D2C Generation

A new production model is emerging in the studios of young designers, frustrated by traditional outlets for design. Helped by the Internet, which supplies a reliable and economical infrastructure for the development of self-sufficient small businesses, the designer-to-consumer model (D2C) avoids the traditional forms of production and sales, and aims instead to sell small quantities of rare goods to large numbers of customers.

TEXT
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PHOTOS
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Hands on design

Four years ago, while visiting the Brooklyn studio of Jason Miller, something about his set-up struck me as being peculiar and unique within a design office. He had reels of bubble wrap, an inventory of cardboard boxes of all shapes and sizes, and stacks of shipping labels from ups and FedEx; it was a full-blown shipping and receiving area. Packaging materials hold so much potential, in their ability to transport something—anything—in a neatly wrapped parcel to someone else, and Jason was using them to ship his products directly to customers who had contacted him for orders.

Since then shopping baskets have started to appear on industrial designers’ websites, and in great numbers. An online shop exists anywhere there is the Internet, electronic currency is the newest and most global coinage, and the infrastructure of couriers founded over the last century, ups, FedEx and DHL, enables timely, reliable delivery. While some designers like Jasper Morrison and Sam Hecht have opened online shops selling products that were designed for brands, a younger generation of designers is foregoing the typical designer-producer relationship, and manufacturing and selling their own products via the Web.

The industrial design practice that emerged in the 20th century, and is still prominent today, was a business-to-business or designer-to-business service. The designer provided design to a manufacturer who dealt with production and sales. The form of design practice that is emerging now is a business-to-consumer or designer-to-consumer (d2c) model. Here, via online sales or relationships with traditional distributors, designers have become their own manufacturers, or created something analogous to the independent record label in the music industry. A look into the studios of some of the designers taking this approach—Very Good & Proper (vg&p), Rich Brilliant Willing (rbw), Object Design League Company (odlco) and Field—reveals that this model demands a whole new set of skills from the
designer and largely reshapes the organisation of the design studio itself.

In addition to shipping supplies, the D2C studio requires a substantial investment in an online sales, inventory and shipping infrastructure, which can cost up to 30,000 dollars or take months of DIY programming to build. In the absence of a traditional producer, who usually employs engineers and a purchasing staff, D2C designers must guarantee the structural performance of their own products, source their own factories and conduct quality control. While some products are made entirely in a single factory, others are made with parts from a few factories, which requires that assembly take place within the design studio. Small orders can be assembled on a designer’s model-making table, but larger orders can turn the studio into a factory. Though the Internet has democratised marketing, allowing designers to compete for attention with larger manufacturers, the well-crafted e-newsletter and Facebook post require time, writing skills and nuance.

By providing the infrastructure for small businesses to flourish, the Internet is dismantling many of the social and professional structures erected during the industrial era. The D2C design studio parts with the division of labour framed by the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, where each operation in society would be carried out by a specialist trained only for that task. Under the Paretan model, many design manufacturers have evolved into complex teams that include an executive vice president of design, an executive vice president of product development, a colour material and finishing design integration manager, a vice president of operations, a vice president of communications, a chief marketing officer, a senior vice president of sales and distribution, and so on. While the D2C design studios are minuscule in comparison to the largest manufacturers, their founders must wear all of these hats.
In the past decade we have seen many professions, from the music sector to the book and movie industries, transformed by long-tail distribution, outlined at length by Chris Anderson, first in his 2004 article for Wired magazine, and later in his book *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*. The basic principle of the long tail is that large profit can be made by selling small quantities of rare items to many customers, where the industrial-era model would sell greater quantities of a limited number of best-sellers. Consumer taste is being redefined by this principle, as individuals find that unique items are easier to access via the Web, and the D2C studio depends on customers’ willingness to trust their lesser-known brands.
The Canteen Chairs and Stools are among the first designs by VG&P. The development of these products is financed by the Canteen Group’s interior design budget, which also paid for the moulds of the cast aluminium legs of the Canteen Table and the development of the Covent Garden Club Chair with a British maker of upholstered car seats.

The D2C design studio also shares aspects of pre-industrial production, where the designer and maker were often the same person, and the consumer (though they weren’t called that back then) bought directly from the maker. Though the D2C model sells internationally, it relies on local factories, small and medium-sized outfits that are in many instances family owned. Lana Swartz, a researcher at the University of Southern California who studies money as a socio-technical practice, has called this “trans-local”, where “you buy from someone else’s local”. This production approach has been welcomed by a wide body of consumers who have grown weary of large manufacturers with veiled factories and practices, and who instead support locally and transparently made products. The D2C studios, more than the large manufacturers, tend to celebrate the production of their goods, citing
the places where their pieces are manufactured and showing photographs from factory floors. This is doing wonders for alienated customers who haven’t the first clue where or how the products they buy are made. And though the products that the D2C studios make are by and large luxury goods, 80-dollar pen holders and 1,200-dollar floor lamps, these studios are helping to create a general awareness of how everyday products come into being. Kmart would be kind to follow suit.

Companies and factories have been successfully set up by designers before. In 1942, the Plyformed Wood Company was founded by Charles and Ray Eames, John Entenza and partners who included Herbert Matter and Harry Bertoia to manufacture moulded plywood splints for the US Navy. Azucena was founded in 1947 by the architects Luigi Caccia Dominioni, Corrado Corradi Dell’Acqua, Ignazio Gardella, Maria Teresa and Franca Tosi to fill a gap in the Italian market for modern furniture. Since 1963 Ingo Maurer has been developing and selling his own designs, initially through a company called Design M, which later evolved into Ingo Maurer GmbH. In each case the designer had to oversee production because there was no ready avenue for what they had in mind. The Eames splints pioneered a new production technique that no existing factory was equipped to employ. Azucena, like many other early producers of modern furniture, was hedging its future on the belief that its products would be embraced by the public. Ingo Maurer’s lamps were so eccentric that even the most fanciful of lighting producers may not have embraced them. Jason Miller ended up following a similar path to Maurer’s, creating his own lighting company, Roll & Hill, which fills a gap in the lighting market for contemporary chandeliers.

In contrast to these examples, the recent D2C uptstarts are producing products that could be made by any number of existing brands. It’s not so much the products that are novel in type
as the use of the Web infrastructures used to distribute them. Many of the D2C designers I spoke to decided to create their own businesses out of frustration with the existing outlets for young designers. Some complained about brands that expected them to work for free, in exchange for publicity, a common problem that plagues young independent designers. Others criticised manufacturers for being aloof, slow in their response times surrounding product development, and poor in their outward communication of the finished products. Caroline Linder and Lisa Smith, co-founders of Ovolo, stated that the costs of exhibiting at the New York Gift Fair were too high in proportion to the sales they made there, and it was less expensive and easier for them to sell their products through local shops in Chicago.

But the freedoms gained with the D2C model don’t come without losses. By taking on all the roles that make up a traditional brand themselves, the D2C start-ups lose the valuable input of the client, the expertise of seasoned product engineers, the business experience of management teams, and the robust development budgets that large manufacturers have.

Once, describing her own planning job for CB2, where the company’s president Frank Stanton provided invaluable support, Florence Knoll said, “I think a designer is only as good as his client.” It’s no wonder that many of the best products consistently come from the best brands, where visionary leaders and designers challenge each other along the development process. Konstantin Grcic has described this designer-client relationship as a ping-pong game. And though most independent designers never manage to play with such skilled opponents as Grcic does, the D2C designer plays largely alone.

With the exception of Jonah Takagi, who founded Field with his friend and business mind Daniel Thomas, the designers behind D2C companies generally shoulder the management side of their brands. They must enter the land of Excel spreadsheets and profit-and-loss statements, and often without any formal training on how to do so. Lacking the hearty development or production budgets of the best manufacturers, the D2C designer is often limited to working with known and readily available materials and techniques. Many of their products are made with milled wood, cut marble, laser-cut sheet metals and bent steel tube, which all lend a common aesthetic to many D2C products, one defined by the rawness and simplicity of the materials used.

But as these young entrepreneurs begin to find resourceful ways of building development capital, their products are becoming more sophisticated, employing LEDs and alloy castings.

André Klauser and Ed Carpenter of VG&P use the budget given to them for the interior design of the Canteen restaurant group to fund the development and tooling for furniture pieces.
These are first used to outfit the restaurant, and later produced as vc&p products. odloco raised cash to make their Wabi Nabe cast-iron cooking pot through Kickstarter, and after the initial production run are able to sell the design via their online shop. With an initial investment of 2,100 dollars, Field was able to cut the tool needed to produce the die-cast aluminium Loop Bottle Opener, designed by Oscar Diaz. rbw is using an approach that is common among Italian furniture producers, where first a prototype of an idea is shown, and if interest and orders materialise, then the design is developed for production. An order of 400 lamps from a hotel allowed rbw to put their lamp through ul testing, and to finance the printing of a custom led circuit board.
Housed in a brick building on the outskirts of Chicago, which was originally a warehouse for the nearby Fulton market, the ODLCO headquarters comprises an office, production micro-units, and storage space.

It is telling that many of today’s young designers are successfully opting for the D2C model; telling that too many of the traditional manufactures offer too little to the independent designer; illustrative of the fact that the Internet is eliminating many of the costs that would have prohibited a young designer from going into business for himself a decade ago; and expressive of consumers’ interest in home-grown, independently initiated product design over mass-marketeted best-sellers.

While the D2C model is new, and it demands a new set of skills from the designer, the products emerging from it remain somewhat conservative. Though some D2cers have found inventive ways around constrained development budgets, the D2C products launched thus far assume many typological norms established by existing design brands. We have yet to see if the D2C model will venture into products that are as novel as the distribution model itself. After all, those packaging materials in the D2C studios have enormous potential. They could ship... anything.

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