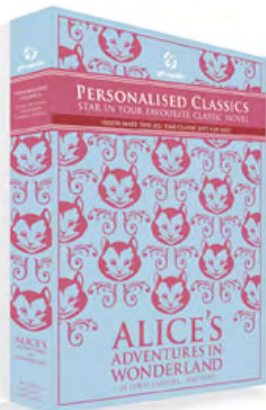


Customization: Make it yourself!



By Meredith Schwartz -- Gifts & Decorative Accessories, 1/1/2010



Personalised Classics let customers personalize the character names of a famous classic novel. \$40–\$60. Gift Republic Ltd. (011) (44) 208-542-4920. www.giftrepublic.com.

making the transfer of home snapshots to almost any surface a far more practical process than it would have been ten years ago. But like designing your own sneaker at Converse.com, this trend offers customers — and retailers — more options than just putting snapshots on products.

Competition or Advantage?

There are a profusion of direct-to-consumer, often online-only

The customer may not always be right, but these days they're more in control than ever. From *Time* magazine's pick of "You" as person of the year in 2006 to Yahoo's recent "You" marketing campaign, the idea that the customer is in control is probably the single most popular development of the decade. While Internet sites like Digg let readers decide what's newsworthy and Microsoft trumpets how consumer feedback drove the company's revision of its operating system, consumer products companies are taking this trend to the next level: Thanks to modern technology, consumers are now designing the individual product they want to buy.

This new direction goes well beyond the perpetual popularity of initials, or even monograms or engraving, with companies like sneaker giant Converse getting in on the act and allowing customers to design their own sneakers. And at Mojamix.com, consumers can make their own custom-mixed breakfast cereal.

Many of the pioneering and most widely known examples of this trend are driven by developments in digital technology; digital images are now cheap, easy and everywhere,



companies offering custom products. (See sidebar for a selection of the customization competition.) But while these services offer yet another form of competition for the independent retailer, consumer customization can also be a way to fight back, and offer your customers something truly unique that they can't get anywhere else.

Some of the customization offerings available to gift retailers offer grab-and-go convenience with all the custom options handled at the manufacturer level to make selling a custom product as easy as selling an off-the-shelf design.

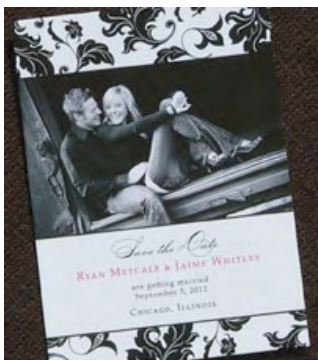
Other options involve the retailer acting as a consultant to help the shopper customize their perfect piece, playing up the knowledgeable, personal service that is often the independents' greatest asset.

Some companies, such as Joo Joo Baby, Los Angeles, which exhibited its wall décor for babies' rooms to the trade at the L.A. Mart, do both: sell online to the consumer and offer custom options to retailers.

Either way, there's a custom option that's right ... for you ... and your customers.



Woven Moments lets customers create throws, totes or pillows from their own photographs. Manual Woodworkers and Weavers. (800) 542-3139. www.manualww.com



New line of Photo Cards feature consumer's photos on holiday cards, invitations or baby announcements. Customizable colors, layouts and text for no extra charge. Tag & Company. (801) 364-0854.

www.tagandcompany.com

Custom to Go

There are currently several grab-and-go type offerings that make custom product easy for retailers to offer. MyPhotoStone, by AngelStar, Morgan Hill, CA, is customized by the consumer at home. They can simply add a photo to the stone-shaped keepsake, or starting in January, they will be able to visit www.myphotostone.com to upload images, and/or print out a themed template to add to the stone.

For Woven Moments from Manual Woodworkers & Weavers, Hendersonville, NC, computer technology is applied to tapestry weaving, resulting in throws and other items woven with the image from customer's photograph. The company offers retailers a starter pack with display and promotional materials, samples and "custom product kits" to sell, making it easy for both the customer and the retailer. A Designer Series features even more choices, letting the customer pick a background motif and a quote (or they can write their own), in addition to the photograph.

Jordan Hill, international account manager of UK-based Gift Republic, explains his company's newest product, a customized copy of shoppers' favorite classic books with themselves as the main character.

Once again, technology is the key to making it affordable: "We have taken a selection of classic novels and written a program that allows [character] names to be replaced by consumer-defined names and define the maximum space required in a book." All the blank books are the same size.

Retailers "don't have to do anything but stock the boxes," Hill explained. "The consumer deals with us. The retailer doesn't have to deal with the follow-up. The retailer just has to sell it, just like they would sell a pillow. The only thing they would need is staff education and training on the product, but we provide that anyway."

Most consumers buy the personalized books to give away, rather than for themselves, which they can do either by giving the gift box for the recipient to register for themselves, or by registering it themselves and giving the finished book. Gift Republic also sells personalized gifts such as a baby print on canvas, where everything they need is in the box, and Name A Star, where again, the vendor handles the fulfillment.

Made Special in Store

Danielson Designs' Studio, launching at the January markets, allows customers to apply their favorite saying to a variety of shapes and sizes of plaque, and pick the colors to fit into their home decor. *Gifts & Decorative Accessories* caught up with retailer Whitney Cooper of Flowers by Whitney, Murray, KY, one of the first to carry the Studio line.



EcoDotz Candle Creations Creation Stations feature soy scent beads which can be layered or mixed to create customized combinations. Onnra Naturals Inc. (815) 777-3081. www.ecodotz.com



New Photo Stones are stone-shaped keepsakes made of clear acrylic. 1¼"x1½". \$6.99. AngelStar. (800) 264-3577. www.AngelStar.com

"There are a few different ways you can order,"

explained Cooper. "We have a laptop set up in the store, so people can order. And that way, we can assist the customer. There's also a brochure and they can fill it out and we will enter it in [the system] for them. But the neatest way to do is at home, they go to the particular website hooked up to our store."

Consumers can have their order shipped to themselves, giftwrapped, accompanied by a card and sent to the recipient, or sent to the store, where Cooper's staff will wrap it. She says the product ships in two business days.

According to Cooper, retailers pay \$275 for a starter kit which includes brochures with a sticker that bears the store's individual Web address, postcards to send to customers, samples and two free items to use as a promotion. Her store, retailing the line since September, has already made back its initial outlay for the kit.

"The great thing about it is, it doesn't take up any shelf space, and you don't have a lot of money invested," said Cooper. "You don't have to pay for inventory," and yet retailers make as big a return as if they did, earning 54–56 percent of every sale in the form of a monthly check.

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You don't have to pay for inventory- Whitney Cooper, Flowers By Whitney

This isn't Cooper's first experience with customization. She also carries Coton Colors pottery, which handles its personalization and custom program the old school way: through a book in the store and shipping that takes two to four weeks instead of two days.

Custom the Old-Fashioned Way

Computer-phobic? Not all custom products rely on technology. Not only are several products sold as kits with vendors who handle all the tech on the back end, so you don't even have to touch a keyboard, there are hands-on, in-store customization stations like Eco-Dotz candles, where customers can create their own unique products the old-fashioned way.

Another make-it-in-store option is AlphaPIX custom wall art. Customers pick photos that look like letters to spell their name (or any other word they choose), which are printed on Kodak Professional Endura Supra Lustre archival low-acid paper.

"They absolutely love playing around with it, and it is so personal to them," Lisa Simonetta, president of AlphaPIX, told *Gifts &*



Decorative Accessories. Stores stock the frames and the photos, then put them together on the spot. Retailers get a free sample of custom AlphabetPIX artwork up to 10 letters, a thumbnail booklet of all photos, a thumbnail sheet of the most popular 150 photos, a thumbnail sheet of top 20 vowels and consonants and signage.



Personalized Plates come in over 200 designs. 9". 10/\$10. Hallmark Cards. (800) HALLMARK. www.HallmarkParty.com

reason not to go online." And isn't giving shoppers that kind of good reason what retail is all about?

Semi-Custom Collection is handmade in America of brass finished in 24-kt. gold. Can bear a message up to 25 characters.
ChemArt. (800) 521-5001.
www.chemart.com.

Even though digital technology is the key to its customization options, greeting card vendor Tag offers the photo card option through its retail accounts in an album so customers can "page through and pick the design they like. They see what the finished quality looks like, that is sort of the key to us," Tom Cormack, owner of Tag, told *Gifts & Dec.*

The other key is how many aspects of the design can be customized: not just the photo, but the colors, layouts and text, all for no additional charge. "Everything is a digital file to us, so we can change the color of a flower or the position of a flower or make a card that was square into a rectangle," says Cormack. "We give them a really good

The Customization Competition

- **Shapeways**, surely one of the most ambitious customization sites out there, uses 3D printing to let consumers customize jewelry, candleholders, napkin rings, puzzles and much more, then sell their designs, effectively each becoming a micro-manufacturer and retailer of their own creations.
- Well-known websites [Zazzle](http://Zazzle.com) and [Café Press](http://CafePress.com) allow consumers and small businesses to apply their logos, graphics and slogans to T-shirts, mugs and other standardized goods, and then sell them online.
- Direct-to-consumer customization products include jewelry from England's **Individjewel**, a subsidiary of a "long established and well-respected" British jewelry manufacturer
- **Lumnique** sells personalized candle gift sets.
- [PhotoPopArt](http://PhotoPopArt.com), [CanvasonDemand](http://CanvasonDemand.com), PrintYourCanvas.com, FineArtAmerica.com and Photowow.com all put customer's photos onto canvas as wall art.
- **PhotoShowerCurtain** and **FotoBed** are just what they sound like, customized shower curtains and bed linens, respectively.
- KarmaKraft.com allows consumers to print custom fabric (also potentially useful to interior designers).
- Multiply.com and **Picaboo** both create custom photo books out of a customer's art.
- **Bath Junkie's** line of stores allows customers to customize their personal care items.
- **TinyPrints**, **My Good Greetings**, **Snappily**, **RocketLife**, **Card Store** and more do custom greeting cards.
- You can even get personalized stamps from **StampExpressions.com**, and beans from **Boys to Men Gifts** that grow with their message intact.