

Next Generation Insights Communities

2019 Benchmarking Guide



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1 | Executive Summary

The Bar has Been Raised

The insights community (MROC) space has evolved and expanded greatly since its inception twenty years ago. Marketers and insights professionals now face a cluttered and confusing landscape of providers to evaluate.

There are three main criteria to use when evaluating a new solution or pressure testing your current solution to determine whether it's keeping up with this quickly evolving marketplace. The three major areas to focus on are tools and tech capabilities, team support, and cost-structure.

New entrants are disrupting the value equation across these criteria to capitalize on areas where legacy players are weak. Major shifts have occurred in the MROC landscape in recent years as new, more nimble entrants have leapfrogged slower moving legacy players on tools/tech, team, and cost structure.

Review the checklist to guide your evaluation. No matter your objectives, these questions will help you make the most informed choice. You will likely find big differences between providers on these dimensions and ultimately you need to find the fit that's right for your business and your brand.

2 | The Evolving Landscape

The Insights Community Landscape has Radically Changed

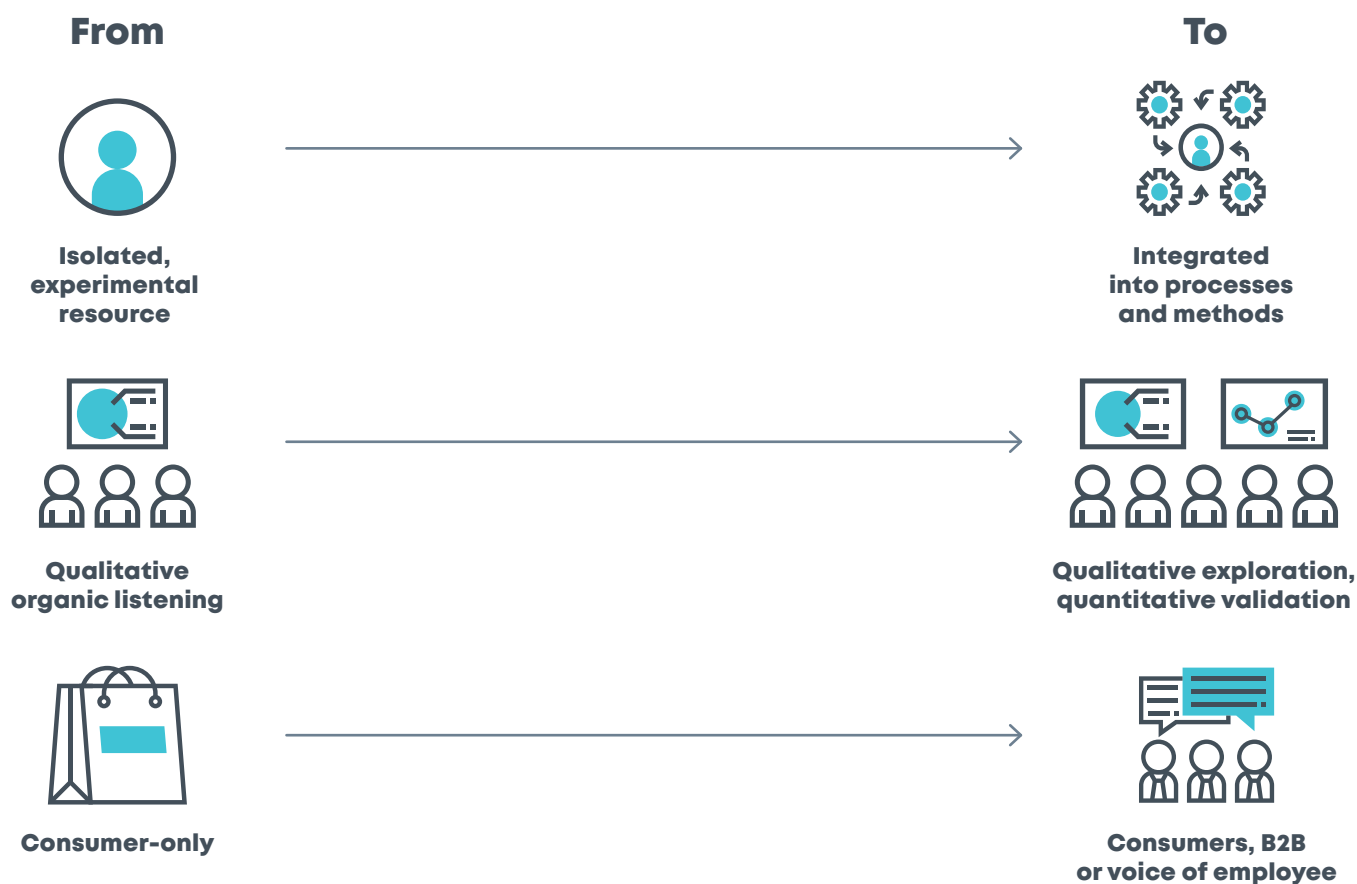
Market Research Online Communities (MROC), also known as insights communities, used to be a niche and novel solution for early adopter insights teams and customer-obsessed organizations. Simply having one was a unique competitive advantage. Insights communities are now a critical resource for the majority of the world's leading brands and businesses. They are often so embedded that organizations can't imagine conducting business without them. There have been several major shifts across the landscape involving what communities are used for and why they're so important.



As of 2017, insights communities are now a critical resource for 60% of the world's leading brands and businesses.

Source: 2017 Q3-Q4 GRIT Report

Figure 1: Major Shifts in Insight Community Use-Cases





From Insights Department Experiment to Essential Business Decision Tool

The Rise of Insights Engines: Unlocking the Value of Big Data

One of the biggest trends driving increased value from insights communities is their companion role to big data platforms. In the past few years, large organizations such as Unilever and Comcast have been setting the pace in the creation of “Insights Engines” that bring light to the “why” behind the mountain of “what” that big data sources provide*. Because those databases are already on hand, and insights communities are so agile, this 1-2 punch combines to create a step change in both the speed and quality of customer insights initiatives.

A New Bridge Between Qual and Quant

When insights communities were new on the scene they were largely limited to qualitative applications with small samples sizes. Rarely would an insights community hold more than a few hundred respondents. Today, progressive providers are removing this constraint with advanced technology platforms that allow companies to speak to thousands of respondents. This opens the door to making statistically significant quantitative comparisons in surveys, while increasing the quality of qualitative research because you have a broader array of respondents (and even respondent sub-segments) to choose from. Working together, the best platforms allow you to quickly recruit respondents from large sample quantitative studies into qualitative activities that uncover the “why” behind quantitative observations.

Unlocking the Voice of the Employee

Another key trend in recent years is the application of insights communities internally, either for internal insights generation or to track and improve employee engagement. By setting up internal communities, companies can canvas the knowledge and expertise of their own employees with insights community tools to create competitive advantage or strengthen their culture.



**Source: HBR - Building an Insights Engine*

The MROC Solution Landscape is More Powerful (and Complicated) than Ever

The Explosion of Choice

In parallel to this change, the marketplace for MROC providers has greatly changed as well. The landscape used to be simple, with few options for brands to choose from and a “one size fits all” approach from the major providers in the market. Now companies have a diverse array of full service and self-service solutions to choose from, each offering unique advantages.

Figure 2: The Community Landscape at a Glance

	Legacy Full Service Providers	Next Generation Full Service Providers	Self-Service Options
 Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Established brand names ✓ Great for qualitative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Cutting-edge tech ✓ Great for qualitative ✓ Larger sample sizes for quantitative ✓ Account teams generally better trained in research / strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Cutting-edge tech ✓ Great for qualitative ✓ Larger sample sizes for quantitative
 Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Tech not keeping up ✗ Inconsistent research support ✗ Smaller sample sizes limit quantitative ✗ Staff not always trained in research ✗ Typically most expensive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Typically not big names themselves though may have worked with big brands ✗ Lack of academic support if needed (e.g. access to PhDs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Since these are software companies, support on research, strategy, or community management is limited
Price	\$\$\$	\$\$	\$ to \$\$\$

Keeping Pace with the Change

Change has happened so fast that it's hard for insights pros and marketers to keep up. For those without insights communities today, the limits of legacy providers that kept them on the sidelines may no longer apply. For brands and businesses that have established communities, they may accept limitations of their incumbent providers as givens without the knowledge that the bar has been raised. Those who must now navigate this landscape of new options face a broad spectrum of providers—from legacy community holdouts, to under-dedicated 'me too' vendors, to DIY platforms of varying complexity.

The criteria used to evaluate current or potential solution providers have therefore changed in-step. Without up-to-date criteria to assess your options, it's difficult to ensure you're receiving the biggest impact and best value from the resources you invest in insights communities.



Without up-to-date criteria to assess your options, it's difficult to ensure you're receiving the biggest impact and best value.



3 | The Three Pillars of Value

Re-Defining The Value Equation: The Three Major Drivers

When evaluating an insights community partner, there are three major areas of focus that will define your experience and the value you receive:



Tools and Tech

The capabilities of the insights community platform, as well as the partner ecosystem of plugins and add-ons surrounding it.



Support Team Skills

The capabilities of your everyday community team, and the skillsets immediately available to assist with needs that go beyond basic requests.



Cost Structure

An understanding of where your investment is going, including how much of it is going toward features you won't use, skills you don't need, and overhead you shouldn't be floating.

Tools and Tech

Seemingly identical tools and tech may have hidden surprises.

At around 20 years old, the MROC space's toolset and technology have evolved to a point of surface-level parity across platform offerings. Besides UI, price, and featured client lists, it can be difficult for the casual observer to see the differences in capability across offerings.

But, there are stark differences hidden beneath the surface that matter.

Figure 3: The Hidden Surprises of Tool and Tech



Community size is now a differentiator.

First generation community providers generally limited the size of communities to a few hundred respondents at most in their early days and have carried that model forward. Today's progressive provider platforms can deploy vibrant communities with thousands of respondents.



Survey tools are 'baked-in,' but can carry legacy complexity or limitations.

Communities began as glorified qualitative consumer message boards, but quickly integrated surveying and polling. Today, there is a lot of variation in the complexity under the hood. Progressive providers should be able to handle sophisticated analytical techniques and engaging qualitative techniques with quick and easy programming.



Journals, mobile video, and image capture are standard, but the ability to leverage it is not.

Communities excel in that they allow members to upload video and images and participate in longitudinal studies. This is very on-trend, as deliverables have become more visual and story-driven. However, many community providers struggle to use these features to their full potential—either moderating them poorly or not integrating them into storytelling and insights well.



Reporting and analysis are simple and powerful, with varying degrees of automation and storytelling.

Speed is a crucial benefit of communities but reporting and analysis is often a bottleneck. Communities have added a mix of native and third-party tools to automate the task. Some providers are not prepared for the pace at which your business needs information or are not capable of going beyond simple data reporting with strategy and storytelling.



Data mining is now possible but not always feasible.

Many of today's community platforms can interlink every response from every member for later use in data mining. This capability only really adds value if your community has enough respondents to mine and your team has the skills to connect the dots across activities to see the "big picture".

Support Team Skills

More sophisticated tools require more strategic thinking.

Leading community partners are deeply involved in their clients' businesses and dedicated to their clients' financial and professional success. Such a relationship demands a highly competent team with a mix of talent.

Full-service community offerings are therefore going in the direction of 'full-service plus'—where full-service teams are supported by extended team members with relevant skillsets beyond community research, enhancing the value of the partnership.

Figure 4: Overview of Immediate and Peripheral Community Skillsets



Smart Generalist Researchers

Communities were born in the qualitative world but have stretched into quant and innovative approaches. To adjust to today's needs, full-service teams must be able to make recommendations on how to fully leverage these methodologies and tools. Skilled full-service researchers should consistently bring new ideas to their clients—not the other way around.

As a best practice, progressive community providers are making sure they have broad research skills in-house, and are not limiting themselves to traditional community research.

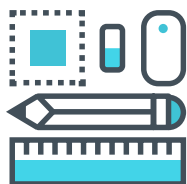


Experienced Brand Strategists

Research—especially community research—goes hand-in-hand with strategy.

While many community providers have gained experience in strategy by learning their clients' businesses and being exposed to strategic projects, being able to collaborate with truly seasoned strategists takes data interpretation and the value of deliverables to the next level.

Innovative community partners are finding the intersection between the two skillsets of research and strategy to enhance the value clients receive from the relationship.



Creatives

A key trend in the industry is the demand for more visual, experiential, and story-driven deliverables. Data that used to live on a PowerPoint slide and die on a server can now be shared via memorable experiences (such as immersion events) or tangible/digital assets (such as animatics, videos, desk drops, infographic posters, etc.).

Advanced community partners are investing in creative capabilities to support these needs as they arise—building creative teams or managing freelancers to develop creative assets and experiences that make insights more memorable and accepted.

Cost Structure

Clients are Subsidizing Legacy Provider Overhead while Seeing Service Declines

While an increase in value may justify an increase in price, the reality is that many community clients aren't getting the value that they should for what they're paying. Many of the existing players in the market today built their technology platforms, staffing structures, and pricing on an expensive legacy model that is declining in relevancy. They've fallen out of line with some of the trends we've covered in the areas of technology and team support but are still charging premium prices. This is compounded when providers are acquired by large agencies and then lost as a priority in a massive global portfolio.

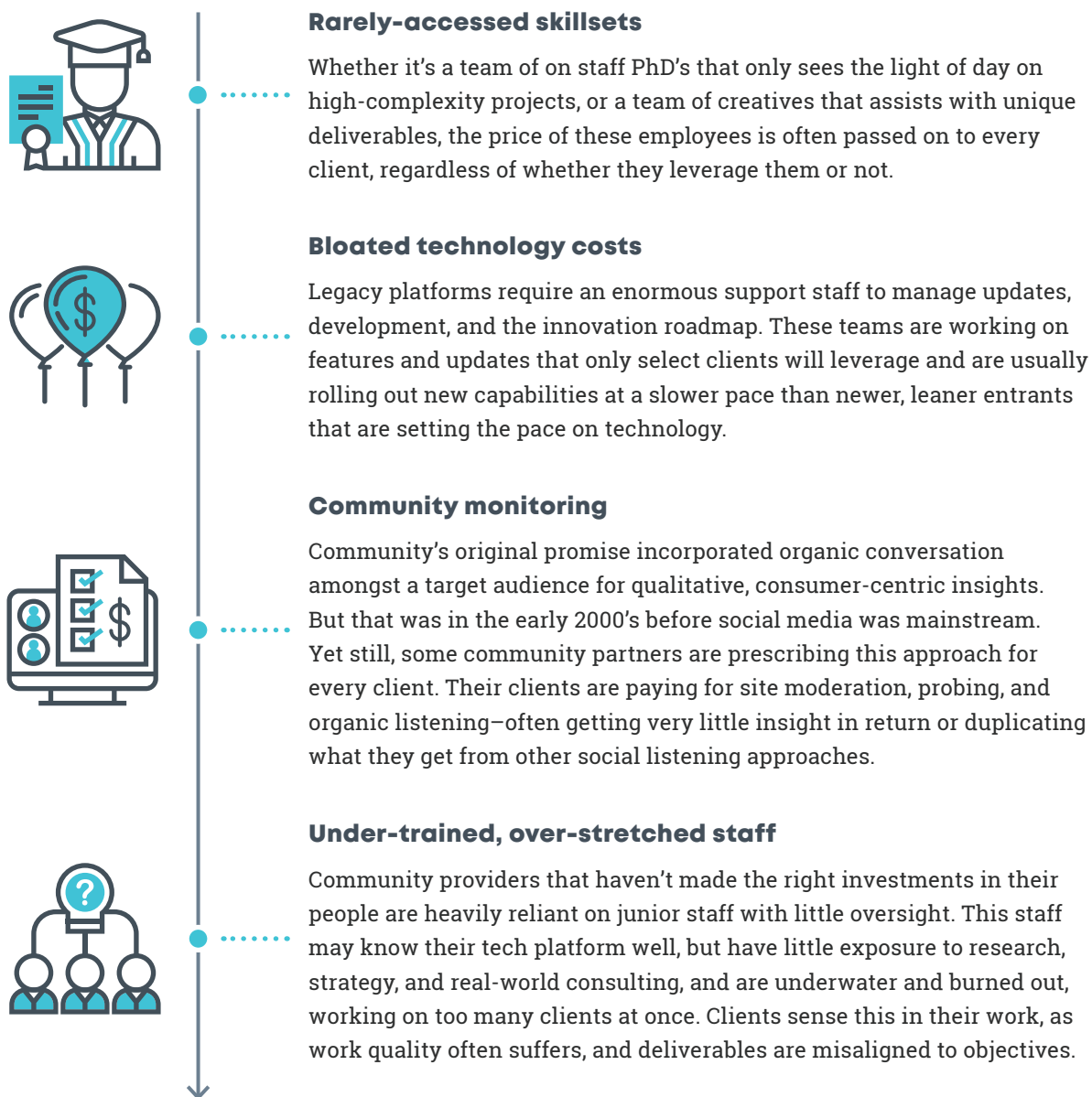
This can result in under-investment in technology and under-resourcing in support. Even though capabilities and service aren't keeping up, legacy providers have yet to adjust their prices, as they still have the asset of well recognized brand names they can lean on. Be aware of how much of your research investment is actually going toward supporting the quality of the research you're fielding in your community.

Even in the case of providers that are keeping up, some clients don't need many of the tech or talent capabilities their provider offers—yet they're still paying for them. Much like paying for 200 TV channels but only watching a few of them, these clients are essentially subsidizing the price that others are paying, with little flexibility to 'right-size' their deal.

There are several value deflators to look out for (See Figure 5).

“Some clients don't need many of the tech or talent capabilities their provider offers—yet they're still paying for them.”

Figure 5: Common Value Deflators



4 | New Models to Consider



A New Breed of Insights Community Provider is Filling the Void

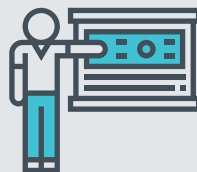
Stated bluntly, the legacy model for insights communities is no longer aligned to its original promise. Communities are supposed to be flexible and cost-effective ways of doing a high volume of research across a sweeping breadth of topics while the account team becomes more embedded in the client's business. However, with many providers, the increasing costs of operation, embedded legacy technologies, and staff skill constraints are in direct conflict with that promise.

In response to the current challenges clients are feeling, innovative models for delivering the promise of insights communities have emerged. Compared to existing players, these new entrants are focused on staying lean and flexible on technology so that account teams—the true powerhouse of the relationship—are better equipped to help their client succeed.

Figure 6:
The New Breed Of Insights Community Providers



Crafts best-of-breed solutions to avoid tech overkill and legacy bloat



Focuses on skills and delivery of accounts teams for greater impact



Runs lean to minimize required investment



Reduces risk of brain drain by enabling longer term relationships

Better cost structures yield better client experiences

This is a paradigm shift away from an era where “one size fits all” tech drove clients’ choice in community provider, to an era where more emphasis can be placed on the relationship, the research, and the realization of the full promise of the insights community methodology.

Craft evergreen and best-of-breed solutions

A key trend in the industry is the demand for more visual, experiential, and story-driven deliverables. Whereas traditional community providers force clients into their preferred suite of tools and technologies, new entrants have formed partnerships with cutting edge technology providers across the industry, allowing them to tailor solutions that are a perfect fit for a client’s specific budget and needs. They also incorporate 3rd party plugins where needed for specialized research applications such as UI/UX research. Being technology agnostic allows them to be flexible and always up-to-date.

Focus attention on skills and delivery

With a reduced focus on managing tech, more emphasis can go toward ensuring strong account teams that can consult and empower your business. Client account teams are highly trained in both research and brand strategy to reduce overhead, improve communication, and increase impact.

Run lean for efficient investment

Without the need to support legacy technologies or to force clients into complex technologies that outsize their needs, savings can pass directly through to clients. It also makes it easier to right-size the investment in community with the appropriate amount of capability complexity.

Reduce risk of brain drain

With an ever-evolving solution, there is no need to switch technology platforms (and thus your community partner) to stay up to date. As a result, an account team’s knowledge of its client’s business is never lost, and only continues to build.

“There is a paradigm shift away from an era where ‘one size fits all’ tech drives a clients’ choice in community provider.



5 | What It Means



Anyone in the driver's seat of selecting an insights community partner or evaluating their current provider should recognize the trends of apparent commoditization in technologies, the tradeoffs inherent with legacy providers, and the shift in importance toward specialized skillsets.

Here are the steps you should take as you investigate your options:

1 **Audit current/potential partners on their capabilities and fit with your specific needs.**

Base this audit on your organization's vision for the role of community. While some organizations use communities as a replacement for a large breadth of research, and thus need a broad toolkit, others will have more narrowly defined roles for their community that may be better serviced by a simpler and more cost-effective solution.

2 **Pressure test the tech to make sure it's powerful and flexible.**

Many legacy providers have limited, outdated technology that looks good on the surface but has serious limitations. Can the provider accommodate large sample sizes? Where does it stand on mobile delivery and video applications? Does it embrace 3rd party plugins?

3 **Place high value on support teams and skillsets.**

Clients with knowledgeable, consultative teams and access to applicable peripheral skillsets are getting far more value from their community relationship than those who deal with order-takers and inexperienced, burned-out staff. The quality of the account team makes a world of difference and you should push to meet with the people who would be your day-to-day support team. Ask questions to test the depth of their research knowledge and their ability to mine data across studies.

4 **Use the accompanying checklist to help you in your evaluation.**

Knowing what questions to ask and what to look for is the most difficult part. Use the checklist in the next section to help you evaluate current or potential partners, or as inspiration to ensure your own set of questions is thorough.

Topic Checklist: **Tools & Tech**

Get the basics with ability to go beyond as needed

Area	General Recommendation
Scalability and Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Community sizes up to several thousand<input type="checkbox"/> Can support pop-up short-term communities of 1-3 months<input type="checkbox"/> Can support multiple community 'rooms' for different member types<input type="checkbox"/> Can support multiple languages natively within community platform
Built in's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Basic research features <i>(surveys, polling, discussions, journals, and chats)</i><input type="checkbox"/> Ability to do longitudinal tracking<input type="checkbox"/> Media hosting and member media upload<input type="checkbox"/> Special question types like heatmaps, video/image upload, and sliding scales<input type="checkbox"/> In-platform activity programming, with self-service option<input type="checkbox"/> Randomization, logic, branching, and quotas within surveys<input type="checkbox"/> Fielding reports and incentive tracking/distribution<input type="checkbox"/> Real-time automated quant and qual reporting, charts, and exports<input type="checkbox"/> All member responses saved to profile for data mining and support team will do mining for you<input type="checkbox"/> User profile management and tagging
Plugins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Advanced third-party tools for unique projects <i>(in-home eye tracking, advanced survey engine, UI/UX tools)</i><input type="checkbox"/> Analysis programs for banners/tabs/nets, MaxDiff, Conjoint, and stat testing<input type="checkbox"/> Exports, such as SPSS that can be ported to external analysis engines<input type="checkbox"/> Advanced question and study types such as timed response, MaxDiff/Conjoint, mobile metering, card sorting, semantic differential, annotation, sentiment analysis, etc.

Topic Checklist: **Support Team Skillsets**

Get to know your team and whether the partner has skillsets you need

Area	General Recommendation
Core Account Teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Research generalists that can speak to the real-world application of both quantitative and qualitative research<input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge and enthusiasm for a variety of methodologies <i>(Price optimization, in-home usage testing, ethnography, projective techniques, etc.)</i><input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge of weighting, stat testing, bias, and importance of sample sizes<input type="checkbox"/> Experience solving big and interesting challenges across a variety of industries<input type="checkbox"/> Strategy and storytelling deliverables with unique insights, story and visuals, and impactful recommendations<input type="checkbox"/> Examples of data-centric deliverables
Peripheral Skillsets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Industry and topic-level expertise relevant to your scope of work <i>(ex. Consumer banking, UX testing, branding)</i><input type="checkbox"/> Creative resources to assist with print, digital, and media assets to support and spread insights

Topic Checklist: **Cost Structure**

Get a sense of what you're really paying for, so you can ensure you're getting the best value

Area	General Recommendation
Unused Staff Skillsets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> The ability to opt out of organic listening if it's not pertinent to your implementation<input type="checkbox"/> Avoid being charged for extended teams of PhD's or experts on your account team that drive the costs up<input type="checkbox"/> Dedicated, lean account teams that are not spread across more than 2-3 total accounts
Right-sized Tech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Innovation roadmaps that free up account team time and consulting power<input type="checkbox"/> Dedication to improving community power, such as data mining and member management<input type="checkbox"/> Partnerships for complex or unique question/study types <i>(vs. building them in and bloating your tech investment)</i><input type="checkbox"/> Flexible cost structures for DIY, lite, normal, and power community usage

6 | Start the Conversation

Finch Brands is a pioneer in Next Generation Insights Communities through its FinchSight™ offering.

FinchSight Insights Communities

FinchSight is a next generation insights community solution designed to address the key areas where legacy first generation providers fall short.

With FinchSight, you get more for less. A more powerful research engine and more impactful strategic support, all for a lower spend due to increased efficiency. In addition, FinchSight is more flexible, offering a wide array of flexible configurations, from year-round solutions to temporary “pop up” communities and “lite” support models that augment the strength of your insights team.

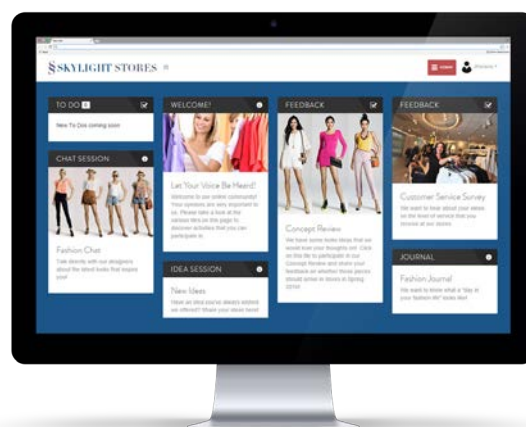
Finch Brands

Finch Brands is a real-world brand consultancy. We exist to help brands win when it matters most.

We achieve this by blending insight, intuition, and creativity to shape brand strategy and drive people to action. Our services span insights, strategy, and design.

Finch Brands was founded in 1998 by pioneering executives instrumental in the ascent of David’s Bridal and IKEA. This heritage of blended client-side and agency experience is alive and well today across our team of strategists, researchers, and designers from companies such as Campbell Soup, Unilever, Target, Kimberly-Clark, Urban Outfitters, and more.

Recent well known Finch Brands clients include Nutrisystem, Samsung, Splenda, Brown-Forman, CubeSmart, Conair, Fathead, and the Philadelphia 76ers. Proud generalists, we work horizontally across B2C, B2B, and non-profit sectors, as well as vertically from startups through Fortune 100 companies.



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