

CUSTOMIZING

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Ebba is a “customer experience designer” though she sometimes calls herself a “strategy consultant”. She works with social innovation, hybrid creation and social software. “The meaning of my job is to explain how we can build our identity together,” she says. Her company designs services, environments and interactions. She is a young Swedish woman who started her career in San Francisco and London. Now she is working in Stockholm in her own company. Talking to her is like talking to one of my ethnography colleagues; her vocabulary is filled with culture analysis buzz words. We seem to use the same concepts, but to very different ends. Here we may follow how concepts from academia are translated into market practices.

In a world of hyper-competition and high speed in brutal markets, the packaging of messages through design and branding is crucial. The ideal of a strong brand governs a great deal of thinking in the new economy. It concerns both commodities and people. The concept of identity is used to market goods and, conversely, business terms such as trademarks and logotypes are applied to people. The process through which a strong brand or trademark is established can be conceptualised as a customizing process. All concepts used in this process make you think of a kind of utopia where everything is changeable, possible to remake and improve. Concepts used in this process sound like a utopian dream of immense flexibility – anything can be totally changed. The words are also catchwords in something that seems to be the mantra of our time – competitiveness – a kind of me-

chanical utopianism within the new economy. This utopianism is very powerful, and has a strong influence, on everything else in business. Being competitive makes you successful. It is the way politics is run and it is also a way of homogenizing the nation, the city, the population and making it part of the global society. To be a part of this wonderful world you have to customize yourself to be competitive.

As soon as you have bought a new product today, especially if it is digital and network based, you get information about how to customize it to fit your personal needs. This process is also applied to people. Several different professionals like Ebba, work with customizing people to chosen identities, by designing interactions between people, places and information. Others work with styling and extreme makeovers to completely transform your looks and your life. Customizing is a highly individualized process and the customizers use expressions like “I want to give people instructions on how to create their own customs. In the end, your most successful customizing process is the one you develop yourself”. In the world of consultants customizing is a cultural process that enables you to create a unique look and feeling, even a new way of life, a new ethnicity, sexuality or economy, by converting tradition, convention, norm, routine, practice, habit and ritual into “self-expression”. In constantly customizing yourself you establish the unique creative identity that is required in the post-Fordist entrepreneurial society. In this process it is love, not sense of duty, that makes you successful.



There is a close relationship between cultural and economic factors in this process. Customizing as an elite project has, of course, a long history. Here I am interested in the mode of customizing that emerged in the 1980s, when new elites started to gain power by customizing themselves constantly, while at the same time it became their job to customize other people. People who make this process a cumulative one are constantly on the move, transgressing normative borders, constantly creating fresh acquaintances, information and contacts. The customizing process depends on people with no fixed conventions, sexual habits, everyday market routines or other ways of life. On the contrary the process is essentially adapting to new rituals while also participating in formulating these rituals and practices by organizing new conventions and tailoring and modifying people to new roles.

The process as such is rather silent, however strong in its makeovers, since it remodels and fundamentally changes people. It is not a cultural process that just implies life styling but also aims for permanent changes to body and mind, though it is ostensibly adapting people to casual fashions and changing market values. At the same time it is very personal, modifying clients, shoppers and consumers according to individual requirements. To understand what is going on in this process I will focus on the work of customizers.

Customizers Customizing in the Customizing Process

The professionals that work with customizing are interesting because they act as a kind of “applied” cultural analysts. Their competence is multifocal. They customize others at the same time as they customize themselves and homogenize the market according to the customs accustomed by them. By studying them we can observe how identities are produced or maintained. They decide at least something about which identities can pass in the market today, since they form an important part of the moulding and creation of public opinion. There is a continuous interplay between customizing and being customized.

In the customizing process the customizers shape identities by the dialectical movement between fixed and non-fixed identifications. Parts in the process are changeable while others remain permanent. It is a question of a process where you have to be aware of ambivalence, complexity and be the creator of new norms and rituals. This is possible if you admit that there are no traditions, no conventions, no routines to be followed or practices to adapt to.

Urban Fashion

When I first met Ebba she was dressed in clothes from We, a brand that I had never seen before. She did not look as conventional as could be expected from a business consultant, but rather like a hip hop youngster. I soon got to know that the clothing company We does not use commercial advertising but is given to certain people who themselves work as the advertising space. On their website you can read:

We Clothing is an urban fashion company with a base in snowboarding and skateboarding. There were never any questions about what We Clothing wanted to create: a clothes company based on personal engagement and conviction; a theme of shared ideas and common values; and friendship, trust and honesty among equals. With a network of contacts among artists, athletes, companies and media, the priority was always to create a feeling of solidarity. The term “Superlative Conspiracy” symbolizes what We Clothing as a clothes brand and company represents: a group, a family of good and competent people working toward the same ideal.

In these four sentences they say something about what is important about the customizing process and in the subsequent discussion I will use their words as headings and catchwords.

One of the main features in the customizing process is creating and configuring auto-alert and self-correcting processes within a new elite of young market oriented people that see themselves as the “fast, innovative and creative actor(s) on the market” (Löfgren 2005). In some ways this ties in with

the fashionable research on “creative cities”, found for example in Richard Florida’s work (Florida 2002, 2005). He has pointed out that the fastest growing economies are located in cities with open-minded mixes of alternative and bohemian life styles, gays, artists, minorities etc. The idea of “the creative class” has opened up new avenues of advancement for women and members of ethnic minorities. In my ongoing study on the customizing elite in Stockholm, I have also found that many of the consultants have another ethnic background than Swedish and that when they become successful their ethnic categories are subordinated. Many of these consultants are women or homosexual men, with backgrounds that often used to be seen as hindrances in traditional business life. However the diversity is, as Florida (2005) says, not diversity in all aspects and manifestations, but a diversity of elites. The consultants in the customizing process are nomadic people, migrants moving between places and positions. As newcomers they get a cultural double vision that also make them suited to hybridise and customize others to new cultural patterns and identities.

At the same time as the customizers are moving around the world, they seem to gather in and create certain places. Place is playing an important role in organizing this process. It is a key economic and social organizing unit. Saskia Sassen (2002) conceptualises the global economy as depending on a network of what she calls “urban glamour zones” like Stureplan in Stockholm. They are characterized by world-market orientations and significant concentrations of company headquarters, specialized corporate services, and asset-management institutions. She also points out how this new elite of consultants creates its opposite in all the service jobs needed to support them. Places they go tend to be what she calls the “sunken plazas”, like Sergels torg in Stockholm (cf. Franzén 2004).

Superlative Conspiracy

The company We shows what is important among the customizers in the customizing process. A company shall be a decent buddy and give you a feeling of “trust and honesty among equals”. They do not use

commercial advertising but get publicity through activists. The message of how to dress and other identity rules and codes are transmitted among the appropriate people. Customizing is a hidden process that is active among people in a new elite, while it is rather silent to others. Magazines like *Connoisseur*, a Swedish product aimed at affluent people, are customizing journals that have marketing goals to organize events among successful people as platforms for bringing out new brands and messages on the market. Some of the actors in this world also play an important role in public opinion since they are the ones who give comments in media – not only on what is going on for the moment but also what will come in the future. Oscar is a well known man in Sweden. He appears on TV either as the presenter of a program or as a guest in other shows. He cooks, discusses important political issues, health matters, etcetera. He is also considered to have the most appropriate clothing outfit for any given occasion. One year he was elected the most well dressed man in Sweden. The day after his recognition, Oscar congratulated himself to the appointment in the Swedish daily papers. He is witty, funny and customizes himself ironically with attributes like braids and eye shadow.

Limited Edition

Ebba emphasizes that customizing is all about making differences. This is also what the business gurus Nordström and Ridderstråle state with the concept of “karaoke capitalism” (Nordström & Ridderstråle 2003). They argue that there is a karaoke reality within business, which they describe as

a cosmopolitan club with endless individual choice but also a paltry place for institutionalized imitation. The dirty little secret of management theory and practice is that business schools, benchmarking and best practice have transformed the entire world of commerce into a super-group of karaoke copying companies. And imitating someone else will never get you to the top – merely to the middle.

Instead of doing karaoke business, they believe that you have to be an original – not a copy. All of our identities should be unique limited editions. To customize a unique talent is, according to them, the only sustainable and successful strategy for the future.

Beyond Money

Lina is a customizing consultant that emphasizes how important it is “to do your own thing”, which she considers as doing the things that you want, regardless of what you gain from it. A customizing consultant job is something “beyond money”, she says. She explains it as a world of partnering, short-cutting and networking. You exchange services, codes and customs. Partnering builds relations and confidence between consultants, entrepreneurs and customers which all have the same interest in common – to transform themselves and others into different identities at different occasions. You are simply customers to each other and have to co-operate to be able to trust each other’s competence and your mutual economic interests. They use expressions like: “We are like chameleons, we love to dress up and disguise ourselves even for everyday use. Sometimes we change clothes several times a day to customize ourselves to our customers.”

Short cutting and networking is a question of being able to locate, adapt and customize the right people with each other in as short a time as possible. One of the most important aspects is fitting into different business nodes. It is a question of exchange, of knowledge beyond money. Lina depicts herself as linking together people and countries – a global citizen. Then she stresses how important it is to be full of nuances, innovative, many-sided, transformable, multicultural, to be witty, have humour, knowledge and a strong message. Her customizing projects are located in Sao Paolo, Kairo, New York and Shanghai.

Customizing as Control Process

This process makes you aware of the cultural competence found in cultural double vision and being able to quickly decipher codes that make you formable and successful. To cultivate a unique talent is the only sustainable success strategy. The uniqueness in

turn is used on the market to further strengthen this talent. When for instance Virgin Atlantic Airways explain why it is important that each of their flights has a unique name, the airline is looking for the best of what it has dubbed “jetrossexuals” or the “new jet-setters”. Ignoring borders and time zones, these people make the world smaller with each journey, the company says, and it is these travellers that have made the airline a successful venture (CNN/Money August 9, 2005, PM EDT). The names that Virgin uses correspond to the cultural codes in the customizing process, like “the networker”, “the islander” etc.

Part of the success for those practicing this process is that rituals rapidly change according to their values. As a contemporary phenomenon it shows in all its obscurity some of the cultural qualifications that govern conduct and behaviour in the business world. Here is a competitiveness that demands unique talents, individuals and identities.

But what is the customizing process really about? Are values and identities rapidly changing while new multicultural, diversified and complex identities are taking shape? Or does it show people customizing to old reliable identities? What sometimes looks like freedom to transform your self can in fact be seen as a form of extraordinary control. It controls the actors in the networks in customizing others while it is also a process that makes use of the mutual relationship between customer and customizer in intricate systems of favours and favours in return.

What kind of metamorphoses and cultural transformations do we meet in the customizing process? Does it simply answer to new political imperatives of competition and competitiveness? In that case it is not newer than the modern society itself. As Patrick Joyce shows in his book *The Rule of Freedom* (2003), it was already in the cities of the nineteenth century that the citizens were made governable in the name of freedom. Even if the ambitions have been intensified the result is the same. When you create all these originals, they also form a distinct category – the customer experience designer and a customized market.

The agenda or action programs within the customizing process show us both the old modern uto-

pian dream of everything being transformable and transgressable and how these programs tend to homogenize people into new categories and identities.

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