

Chapter 5



SIDE QUIRKS



What's the Non-Obvious Trend?

As the global shift toward individualism continues, people of all ages embrace what makes them unique, follow their passion, often start a side business and increasingly appreciate the quirky differences in one another.

A coffee mug is a nearly universal symbol of individuality.

This simple insight is one that the team at online arts and crafts marketplace Etsy uncovered as they prepared in late 2016 to launch their first global brand advertising campaign. The campaign introduced the tagline “Difference Makes Us” and featured an assortment of unique and quirky products (like coffee mugs) which are sold directly to consumers by artistic enthusiasts.

Describing the vision behind the campaign, Etsy CCO Paul Caiozzo said “an important part of this message is: Did you know that something as simple as a coffee cup can reflect what creativity means to you? And on Etsy, there are 200,000 different coffee cups—new, old, antique, used,

vintage—that you can get.”

The site is most popular among consumers who want a unique hand-crafted gift or product and there is plenty of global demand.

Etsy has more than 25 million buying and selling members – and the marketplace usually has close to 40 million items for sale at any one moment, serving buyers and sellers in nearly 200 countries.

Etsy is the ultimate place for anyone to explore their *Side Quirks* – and provides the perfect introduction to this trend. Not only can consumers find the ultimate product to express their individuality, but aspirational entrepreneurs can realize their dreams by expressing their creativity and making money from their passion.

The quest to buy and sell products not available anywhere else has propelled the growth of the site for more than ten years, but the real secret of the site’s success might be because of a global shift that has been decades in the making.

Rise of Individualism

Social scientists describe the societies of the world as holding two seemingly opposite worldviews. “Collectivist” societies value family and group goals over the needs of the individual. In Collectivist cultures like India, China, Korea, Mexico, Japan and most of Africa, the “rules” of society promote working with others, selflessness, and caring for larger extended families.

“Individualistic” cultures, like the USA, Australia, South Africa and most of Europe generally celebrate individual achievement and encourage people to rely on themselves and focus on their immediate families.

Though those classifications have long been accepted as fact, recently researchers have started to test these assumptions.

For example, one team from the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo and Arizona State University led by Professor Igor Grossmann is studying indicators that are commonly associated with individualistic cultures, such as the prevalence of unique baby names, or the percentage of single child or two child families (where kids generally expect and receive more attention than in larger families). Each of these is

considered to be a small piece of evidence supporting the conclusion that individualism has been slowly expanding globally over the past 150 years.

The ground-breaking World Values Survey (WVS) has measured people's values and beliefs across the world since 1981. One of the architects of the survey, social scientist Ron Inglehart, has said that the mission of the WVS is to measure everything from support for gender equality to attitudes toward the family, national identity and culture.

One of the key findings from the survey over the past two decades was a rising prevalence of individualism globally - a shift that is commonly referenced in global brand advertising for everything from cars to mobile devices.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this conclusion is how exactly it has been shaping attitudes over the past decade to encourage positive and negative *Side Quirks* in cultures where you would least expect either to thrive...like across Asia.

Korean Honja, Japanese Hikikomori & Chinese Individualism

When thinking about *Side Quirks*, it is easy to focus on the positive. Individualistic societies tend to celebrate the success of the individual and the quirk that leads them to success. When you consider the example of Asia, individualism is evolving in very different ways than in the West.

Sometimes, the path is not quite so optimistic or empowering. As case in point, let's consider the curious example of the hikikomori in Japan.

The term *hikikomori* is used in Japan to define a reclusive subgenre of (mostly) men who haven't left their homes or interacted with others for at least six months. According to a recent Japanese cabinet survey, there are currently 541,000 young Japanese aged 15 to 39 who could be described as *hikikomori*.

Some have been driven to their solitary existences by failing to live up to societal or parental expectations. Others retreat after being unable to cope with some big conflict. Many end up staying at home with enabling parents who take care of necessities like food and rent.

Part of what makes this type of existence appealing is the easy access

to the Internet and technology which allows *hikikomori* to retreat into the digital world. Shifting to the culture in China, technology plays a similarly enabling role – usually without the same debilitating social isolation.

When former J. Walter Thompson Asia-Pacific CEO and longtime Shanghai resident Tom Doctoroff was interviewed by Asia Society, about the state of individualism in China – he had this to say:

Young people in China use the internet as much more of an emotional engagement with their own identity. They feel they have opportunities to express themselves in ways that they never could in the real world. So they want to liberate who they are or who they aspire to be in a safe way without coloring outside of the lines. That's why the internet is so powerful for Chinese — because it's virtual and it's relatively anonymous and safe.

In China, the path for rising individualism goes through the internet. One example of this is the Chinese video-based network YY which features (among other things) gaming videos and karaoke competitions. In South Korea, it is coming from the rising comfort of people are finding “alone time,” according to one recent survey.

In late 2016 a well-known Korean jobs portal called Saramin asked 1,593 male and female users aged 20 to 30 years old about their preferences and habits. When asked whether the spread of “individualistic culture” and wanting to enjoy more “me-time” was a positive thing, 86% responded yes. In a culture where going out alone was once considered the behavior of a social outcast (*wangda*), a new vocabulary has emerged in recent years to describe a slew of activities that used to be taboo in Korean culture.

On a recent visit to Asia, a Korean colleague of mine shared that *honbap* is the Korean word for eating alone, *honsul* for drinking alone, and *honyeong* for going to the movies alone. “Hon” is the first syllable from the word *honja* (which means to do something alone in Korean) and an online search for “hon” activities now yields hundreds of results.

In the survey, a majority of respondents felt that technology and social media (often described as “selfie culture” which I explored in my

2016 trend *Selfie Confidence*) had enabled more independent thinking and less desire to conform among Korea's youth.

What can the Japanese *hikikomori*, Korean *honda*, and the way Chinese citizens find and explore their identities online tell us about the power of *Side Quirks*? In some cultures, the quirk may not be exploring a hobby for pleasure – but rather finding yourself through the process of crafting your own personal story and identity online.

In other cases, that quirk might actually lead you to building a profitable side business...which has rapidly become a movement all on its own.

Side Hustle

When describing a side hustle, it is usually considered as something cash strapped Millennials do for extra spending money. This is an oversimplification that is best dissected in an article by freelance writer Catherine Baab-Mugira.

Her article defines a side hustle in this way:

Millennials didn't invent the second job, they just branded it. The side hustle offers something worth much more than money: A hedge against feeling stuck and dull and cheated by life. This psychological benefit is the real reason for the Millennial obsession.

...in the best-case scenario, your side hustle can be like a lottery ticket, offering the possibility—however remote—that you just might hit the jackpot and discover that holy grail of gigs. The one that perfectly blends money and love. The one that's coming along any day now.

Baked into this description is a sense of hope and optimism for the future fueled by the side hustle. It offers a purpose that work often does not – and does it in a way that has the potential to lead toward a more desirable career path.

Engaging in your side hustle doesn't always mean you need to quit your day job either. My business partner and friend Paresh Shah is working

on an upcoming book right now called *Lifters* which explores the idea of reconciling having a day job with simultaneously exploring your passion and being a force of inspiration to those around you.

Whether you use it inside the company or as an entrepreneur, the side hustle is an example of how *Side Quirk* is affecting careers, how companies attract and retain employees, and the way that we think about work – even for people who are far older than Millennials. The AARP has a frequent stream of articles and advice for people over 50 years old on how to make money on the side while exploring their more artistic passions – from graphic design to saddle making.

As part of last year's trend of *Optimistic Aging* I also wrote about the growing desire for those over 50 to not only remain active in their retirement, but to do so by starting a second career or entrepreneurial venture that they run on the side while enjoying family, travel and more free time than they ever had during their past working years.

Side Quirks also go far beyond just turning hobbies into business opportunities. It can also help to humanize leaders who need to better connect with employees and stakeholders.

Quirky Leadership

At the Coca-Cola shareholder meetings in 2015, billionaire Warren Buffett joked that he probably had enough money to actually buy the world a Coke – referencing the brand's famous jingle from the 1970s. During the meeting the company's biggest single shareholder then went on to take the stage and play a rendition of the jingle on his ukulele.

The performance offered another side of the world's richest man who is often profiled for his investment savvy and charity but rarely for anything else. Playing the ukulele on stage made him seem just a bit more approachable and human. *Side Quirks* can do that in a unique way for any leader.

Most of us have these special types of skills or personal hobbies – but there was a time when they were mainly hidden from few. Job applicants were encouraged not to get too personal on their resume. Executives led more guarded lives away from the public eye and tended to keep their private passions disguised or rarely seen.

That time has changed.

Today more and more leaders are actively sharing their *Side Quirks* with pride as a way to better relate to their employees and community, lead with authenticity and create more personal connections.

It is something I routinely do with stage audiences and clients as well. Anyone who has worked with me or read my bio probably knows that I hate cauliflower, play the drums and buy far more luggage than I could actually use just because I love it. I even have an entire page on my website (linked in the bottom footer) about my well-documented “cauliphobia” as I have sometimes jokingly called it.

Those are my own side quirks, but there are plenty of other leaders who actively share their own any chance they get. Here are a few examples:

- Current Chairman of Alibaba Jack Ma collects crickets and loves to sing at corporate events (a fact that has been regularly captured on video and posted online)
- Former Twitter CEO Dick Costolo is well known for his hobby of beekeeping and often brought fresh honey to the office.
- Adventure CEO Richard Branson has done everything from riding in a hot air balloon to nearly killing himself when speeding down a mountain on a bike.
- Cisco Systems cofounder Sandy Lerner is a big fan of the medieval sport of jousting. She owns lances, costumes, and raises horses for competition.

What all of these CEOs are illustrating is that it now acceptable and even desirable for leaders to show their interests and personality. In fact, it may be a critical component of helping them to connect with their employees.

Twee Revolution and Generation Z

The final piece of this trend comes from a growing shift in how we define identity and gender. This is mainly driven by the rise of the successors to the millennial generation who are just now entering their teenage years: Generation Z.

In his book *Twee: The Gentle Revolution In Music, Books, Television, Fashion, and Film*, former Spin magazine writer Marc Spitz defines being “Twee” as “the utter dispensing with of ‘cool’ as it’s conveniently known, often in favor of a kind of fetishization of the nerd, the geek, the dork, the virgin.”

This new generation (currently aged between 5 to 19 years old) differs from their Millennial siblings in a few important ways. Most notably, according to a research report from marketing agency Sparks & Honey, they have global social circles, are concerned and aware of the world, and far more likely to come from blended cultural backgrounds.

This mixed background creates a curious duality where they want to fit into the group and feel connected, but also have some small quirks can help you use your personality to stand out. These *Side Quirks* are small nuances in how any of us describe ourselves or see our own self-identity.

In some cases this sense comes from uniquely defining gender in unexpected ways which even led Facebook a few years ago to offer 71 standard gender options for people to identify as – along with an open fill-in-the-blank for those who describe themselves as something not yet listed.

In other cases, it can be driven by a shift in how Millennials use a product that has been around for decades. According to research from the NPD group, sales of so-called artisanal fragrances rose 22 percent last year, making them the fastest growing segment in the fragrances industry. A major driver of this sales boom are millennials who, unlike their parents or grandparents, don’t want to wear the same scent every day. As one shopper who was interviewed about her fragrance choices by BusinessWeek said: “I don’t want to smell like everyone else now. I like to discover new names and buy from small boutiques.”

Why It Matters:

There used to be a global divide between cultures that celebrated individualism and those that did not. Among the ones that did, people were encouraged to find success as an individual but not necessarily encouraged to celebrate the quirks of their personality that make them feel unique and special. These passions and behaviors were once derogatively described as

quirks. Now quirks have a new positive meaning and more people are finding joy in embracing these elements of their personality.

In some cases, *Side Quirks* are leading people to start the businesses or volunteer for the causes they always wanted to start or engage with. In other situations, they are just leading people to feel more independent and comfortable spending time alone without the necessity to have others around. While some cultures will continue to struggle with this shift, leaving behind troubled groups like the Japanese *hikikomori*... the vast majority of the impact from this trend will lead to more consumer empowerment, greater self-esteem and the flexibility and freedom to leave a soul-diminishing career for something better.

How To Use This Trend:

- ✓ **Celebrate achievements** – One of the hallmarks of this trend is that people like and expect to have successes celebrated in a meaningful way. This means, depending on the culture, you should be ready to make an announcement to honor employees who do well, or encourage teams to take pride in their achievements in a personal way (without the announcement).
- ✓ **Show your quirks to connect** – When leaders want to build trust, they are often best served by showing some vulnerability. Showing your quirks can be a great way to connect. This might mean sharing a hobby or having a side interest that becomes a reason to connect. Either way, *Side Quirks* can give people a reason to believe in and trust you more deeply.
- ✓ **Stand for something** – Inherent in the idea of showing your quirks is being willing to take a stand on behalf of what you think. This is a powerful strategy for brands to stand out and one that you will routinely see beloved brands do. *Side Quirks* are not just to be embraced in people, but can also bring a brand to life and create more human and emotional connections with customers.