

Is crowdsourcing killing the traditional design industry?  
September 1, 2009 | By Angelina Russo



If you're under thirty and you wear t-shirts, then you've probably heard of [Threadless.com](http://Threadless.com).

In 2000, Jake Nickell and Jacob DeHart launched a website where people could submit designs for t-shirts and the public would vote on the ones they liked best. The winner would receive free t-shirts with their design and the t-shirt would go into production so that anyone could buy them.

What sounds like a simple process of audience participation turned into a multimillion-dollar enterprise with a network of over 76,000 Facebook fans, thousands of designs and a seemingly endless market for expansion.

This stunningly simple idea has successfully transformed into an innovative business. Threadless.com represents the heart of crowdsourcing design; audiences engage in the creation and critique of new products and services.

So what happens when you're concerned about products with design faults? Well, you could complain about it or, if you're like the team managed by Maxim Schram in the Netherlands, you could redesign the product yourself.

In 2007, Schram founded [redesignme.com](http://redesignme.com), an organisation to help companies innovate through co-creation. Built on the understanding that end-users have huge creative potential, redesignme.com provides a service that supports organisations that don't have the tools or expertise to harvest the creativity of their customers.

This is how it works. Companies upload a product that is already on the market and needs an upgrade, or products that have not yet been launched. Users post comments on the design and develop new versions, which they then upload. Each new design is rewarded with a virtual amount of money - RDM - which can be used to buy real products from Redesignme.

Welcome to the fledgling world of crowdsourced design.

Design practice has a pretty long history of participatory design where users have become involved in the creation of products and services. For the most part, this has occurred at the periphery - you won't find too many glamorous design magazines that feature this type of audience engagement in the design process.

Yet, increasingly, we are seeing new design-related magazines and websites that call on the crowd to both create and participate in critiquing design.

[Ready Made: Instructions for Everyday Life](#), a design magazine and associated website, focuses on facilitating the production of design by providing readers with examples, instructions and reviews on how "amateurs" can create their own design objects. Ellen Lupton's [DIY: Design it Yourself](#) book and website works on the assumption that if you have access to design tools then you too can create and critique with the best of them.

In all of these examples, we are witnessing ways in which crowdsourcing can become embedded in the client/creator process. Some of the benefits include:

- The client receives a product that is audience-tested in the selling environment.
- Products are demand-driven - crowdsourcing can indicate whether the product will be popular or successful, thereby limiting risk for producers when developing new products.
- Crowdsourcing design produces a saleable experience that engages audiences in unique ways.

So what does this mean for design practice? If the answer to new products and services is out there in the crowd rather than with the designer you just employed, what will happen to established industries? Will we need to educate a new generation of designers to both embrace crowdsourcing and its outcomes on products, services and experiences? And is that enough?

Designers have held a central position in the relationship between client and product, bringing their skills and experience to the process. What will change when clients are able to engage with and respond to crowdsourced solutions? And what mechanisms can designers put in place to take advantage of the increased capacity and capability that can come from working in partnership with the crowd?

The ways in which this will play out are as yet unknown. The next few years will determine where and how designers engage in crowdsourcing to the benefit or demise of their profession.

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