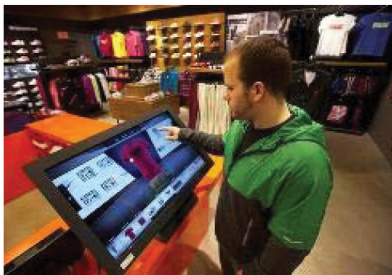




Customized gifts, from food to shoes, are popular this year

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Enlarge

Kenneth Coffee works on customizing a T-shirt based on designs provided by Nike at a Finish Line store in the Indianapolis area.

By **Jayne O'Donnell, USA TODAY**

What says you care more than, say, a mattress with a love note on the label, beef jerky in your favorite flavor combination or Oxfords or loafers in your college team's colors?

Given the growth in custom products, now being touted as the perfect gifts for the holidays, it appears nothing can quite compare. Shirts, shoes, beds and baubles that are truly "you" are more popular than ever, thanks to all the social-media emphasis on our tastes and traits.

"People are looking to find a way to express their individuality, their uniqueness, to the world," says John Long, a retail strategist at consulting firm Kurt

Salmon Associates. "Everybody is looking at a greater level of personalization."

PHOTO GALLERY: [Retailers offer custom gift options](#)

Retailers and manufacturers are more than happy to comply.

Monogrammed clothes, towels and totes may have been around for decades. But now you can really design almost any type of apparel, food or shoe on a growing number of websites.

Prefer garlic, brown-sugar glaze and grass-fed beef in your jerky? Check out [SlantShack Jerky](#). Know that your wife wants a purse that couldn't pass for anyone else's? [Laudi Vidni](#) ("individual" spelled backward) lets you design her (or your own) handbag. Want her to know you care enough to pick the placement of the stones on her ring? Try [Gemvara](#).

More custom offerings:

A shoe-in

High-end shoe-seller [Allen Edmonds](#) lets you customize your shoe down to the soles, color, style and type of leather. A pair of green and red oxfords is decorating the windows of Allen Edmonds stores, but the shoes can be mainstream or as wild as blue and white for your alma mater. The company has been customizing for so long, it has built many of its customers' preferences into their in-stock offerings, but it finds people still like to special order or buy gift cards for custom shoes for the holidays. Custom shoes range from \$375 to \$450.

Create your own magic

Evan Saks, right, a former [1-800-Mattress](#) executive, started [Create-A-Mattress](#) this year because he decided people weren't getting what they really wanted from mainstream sellers. Or they were paying too much for it. He says getting a pillow-top mattress with isolation coils, a special fabric print and — as one client did recently — the Lord's Prayer on the label, is all possible for up to 60% less than at other retailers. Custom mattresses range from \$369 to \$6,718.

Saks acknowledges "the whole idea of aesthetics on a mattress is a little of an oxymoron," but he finds people do like to personalize them with special fabrics, trim or messages. After all, "However often you change your sheets, you see that little message."

That includes the bachelor who gave himself the gift of a mattress with a label that read, "Where the magic happens."

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Create-A-Mattress founder Evan Saks shows off a custom mattress with a personalized label in a Boston-area bedroom.

Tailored for your wallet

You don't need to go to Italy — or spend a fortune — for a custom tailor. **J. Hilburn**, based in Dallas, will send one of its 650 "style advisers" to your home to custom fit men in shirts, pants, sweaters and coats, for far less than many luxury department stores charge. The company's custom products range from \$79 for a dress shirt to \$185 for "made to measure Italian wool trousers."

"People are finally coming to the point where they want something a little more unique, a little more special, and we're helping them find themselves," says co-founder Veeral Rathod.

Chocolate heaven

Fear the candy world has shunned your taste buds? Design your own chocolates through **Chocomize**, which will combine five of 90 different ingredients with your favorite chocolate and let you choose which charity will get a portion of the purchase price. Bars range from \$4 to \$6 and top out at \$13 for "24-carat gold flakes."

Say it with a T-shirt

Athletic wear retailer **Finish Line** is adding T-shirt customization stations to its stores in partnership with **Nike**, which helped popularize custom sneakers. Now in Orlando, Indianapolis and Staten Island, N.Y., the stations let customers select from dozens of **Nike** T-shirt designs and personalize them with names, sports numbers or favorite sayings. The shirts, made in the Finish Line store while customers wait, average about \$30.

Finish Line President Sam Sato says teens, especially, like to customize items for friends, sometimes with a nickname, shared joke or team name that "bonds them together with their friends."

"It's instant gratification and the cool factor of giving a one-of-a-kind gift," says Sato.



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