

Mass customisation: You never step into the same river twice

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Shouting for personalised service
Adam Simpson (2008) ©

Scope

Consumers change with every interaction with your brand and your products or services. How do you communicate with individuals who are no longer anonymous mass markets but members of segments and niches which change over time and are truly unique in combination to each person?

As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus noted, every time you step into a river, it's a different flow of water washing by your feet, coming from different sources and carrying different particles, winding its own path through the currents and eddies of the river.

But his double meaning is even more important: you are different every time you step back into that river. We as people are the products of our experiences; we constantly change as we wind our own path through the currents and eddies of life. And realise the implications for your business: your customers are different every time they interact with you.

We have made tremendous progress from the old days of viewing markets as anonymous agglomerations of customers. There are no truly mass markets any more, and if we're smart we've gone beyond looking at market segments and niches to understanding the truism that every customer is his own market. Every customer deserves to have exactly what he wants at a price he's willing to pay, and our job is to help that customer figure out what he wants – even if he doesn't know, or cannot articulate it – and then give him that offering efficiently. This requires Mass Customisation: meeting the co-equal imperatives of low-cost, high-volume, efficient operations and individually customised goods, services, and experiences.

But this progression, first identified by Stan Davis in his seminal 1987 book *Future Perfect*, from mass markets through segments and niches to mass-customised markets doesn't end there. That notion may seem strange; after all, what could possibly be next after recognising that every customer is his own market?

It is this: recognize that every customer is multiple markets. Customers want different offerings at different times under different circumstances. They are different every time they step into your river.

Think of travel. If you travel on business, you want one thing from the airline, the hotel, the rental car company, the restaurants you frequent, and so forth. Bring your spouse with you, and suddenly all of those requirements change. Bring the kids along, and they change again. Travel for pleasure, rather than on business, and each permutation mutates yet again.

Or consider how your reading habits change with time. Notice how newspapers always publish larger editions on Sunday? That's when most people have extra time in their day to consume more information

(and, papers increasingly plead, the ads that go along with them). Notice further how what you read – what books, what articles, what blog posts, what information – is influenced by your current interests, what is on your mind, how much time you have, and even your mood. Each and every time you read, you are in a different market than you were before.

That's why Mass Customisation is so important today. When Stan Davis first coined the term over 20 years ago it truly was an oxymoron. When I wrote the book on it in 1993 it was, as its sub-title attested, The New Frontier in Business Competition. Today, it is an imperative in industry after industry to discover and fulfill the multiple markets within each customer.

To make it work, you must modularize your capabilities. Take your offering – whether a physical good, intangible service, or memorable experience – and break it apart into modular elements like LEGO building bricks. Think about it: What can you build with LEGO bricks? Anything you want, thanks to the large number of modules (with different sizes, different shapes, different colors) and the simple and elegant linkage system for snapping them together.

Then you must work with each individual customer, creating a design experience through some sort of design tool that helps customers figure out what they want; for customers who don't always know what they want and even if they do, they can't always articulate it. Recognise also that the most frequent mistake mass customisers make is overwhelming their customers with too much choice. Fundamentally customers don't want choice; they just want exactly what they want.

So provide a design tool – whether online under their control, in a physical place where you can collaborate with them, or even one that only you use to presciently determine their needs – so you can figure out what they want at this moment in time, and then get that information back into operations to do something different for that customer. Mass Customisation is not being everything to everybody; rather, it is doing only and exactly each individual customer wants and needs. The former is a surefire route to higher costs; the latter can actually lower your costs by eliminating waste in your operations and sacrifice in your customers' lives.

Don't forget also to remember your customers' preferences. Create a database of customer profiles so that with every interaction you have with them you can lower your customers' sacrifice – what they have to settle for to buy with you, versus what they truly want and need. Again, not that they'll always want the same things, the same activities, or the same events, but each interaction provides a base from which you can more easily ascertain their current preferences and then fulfill them.

Only then can you hope to fulfill the multiple markets within each customer. Give them a reason to step into your river, time and time again, by being the one company to recognise them as the unique individuals they always were.



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