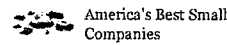
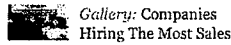
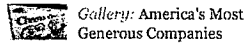
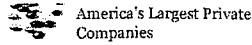


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From Focus Groups to "Friend" Groups

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Arguing that focus groups were never really all that effective in the first place, agencies and research facilities have introduced a variety of methods aimed at shaking up the traditional focus group approach.

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Young & Laramore, which has done work for clients like Procter & Gamble and PepsiCo, is one such practitioner. Instead of focus groups, the Indianapolis-based agency frequently runs what company president Tom Denari calls "friendship groups." That's when the company will tap one consumer and ask that individual to recruit two or three others from his/her social circle. The assumption is that one is more likely to be comfortable in an experimental setting when with others in one's social network.

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In these situations, researchers can tell when participants are sharing "secrets with each other, you can catch them winking their eyes or exchanging signals with each other, and you dig into that and find out what's up," he says.

Contrast that with the conventional focus group model, in which the scenario in question usually runs something like this: A packaged goods company, retailer or marketer, let's say, asks an agency or research partner to recruit a panel of consumers with whom to test new products, packaging or ideas. These groups, which can range anywhere from six to 12 or more in number, then gather in a "sterile" room, as many agency

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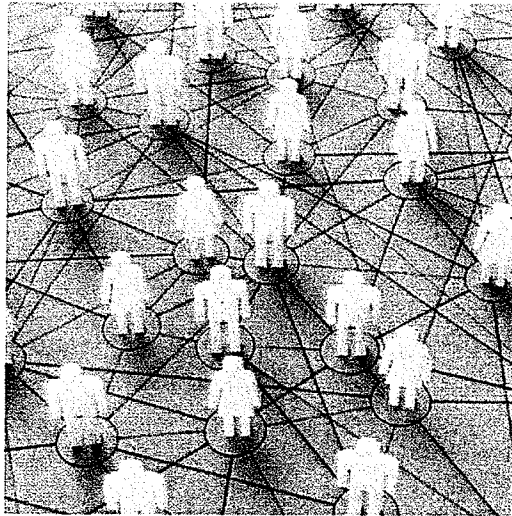
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execs describe it. Think "beige" walls and "bad furniture, as Campbell Mithun brand planning director Lynn Franz puts it. A moderator then runs through a list of questions and records participants' responses while researchers in the back room watch. All while munching on M&M's or, in some cases, checking their e-mail. Point is, such procedures are routine, boring, not to mention long—one session can last 90 minutes—and yield few, if any, new insights. It's mainly a confirmation experiment, if you will.

And so, agencies—many of whom conduct the bulk of these studies—have stirred things up a bit. One catalyst driving the push is the proliferation of social media mining tools, which allow companies to test and tweak new go-to-market strategies in real time and without the need for an actual focus group.



To avoid the typical, ho-hum answers, one company, The New England Consulting Group, uses a methodology called Super Groups. The latter involves finding the extreme, "lunatic fringes" of a consumer set, said Gary Stibel, CEO and founder, over a coffee meet in New York City last week. Stibel, a former P&G marketing manager, says the approach has since been copied by many who run focus groups. Why so? Talking to those who are not your average consumer ensures that you get not-so-average—and in some cases, off the chart—results.

Several agency executives interviewed for this article also brought up the idea of "conflict groups." The latter is when "you recruit and mix people who love something [with] others who hate it or [bring together] passionate lovers of two different brands," explains Lisa Borden, EVP and human nature director at Havas-owned Arnold.

Franz, of Interpublic Group's Campbell Mithun, says her agency "recruits zealots a lot." In a slightly different twist to Young & Laramore's "friendship groups," the former has also held "neighborhood" focus groups. In one such study, the agency had residents "bring their mowers and sit in someone's backyard." The experiment in question was, of course, for a mowing client. Kind of like a neighborhood mowing get-together, if you will.

Like Young & Laramore's Denari, Franz found that such social settings made participants more likely to talk. Buddy Ketchner, president of Sterling-Rice Group, an agency in Boulder, Colo., has witnessed the phenomenon himself: "It's amazing, but when people are with their friends, they talk, and they talk differently," he said over breakfast at New York City's W Hotel on Union Square earlier this week. His agency has run focus groups bringing together families in the neighborhood.

Efforts like these are revolutionizing the focus group as we know it, but the approach is by no means common. Though some marketers may be

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#### ABOUT ME

Hello! I'm a media/marketing reporter for Forbes. I write for the CMO Network as well as our newly launched Sales Leadership channel. (Think: "Sales" equivalent of a chief marketing officer for the latter.) Before that, I covered advertising/marketing at AdweekMedia (Adweek, Brandweek and Mediaweek) where I wrote about everything from hilarious toilet paper campaigns (Georgia-Pacific) to tissue paper wars (Kleenex versus Puffs!) to more serious stories, including a profile of Procter & Gamble's (then incoming) global marketing (and now also brand building) officer, Marc Pritchard. These days, I'm more focused on the emerging media side of things—i.e., digital, social and mobile media trends. I hail from Philadelphia (Penn '07 graduate), and, when I'm not poking around for the next big marketing story, I can often be found downloading apps (to the point where my smartphone explodes), cartwheeling or doing splits in the middle of the living room. (Needless to say, my parents are appalled.) Always on the lookout for interesting new digital work and marketers (and sales leaders) to talk to. You can reach me at [elaine.wong@forbes.com](mailto:elaine.wong@forbes.com) or direct message me on Twitter: @ElaineWong85.

Oh, yes, and one quirky fact about myself: I once wore a mitten during a press interview as I had to shake the executive's hand and my pen had exploded all over my sleeve (and right hand). The woman didn't notice, but she was probably wondering why I had my coat and mitten on inside a Florida hotel. (I later got the ink off with a bottle of baby oil.)

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open to new ways of gathering qualitative research, many are equally resistant to it.

“I don’t think we’ve completely cracked the code,” Campbell Mithun’s Franz says of pioneering new focus group methods. “It’s a wonderful opportunity,” but many companies—and focus group researchers themselves—are still holding tight.

“The minute it becomes old is when something becomes the way you do things,” she says.

This is not to say the focus group concept, when it was originally conceived, was useless. Focus groups were “originally intended to help people talk about a specific topic, but then, over time, it evolved—or should I say devolved—into what many researchers thought was an economical way to test ideas,” Denari, of Young & Laramore, says. “It’s a wrongheaded way to go.”

Efficiency aside, the historical focus group also posed other problems. One is the gap between what people think and how they later act. Consumers may rationalize their shopping or buying behaviors, but emotion, rather than reason, is often a big driver of these decisions, Denari says.

If anything, focus groups are best used when companies want to “define or elicit a hypothesis,” he says. Still, a researcher cannot achieve the same level of depth that one could get by running one-on-one “immersion” studies with consumers. The latter delves into the “why” as opposed to the “how” behind specific consumer behaviors, Denari says.

Regardless of whether companies are sizzling up the focus group approach or sticking to the old model, the same challenges remain. “At the end of the day, you are trying to divine some insight. And consumers are not going to give it to you. Their job is really to be sitting there, while you’re doing your own thinking,” says Seth Friedman, Tribal DDB’s planning director.

Further accelerating the trend are recent rallying cries, within the advertising community, that the focus group is actually dead. Social media has killed it, many say.

Campbell Mithun’s Franz thinks otherwise. Twitter, Facebook and social media’s dominance may have challenged the relevance of the traditional focus group, but the concept, at least in working theory, is not dead. “There are a lot of ways to shake it up,” she quips.

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