



Courtesy of Zazzle.

Making Now: Zazzle's Approach to "Things"

Mastering the consumer ideal in an increasingly customized world

Zazzle, an on-demand, online marketplace that connects customers with artists' designs, has become a juggernaut in the product customization space, giving designers and customers a platform to create products with independent manufacturers using their own images. The company also manages and facilitates the use of images from participating designers and companies. As Zazzle has grown, it has entered into partnerships with companies such as Hallmark and Disney allowing the use of their images.

Charles Ohiaeri, Zazzle's Chief Fulfillment Officer, attended SGIA's inaugural THREADX conference in 2018 and left so inspired that he asked to be included in the THREADX 2019 speaker lineup. Ohiaeri wanted to offer his own inspiration by providing an overview of his company's processes and approaches to customization.

Ohiaeri studied economics at Stanford University with the company's owners/

founders, Bobby and Jeff Beaver. The brothers brought him on board to build Zazzle's customer service division, and quickly transferred him to lead operations. With his passion for manufacturing processes and customization, he built the architecture that allows the company to produce millions of one-of-a-kind products.

Exploring New Models

In his presentation, Ohiaeri discussed how models of manufacturing are changing, driven by the rise of e-commerce models. Traditionally, the model has been a linear movement from manufacturer to warehouse to retailer to the end customer. In recent years, the "retailer" aspect of that flow has changed, and an increasing percentage of that step is fulfilled by Amazon.com. He adds, however, that much of this is for items that have already been made. The Zazzle model, as presented by Ohiaeri, eliminates both warehousing

Customization is on the verge of no longer being a novelty.



By Dan Marx, Director of Content Development, SGIA



28%

increase in average purchase price for customized goods

55%

of customers will pay more for products from sustainable companies

63%

of Americans willing to pay more for products made in the USA

Amid much discussion among apparel decorators and other industries about new models for profitability, Ohiaeri stated these conditions all point toward a new age of entrepreneurship.



Courtesy of Zazzle.

and retailing, creating a conduit between manufacturer and customer. The Zazzle platform creates a common creative space between designers, makers and customers.

The process for creating this “new way” involves 100% digital manufacturing workflows. Product population of the platform is bolstered by the fact that there is no setup cost for most product types. The next crucial factor in the workflow is deep partner integration, to create a supply chain and producer partnerships that work and add reliability. Proprietary software systems drive the process. This is important because the systems meet the company’s specific needs head-on as they also provide a value-add that is very difficult to replicate. Lastly, the company provides exceptionally fast turnaround — most products are manufactured in less than 24 hours.

Understanding Personalization

Ohiaeri described the company as producing “millions of products that don’t exist yet.” Surely, zero-inventory models and on-demand manufacturing are approaches that have changed the

way products are made. Increasingly, consumers are becoming accustomed to specifying what they want: color, design, fit, weight, texture, etc. It is at the core of digital manufacturing and the personalization model.

Personalization is more than simply putting a different image on the same blank or using different blanks for the same image. Key factors Zazzle considers in its specification model go beyond artwork to include product type, brand, silhouette, materials and components, colorways and embellishment. In addition to providing the customer with unique choices and a variable experience, artificial intelligence is used to help facilitate choices via search queries.

For Zazzle, part of the value of customization is in sheer volume. Ohiaeri said Zazzle hosts more than 30 million designs on its site and offers more than 250,000 product types. Using simple math, there are, in theory, 7.5 billion possible combinations. While the company does ship some non-customized products, Ohiaeri reported that 67% are customized before purchase. Despite all of these

possibilities, the company experiences a less than 3% return rate, and a stockout rate of less than 1%.

The Compelling Case

Ohiaeri cited research illustrating the growing consumer acceptance of customization, validating it as a model: 41% of Etsy customers, 53% of Amazon customers and 39% of eBay customers reported awareness of customization options on those platforms. Additionally, 40%, 24% and 20%, respectively, had actually purchased customized products. Customization is not just a niche, it is the new, growing reality.

Adding to this data, Ohiaeri noted that 28% of consumers will pay more for customized goods, 55% will pay more for products from sustainable companies, and 63% of U.S. consumers are willing to pay more for products made domestically. Amid much discussion among apparel decorators and other industries about new models for profitability, he stated these conditions all point toward a new age of entrepreneurship.

Looking forward, the company is

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Courtesy of Zazzle.

The Zazzle platform creates a common creative space between designers, makers and customers.

working to improve the customer experience by giving more granular information about the products available. Using the lowly sock as an example, he shared how the company is using techniques such as 3D imaging to provide a deeper “feel” to the purchasing decisions, instead of simply choosing from seemingly similar static images of plain white fabric foot coverings. Zazzle recently installed a photographic robot for 3D imaging, fast tracking what was previously a tedious and time-consuming process.

What it Means

Consumers find value not only in getting what they want, but also feeling (whether real or not) they had a role in “making” an item. In the new “everything now” society, it feels good — and is increasingly expected — to be able to make choices before purchasing. Customers can make unique items in a single run for a slight additional cost. It’s cool.

From the manufacturer standpoint, customization, as described above, is on the verge of no longer being a novelty. The paradigm is shifting. The tried-and-true manufacturing models are giving way to new approaches. Industries — printing and others — are “going there.” It can be seen in the technology and the ideas of new leaders. It’s now just a matter of when companies decide to “go there.”

One of the strengths of THREADX 2019 was that it was a conference about ideas and possibilities that went beyond the confines of apparel decoration. By viewing the approaches and philosophies of companies and individuals working in other areas, attendees were able to learn by analogy.

Ohiaeri’s Zazzle-focused presentation was an excellent example: While the company operates at a scale larger and more diverse than a majority of those who were in the audience, the concepts in the presentation could be considered, customized and reinvented. One must only do the thinking and the work required to get there.

Dan Marx is the Specialty Graphic Imaging Association’s Director of Content Development. With SGIA, he works with the graphic communications industry’s diverse knowledge base to raise awareness of trends and opportunities, and helps graphics communications companies and their customers identify and adopt new technologies and access lucrative market areas. In his more than 25 years at SGIA, he has authored numerous articles for industry publications worldwide, presented at a wide range of industry events, and served as an enthusiastic ambassador for new processes and opportunities.