

Nowadays, a number of nations are in a dramatic era of *mass customization*...in fact, I'm going to throw in a key adjective here: many nations really are in an era of *supercharged mass customization*. And even the poorest consumers in a place like America can benefit from that supercharged mass customization!

For this podcast episode's topic, the challenge is that many really smart folks have never even heard the term "mass customization," but the ironic thing is, they have very smartly taken advantage of mass customization many times! That may well include you! So...just what *are* we really talking about here?

Well, here's a definition according to Investopedia: "mass customization is the process of producing affordable market goods and services that are customized to meet a specific customer's needs." Let me repeat that, and then unpack that just a bit. "*Mass customization is the process of producing affordable market goods and services that are customized to meet a specific customer's needs.*"

Of course, for starters, the reality of routine opportunity for mass customization requires a free-market economy full of robust consumer choices. So, a sad percentage of folks around the world don't enjoy the measure of economic freedom that fosters mass customization—they live in communist countries like Cuba or in socialist countries like Venezuela where economic sanity has been severely compromised.

But generally free-market economies foster mass customization, and the outcome can be simple but very powerful: over the long haul, consumers are highly favored with increasing choice for competing goods and services. Now there's a legendary story about a kind of modern start of that...a story dating back about a century ago. Several renderings of that story float around, but this version rings true...

Henry Ford established a level of strong market leadership in the still-young auto industry when Ford Motor Company created assembly lines for production efficiency, lower product cost, better consumer affordability, and much higher worker wages. As part of that, Ford started offering his very popular "Model T" only in the color black. Even though Ford had previously offered other colors like blue and green, he wanted to keep his production costs low with uniform processes, so Ford reportedly said, "Any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black." Yep, no choice...same color for all.

Then the story unfolds. Competitors like General Motors moved in with many choices for consumers, not just colors but in design and features, you know, like GM's range of brands: Chevrolet, GMC, Cadillac, and Buick. To some business historians, this story of increased consumer choice is an approximate but representative marker of the beginning of a sea-change from the "production era" to the "consumer era."

Whatever the historical marker that signifies such a launch, the past hundred years have brought forth radical competition in many products and services in generally free-market spaces like America. What happened is that a large part of consumer activity developed and then migrated *from mass production* that drove mass affordability for consumers using production lines like Ford *to mass customization* that also gives a tremendous range of choices at low cost. That's right: the "mass" dimension works to drive low costs for lots of customers, but the "customization" dimension also works to provide a mind-blowing slate of choices. Nowadays, that potent combination is supercharged by amazing digital infrastructure.

Wait, you might be saying, why is this important to me in my workplace? And the answer is simple: any enterprise seeking to provide cutting-edge goods and services in a free-market economy *must* answer the challenge of affordable value *and* a wide range of consumer choice. *If you don't, your competitors will!*

The really cool thing is, we can learn a whole lot about mass customization by taking a quick glimpse at multiple key facets of a company that is currently a clear picture of mass customization success...and it's a company that virtually every consumer in America has experienced—Amazon! So, what we're going to do next is actually list eight core facets of Amazon's approach that are functioning examples and emblems of successful mass customization...yes, as individual facets, but even more powerfully when taken together as a complete package to forge a powerful version of supercharged mass customization. Let's quickly look at those eight features of Amazon.

First and foremost, is a key Amazon mindset that founder Jeff Bezos established. Here's Bezos: "The most important single thing is to focus obsessively on the customer. Our goal is to be earth's most customer-centric company." And that customer obsession centers on *customized choice*—Amazon and its third-party sellers offer a reported *300 million products* via its website. Wow, *that's* enormous customization!

Second, Amazon also obsesses on low consumer costs. Here's another Bezos quote: "Your margin is my opportunity." Here's a translation of that: "your company's higher prices open the door to your customer buying from me instead." *That* is part of a mass "low-prices" mentality in Amazon's equation.

Third, Amazon's collaboration with every one of its customers through each customer's easy self-search and self-select. Amazon built amazing capabilities on its website...on each visit, each customer can surf to a new set of specifically preferred products...multiple times each day, week, or month! Fresh each time.

Fourth is at least three customized "libraries"—first, each individual's official "*browsing history*" is stored...then there's the "*save for later*" feature in the checkout cart area...and there's also the "*buy it again*" list for repeat purchases. You talk about customized for remembering—yeah, *Amazon remembers for you!*

Fifth is Amazon's multi-tiered delivery options and then customized tracking to every address you desire, past and present...then each address is stored for your purchases in the future...with your favorite go-to address auto-defaulted. And when you need to send a purchase to your uncle in Milwaukee, no problem!

Sixth—as if this digital platform for countless third-party sellers and consumers wasn't stunning enough—other people can enter into the mix of possibilities...like folks registering for baby or wedding gifts with their own customized delivery addresses embedded and an opportunity for your customized messaging.

Seventh, multiple payment options for using and storing, you know, like your credit cards and gift cards, all the way to using reward points of affiliates like American Express. Yes, *fresh customization each time!*

Eighth, how about "pure" digital delivery of numerous Amazon prime entertainment features like movies?

Look, the ultimate power here is in *the near-infinite mixing and matching* of these eight dimensions *and more*—Amazon has created a near-unlimited kaleidoscope of customization choices...not just once, but each time you visit the site. *Evergreen mass customization experiences* keep millions returning to Amazon!

Wow, so Amazon must dominate retail spending in the U.S., right? Absolutely not! One estimate is, e-commerce sales represented just 17.9% of total retail sales in the U.S. in 2023...and Amazon reportedly represents about 37% of that. So that calculates to Amazon having only about 6.6% of total U.S. retail.

That's not even close to dominant. But the happy reality is that countless competitors to Amazon have been compelled to respond to Amazon's success at evergreening mass customization...not least is its competitor Walmart! And who ultimately wins with all this? Consumers, producers, vendors, truck drivers, workers...and mass customization will continue to grow because it works to facilitate great collaboration in the marketplace and real betterment for consumers who vote every day with their pocketbooks. Of course, this kind of mass customization has extended into other arenas such as financial-services sites like Schwab, where customers can constantly self-customize their financial future to their hearts' content!

But the *truly* supercharged mass customization—done better than anything else in all history—came at the Cross. Jesus's death and resurrection was a mass offering to all...yes, to whoever calls upon the name of Jesus for eternal life (John 3:16)! He opened up a relationship with the living God—the greatest service offering of all time! But that relationship is not a standardized, impersonal set of rituals—it's a personal, ebb-and-flow relationship with God Himself—uniquely customized to each individual! And, in order to serve best, the believer collaborates and customizes with God in obedience to the Word and Spirit!

So, with Amazon, Schwab, and the like, we live in a privileged era of supercharged mass customization. But, for two millennia believers in Christ not only have hope and the gift of eternal life, they are privileged to live each day in the joy of extraordinary *Spirit-led* customization of service to others! *That's crazy good!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Do you find it constantly astounding at how hard that businesspeople work at places like Amazon and Walmart to help you live with extraordinary customization not even in the “dreamable” category just a few years ago? If not, why not...do you take it for granted? If so, do you consistently thank God for living in this era?

2. Is your workplace consistently working to ensure that it doesn't get torpedoed by current or emerging competitors—those enterprises that are working out Amazon-types of processes to serve your constituents better than you are? If so, be specific as to how you are doing that. If not, why not?

3. Isn't it stunning that Christ died for every person in the world at the Cross (“God our Savior desires all people to be saved” 1 Timothy 2:4)? That's the unique offering that is freely available to all! And isn't it just as stunning that believers collaborate in Spirit-led lives that manifest as uniquely customized opportunities to others...“*mass customization*”? Discuss.