

## Is Customisation Compatible with Fashion?

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Traditionally, mass marketing and industry find a point in common in their shared finality of the standardisation of products and services aimed at the largest number of people possible. In reality, what they are aiming for is a cut in costs through the growth in the volume of products and controlling fixed costs linked to product development. But in the end, what is the real motive behind this ideology that has dominated the world of consumption since the industrial revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Is the sole search for the “variety of product/low cost” compromise supposed to constitute such a competitive advantage in that it excludes all others *de facto*, or, is it an incapacity to understand the individual urges behind the demand and to produce them at an acceptable cost that has brought us to an economic logic dictated by the “lowest common denominator”? Mass customisation claims to break the locks on mass marketing that, we are told, limits the level of satisfaction of the silent expectations of the consumer. The emergence of personal expression through tools from the Internet –blogs, special interest sites, web 2.0 sites– now constitute the fertile base for customisation, but will the fashion economy be able to find adequate answers to this new challenge while preserving its creative and differential foundations and, without losing its soul? The changes in consumer habits have already largely called into question the basics of mass-market marketing. The markets are saturated with product, consumers now possess in-depth knowledge of products and markets, globalisation has given rise to buying behaviour and motivations that are exceptionally

varied due, notably, to the appearance of new countries in the consumption concert. There is a high level of tension among individuals between their behaviour as citizens and as consumers, the personal aspirations of individuals are climbing Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in industrialised countries<sup>1</sup>. The ambiguity of this issue is that, for all that, it is impossible to pretend that fashion culture, aspiring to beauty and innovation carried by these individuals would be more developed, but it is certain that these same individuals possess more markers to find an answer in line with their expectations, whatever it might be, vulgar or subtle, innocent or expert.

Paradoxically, far from calling into question the laws and practices of the mass-market, these changes have, in fact, pushed the players in the economy to perfect their mode of functioning in order to always better target the needs of their consumer niches without compromising the aggressiveness of their pricing. Taking into account consumer behaviour in the construction of the product range is heavily backed up with consumer testing, behavioural studies, and follow-up of “after-sales” services. So all is well?

Is the “product offer system” capable of adapting naturally to any structural evolution in buying behaviour, even the most complex? Is there a rupture between, what we could term, the “traditional” manner of positioning a product and supply chain, and the way in which a company working in customisation would do so? I have no intention here of coming to a conclusion, I would just like to outline the basic question: on the principle that in the traditional economy, the offer of products and services is the authentic work of a finite group of individuals that are supposed to propose a suitable answer to the silent, or not so silent aspirations of the population, in an expert manner, is it therefore really possible for big companies to satisfy the myriad of individual demands? And as these demands change rapidly, to follow their detours, contradictions and

chaotic rhythms? As, the actual number of individuals that construct the world fashion product range (stylists, product managers, marketing people) is quite limited; this phenomenon is reinforced by the growing domination of world-wide brands that dress a bigger and bigger population with a range that is, in the end, more restricted.

From a different angle, what are the levers that will make it possible in the future to comprehend consumers individually and thus construct a range that is adapted and competitive compared to others?

### **Individualisation/Standardisation**

The “individualisation/massification” tension of the range is the key to this issue. There is a permanent arbitrage between the necessity to propose an offer that is competitive in terms of price and one that differentiates itself enough so as its sale is not merely reduced to price reasons. This rule will remain in play most probably for a long time to come regardless of the changes in demand. At one extreme, the most personalised response to individual demand is that of a craftsman satisfying unitarily the needs of one person in their presence. The image of the tailor is, of course, the one that springs to mind immediately to illustrate this case, but more generally, we should remember that in Asian culture, buying a man’s suit is traditionally done in this manner alone. At the other end of scale to the craftsman working in made-to-measure, is the paradoxically quite close luxury industry and mass market, both of which, but obviously for different reasons, propose a range that is non-negotiable, to be taken as it is. But this vision of perfection takes us away from the real issues facing companies interested in customisation and their range: operating on a significant economic scale and finding a convincing balance between a form of made-to-measure and a mass-produced product. In another form, the idea is to give the perception of the widest variety possible to consumers while, at the same time, managing to standardise or rationalise the

working methods. An article from the *Harvard Business Review*<sup>2</sup> proposed a educated segmentation of this type of gradient that constitutes the relationship between individualisation and the standardisation of the offer. The reasoning of the authors involved segmenting the possible approaches to the customisation market by observing the level of adaptation of a product and its presentation (brand, packaging) so as to create four main domains of activity. The idea being that a company that wishes to take on “mass customisation” must position the offer on one of these four quadrants and this positioning must product an acceptable “consumer sacrifice gap” (the gap between the desire for customisation and the actual product). In this representation, the zenith in terms of customisation is the collaborative product that involves the consumer in the design process, that can itself be sub-segmented according to the level of participation afforded to the consumer in the detailed definition of the product, going from the minimum level of ticking off choices proposed in a list, to the maximum level of being given “carte blanche”. This analysis, that is similar to basic marketing techniques, proposes to manage the level of acceptable frustration by giving the company the possibility to propose a product that is seen as being customised at an acceptable retail price. Taken even further, the marketing of customisation is an adapted form of the value analysis theories currently used aimed at finding a compromise between expectations, functionality and cost, but now re-situating the consumer within the construction and arbitration process of the “acceptable offer”. It is, in a way, four-handed marketing. From this angle, the article introduces also the interesting notion of “common uniqueness” that means the capacity of individuals to be aware of their own uniqueness while reproducing typical behavioural patterns. This is not a million miles away from niche analysis that mass marketing has been using for a long time, but it uses this concept by proposing to let the user himself or herself

create the signs of belonging and differentiation with regard to their community. The whole question is an affair of perception and the free will of individuals faced with propositions. One of the basic premises that underlies customisation –a premise that is difficult to show without an in-depth analysis– is that the possibility given to the user to add their personal touch reinforces his or her perception of variety and consequent level of interest.

### **Rationalising the product range**

The idea of building a “rationalised” product range is certainly seen as offensive by the players in the fashion industry, and to a lesser extent by those in the design world, but it is indeed a major issue of durability for the economic actors of customisation. The case of Swatch in the watch world foreshadowed this principle. To propose a renewable variety at a low cost was a risk to take at the time, and the current positioning of the brand proves not only the solidity of its founding principles, but above all, its capacity to put them into action in a sector that is definitely industrial and complex. Today, there is probably room for a really customisable range from Swatch based on the brand’s capacities for rationalisation and marketing acquired in their niche over 20 years. As for the fashion and textile sectors, mass customisation has often been restricted to the engineers, production managers and IT simulation techies. The offer has often been oriented to “made-to-measure” products with high levels of customisation that have hindered the development of this type of market and compromised the financial viability of the initiatives. In addition, the fact that the customisation debate is centred on the morphological adaptation of the product de facto renders it imperative that the manufacturing takes place nearby. While this constraint was seen as a healthy opportunity to put the brakes on relocations abroad, the other consequence was a hike in cost added to the other costly effects that are part of

customisation –the short series or one-off effect in particular. In addition, by positioning itself as such, the fashion product has always been oriented towards products that are classic, stable, “without risk”, which of course meant they did not match up to consumer expectations in terms of newness, and generated an image gap in a sector that should be giving its clients a dynamic image. The real issue at stake is probably now to define a customised product range that, as with Swatch, proposed an adequate range of standard components, that mix with more complex manufacturing operations in a style offer that is coherent with fashion and the expectations of the “common uniqueness” niches. Probably the most emblematic case among the new approach is currently that of the site [lafraise.com](http://lafraise.com) that, without being a customisation site *per se*, has created an interesting three-handed relationship in which designers suggest proposals for t-shirts that are then voted on for free by the web-users. Once a tee-shirt gets over 500 votes, the site prints the tee-shirt, pays the artist 1 000 € and sells the shirt on their site in a limited edition until stocks last. So this is a “six-handed” design in which the site only really supplies the carcasses, the ecru t-shirts, and animates the community of individuals that decide spontaneously what can be defined as a large enough niche to justify going into production. This is typical of the Web 2.0 spirit that is currently very popular, but done in a unique manner for the production of merchandise –what is quite unusual in Web 2.0 communities that are naturally suspicious of anything commercial. The German site [spreadshirt.com](http://spreadshirt.com) was quick to identify the originality of the concept going as far as to buy the concept for an undisclosed sum, taking into account that the site’s founder, as the only employee, had a monthly turnover of up to 200 000 €, proving the incredible lever effect of a “standardised” activity the produces a level of variety to satisfy the site’s users. Without a doubt, [lafraise.com](http://lafraise.com) is, in itself, a contemporary replica of the sample consumer groups used by large-scale marketing to validate

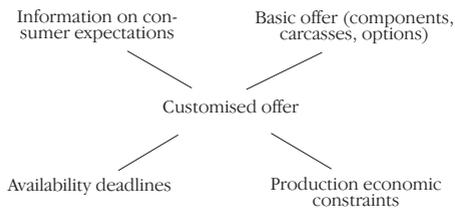
commercial proposals, it is almost identical except that the process here is in real time, and that the size of the sample can be infinite without it costing anyone anything.

### Mass customisation

To get back to a slightly structured analysis, it is absolutely acceptable to question what characterises a customised offer for a company.

- consumer participation in the conception of the product;
- production after the fact (the product is not manufactured in advance);
- almost unitary production or in very limited series;
- an activity on a non-artisan scale, a constructed human organisation.

The construction of the offer as close as possible to individual aspirations supposes complete control over four main, and, in the end, interdependent issues:



#### . Information on consumer expectations:

All recent innovations in information systems tend to enable a better level of comprehension of mass consumption phenomena<sup>3</sup> and consumers in isolation. Data mining, Consumer Relationship Management (CRM), and soon RFID (Radio-frequency identification) make knowledge available on group behaviour and, in parallel, web 2.0 type services spontaneously operated by individuals make room for personal expression. All of this elementary and consolidated data is potentially useable to build an evolved and responsible relationship between the offer and the demand, if, of course the action of companies respects the fundamentals of a democratic society

(respects personal space, actions conditioned on the consent and free will of individuals, respecting commitments...).

#### . Production economic constraints:

Everyone knows, at least in our own minds, that the consumer is not prepared to pay any price for an item, however unique it may be. For some customised products as for any other type of merchandise there is an elasticity of demand, a mechanism that describes the capacity of a consumer to overpay an item in comparison to others, a capacity that is destroyed once the price reaches a certain ceiling. But, the cost of design as well as production grows when the series are limited. So, a very particular expertise is needed to place a customised offer in a domain that minimises this price rise so as to remain within the zone of demand elasticity. This expertise, comparable to that of value analysis that we find in design companies is more subtle than it appears and can be summed up as follows: how to generate a maximum level of variety perceptible to users, while minimising impact on costs?

Constructing a customised offer that is economically viable supposes being in possession of a two-fold creativity that can propose a variety of options seen as the strongest possible, but by mobilising very economical production processes. Customisation companies that have managed to balance their books have all been managed by people with a high level of production experience. This expertise was useable in the manufacturing process but also to position an offer in a clever manner compatible with the possibilities made available through technology. However, we should add that the main point in this domain is to preserve a reasonable level of ambition and not to let the technology become the only issue at stake in customisation, which would take away from the second essential issue, that fashion content of the products.

#### . Availability deadlines:

This dimension of the offer is very immaterial in general, in particular for a customised offer that, by definition, is not made in advance, and it can become the arbiter of choice: if the design/manufacturing process mobilises a chain of deadlines that are too long, the consumer will necessarily be put off from buying customised products on a regular basis. And, this variable is closely linked to the choices that will be made in terms of production techniques to customise the products. This variable within the offer is strongly dependent on the production techniques chosen, and the availability of the basic components that go into creating the finished product: are they available in stock on site, in stock at the suppliers, to order? The issues surrounding these technical choices is not uniquely a cost issue, but also that of the positioning of the offer of the associated services.

#### . Component and options offer:

As we said above, one of the keys of economic balance and the potential of conviction for offers of customised products is to propose basic components that are easy to assemble, available as much as possible to limit availability delays, and which enables the construction of a product that corresponds to the qualitative expectations of the moment in terms of style. Here, we are dealing with the major weakness in the customisation sector that, regardless of the initiatives taken, has always bet on traditional products, as they are supposed to be low-risk and conform with the demands of the mass market. Is it not paradoxical to approach a market that is sensitive to trends with a banal proposal? It is interesting to note, that in order to compensate this weakness, the so-called solution has often been quantitative, by multiplying boring options and components. This is where we situate the margin of progression of customisation activities in order to oppose this quantitative temptation with an expert approach and that products that are truly interesting in

terms of style are doable through customisation. Finding the right options in line with the “air du temps” –as a stylist or product manager might say–, that is the real issue for new designers in the customisation sector. Even the European leader Spreadshirt.com is lagging in this area as it merely proposes carcasses (basic garments for printing) with no great originality, even if the broadening of their offer has seriously improved the general quality level.

#### **Customisation and fashion**

Probably the most interesting question in the customisation economy is the relationship to the notion of fashion that will be established: essentially, in this type of activity, the fruit of creativity does not exist in a unilateral manner. The brand –the designer?– propose a sort of creative tool box that will finally end up in the hands of the self-proclaimed designers. What heresy to let people without any skill design their own products! The debate is not recent, but taking into account what has already happened in other design sectors, it is certain that whole swathes of products will feel the impact of this newly available possibility. The most striking analogy must be found in music where under the influence of the digital equipment now available, the possibility has been given to amateurs to manipulate “musical matter” (sampling, loops stitching, mixing, scratching...) and data bases of musical “components”. The DJ/VJ culture and the huge economy it created are based on this reality. Is this good or bad for creativity? Of course our first reaction is slightly reserved, even slightly disdainful towards this type of phenomenon, but the debate does not take place at this level. Fashion is basically an affair of “common uniqueness”, of self-realising prophecies launched by hordes of gurus, from salvaging and rewriting original proposals in often banal personal stories, cultural brouhaha in short. The process of officially copying styles –pushed to its limits by the biggest brands– and generalised inspiration has already

made the creative process a little vague. What is happening is but another evolutionary step in the mechanism of echoes and multiple propagations between authentic creative propositions and the capacity for individuals to take them on so as to better throw them back in the faces of their creators. The particular difficulty caused by these new markets will be not to take the necessity to produce customised products at a reasonable price as a pretext for soulless products that would be the very contradiction of this positioning. So, who will be the designers and entrepreneurs that will prove that one can do both customisation and fashion, Probably designers, in the most authentic sense of the term.

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1. Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, Paperback, 1987.
2. James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine II, "The Four Faces of Mass Customization", in *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1997.
3. See article by Evelyne Chaballier in this issue dealing with these questions on consumption.