

Customise yourself into a life of luxury

Almost any product now can be tailor-made, but those exclusive looks comes at a cost, writes **Katrina Nicholas** in Singapore.

New North American company zzzPhone allows consumers to pick and choose features from an online menu and customise a mobile phone. Fancy the Nokia N95 but want it in pink with gold trim? That'll be \$US178 (\$184). Engrave your own message, add an extra-life-battery, install a few pre-loaded movies, games and songs and expect to pay \$US251.

zzzPhone has its own assembly plant near Shenzhen, home to the Chinese factories of Nokia, Motorola and Palm. It claims this allows it to secure unbeatable pricing on parts and then ship direct to customers.

Those in the mobile phone industry proper say good luck to zzzPhone actually ever making a profit.

In today's day and age, where luxury has become a global mass marketing phenomena, almost any product is capable of being fully customised, but at what cost?

Still, now that Prada sunglasses adorn the faces of pimply teenagers the world over and Louis Vuitton monograms rub shoulders with McDonald's arches, it's little wonder consumers accustomed to an experience at once both private and privileged crave something they can call their very own.

"It's a small market but there's big demand for customisation," says Kjell Grant, an industrial designer whose products sell in Japan, the United States, Europe and Australia.

"I teach my students design for the international marketplace, the reason being manufacturers can get more money for the goods. You might find a piece of furniture in [retailer] Space for \$1200 but with additional detailing it's \$2400. Consumers don't mind paying."

One of Grant's former students (he teaches at Melbourne's RMIT University) is Oliver Field, a concept designer with Schiavello, which specialises in custom-designed office furniture and fittings.

Field, who takes inspiration from the quirky poetry of A. A. Milne, was the brains behind Schiavello's hedge seat, a futuristic looking squiggly lounge which allows people to either slip in between its folds or stretch it out for more room.

According to Field, even in stock standard workplaces, customisation most definitely has a place.

"We're finding office furniture is changing as the way people interact with technology changes," he says. "Formal work areas are opening up, work surfaces are getting smaller and communal areas are getting bigger."

Another of Schiavello's popular products is the i.box, a freestanding four-walled glass cube which can be used as an office, meeting space or breakout area.

Unique in itself, the i.box can be further customised with string curtains, pin boards and graphics.

Schiavello managing director Peter Schiavello, whose father started the company in 1966 on the premise that no two clients are alike, says there's a growing appreciation and understanding of good design.

"It could be something that's functional, or unique or expressive — the days when you could just throw something in the backyard are probably behind us," he says.

But with customisation comes expense. Schiavello's manufacturing plant in Melbourne's Tullamarine is stocked with state-of-the-art machines from Europe and Japan, and the latest in CAD/CAM automation software.

"When you're producing the same product you can just set up a [production] line and run a plant with unskilled labour," Schiavello says.

"With customisation you need people with

a much higher level of technical expertise who understand what is and isn't possible. You get what you pay for. With a cheaper product you might save money, but it won't create the environment you wanted for your business."

Although customisation as a concept has been around for many years, its inception



can possibly be traced back to the French fashion houses where haute couture has always had a place.

Arguably the most prestigious and exclusive fashion house is Hermes. Although listed on the Paris stock exchange, it still counts the Hermes family as big shareholders and hasn't, like many other luxury brands, become part of a huge fashion conglomerate, despite persistent speculation.

At a workshop above Hermes' offices on 24 rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré, Paris, five tradesmen work on between 20 and 30 Hermes special orders a month.

A special order is any item which is slightly different from what is sold in store and can take many months to complete. More unusual requests have included a signature Kelly bag made from denim and kimono, a scabbard and a lampshade.

However, according to Hermes Australia managing director Karin Upton-Baker, even the company's regular leathergoods are hand made, with the level of craftsmanship reflected in their price.

A Kelly bag, for example, made famous when it appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1956, carried by Grace Kelly to disguise her pregnancy, costs about \$8000 for a basic version, and stretches to \$27,000 if a client wants diamond and platinum hardware. With more than 2600 hand stitches, waiting lists, some exceeding five years, exist in most countries.

"I think as the market expands there will always be people who search for something no one else has," Upton-Baker says.

"Plus we've seen incredible growth in wealth in markets like Russia where price really isn't an object."

Upton-Baker agrees that on paper, Hermes' business model looks like it wouldn't fly.

"There isn't any

compromise. Of course, that sacrifices short-term profits, but the company takes a longer-term view."

Financially, however, it's tracking relatively well. Revenues grew from €1.5 billion (\$2.5 billion) for the 12 months to December 31, 2006, to €1.6 billion in 2007 and the company has been able to reduce the percentage of sales devoted to selling and administrative costs, resulting in bottom-line growth of 7 per cent.

From high-end fashion to cutting edge technology, Dell was one of the first industrial companies to embrace customisation. Since 1996, Dell's customers have been able to build a computer online, tailoring the end product to suit both budget and technical requirements.

Ken Ding, regional director at Dell's design centre in Singapore, says consumers are not only demanding a product that's customised, but one that also boasts a sophisticated design.

Dell's new crystal screen monitor, for example, resembles a transparent sheet of glass and has speakers and a webcam embedded.

"Consumers are attracted to elegance in design also," Ding says. "As notebooks replace desktops and are carried around, they're becoming fashion items."

Other industries have jumped on the custom-designed bandwagon, including car makers, for whom customisation has now become a distinguishing factor.

Although automobiles obviously can't be crafted individually like handbags, manufacturers are modifying their processes to better fulfil consumers' desire for something different.

Earlier this year Fiat launched the new Fiat 500 Pepita, modified by Studio M in Italy. For €60,000, it comes with a covering of 24-carat gold paint, Swarovski crystals embedded into the gear stick, hand brake and pedals, cashmere floor mats and a choice of crocodile, snake, shark, skate or lizard-skin seat covers.

BMW meanwhile, whose brands also include MINI and Rolls-Royce, allows people to customise their car model of choice online before heading to a showroom. For a vehicle like the MINI, that goes well beyond exterior colour and seat trim, with optional extras ranging from bonnet stripes to satellite navigation.

Such is the level of customisation possible that at any given point in time on one of the company's BMW 3 series production lines, no two cars are the same.



"The amount of flexibility we offer means you can order a car today and up to six days before it is built change any option," BMW Australia marketing manager Tom Noble says. "Our cars are luxury goods and exclusivity is incredibly important to us."

Noble says the customisation options BMW offers means its production plants in Germany, the United States and South Africa would look quite different to, say, Toyota's.

"Just the logistics involved means you need to set up things in a way so they're easily changed," he says.

But while BMW can technically design and create a completely unique car (it has been done once or twice for wealthy Japanese consumers with several million to spare), Noble doesn't see that degree of customisation ever taking off.

Before he joined BMW, he used to work for Nike and watched with interest the rise of the customised sneaker.

"What people quickly realised is that designers get paid for a reason," he says.

"What might look cool in 2D often doesn't look so hot when it comes back in a box.

"Really what people are looking for is exclusivity and individuality. You don't need a fully customised product to do that."



Get them tailor-made . . . clockwise from below, a BMW car, Schiavello furniture (the company's 101 chair is pictured), a Dell personal computer or a Hermes Kelly bag.

