions in your car? Headrest or center console? Hold the pickle, hold the lettuce; special orders don't upset us? Of course. Mass customization is quickly becoming the whole of modern retail. And as consumers pick up on it, they bring with them the old ideas of the expense and grandeur of what customization used to be. Eventually, this will let anyone become their own Michelangelo, creating a "David" in a brand new Cadillac they built online or a pair of shoes with their name on them. All it takes is a little extra time and the will to do it.

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