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HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Testing company Birkman International may have traded in the No. 2 pencil for the Internet, but the company's Birkman Method has stood the test of time

Houston Business Journal - December 29, 2006 by [Nicole Bradford](#) Special to Houston Business Journal

A series of framed company logos in the office hallway at social testing company Birkman International Inc. could almost be a study in the evolution of graphic design.

The changing fonts and graphics through the years parallel the changes within the 55-year-old company that, too, are a sign of the times. The company's well-known Birkman Method exam, once taken in-person with a No. 2 pencil required, is now available worldwide through the Internet.

The Birkman Method, developed by Roger Birkman in 1951, measures how its subjects view others and themselves as well as their interests and needs in the workplace. It is used by companies for such purposes as hiring, employee retention and team-building, and by schools and other organizations for career planning.

Originally scored by hand, the test itself still remains a useful tool based on its ability to evolve over the years.

But internal marketing, administering and training as Birkman International grew larger and rolled into the high-tech 21st century has been a challenge, says Sharon Birkman Fink, who took over the company from her father in 2001.

"One of the most challenging things is when people ask 'What is it that you do?' " Fink says.

Birkman, who served as a B17 bomber pilot during World War II and often heard conflicting stories from other pilots in the same bombing runs, was fascinated by how different people perceived the same situations and events.

While pursuing his Ph.D. at The University of Texas, he developed a "test of social comprehension," which eventually was labeled the Birkman Method. During the 1950s, while what was then known as Birkman and Associates was housed in a three-room office downtown, most of the companies that used Birkman's Test of Social Comprehension were local. Marketing for the product was essentially direct.

"In the early days, it was just knocking on doors, cold-calling and word-of-mouth," Fink says.

While the company's advertising remains mostly by word-of-mouth, usually through its consultants or clients, the client base is far from local.

The Birkman Method is currently administered by an estimated 2,000 certified consultants



Craig Hartley/HBJ
Sharon Birkman Fink and
Roger W. Birkman of
Birkman International:
Getting good grades.
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worldwide to corporate clients such as The Coca-Cola Co., Marathon Oil Corp., Cardinal Health Inc. and The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston.

Gross revenue for the company, which has 17 internal, full-time employees, was \$4.2 million in 2005, with a projected \$4.81 million for 2006.

Dealing with growth has kept Birkman International from sitting back and riding the success of its product. The company is constantly working to streamline its certification process for consultants, who either work independently or in human resources departments for large companies.

One way the business gains more clients, is through what Fink calls "the viral method."

"Once people get certified in Birkman, they rarely leave us," she says. "They may leave one company in human resources and go to another company -- and they take our method with them."

With the advent of the Internet, the company quickly realized that the Web could be used not only for administering the test, but as a tool for certifying consultants who were not able to spend four days in the traditional certification process. A recently developed, partially online version of Birkman certification training requires potential consultants to do prep work online and attend two days of training instead of four.

"I think the reason Birkman has been so successful for so long is genuine commitment to help their customers and consultants," says certified Birkman consultant Dave Steitz of Steitz Partners in Houston. "They have maintained a long-term consistency and yet are willing to constantly question and make changes for the better."

Birkman International is currently working to find an avenue for the method to reach further in to the companies that employ it in order to provide a more complete picture of each organization.

"It's been an instrument of the elite -- it's used in upper and middle level management," Fink says. "We feel that it has value throughout a company."

Still, Fink admits that companies with thousands of employees often don't have time to look at the numerous reports generated by the process.

"If you're going to take it to 60,000 people," she says, "you've got to find a way to make it practical."

Whether with the Internet or through updating the test to reflect transformations in corporate America, change is not new to the Birkmans. In the late 1960s, Roger Birkman shocked peers when he integrated the use of a mainframe computer into his business. By the mid-1990s, the company had ditched its paper question-and-answer forms for a computer disk version. Today, the test is available directly on the Internet.

"With every change in any direction, you have those who are used to the old method who don't like the new one," Fink says. "With things like that, you're going to have growing pains."

Still, the arrival of the Internet was a huge boon to the company's growth, since the questionnaire could now be widely and instantly available and translated into more languages.

Doing business on a grand scale, says Birkman International Chief Operating Officer Richard Goldman, means the company must go from one that has personal relationships with clients to one that provides service on demand.

As a result, Birkman International works to anticipate the needs of clients and then to develop ways to quickly and accurately fill those needs.

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"Our business customers may have specific problems they need to solve," Goldman says. "They're not just looking to get insights on people. They've got to interview and hire people quickly, or they need to build a team. It takes a lot of art as a consultant to figure out which reports to use for which problems."

Through all the technology, however, the basic Birkman International product has remained the same. This, some say, is the nuts and bolts of the company's success.

Client Randy Hopkins, president of Team Excellence Inc. which specializes in information management systems and strategies for small to midsized businesses, says there is a "real magic and 'wow-factor'" " experience that comes along with administering and applying the test.

Hopkins, who was introduced to the Birkman Method early in his career, founded his own company in 1981 and still uses Birkman in working with clients.

"I have thousands of individuals ask me, 'How in the world did you get all of that about me out of those dumb questions?' " he says. "That is self validation at its highest, and that is why Birkman has lasted."

Birkman International Inc.

Owners: Roger Birkman and Sharon Birkman Fink

Founded: 1951

Employees: 17 internal, plus an estimated 2,000 outside certified consultants.

2005 revenue: \$4.1 million

2006 revenue: \$4.8 million

Web site: www.birkman.com

Nicole Bradford is a Houston-based freelance writer.

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