

MARKET RESEARCH

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Introduction

A billion-dollar industry at a crossroads

Market research is having a moment—a big one. The global insights economy just topped \$150 billion USD, according to Esomar’s latest [Global Market Research Report](#). The biggest driver of growth? The rapid rise of research software, which surged 11.5% year over year to exceed \$62 billion USD.

Greenbook’s [2025 GRIT Insights Practice Report](#) tells a similar story: full-service firms are finding their footing again. The real standouts, though, are the ones combining technology and human connection to deliver insights that are faster, richer and more relevant.

Meanwhile, [WARC’s 2025 Consumer Trends Report](#) and [Reach3’s Trade Winds](#) both show a world of consumers caught between caution and fatigue. People want brands that see and understand them.

And marketers? They’re asking for insights that feel more human, more emotional and more grounded in real life.

A new chapter for insights

This combination of technological acceleration and emotional expectation is reshaping what “good research” looks like. Some traditions are being reimaged. Others are proving their staying power.

2026 is not just about using more AI or collecting more data. It’s about redefining quality: how insights are generated, shared and acted upon.

The following seven trends highlight how leading insight teams are balancing innovation with intention, moving the industry forward while staying true to what makes research valuable in the first place.

TREND 1

AI: Full steam ahead (*with a healthy dose of skepticism*)

From hype to habit

AI has officially moved from an industry headline to an everyday habit. According to Greenbook's 2025 GRIT Insights Practice Report, high-performing suppliers now automate an average of 5.1 project functions using AI.

Research teams are using AI to draft reports, transcribe interviews, cluster qualitative themes, and uncover patterns that would have taken weeks to find manually. But for others, it's also a strategic thinking partner.

"As insights leaders, we aim to take a holistic view of the business because our work underpins the organization's key objectives," explains Teresa Correa-Pavlat, Insights & Analytics Lead and AI Agile Capabilities at Haleon, in The Next Era of Insights Report. "This is why AI fits so naturally. It allows us to connect the dots across a wider set of data and even illuminate the need for data ecosystems to help us. With it, we can stretch our curiosity further, move faster, and still stay grounded in the signals and truths that matter."

Researchers are finding ways to let AI handle the heavy lifting while they focus on interpretation, creativity and storytelling.

Kerry Sette, Vice President and Head of Consumer Insights & Research at Voya Financial, sees this evolution as an opportunity to make research more accessible and actionable across organizations. She says: "Artificial intelligence is transforming data gathering—accelerating speed, reducing cost and reshaping how decisions are made. I believe it's going to help democratize data and analysis and help unlock that more holistic view of the customer."

"AI has brought back the DIY culture. Anyone can go from an idea to a proof of concept in a matter of hours or days, with little risk. If there was ever a time to design and build the products of the future, it is now. AI is the collaborator that makes it possible."

**Graeme Ford, Founder
& Innovation Consultant,
PunkMRX**

Are researchers actually using AI?

Short answer: yes, and fast. In our annual Market Research Trends survey, conducted using [Rival's conversational research platform](#), researchers reported steady adoption across teams, a trend that aligns with research from industry experts like MRIL.

62%

say “most” or “some” of their team is already using AI

— Market Research Institute International, “[AI in Focus 2025](#)”

71%

believe AI will improve their jobs in the coming years

— Market Research Institute International, “[AI in Focus 2025](#)”

64%

of researchers say the number of AI tools they're using increased in 2025

— Rival Technologies, November 2025

90%

of researchers are excited for AI-assisted analysis and reporting

— Rival Technologies, November 2025

*AI is moving from side project to **core capability**.*

The quantification of qual

One area seeing a major leap forward is qualitative research. AI is revolutionizing how we capture and analyze unstructured feedback and speeding up tasks that once took many, many hours to complete.

Today, AI tools can help automatically prompt participants to share more. In a recent [research-on-research study](#) from Rival Technologies, Reach3 Insights and Angus Reid Group, qualitative feedback collected through conversational methods produced open-ended responses that were 2.5x longer than those from traditional surveys. Add AI-driven probes and video, and that depth increases nearly eightfold.

On the analysis front, AI can transcribe, summarize, and detect patterns in minutes. Those richer stories don't just make insights more vivid. They give AI better material to learn from, leading to clearer summaries and stronger models.

As a result of these advancements, researchers are leaning more on qual research.

"I've fallen back in love with open-ended questions," Michael Viveiros, Senior Director of Research at My Code Media, says. "I've never seen so many high quality responses and people going way beyond the scope of the question and giving us a lot more, detail about their lives than we needed for the question. It's really helpful for context."

Which AI tools are researchers still missing?

In our [conversational survey](#), we asked our participants to tell us what AI tools they're still dreaming about. To get richer insights, we used Rival's Smart Probe Text and our proprietary Thoughtfulness Scoring to make sure we only ask relevant follow-up questions when it's appropriate and required. Here are some capabilities that came out of our research.



Research tasks that AI can help with

Sample management

“The biggest challenge is the abundance of sample provider options, making it impractical to send RFPs to all. I would invent an AI tool to find the right sample providers for each target audience.”

Presentation drafting

“I would like an AI tool that can create PPT decks from crosstabs and data analysis based on important insights.”

Quant research

“I would like an AI tool that can analyze a database and provide an executive summary. I work mostly with SPSS files or unstructured data.”

Knowledge management

“I’d love a very responsive research library that serves as a learning basis for projects, creating value from past projects. While some tools exist, I’d prefer something more automated with agents to share information across trends. The biggest challenge is having all past research digitized and easily accessible, as well as finding the time to go through the reports myself.”

Proposal writing

“I would like an AI tool that sources information and pricing needed for proposals from a simple prompt. Currently, I spend a lot of time tracking down information that is not organized or centralized. This process takes up so much time that I have to delay other tasks and often end up working late or on weekends to catch up, which is not ideal.”

**TREND 2**

Implicit research: Finding the “why” beneath the words

Seeing what people really mean

Researchers know it well: people don’t always say what they think. Or think what they say.

That’s why implicit research is having a moment. With emotions and polarization shaping so many choices, teams are turning to methods that dig below surface-level answers. The Implicit Association Test (IAT), created by Greenwald and Banaji decades ago, proved that many decisions come from subconscious associations, not deliberate thought.

In 2026, that truth feels more relevant than ever.

Measuring what people can’t explain

Emma Woodley, founder of behavioral science firm Truth Be Gold, summed it up perfectly: “Measuring subconscious attitudes—rather than conscious opinions—can reveal which menu items, images, or messages truly resonate. In one project, implicit testing predicted sales mix more accurately than any survey.”

That’s the power of tapping into instinct. Implicit techniques help researchers capture those gut-level reactions that traditional surveys often miss.

Engaging both System 1 and System 2

What we’re talking about here isn’t necessarily about abandoning questions, but instead it’s about asking in smarter, more intuitive ways.

At Reach3 Insights, a methodology called emotional elicitation demonstrates how to bring System 1 and System 2 thinking together in practice. Instead of asking consumers directly how they feel, participants are first shown a curated set of images that might capture their emotional response. Only then are they asked why they chose a specific image.

That small shift—starting with emotion, then moving to reflection—creates a bridge between instinct and reasoning. It helps participants articulate feelings they may not have recognized consciously, and the resulting explanations are consistently richer, more nuanced, and more authentic insights than we get from traditional “how do you feel” questions.

“To understand what people actually think, feel and do, we need to go beyond traditional research approaches. In 2026, we’ll see faster adoption of AI-accelerated, mobile techniques. By delivering immersive and immediate feedback, these conversational approaches help reveal the underlying dynamics driving decision-making.”

Matt Kleinschmit, CEO and Founder, Reach3 Insights

Is the insights industry making a positive impact?

In our conversational survey, we asked researchers to answer a somewhat philosophical question: is our industry making a positive impact in the world today?

“We are the voice of reason in many conversations,” one respondent said.

72%

of researchers agreed the insights industry is making the world a better place.

Source: Rival Technologies



Another added:

“With the pervasiveness of AI across all businesses, it’s so important to still stay in touch with your consumer and understand how he or she is reacting to the world to categories and to products so that any company can move forward successfully and delivering value for him or her.”

Another simply said: *“We guide brands and strategic decision making.”*

But others hold a more balanced view. *“Research is under pressure facing a lot of economic and foundational change,” one participant noted. “The impact of insights at board level has not been sufficient to protect it from these headwinds.”*

TREND 3

The return of the classics: When old-school methods get a modern upgrade

Everything old is new again

In fashion, what’s old is new again—cargo pants, wide-legged jeans, even low-rise denim are making a comeback. The same thing is happening in research.

Methods like segmentation, ethnography, and path-to-purchase studies never really went away. But in 2026, they’re back in style—refreshed by mobile tools, AI-accelerated techniques, and faster, more flexible workflows.

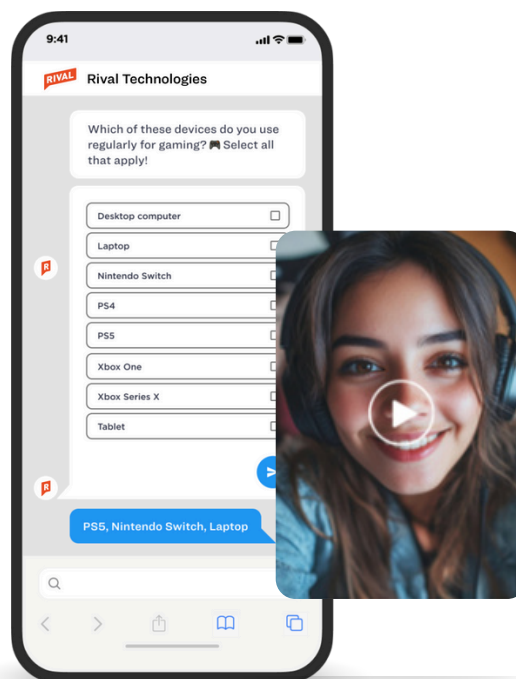
Segmentation gets its groove back

Segmentation has always been about making sense of the messy reality of consumers. The difference now? Teams are doing it faster, lighter, and more often.

Enter the rise of the “mini-segmentation.” These smaller, focused projects give researchers a quick, actionable read on audience needs and attitudes, without waiting months for a full rebuild. A light factor pass here, a quick profiling exercise there, and suddenly teams have a current picture of who matters most before jumping into message testing or value-prop development.

As **Leigh Admirand**, Executive Vice President at Reach3 Insights, wrote in her **American Marketing Association** piece: *“Segmentation today isn’t about sorting people into neat little boxes. It’s about truly understanding what makes them tick—and being able to adapt when things shift.”*

Modern segmentation blends conversational inputs, open-ended responses, and even video, so AI can handle the heavy lifting while researchers focus on what really counts: interpretation and direction.



Ethnography for the mobile age

Ethnography is also getting a glow-up. What used to require flights, transcripts, and long observation cycles now happens in real time.

Mobile-first insight communities and video diaries let researchers capture context as life happens: where people shop, scroll, or snack. Instead of waiting for fieldwork to wrap, teams can review clips on the fly, spot emerging patterns, and follow up while the moment is still fresh.

AI lends a hand by handling transcription and pattern detection, freeing researchers to focus on what really matters: the human story.

“Shopper journey/path to purchase is a methodology that seems to be back in demand, driven by the confluence of most existing studies on this topic being dated – many conducted pre-pandemic – and AI’s increasing role in the decision-making process for a wide variety of categories. As I think about next year, I expect to do a lot of work in this realm and am excited about applying our conversational-based approaches (and benefits) to the clients who choose to work with us!”

Jon Dore, Executive Vice President, Reach3 Insights

“Rethinking journey mapping is a MUST DO for companies. As AI becomes a part of everything, and Search fades away, what are the channels, info sources and decision-making pathways? Brands need to know and that will be critical.

Also, I’m excited for MORE researchers to be more nimble and be open to all the tools that are available. As researchers, we are able to spend time on where it’s needed, and use tools to tackle the rest. AI is certainly a part of that, but you can develop your own tools and create your own processes. It’s possible now.”

Chi Paler, Head of Customer Insights, 10x Genomics

TREND 4

Synthetic respondents: Promise, debate, and a reality check

Synthetic respondents are one of the most talked-about (and divisive) innovations in research right now. And this showed up in our own research.

How do you feel about synthetic respondents?

27%

EXCITED 😄

30%

MEH 😐

43%

NOT EXCITED 😞

Source: Rival Technologies

In the right context, synthetic data can reflect real behavior—not replace it, but complement it.

Still, it's important to recognize what's at stake. [Ben Leff of Verisight](#) recently compared real and synthetic data on U.S. coffee consumption and found that these models can miss the finer details. Synthetic data performed well for well-known brands, but misread regional nuances, niche categories or unfamiliar products.

The takeaway from both studies is similar: synthetic data is only as good as the input and context it is trained on.

In an article for [Marketing Week](#), Jane Frost CBE, Chief Executive of the Market Research Society, says the potential for big mistakes from decisions driven by synthetic respondents is still significant.

“While undoubtedly being cheaper in the short term, using synthetic data as the sole basis for marketing campaigns is fraught with long-term reputational and financial risk,” she explains.

Let's get one thing clear though: The rise of synthetic data won't kill primary research. If anything, it highlights why human engagement matters more than ever.

“AI needs to be regularly refreshed with primary research, or the data becomes outdated, out of context and polluted by the biases and problems with historic information,” Frost continues. “Without engaging real people, you simply can't predict with any certainty how they will react to your content.”

Supporters see synthetic data as a way to move faster, test early ideas, and fill in gaps before fieldwork begins.

- The [Market Research Society's Delphi Group](#) called it “a useful addition to the toolkit.”
- A Colgate-Palmolive and PyMC Labs study found that large language models could replicate human purchase intent with up to 90% of real test-retest reliability.

When designed carefully, AI-generated respondents can produce surprisingly realistic patterns across demographics.

I believe synthetic data has its use and applications. But leveraging synthetic data to create artificial respondents to ‘boost’ the sample is likely a weaker application.

Just because the algorithm is clever enough to create synthetic responses of real humans doesn’t mean it can help uncover deeper insights. You might be better off working with the sample limitations, leveraging insights qualitatively, instead of pretending you have a robust sample to interrogate deeper.

Ask yourself, are you creating an illusion of statistical robustness? Isn’t this risky? Wouldn’t you be better served knowing the real sample limitations and working with them?

Leveraging it for validation might be a better application. Even there, one could make an argument to rely on advanced & predictive analytics instead.

Next time you come across a clever ‘persona’ based solution that’s basically built on the foundation of synthetic data, ask the question: will this truly solve the problem? Or does it risk creating a bigger one?

Pavi Gupta, VP of Insights & Analytics, Chobani

TREND 5

Consumer closeness: Using conversations and communities to create connection

The human antidote to automation fatigue

Despite all the buzz around AI and synthetic data, one truth remains: connection with real people still matters most.

In a world where algorithms can predict behavior but not emotion, smart insight leaders are leaning on the power of genuine human connection to understand customers.

“Community has been a lifeline for us in the last year,” Mary Anne Fitzgerald, Director of Consumer Insights at Balsam Brands, shared in a recent webinar. “It was so joyful to hear how connected our community members feel to us.”

“I’m really drawn to participatory and community-driven research. There’s a shift happening where people don’t just want to be “subjects”, they want to co-create the solutions. I’m also excited about how insights are being tied to social impact i.e using data to drive change, not just decisions.”

Stella Igweamaka, Senior Consultant, New Markets & Opportunities, Servus Credit Union

When participants feel heard, they open up. They share more freely. Insights get deeper and more nuanced. Feedback stops feeling like a task and starts feeling like collaboration.

There’s another benefit: when you’re talking to your own consumers, the data itself becomes more reliable. It’s harder for fraud or fatigue to sneak in when there’s a real relationship behind the responses.

For Rival, Reach3 and Angus Reid Group clients, we’ve seen this model work across industries where community members aren’t just respondents but ongoing partners in shaping strategy and creativity. Each share-back, thank-you video, or quick follow-up poll builds momentum and mutual trust.

A single word isn't enough to convey the mixed emotions out there so anxcitement is portmanteau for anxiety + excitement.

People are deeply worried about the pace of change, the displacement of old ways of working and the potential for role redundancies driven by AI and automation.

They're also energised and enthusiastic about the potential for these new technologies. In fact, the more AI rolls out, the more obvious it is that research skills are a core competence for the AI era. It's just that the jobs will be different.

Mike Stevens, Founder, Insight Platforms

The winners grasp a fundamental truth: AI isn't the strategy: it's the infrastructure enabling strategy. The real competitive advantage lies in what I call the "3 U's of Data": Uniqueness (proprietary data aligned to business questions), Usability (ease of generating enterprise-wide insights), and Utilization (translating information into decisions). AI unlocks these dimensions' potential, but human expertise determines whether potential becomes reality.

**Lenny Murphy, Chief Advisor for Insights and Development, Greenbook
(from Greenbook's 2025 Business & Innovation Report)**

TREND 6

Data Quality: Beyond Bots and Bad Actors

The new definition of “quality”

At a time when brands need insights fast, data quality is more critical. And in 2026, quality is more than just about fraud detection.

It's not just about catching bots or screening out fraudulent actors. It's about protecting the integrity of insights from start to finish: how people are recruited, how questions are asked, and how responses are interpreted.

The [Global Data Quality Project](#), a collaboration among leading industry associations, is taking that broader view. Their work spans supplier transparency, sampling practices, fraud prevention, respondent experience, and even participant education. The mission is simple: rebuild trust in research by creating standards that protect both people and data.

Engagement is the real quality filter

As Jennifer Reid, Co-CEO and Chief Methodologist at Rival Group, wrote in [Greenbook](#):

“Even after the fraud is filtered out, the biggest threat to data quality is not always fake respondents. It's real ones who are bored, fatigued, or simply not engaged.”

That's the crux of the issue. Good data relies both on clean samples and motivated participants who feel seen and valued. When engagement drops, even real responses lose meaning.

Esomar's latest report echoes this shift, identifying “respondent trust and inclusion” as an emerging differentiator for research firms. Similarly, GRIT's 2025 report lists data quality and integrity among the top five priorities for tech providers and fieldwork partners.

Insight communities as a safeguard

Communities are becoming a vital part of the data quality solution. They give researchers a direct line to verified participants and create an environment where people are invested in sharing authentic feedback.

As Sofia Gomez Garcia of Warner Bros. Discovery explained:

“We run a community called the Warner Brothers A List community, and it's very valuable for our organization, both in terms of efficiencies and cost savings. The community has never been more important in our organization because as we continue to do so much quant, we see an uptick in sample fraud, and it's become harder for panel providers to separate bots.

When you have a community like ours, the incentive is different, and there is a much lower risk of that type of infiltration or fraud.”

That level of control makes all the difference. When brands build and manage their own communities, they know exactly who they’re hearing from. They can validate participants through photos, videos, and consistent engagement, creating the trust and accountability that true data quality depends on.

SMS distribution adds an extra layer of protection. While it’s easy to create multiple email addresses, the same is not true for securing multiple phone numbers. SMS distribution makes it much harder for bots, click farms and fraudsters to game your research for incentives.

TREND 7

More focus on learning and experimentation

The next competitive edge

The best insight teams in 2026 and beyond will be the ones that never stop learning.



46%

of researchers say their budget for AI tools will be increasing in 2026.

Source: Rival Technologies

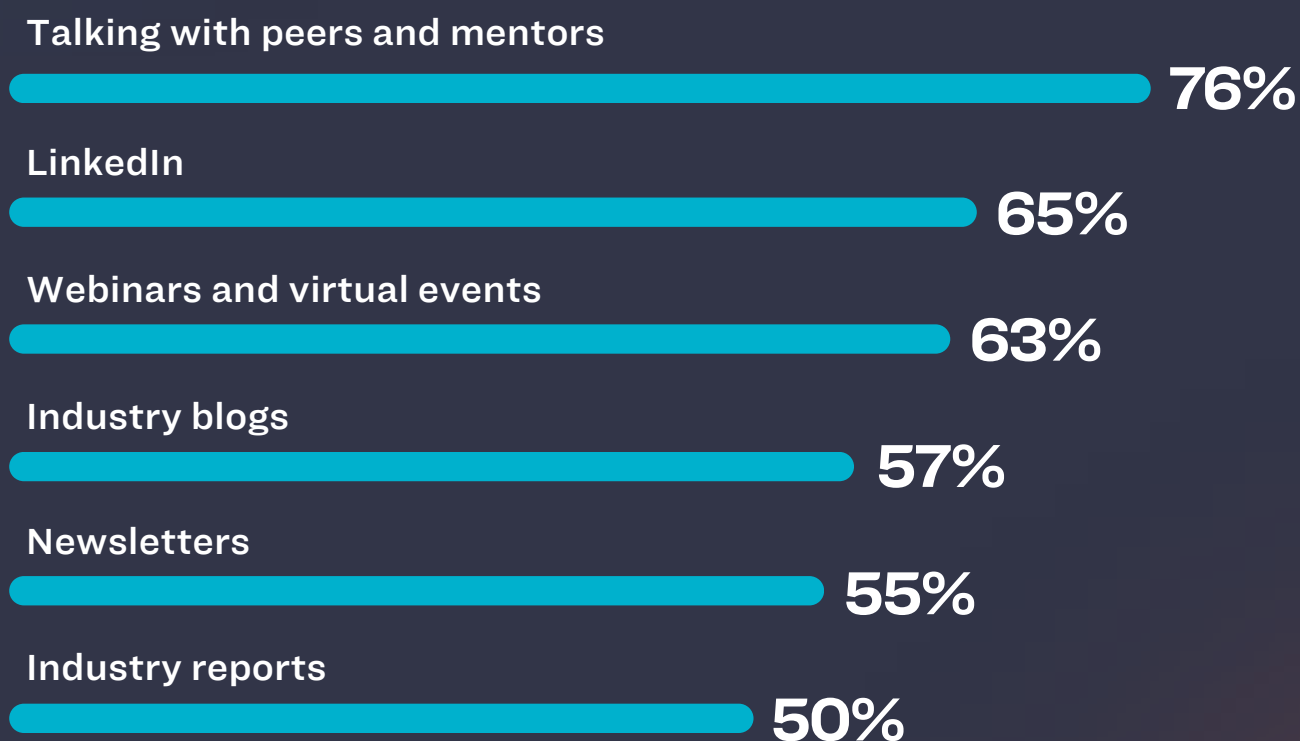
Technology, expectations, and methodologies are evolving too quickly for “best practices” to stay static. What worked last year might already feel outdated. The teams pulling ahead are the ones that experiment, adapt, and share what they learn—not just once a year, but all the time.

According to GRIT’s 2025 Insights Practice Report, “organizational experimentation” is now a defining trait of high-performing insight functions. These teams see testing as part of the process, not a side project.

Experimentation doesn’t have to mean risky pilots. For some, it may mean trying “vibe coding” or creating their own custom GPTs. For others, it may mean running a conversational research study alongside a traditional survey, or trying an AI agent for a specific task.

Top ways researchers hear about new trends

Question: How do you usually keep up with new trends in the research world?



Source: Rival Technologies

From hype to hands-on

At Rival, we've taken this mindset to heart through our Innovation Insiders program, a year-long cohort that helps brand-side researchers learn, test, and operationalize AI in real-world projects. Participants explore use cases, run pilots, and share what works (and what doesn't) in a safe, collaborative environment.

This approach turns curiosity into capability. It replaces hype with hands-on learning and helps teams future-proof how they work.

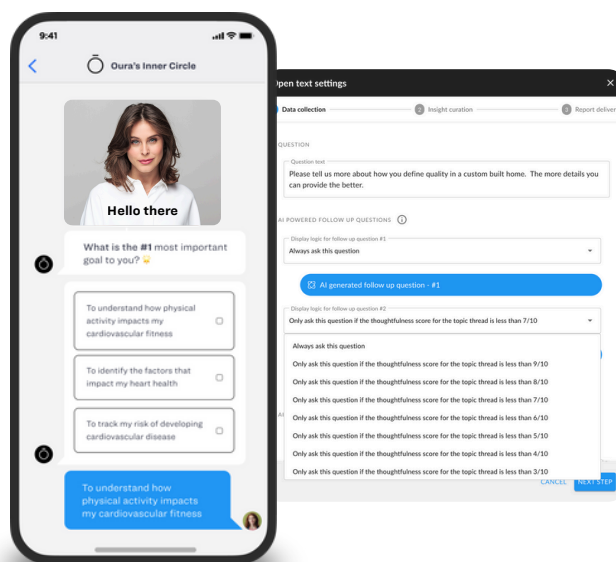
"The truth is, experimentation does take extra work. You're probably going to have to carve out time you don't really have...But it's worth it. This mindset of staying curious, running little experiments, not gripping the wheel too tight is how you get to the big stuff: operational efficiencies, new ways to serve customers, smarter ways to sell."

Andrew Reid, CEO and Founder, Rival Technologies

The mindset that moves the industry

Experimentation keeps the insights industry sharp, creative, and resilient. It's how we separate innovation from imitation, and how we make sure technology works for people, not the other way around.

In a world that's changing faster than ever, that mindset might just be the most important insight of all.





Looking Ahead

If there's a single thread running through all these trends, it's this: the future of insights isn't about choosing between technology and humanity. It's about combining them.

AI is changing how we collect, analyze, and share information. But the researchers leading the way aren't just adopting new tools—they're redefining what better looks like. Faster doesn't have to mean shallower. Automation doesn't have to mean less human.

The most exciting progress is happening where curiosity, creativity and technology intersect.

The year of purposeful innovation

GRIT calls this a “make or break” moment for the industry: a time when agility and foresight separate innovators from imitators. At Rival, Reach3 and Angus Reid Group, we see that every day. Technology might be the engine driving insights forward, but humanity is still the steering wheel.

Our mission remains the same: to help researchers ask better questions, listen more deeply, and turn every interaction into insight.

If 2025 was the year of experimentation, 2026 will be the year of integration—where the tools, the teams, and the talent come together to create insights that are not only faster, but more meaningful.

Conversational Research Trailblazers

Deeper, Authentic Connections.
Real-time Insights. Transformative Results.



Mobile-First
and Chat-Based



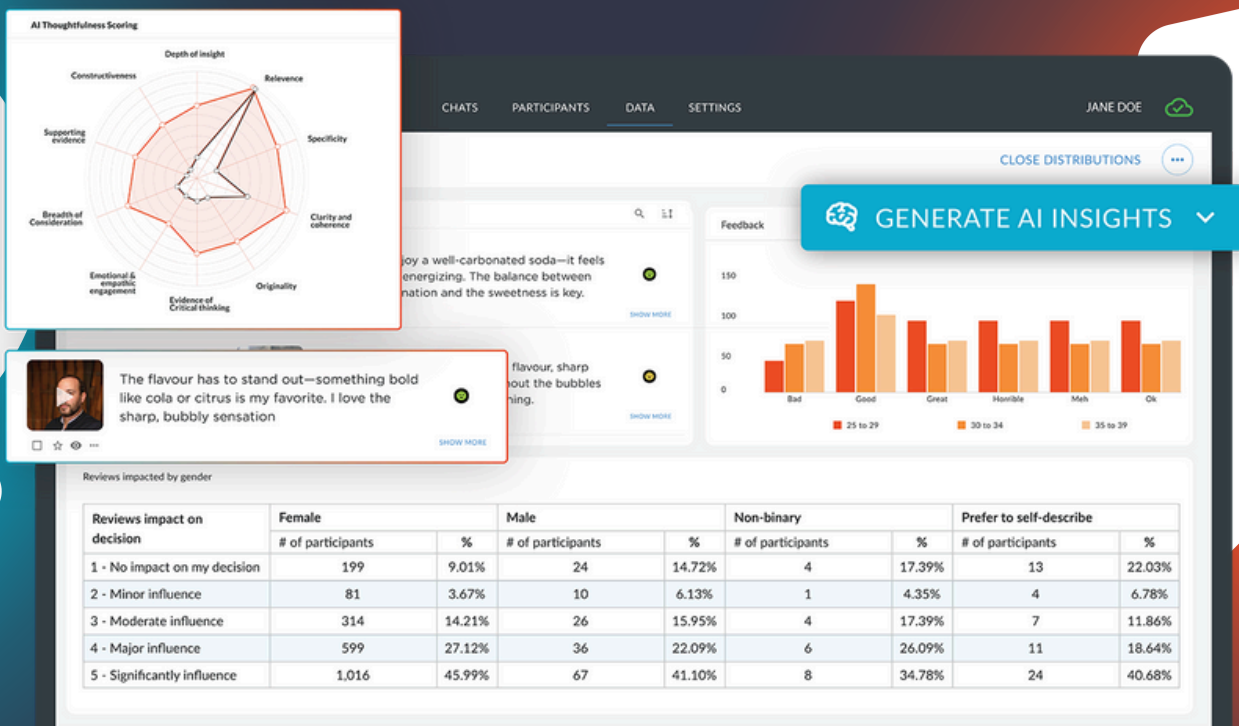
Quant, Qual, and
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Next-Gen
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