

Chapter 13



UNPERFECTION



What's the Trend?

As people seek out more personal and human experiences, brands and creators intentionally focus on using personality, quirkiness and intentional imperfections to be more human and desirable.

Christian Rudder knows more about people than you do.

He's not a body-language expert or behavioral scientist, but he does have access to something that most of us never will: a treasure trove of data about what people find attractive about one another and what they don't.

Rudder is the founder of dating site OkCupid and for the past several years he has been writing a blog called OkTrends about some of the strange and quirky insights that have emerged from all of this data. On the blog, he writes about his small, data-based observations, like how religious people don't seem to care as much about using proper grammar and how most people seem to prefer dating someone from the same race they are.

Thanks to all this dating data, Rudder can also spot underlying trends in behavior that we may not always be able to see.

Around the recent launch of his new book *Dataclysm*, for example, he shared this insight with *BusinessWeek* magazine: "polarizing

looks—people with unique features or lots of tattoos—get 10 percent more messages and dates than conventionally attractive people. A lot of people are put off by them, but the people who like them really like them.”

In other words, we are attracted to people who are more unique and who stand out, even if they happen to be less perfect by traditional measures.

On the surface, this may not be that difficult to believe. Being polarizing helps you stand out—and standing out is usually a good thing when it comes to trying to capture attention through an online dating profile listed alongside hundreds of others.

This principle of us appreciating the imperfect extends far beyond dating, though. Particularly when it comes to a certain type of hideous clothing that sparked a strangely popular national holiday between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Celebrating Ugly

Although no one really knows where or when the first Ugly Christmas Sweater party took place, the authors of the *Ugly Christmas Sweater Party Book* (yes, it’s a real book) suggest that it was probably in Vancouver, Canada, more than a decade ago. The book itself played no small part in anointing the second Friday in December every year as Ugly Christmas Sweater Day, where people hold their own parties and invite guests to don their own ugliest sweater.

The day has become big business, with the NFL and NBA even jumping on the bandwagon and offering a line of team-branded ugly sweaters available for sale online just for the occasion. And for several years now, Bank of America has even been running national television ads featuring ugly sweaters as a new holiday tradition.

While these sweaters may be an example of something ugly becoming popular mainly in jest, some products are succeeding in the real world thanks largest to their intentional ugliness.

Ugg boots are an authentically and unapologetically ugly product. After decades of selling the unique sheepskin boot whose name was inspired by an Australian slang term for ugly, Ugg boots achieved major recognition in 2000 when Oprah declared on her show that she “LOOOOOVES her Ugg boots.”

Since then, the company’s boots have become an iconic fashion accessory worn by celebrities and ordinary people alike—and they are celebrated for their quirky and ugly look. Whether considering the rise of ugly sweater parties or a piece of footwear that has been celebrated in part for its ugliness, the idea that people can derive pleasure in the intentionally imperfect—even if it happens to be ugly—is clear.

Ugliness is one form of imperfection, but it is hardly the only kind that has started to gain popularity.

The Makers of Imperfection

Early in 2014, an article in *The Economist* magazine coined the term “artisanal capitalism” to describe a rise in businesses and individuals creating handmade products and leveraging a growing range of online marketplaces to sell them to one another. It was broadly connected to the Maker Movement: the idea that we now have more technology and tools to be able to make for ourselves things that we previously relied on mass production to create for us.

As 3-D printers start to make their way into homes and tinkering becomes a mindset, it is not hard to imagine a world where this type of person-to-person commerce is the norm.

When it comes to handmade or artisan-built products, imperfection has always been part of the value.

At the online craft marketplace Etsy, some of the most popular sellers list everything from sets of unusual buttons and charms to unique hair accessories and bows for babies. Each product may not be perfect, but you can be almost certain no one else will have anything like it—and that makes it desirable.

The Origins of Imperfection

Astute readers of my *2014 Non-Obvious Trend Report* may realize that this trend is quite similar to one called “Lovable Imperfection” that I had shared in last year’s report.

In that report, I focused on the intersection of flawed yet authentic celebrities (like Jennifer Lawrence) and lovable bad-guy heroes (like Walter White from *Breaking Bad* or Gru from the *Despicable Me* animated films). Those were symbols, I argued, of our desire for imperfection, and we often reward that desire with our attention and emotional investment.

So what is the difference this year? Though subtle, I see the largest change in this idea of *Unperfection* as a move from how we bond with people and connect with them through their imperfections, to *Unperfection* as an ideal that brands, experiences and products are intentionally aiming to create.

This is true even if those creations have more to do with design and an actual product.

Wrong Theory

In September 2014, *Wired* magazine devoted an entire issue and cover to what editor Scott Dadich had come to describe as Wrong Theory.

The idea of intentionally making bad design choices was something he started to embrace when designing the magazine because it added something that he couldn’t quite explain. A little orange bar on the cover, headlines at the end of stories, and overlapping text on images all became intentional design choices.

Why would one of the most respected magazines in the world take this type of gamble with reader’s attention?

There is a delight in seeing something unexpected. Though plenty of studies have illustrated how humans (and babies) prefer symmetry and routinely rate it as more attractive, what Dadich uncovered through leaving convention behind was that there is beauty in the imperfect as well, and that beauty may be far more worthy of celebrating.

Why It Matters

We no longer live in a world where everyone must strive for perfection. In examples from artisanal product sales to how designers are increasingly approaching all types of projects, this idea of making purposefully flawed products, services and experiences as a way to make them unique and desirable is gaining traction. What it means for all of us is that the emotional and personal aspects of an experience that make it memorable may be the exact same ones that might previously have been considered imperfect. The challenge for any of us will be to let those types of moments and features exist and delight customers instead of being removed in each iteration of our own processes.

Who Should Use This Trend?

This trend is important for anyone selling a product or service that has many competitors with similar offerings. The challenge in any crowded marketplace is finding new ways to be unique and stand out. Focusing on *Unperfection* can help you to add more humanity to your products and services and help them to stand out for what they are or for how you describe them.

How to Use This Trend:

- ✓ **Remember, imperfect is different than broken** – Following the news that we throw 300 million tons of food away each year, the European Union declared 2014 the year against food waste. Following the announcement, French supermarket Intermarché created a series of posters featuring “the grotesque apple, the ridiculous potato, the hideous orange, the failed lemon, the disfigured eggplant, the ugly carrot, and the unfortunate clementine.” The posters were a viral success and managed to encourage hundreds of consumers in several pilot locations to purchase this “disfigured” produce at a discount. The point is, sometimes we equate imperfect as being the

same thing as broken or unusable, but as Intermarché illustrated, these perceptions can be changed—it just takes the right creative approach to do it.

- ✓ **Make it purposefully flawed** – When describing his insight for Wrong Theory, *Wired* editor Scott Dadich was sharing the idea that sometimes it may be perfectly acceptable to create something that is purposefully flawed. It is a sentiment that many food manufacturers certainly agree with; consider the rise in so-called artisanal foods, or McDonald’s imperfect new Egg White McMuffin (versus the perfect “hockey puck” regular McMuffin). The idea is, if you can add the flaws on purpose to a product or experience, you can make it more distinctive and perhaps make it seem more natural as well.
- ✓ **Embrace your “flaws”** – For NPR listeners, radio personality Diane Rehm has one of the most easily recognizable voices on the air. Yet for many years she has suffered from a neurological condition known as spasmodic dysphonia, which affects the quality of her voice. Rehm’s “unperfect” voice is part of her personality and charm, and it helps her stand out. Amongst a sea of perfect altos reading the news, her voice offers something different, and millions of loyal listeners reward her for it with their attention.

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The 2016 Perspective

One of the biggest viral social media stories of the past year involved 18 year old Australian Instagram model Essena O'Neill making waves by deleting 2000 pictures “that served no purpose other than self promotion” on her popular Instagram account and renaming her account “Social Media Is Not Real Life.” Over the following weeks, she captivated her half million followers by changing the captions on remaining photos to share truthful stories behind their creation, such as the following caption on a photo of her lying sideways on a beach towel in a bikini:

*NOT REAL LIFE – took over 100 in similar poses trying to make my stomach look good. Would have hardly eaten that day. Would have yelled at my little sister to keep taking them until I was somewhat proud of this
Yep so totally #gross*

In another challenge to the status quo of the world of fashion and beauty, comedienne Amy Schumer posed partially nude in a calendar photo shoot for tire maker Pirelli. Already a rising star for her frequent

mocking of cultural expectations of women (the poster of her solo standup comedy tour features her dressed in a men's suit holding a cigar and a whiskey), Schumer posted the following message about the photoshoot on Twitter: "Beautiful, gross, strong, thin, fat, pretty, ugly, sexy, disgusting, flawless, woman. Thank you @annieleibovitz." Her experience was part of a larger trend towards makeup-free and unretouched images of women and men being shared as part of fashion and entertainment campaigns across the globe.

Even the "Ugly Sweater Party" craze spotlighted in the original trend chapter reached an unexpected milestone late in 2015 when the champion brand of ugly knitwear (Topsy Elves) passed the \$6 million revenue mark and landed on the Inc list of the top 500 fastest growing brands in America at number 258.

As the year went on, a broader embrace of online vulnerability also became commonplace as sharing on social media took a more imperfect turn and many people stopped shying away from sharing the sad, insecure or turbulent times on their lives with friends and family. Rather than being ridiculed, many started to find solace in the virtual sympathy and encouragement of their extended social media network. Seeing more of one another's flaws, in other words, brought out more empathy and understanding for one another.

In 2016, this macro trend toward people and businesses embracing their Unperfection is likely to continue on many levels and create more opportunities for the boldest companies and people who are able to conquer their fears and share something real, different, and bravely honest.

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