



Made to measure up to professional standards

Brands from an ever-wider variety of sectors are buying into the self-service trend by giving consumers the opportunity to create high quality personalised products or services.

By MaryLou Costa

The term DIY used to apply to all forms of home improvement, from putting up uneven shelves to painting and decorating. But today the DIY trend is about consumers using new self-service brands to achieve and create professional-quality products, goods or services.

Want to make sure you have a nice bottle of red for your next dinner party? Crushpad Wine lets anyone create their own wine and launch their own label for commercial distribution. Fancy selling your own designs? Online retailer Asos has a Marketplace section that allows people to start their own fashion boutique online.

Other examples include New Zealand-based WilliamsWarn's in-home brewery, California-based TechShop, which runs a chain of mechanical workshops where users can work on their own car projects, and Collabracam, which allows its users to shoot and edit professional video footage through iPhone/iPad software.

Henry Mason, head of research and analysis at consultancy Trendwatching, has dubbed the phenomenon "Profession-all". Its latest report notes that not only does a DIY mentality fit with the tough economic climate but it harnesses a craving among consumers for creativity.

"Consumers are looking for stories because the world is full of mass-produced objects that

anyone can buy. So what's interesting for consumers is a product they can tell people about through the knowledge and experience they gained," says Mason. He adds that as many jobs are disappearing, people are looking for new career opportunities and using self-service brands to restyle themselves as entrepreneurs.

Bespoke fragrance maker The Perfume Studio and gourmet cooking school L'Atelier Des Chefs are tapping into this trend by offering consumers experiences where they can create custom products for themselves. Both have price points comparable to a mainstream product, with The Perfume Studio's bespoke perfume making sessions costing about £40 and L'Atelier Des Chefs' gourmet cooking classes ranging from £15 to £54.

The Perfume Studio managing director Robert Taylor explains: "We started out with the idea of selling perfume, but now we sell an experience first and the fragrance second."

"People really get into a Perfume Studio experience. It's not to do with price necessarily as we cost about the same as a fragrance from store. For £40, people can have an experience as well as the bottle of perfume they can take home – it's added value."

Taylor claims that bespoke fragrance has become so popular that insight firm Mintel recognises it as its own distinct product

Cooking up a storm:
L'Atelier Des Chefs offers an individual culinary experience



brands moving into the self-service perfume area soon. He predicts that not only will major fragrance houses begin to offer "mix and match" sets for consumers, but that the trend as a whole will pick up across other markets.

"It's happening in clothing. People are going more bespoke because it's more fashionable. Across product ranges, I think bespoke has to be the way to go," he says.

"The convenience purchase is always going to be available and there is nothing wrong with that. But as the power of the high street diminishes further, and more store groups start to disappear, people will want greater choice and bespoke offers that."

The only barrier to bigger brands moving into this area, he says, is that their scale means that while they can spot trends, they cannot always commit to getting involved. And unless the opportunity offers major profits, they can't divert resources away from core operations.

L'Atelier Des Chefs UK general manager Marie Clarke claims the self-service trend could really have a major impact in the food sector.

"You could easily spend the price of one of our classes on eating out," she says. "But you walk out of a restaurant thinking you've had some lovely food, whereas you walk away from one of our classes having both eaten well and learned something."

Asos Marketplace: Allows people to start their own fashion boutique online



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Henry Mason, Trendwatching

category. He says the company saw potential for consumers to personalise their own scents a decade ago, following the trend for celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez or Sarah Jessica Parker to create their signature fragrance blends.

Now The Perfume Studio operates many days out for groups of friends to blend their own scents. The majority of these people are women, although it has also been promoting itself as a corporate team building activity, which can raise the interest of competitive men. It is also rolling out at-home "scent events" along with retail partnerships to open concessions in stores such as Debenhams.

Taylor says he expects to see mainstream

What's brewing: Ian Williams and Anders Warn believe there is a market for their in-home beer making system

▷ Classes are taught by chefs who have worked in Michelin-starred venues, and range from Thai, French and British cuisines in one, two, three and four course options. A French company, L'Atelier Des Chefs opened in central London last year and is looking to expand to a second location.

Clarke believes there is room for the self-service trend to expand in this area. "There is definitely a market for home-grown, personalised DIY-type presents and for this type of activity as a trend around eating – especially in terms of awareness of what goes into your food," she says.

L'Atelier's latest venture involves partnering with brands to sponsor classes. For example, online grocer Natoora is sponsoring classes that use the products it sells, at half the price of a similar non-sponsored class. A partnership with Total Greek Yoghurt is coming up and Clarke says she is open to more of these. "The best way to showcase a product to a consumer is actually using it."

The French arm of L'Atelier Des Chefs has also started online classes where users can participate via video from home and this will also be how the brand expands in London, says Clarke.

While The Perfume Studio and L'Atelier des Chefs appeal to people as occasional experiences where the majority of participants will not go on to become professional chefs or perfumers, some self-service brands have centred their business on enabling people to turn their hobbies into a full-time job.

Online publishing platform Blurb takes the concept of photo books to a new level and allows people to publish not just photography but any content. They can then sell what it calls a "book store quality" product on its online seller platform (see case study, below). The book creator can put a mark up on their product, and keep any profit when it sells.

Blurb chief executive Eileen Gittins says the platform's increasing popularity stems from the rise of blogging and social networking, ▶



case study **blurb**

Millions of people dream of becoming the next JK Rowling, but very few achieve it.

That could change, however, because self-publishing on an individual scale is now an affordable route for aspiring writers thanks to platforms such as Blurb.

It was set up in 2006 by US entrepreneur Eileen Gittins, who had been looking to publish just 40 copies of a book containing her photography but could not find a suitable outlet. Her experience sparked an idea to create a platform that offered downloadable software for people to lay out their content to their liking, upload it, place an order and have a printed product delivered to them within a week.

Unlike existing offerings from photography brands such as Kodak and Jessops, Blurb's unique selling point is its seller community. Once someone has created a book via Blurb, they can add it to the online bookstore complete with price, barcode and checkout for anyone to buy. The user keeps the entire profit, which Blurb deposits straight into their bank account.

Blurb has published everything from accounts of personal events such as holidays and weddings, to cookbooks, poetry, photography, novels, memoirs and self-help titles. Gittins says Blurb is now a multimillion dollar company, reaching \$1m in revenues in its first six months of business.

Brand awareness for Blurb has been driven largely by search marketing, online advertising, deals on sites like Groupon and word of mouth. The Blurb brand is soon to make its marketing debut in print and on TV, advertising within specialist cookery and travel programmes.

"Our timing was key," Gittins explains. "The rise of social media coincided with our launch, and it was the first year that sales of digital cameras eclipsed those of film cameras.

"People were also starting to blog and their behaviour was changing from being consumers of content to producers and participants of it. This has only increased since then. The story of Blurb is really about the rise of consumer participation online."

Motivations for using Blurb vary from individuals looking for alternatives to traditional photo printing and those who wish to self-publish content, to people creating portfolios for professional reasons and companies creating documents for internal or even marketing purposes.

Those self-publishing books vary from those looking to market themselves as a writer, photographer or expert in a niche area and generate profit, to those using their product as a charity fundraising project.

"Most individuals [on Blurb] would previously not have been attractive to the publishing industry because their title would

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not be likely to sell the requisite amount of copies. Our growth has come from enabling access for everyday people to make a professional quality book affordably enough where they could still put a mark-up on it to make a profit," Gittins claims.

Many of the books published through Blurb are around niche topics. "A woman in the US made a book about the art of Sámi band weaving. How many people who walk into Waterstone's are going to know what Sámi band weaving is, or care?" says Gittins.

But being online allows those who are interested in niche areas to find each other. says Blurb's selling platform is growing fast. "People buying other people's books makes up 7% of our worldwide revenues," Gittins reveals.

Blurb has even caught the attention of already published authors looking to go do



Eileen Gittins
Founder and
chief executive
Blurb

Q&A blurb

Marketing Week (MW): How did the Blurb selling platform – where authors can list their self-published books for sale – start?

Eileen Gittins (EG): Our original store was a facility where you would place an order and then receive the URL. Then professionals began making their way to us and their work was commercial quality, so that's when we knew we needed to develop a seller programme.

MW: How can you make such small print runs economical?

EG: The process becomes very manual. We get sent a file that gets sent to the printer, but the printer is used to doing large runs so someone has to set it up for the small run with specific binding and paper.

We didn't just have to create the book software, we needed to find and work with printers that could do this. We had a print expert on board to pitch the concept to printers and convince them it was the future, as well as to ensure consistency across different international printers. It takes a lot of relationship building and coordination but this model works well for us. We are looking to grow globally so we are always investigating new print partnerships.

MW: Can the unedited quality of written work published on Blurb stand up to the traditional market?

EG: There is a natural filter – someone will read a book and give it five stars or 'like' it on Facebook and soon it will get some visibility for being good. We have people who print their first book, give it to people to read and then adjust future copies based on the feedback received. The editing function can still happen, but what's changed is that it now happens through your network, not a big publishing house.

MW: What reaction have you had from the traditional publishing world?

EG: The publishing industry has become receptive to partnering with people like us. They send us leads to authors and use us as a testing ground. There are books that have been published on Blurb that traditional publishers have picked up. If we can be seen as a place for emerging talent, more people will want to put their work on our site in the hope of being discovered, which is a good thing for us.

MW: Could this lead to Blurb being bought out by a big publisher?

EG: We've been approached for purchase before but it wasn't the right time or company. We're open to an exit, either through acquisition or share flotation. We'll pick the best option in the future.



the 'indie' route after becoming disillusioned with long-winded process of traditional publishing houses.

Gittins likens it to the film industry: "Back in the day, you wanted Warner Brothers to produce your film. Now you want to do an indie film and you want to premiere it at Sundance because that's where the really creative juicy stuff is coming from. It can be quite lucrative if you already have an audience that you can direct to Blurb."

She gives the example of US fitness guru David Kirsch, whose brand spans across books, DVDs, diets and vitamin supplements. "He has been picked up by every major publisher. Each time he did a book he said it would take over two years to get it to market from the beginning of the idea, with a million meetings involving everyone who needs to weigh in on it and all kinds of objections.

"And with traditional publishing there are a lot of mouths to feed in the process – the publishers, the designers, the distributor, the retailer – so the author is lucky to see 10-15% of the retail price of the book. Kirsch came to us because he preferred to spend two months working on a book rather than two years."

Gittins says Kirsch's "Butt Book", focusing on buttock exercises, has already sold 30,000 copies, with the author earning an estimated \$6 per book at a retail price of \$15.

By the book: Blurb offers authors the opportunity to self-publish their work



People who aren't already in the public eye may not sell in these volumes. But Gittins insists that it's possible for an unknown first-time author, who self-publishes a quality book on Blurb, to turn a reasonable profit, provided they become self-marketers, using the social media networks they have established on the likes of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and their own blog.

2.8m
the number of
self-published books
in the US in 2010



The Perfume Studio
Selling the experience
of making personalized
created perfume



Making scents: The Perfume Studio's offer runs to team building events

We started out with the idea of selling perfume, but now we sell an experience first and the fragrance second

Robin Taylor, The Perfume Studio

▷ which has given more and more people the opportunity to publish their work, expertise, views and even random thoughts online.

Gittins says Blurb as a self-publishing avenue brings the trend of blogging full circle as content creators not only move back to publishing in the physical form, but market their product via social networks. "Blurb means people can now produce products – not just fun

things – by themselves without having to invest in the means of manufacturing," she says.

"None of these things were previously available to normal people because you would have had to build up manufacturing and distribution. And now because of the internet there is technology where we can aggregate all the individuals and make it economical to do. With social media, these people can reach others with the same interests and passions."

Meanwhile, New Zealand brand WilliamsWarn has only been in operation since April, but founders Ian Williams and Anders Warn believe there is a market for their in-home professional beer making system. Williams says the product is appealing to ex-homebrewers who have been disappointed with the poor quality of their own produce and the complications involved.

Despite being priced around the £3,000 mark, Williams says: "Our message is that you have the ability to make professional quality beer without all the errors that occur in traditional home brewing. It's the same message for those buying an expensive coffee machine.

"The price may come down over time but we are focused on this unit to begin with. It's actually quite cheap considering what it has on it and what it does. [Luxury car brand] Porsche doesn't apologise for quality and neither do we. In blind tastings, our brew beats commercial breweries in taste score. I can't do that in a plastic bucket so some has to be expected."

While both L'Atelier's Clarke and The Perfume Studio's Taylor anticipate mainstream brands will soon start recognising the self-service consumer, Trendwatching's Mason argues a few people will make a lifelong commitment of applying DIY to everything.

"Even for the die-hard DIY enthusiast, there will still be things they need to purchase to support what they are doing, and there are going to be things they don't do themselves," says. "But it could be an opportunity for mainstream brands to help guide the process of consumers doing something themselves."

Mason says there is an opportunity for many businesses to tap into the trend by experimenting with pop-up shops or in-store classes. Alternatively, he suggests: "Brands do it on a smaller level, such as allowing consumers to put the finishing, personalising touch to a product and not have them involve the whole process."

Whether self-service means having consumers create every part of a product or service themselves or simply giving them a stake in the process, Mason says it is a good tactical strategy for brands. Otherwise they risk being left out if people choose to do it themselves. ●