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Ice-cream tests lick the focus group

If the world of politics decides to take its lead from the world of business, then one of the great New Labour bastions could soon be extinct. The focus group is out, the cultural anthropologist is in.

As more and more companies branch out globally, an increasing number find themselves hitting the same brick walls. Although it may look as though the big multinational players successfully sell the same goods all around the world, in reality they have to make subtle adjustments to appeal to the societies behind individual markets.

But understanding those markets is no easy business. At best, it is time-consuming and expensive, at worst, it can be totally fruitless. Now, a growing number of global companies are starting to realise that the problem may lie in the methodology.

At the moment, research is carried out by assembling a small focus group and firing a rigid series of questions at its members. The trouble is that people often say one thing in a focus group but do another in the outside world.

Cristina Afors, managing director of Cultural Imprint, believes that if they want really efficient market research, the multinationals need the academic services of a cultural anthropologist.

Her company's clients include Unilever, the food and household products group, whose markets span literally hundreds of cultures. One of her recent projects involved working with the group's ice cream division.

If you just listened to the focus groups there would be no ice-cream at all?' she says. "Focus groups can't detect this, but people change their minds depending on a lot of things. During the week, they tend to like healthier foods, but on Friday nights and over the weekend, they want to eat things that are dripping with fat. It's like Jekyll and Hyde."

Her work throws up a number of such-paradoxes, but Ms Afors firmly believes it is providing a more accurate picture of what the eventual market truly wants. Her strategy involves non-group-based surveys, which can then be combined with academic studies of the target audience.

In the case of the ice-cream job for Unilever, the product that emerged from Ms Afors' work was the Magnum range of choc-ices, which, in a variety of forms, has enjoyed massive success throughout Europe.

Cultural Imprint already has a considerable list of clients, and Ms Afors is confident that her methods will soon attract an even wider following. Kellogg's, Shell, Nokia and Lego are already on her books, and others are about to jump on the bandwagon.

In her latest client however, Ms Afors may have met - her match. She is currently being employed by the European Commission to work out via cultural anthropology how the concept of federalism can be sold to heel-draggers like Britain and Denmark.