

# Do Take It Personally

Putting the 'me' and 'I' in merchandise

BY JOE KNUTSON

**T**he Millennial generation is changing the way goods and services are consumed. Music is purchased in digital format, and books are headed in the same direction—with implications for those of us in the gift world.

Millennials demand a wide selection and competitive prices. They can find the lowest price with their smart phone and they share what they love with a cadre of friends through social networks. There is a way to not only survive this shift, but also to even thrive because of it.

That way is with personalized gifts.

Until recently, personalized gifts have pretty much been limited to embossed Bibles.

While technology has made personalization much more widely adaptable and available, it is not new. Consider that one of the first accounts of personalization comes from Exodus 28, in which the breastplate made for the high priest, Aaron, was adorned with 12 precious gems engraved with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel.

In the course of history, personalizing something meant handiwork by a highly skilled artisan—pricing it out of reach of most people. But with the advance of technology, machines are replacing that individual—bringing personalization to the average person.

## Versatility

Today there are a wide variety of machines catering to the retail environment, putting the power of personalization into the hand of the local merchant.

A category that is versatile, which creates an experience in the store and often carries wider margins, personalization is showing tremendous growth. The addition



**TOP LEFT:** A variety of products, including wall clocks, can be personalized according to the customer's wishes; **TOP RIGHT:** This Faith, Hope & Love mirror was inscribed for a wedding gift; **BOTTOM LEFT:** This aluminum dog tag can be used as a luggage tag, attached to a keyring or worn as a necklace; **BOTTOM RIGHT:** A pocket knife with a name engraved can make a special gift.

of personalized merchandise does not require the reinvention of your store; it is an added service that can adapt and enhance the best you currently offer.

And while trends come and go, personalization is adaptable across a wide variety of products and demographics. From sippy cups for kids to pocket knives for guys and

jewelry for women, nearly everything in the market can be personalized.

Purchase an Apple product online and part of the checkout process includes the ability to have it personalized. Thumb through a Williams-Sonoma catalog and you will find more than half of the high-end kitchen products can be personalized. »

Capital One Visa even allows the personalization of banking services by putting a picture of your choice on their credit cards.

The point is, savvy retailers are taking their core business and making it even better through personalization.

Personalized gifts can capture special moments and preserve them—a personalized wedding gift may follow a couple through their entire lives.

For a Christian retailer, personalization can become a part of their ministry to customers, providing a service that brings customers back to commemorate, celebrate, acknowledge and capture the emotional impact of other life moments and passages.

Some personalization programs, like P. Graham Dunn's in-store laser systems, can be something of a draw in and of themselves, creating a dynamic experience for the shopper. Not only can customers personalize gifts,

may not have been available.

But with today's technology, the greatest benefit of personalization is the sheer adaptability. Gifts can become a blank canvas. Beyond simply adding a name to a gift, merchants can engrave special messages for holidays, like Mother's Day, Father's Day, Pastor's Appreciation Day, Valentine's Day, birthdays and more.

How many stores carry 37th wedding anniversary gifts? Or drop in a logo and sell business-to-business, or cater to boosters at a local high school? The best personalization systems allow for a wide variety of products and flexibility of design.

Advances in technology are putting personalization into the hands of more people. Computer software enables consumers to design their own products online. In-store systems can allow for a great deal of design and can essentially put the power of production into the hands of the merchant.

Some personalization programs offer greater rewards of gross margin. Generally, the greater degree of input by the merchant, the greater the gross margin.

As with any endeavor, one must weigh the pros and cons. The greater the extent of customization available, the more investment in labor that is required. Some personalized programs offer a great deal of cus-

tomization. Subsequently, there is more design time by the store employee, more input from the customer and more communication of the idea.

Personalization is a service that requires a great deal of communication. Sometimes things are lost in communication, and the result is wasted time, energy and product. Showing care in the process will ensure mistakes are minimized and customers are pleased with the results.

The biggest pitfall, however, is missed opportunities. Some retailers decide that they do not want to be bothered with personalizing merchandise and therefore hide the machinery in a back room. A Canadian retailer with one of our personalization systems has told how installing it has added traffic—the

experience of seeing the machine operate creates excitement.

## Opportunity

How do you ensure success with personalization? First and foremost, you must educate your customers. Unless you've been offering this category of gifts for some time, they need to be aware of the new service you are offering.

You will also need to keep close tabs on labor. Personalization may require a good deal of communication and design time. Take advantage of the technology. Push your system to the limit and never miss an opportunity to sell. Distinguish yourself from online vendors and never underestimate the power of immediate gratification.

Reduce propensity for mistakes: Have your customers double-check a design before the product is created. Get the greatest number of turns. Anytime a machine you've invested in is idle, it is missed opportunity.

Shops that offer a deep selection and the ability to personalize a gift for any occasion will positively impact their conversion rate and be the place customers come for last-minute gifts.

Finally, think outside the box. Many of the systems available nowadays offer a great deal of versatility and can cater to personalize nearly anything you can imagine.

If the past is any indication of the future, we will see personalization fall into the hands of a greater number of merchants. Moreover, the process will continue to get easier as the options expand. Personalization will fall into the hands of your best salespeople and not the most technically gifted. Personalized products will be cheaper to produce, and quality will climb.

The future is promising for personalized gifts. Each advancement makes the process easier and allows for greater diversity of product. **igm**



Shown here in one of P. Graham Dunn's retail locations, the laser-engraving machine serves those who wish to personalize products.

but they are actively a part of the process and able to watch the laser engrave their design.

For some stores, the process may not be as high-tech; it could be staff hand-painting ornaments during the Christmas season. PetSmart uses a stand-alone kiosk for producing laser-engraved pet tags.

In all cases, though, the consumer is treated to the process of personalization.

## Adaptability

Traditionally, offering personalized gifts meant carrying a great deal of merchandise. Many of us remember—and may still have—racks of mugs with various names already personalized. To avoid missing opportunities, you would have to go deep on common names, and yet often the name your customer was looking for

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