

'Not my news'

BY LIZ TORLÉE

The quest for ultra-customization signals an increasingly inward looking culture

Overheard at Toronto's airport recently: Woman 1: "Wasn't it awful, that tornado in Kentucky-quite a few killed."

Woman 2: "What tornado?"

Woman 1: "Oh, have you been away? It's been all over the news."

Woman 2: "Not my news. I don't get that stuff."

Well, now there's a new concept. Not my news. The second woman went on to explain that she no longer watches TV news, only gets the paper for her daily Sudoku fix and has customized her home page to receive just good news, news about her personal interests (photography, I gathered) and "some business things." I was dying to ask her what "things" specifically but eavesdropping has its limits.

This conversation was particularly interesting because similar comments keep surfacing in infield work across many different age groups. On the subject of news, it's clear that some people are at least one hurricane and a couple of contested elections behind. They are "taking a rest from it all," they say, slightly defensively. It seems there is a growing "headline fatigue" these days. Large scale bad news, especially when laced with melodrama from various mythical "headquarters" with names like Operation Blood and Gore, is not only draining, it's losing its ability to shock. People are developing an immunity and, both literally and mentally, they are tuning out. In some cases, like Woman 2, they are taking the news into their own hands.

More telling, however, is that this is a manifestation of ultra-customization. Ordinary customization is now almost taken for granted. The ability to hand-pick your entertainment packages, personalize your next vacation and design running shoes online that are delivered to your door, barely warrants a sigh of appreciation. ("Yeah. So," was all one 17-year-old male was able to muster when asked for his feelings about this running shoe.) But ultra-customization takes things a step or two further and actually begins to change your life. There are basically three root causes:

1) Status anxiety and the need to matter more (if only to yourself).

Ultra-customization is one way rich people can keep proving how rich they are. Terry de Gunzburg, who used to work with Yves St. Laurent, says "I found the world of luxury slipping into standardization...it was inevitable that we would swing back to a thirst for elegance and personalization." With this in mind, she founded By Terry, a boutique in Paris where you can customize, for example, your very own lipstick that virtually requires your DNA and planetary alignments. It is designed and created solely for you-to reflect your "essence" in its colour, texture, style, shine, sheen, etc. And the cost? About US\$1,200. (But surely you're worth it.)

2) The need to retreat and protect ourselves from all the slings and arrows.

This is where customization is the active saying of "No." Opting out. Unplugging. It begins with simple things like refusing to give your phone number or e-mail address to people in certain stores when they pretend to be doing customer relationship management. This means you don't get that store's seasonal mailings and you escape a few telemarketing calls and 3 a.m. faxes about computer parts. And, if you really work at it, it can go all the way to protecting yourself from bad news.

3) The need for control over life itself.

There's a lot of talk about control but most people still don't feel they're in it. It takes more skill, stamina and vitamins to get through any day, it seems. Technology, although it can often make things even more complicated, is now increasingly used to customize and ironically, to disconnect, from "things that don't matter" as one 32-year-old budding city planner put it.

Whatever the reason, ultra-customizers are becoming more self-aware and self-centred. With their customized newsletters, magazines and websites, their manipulation of live TV, the banishment of the unwanted from their mailboxes and chat groups, their daily-life gadgets fixed to their belts and their iPods clamped firmly in their ears, they receive only the people, the music, the news, the entertainment-and the advertising-that they want.

Sounds pretty good. But there is a worrying flipside. This not only cocoons them in their own world but prevents them from hearing anybody else's opinion, let alone their sales message. They are shutting out the hopes, dreams and dastardly plans of the rest of the world. There is a kind of counter-social thing happening here. The more we are able to connect to and manipulate the things we like, the more isolated we are becoming.

For marketers, identifying and reaching the target audience, already a mind-bending exercise, will get tougher and tougher. It's going to require a whole new approach to planning-better spies and infiltration experts and keener observational and tracking skills will certainly be needed. In the meantime, eavesdropping is good practice.

LIZ TORLÉE is Joint Managing Director of TerraNova Market Strategies Inc.
www.terranova-msi.com