

# Why 23andMe Is Smoke and Mirrors



By Lila Abassi — March 11, 2016



Genetic testing via

[Shutterstock](#) [1]

Part of me feels somewhat intimidated and reluctant to blast anything Google-related because they can probably take me off the grid and no one may know I ever existed – sounds a bit paranoid I know, but sort of feasible, right?

The company 23andMe, a direct-to-consumer genetic testing company, recently made headlines because they opened up more about what they offer to consumers and why they are so great. Chief Executive Officer Anne Wojcicki, ex-wife of Sergei Brin (co-founder of Google, she started it just before they got married), stated, "We can get a lot of people to understand what their genome means. More than 90% of our consumers have the comprehension, which means the average individual in this country can understand genetic information."

I would like to disagree with that statement - as did the FDA when they forced them to stop over-hyping their products a few years ago.

And it also seems a bit interesting that their company uses catch phrases like, "taking power," or be "empowered," and the company has two female co-founders, one of whom referred to the FDA's requests for information [with statements like](#) [2], "We're playing in a big boy's world," which is essentially equating her company's legitimacy with a feminist fight against male dominance - cliché and borderline offensive. They often talk about the female leadership while ignoring that co-founder Paul Cusenza was the co-president because he had all the experience.

Initially, the genetic test kit was created as a novelty experiment involving the individual as the primary and sole subject, enabling them to find out fun facts about themselves, such as why they can't stand cilantro or some cute fact about their pee.

But is that all it really is? Or is this company as insidious as paranoid individuals, such as myself, are inclined to think they are or have the potential to be? Between knowing my weakness for Tupperware purchased from Amazon *and* my genetic information, I'm fairly certain that, together

with Google (though divorced from Brin, her sister is still CEO of YouTube) will ultimately find new ways to gain world dominance.

Similar to the way cookies work on a webpage, 23andMe could take your genetic information, glean from it your predisposition for developing a particular disease and gear marketing toward you that either you or they, may find beneficial – just the same way that every website I visit, is loaded with Amazon advertisements (and no, I'm not a skill for big Amazon).

In reading about the company and its claims, my hypothesis (which is not unique to just me) is that what they are doing is more akin to an elaborate magic trick. While they keep the attention of the masses focused on what the right hand is doing, people miss the fact that it's the left hand that just pulled a fast one on you.

Let me explain. The company, as per their website, offers four different types of reports:

- Carrier status – if you have genes for an inherited condition
- Ancestry reports
- Wellness reports – if you're lactose intolerant (because you wouldn't know it by now if you're old enough to have a credit card?)
- Traits – what makes you unique

According to some anecdotal testimonials, most of the information that these reports contain are hit and miss, similar to a weather reporter announcing that there is a 50/50 chance of rain. And as far as being able to determine whether I have sickle cell disease, for example, is not a novel discovery. Because I can spit in a tube and be told that does not make it much cooler.

I have a real problem with many things in life – the Kardashians, reality television in general, advertisements for feminine products and people eating on New York City subways - but I have no control over these circumstances. What I do have control over is with whom I choose to share intimate personal details – I lie to my own doctor, for the love of Pete, and I am one. How could I trust this kind of information with strangers who have you sign away consent for them to use your genetic information to publish papers and sell more stuff?

It's not so much *what* they can tell you folks, because besides some obvious genetic disorders, 23andMe is not super concerned with the accuracy of their reports, but rather with compiling vital information about us and using that data for whatever sordid purposes they can come up with, to give them more leverage in the world than they already have. I feel that even if the initial sentiment may have been benign, this extent of information about the public in conjunction with the power that Google provides, spells disaster—IMHO.

References (1 [3], 2 [4], 3 [5], 4 [6])

**Source URL:** <https://www.acsh.org/news/2016/03/11/why-23andme-is-smoke-and-mirrors>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.shutterstock.com>

[2] <http://nymag.com/news/features/23andme-2014-4/index1.html?source=acsh.org>

[3] <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/23andme-is-terrifying-but-not-for-the-reasons-the-fda-thinks/?print=true>

[4] <http://nymag.com/news/features/23andme-2014-4/#>

[5] <https://www.23andme.com/about/tos/>

[6] [http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/860223#vp\\_2](http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/860223#vp_2)