

# The era of user-generated content

With the spread of the Internet, everything that can be customised will be customised, says **SIVAM KRISH**

**T**HE current chief executive of online retailer Amazon.com Jeff Bezos once said: "Before long, user-generated content won't refer only to media, but to just about anything – user-generated jeans, user-generated sports cars, user-generated breakfast meals.

"This is because setting up a company that designs, makes and globally sells physical products could become almost as easy as starting a blog – and the repercussions would be earthshaking."

I believe we are already beginning to see this happen around us. Every industry is adapting to smaller batch sizes and customisable product configurations. In some cases, it's to place an order of just one item.

There are two forms of customisation out there. Firstly, during our grandparents' generation, most things were hand-made, tailored to individual tastes, needs and requirements.

But more recently, the Internet age has made creating, ordering and shipping into an electronic exchange with such fluidity that makes it possible to source different services globally, in order to customise a single product according to one's exact personal taste and requirements.

Dell is well-known for allowing people to customise their laptops to their needs. However, as more companies realise the value of this, it will become increasingly difficult to find a company that does not follow suit in providing this service.

In due course, everything that can be customised will be customised. There are, of course, some barriers to customisation. One is the complexity of the design and the manufacturing process. The other is the additional cost incurred to the customer.

Research has shown that customers are willing to pay 30 to 60 per cent more for customised goods. This additional value will eventually tip the balance, creating an avalanche that Mr Bezos is betting on.

Customised goods have a special value proposition that many businesses have yet to grasp. Customisation produces one-offs that are unique, personal and therefore highly valuable.

Invariably, customisation is driven by the consumers' desire to express themselves. Customised goods are created by their user. This frequently results in the same kind of attachment that parents have towards their own offspring. What we create is our own and very special to us.



**Express yourself:**  
Dr Sivam Krish, (fourth from left) says the Internet has made it possible to source different services globally, in order to customise a single product according to one's exact personal taste and requirements

In comparison, mass-produced goods are slowly but certainly losing their appeal. The cost of creating that appeal through marketing and branding is eventually borne by the consumer. Consumer-designed goods do not carry this burden.

Many companies, including Muji in Japan, have realised the benefits of putting the consumer in the driving seat. They introduce products that have been designed in forums and discussed in communities. Being able to find out what the target audience likes and more importantly, is willing to pay for significantly reduces the risk of product failures.

In a highly globalised, highly competitive world, the success and failure of consumer companies now increasingly relies on one thing – introducing products that consumers like.

In the current system, the company's marketing department does a market survey and then the designers try to create products based on that piece of sophisticated guess work.

In reality, this is a risky proposition, and frequently companies end up designing, creating and marketing a product that does not sell well, due to "faulty guesswork".

Moving forward, more companies are letting their consumers design what they want, create the material, discuss it on forums, vote for their preferences and eventually develop the product that they want to buy.

A few companies are taking the lead in deploying such strategies. They create the buzz, source the designs and in some cases, they even book orders well before products are made.

Speaking from example, I was a former assistant professor in industrial design lecturer in the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore (NUS) for about three years. During my classes, I found that the younger generation was able to create designs using a fundamentally different approach.

I found them spending a lot of time in front of computers modifying computer-aided design models, and I felt that this could be automated.

My early experiments showed promising results. When I saw the computers generating quality designs without any user inputs, that was the catalyst that made me decide to take a risk and strike it out on my own.

With the support of the university's Industry Liaisons Office, I patented this technology that I felt could completely change the way products are designed.

Together with four friends, I set up a company called Genometri, to develop this core design technology and with a deep breath I took the leap from being an academic to an entrepreneur. NUS has a good support structure for funding. But as with all start-ups, there were its difficulties too. Mine was in convincing designers to use the software I created.

After attending a conference in the US on mass customisation, I realised that the greater opportunity is in letting customers design and that most companies were trying to let their customers do this.

So we swung our B2B model to a B2C model, focusing on the consumer. We launched a portal ([www.jujups.com](http://www.jujups.com)) as a design platform that would allow consumers to create personalised keepsakes, including mugs, t-shirts and 3D-printed photo frames, by using drag-and-drop functions.

Individualised products can be designed, ordered, created and shipped with the click of the mouse. A recently-concluded Christ-

mas mug design competition attracted 1,200 designs in just two weeks.

Looking forward, I hope that by the end of this year we can build an active, pro-summer community creating cool, customisable products online.

Being an entrepreneur is tough, I do not recommend it to anyone, except for those who are compelled by naivety of lunacy that they have something worthwhile to sacrifice their well-being for.

Will I go back to teaching in future? I love to teach, but more than that, I love to learn. I think in many areas the universities are far behind what is happening in industry and more importantly what is happening online.

The world is changing faster than we can understand it. I want to remain in a learning environment and for now our little company is a great place to learn. Whether we succeed or not, we are part of the great changes that are shaping the world. To me, there is value in that.

*Dr Sivam Krish, 46, is CEO and founder of Genometri, a design technology company that allows consumers to create what they want online. His company is currently being incubated by NUS Enterprise*