

# The History of Marketing of Identity

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The popularity of personal genealogy in the 21st century is not a new phenomenon. Genealogical research dates back centuries when it was undertaken to document the succession of royalty and aristocracy, to bolster claims to hereditary rights to power and land ownership. In 19th-century America genealogical research was conducted to petition for rights to inheritance, pensions, and honors, including membership in such organizations as the Sons (and Daughters) of the American Revolution and the Mayflower Descendants.

In the 19th century the production of genealogical research “became an industry, saturated with race, nationalism, and conspicuous consumption.” The paid practitioners in this field included charlatans pandering to gullible clients seeking impressive pedigrees and usually-fraudulent heraldry, and of scholarly historians documenting and producing factual family histories for wealthy clients.

Genealogical research also became a popular American hobby. In 1879 the *New York Times* observed, “We are becoming the most genealogical nation on the face of the earth,” and noted that this interest extended to “our great middle class.” Americans collected family stories and turned to commonly-held family bibles, important records in an era when most births were at home and government collections of civil records were not well standardized.

This paper begins with a brief history of American genealogical production and consumption in the 19th and 20th centuries, including the expansion of interest in genealogy, consumer motivations (including the LDS Church’s admonition to prepare family histories for religious reasons), and efforts to professionalize the practice of genealogical research. In this period the resources for accurate genealogy included documents and memoirs, but the scientific tools of the late 20th and the 21st centuries eclipsed the methods of previous centuries.

The heart of the paper is the 21st-century marketing of specialized, high-value genealogical information, harnessing DNA technology to create indisputable linkages between individuals that were previously impossible. For example, genetic paternity and maternity can now be scientifically established, after decades of reliance on similarities of appearance and later on blood typing. Likewise, DNA analysis can help populate family trees with precision, bring together adoptees with birth parents, identify human remains, and, most recently, link suspects with crimes with a high degree of certainty.

DNA-based genealogical services to the public are quite recent. One of the earliest, in 2005, was the Genographic Project by the National Geographic Society and IBM, a multi-year genetic anthropology study that aims to map historical human migration patterns by collecting and analyzing DNA samples. The data set came from indigenous communities and the general public, “using advanced DNA analysis to help answer fundamental questions about where humans originated and how we came to populate the Earth.” In 2005 each consumer kit cost \$114, which helped support the research and entitled contributors (of money and DNA samples) to information on the haplogroups and migration patterns of the consumer’s distant ancestors.

The best-known direct-to-consumer genetic genealogy services utilizing consumer DNA samples are FamilySearch, Ancestry.com, 23andme, MyHeritage, and the distinctive GEDmatch which utilizes DNA data collected by other services. This paper presents the target markets for each service, the motivations of the founders of each, the products and services offered, the promotional methods and messages each service has used over time, and the special features which have been added and enhanced to differentiate each service.

In addition to these major DNA-based services, the expansion of interest in genealogy has created a huge and rapidly expanding market for associated products and services:

- *Consulting services* provide professional analysis of DNA results, to answer questions about ancestry, legitimacy, and extended family.
- *Workshops and conferences* bring together specialists and practitioners, bringing in fees to the institutions and organizations offering them.
- *Professional certification programs* charge for courses, manuals, and for testing and annual certification retention.

- Early *software* was designed to keep and organized genealogical records and research; recent software provides ready-to print *displays and wall charts*, which are also produced by specialist companies.
- *Books, manuals, journals, and magazines* have a large market.
- *Blank forms* for recording information and paper filing systems support those who do not use computers.
- *Genealogy librarians* are finding employment, serving patrons in public and specialized libraries.
- *Television shows* such as *Long Lost Family* and *Finding Your Roots* attract viewers and sponsors, and promote genetic genealogy along with traditional genealogical methods (including use of census records, wills, and registrations of birth, marriage, military service, and death).
- *Genetic genealogists* are being recognized and hired *to aid law enforcement* in resolving cold cases. A leading example is CeCe Moore, who was directly involved in identifying the most likely suspects in two murder/rape cold cases in California, Indiana, and Washington State, leading to arrests in 2018.
- *Heritage travel*, both organized groups and independent travel, has become a new business opportunity for travel agents, tour leaders, and historians.
- *Specialized publishers* create family books based on input from researchers.
- *Wall charts* produced by specialized companies display genealogical research results.

#### **Selected references**

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Other source material includes examination of marketing materials and messages of the major genealogical services employing DNA samples, interviews with marketing people at these firms, and conference presentations by company representatives and leading professionals.