

Still waters run deep

It has been my experience that when clients perceive a project to be of especially high importance, they request us to recruit “creative” respondents. Regardless of the nature of the project, we always say we want articulate respondents. This suggests that if we don’t take special screening precautions, we are likely to end up with a large number of uncreative respondents who have little to say. We often build in special screener questions to gauge how articulate or creative a prospective respondent is, e.g., “If you could pick one famous person to be your dinner guest, who would you choose and why?” Or, “If you could show me just one item (not a photo and not a person) that represents you, what would you choose and why?”

While devising these questions can be fun, it is a rather dubious process since recruiters usually evaluate the responses. These types of questions are often placed toward the end of the screener. Is it realistic to assume that recruiters are: a) trained to effectively evaluate responses to these questions, and b) motivated to not accept a potential respondent who qualifies on all other specifications?

These assumptions are especially impractical when recruits are tough and last-minute. I’ll sometimes ask facilities to fax me the responses they have received to the questions about articulateness or creativity in hopes that I’ll be a better judge of the respondent than

they. However, the reality is that a simple answer to one or two questions, likely shortened and paraphrased by the recruiter, is a poor assessment of a respondent’s ability to be articulate or creative. The questions are particularly bad indicators for introverts who are uncomfortable coming up with an answer off the top of their head.

Not creative

A common tendency is to assume that quieter, more introverted respondents are not particularly creative. Other misconceptions are that introverts are unfriendly, won’t talk, don’t like people and are withdrawn or shy. Some more extroverted clients – and moderators – assume quieter respondents are just not very bright. To the contrary, leaders in psychoanalysis and communication tell us that introverts are often better thinkers than extroverts. Introverts are independent yet flexible, have a strong ability

How to recognize and benefit from more inner-directed respondents



By Myra Summers

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ty to concentrate, enjoy creative out-of-the-box thinking and possess strong analytical skills for concept development and problem solving, i.e., creativity!

Unless you know how to spot an introvert, it's easy to dismiss or pass them over. Big mistake! There may be a volcano of rich, juicy insight brewing within. The introvert's tendency to avoid immediate and enthusiastic communication of their ideas sometimes leads to the assumption that they have nothing of value to offer. This fallacy results in the potential loss of quality feedback and applicable insight. We do ourselves a major disservice when we give up too early on more introverted individuals. Introverts have the ability to take us to the next level in terms of developing ideas and expanding concepts. However, their reluctance to fight to be heard, slower processing time or a deliberate style of thinking may result in our missing their ideas, solutions and creations. They are still digging deeper in their own minds but the moderator has moved on to the next question or topic.

Different wiring

Better understanding of the different wiring of introverts and extroverts is key to appreciating the value more inner-directed respondents can bring to a project. The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is probably the most recognized indicator of temperament. Building on Carl Jung's theories, Isabel Briggs Myers and Katherine C. Briggs developed this indicator, which includes four temperament continuums, introversion/extroversion being the most widely used. The MBTI proposes that temperament reflects innate preferences established in early childhood based on our neurological genetic wiring. Myers and Briggs purport that introverts are energized by the inner world of concepts and ideas while extroverts are more focused on the outer world of people and things. Introverts are estimated to account

for about 25 percent of the population. Being vastly outnumbered by us sometimes loquacious extroverts, many introverts have become quite proficient at interacting with the world around them. They just prefer to think things through internally. Introverts do their best work inside their own minds where they can adequately reflect on issues without external distraction. Conversely, extroverts tend to need external input or dialogue in order to formulate ideas and problem-solve.

Marti Olsen Laney, a psychotherapist who specializes in working with introverts, explains that their neurological wiring assists introverts in retrieving long-term memories, problem solving, introspection, complex thinking and planning. Research indicates that introverts have more brain activity in general (that's humbling, isn't it, fellow extroverts?), specifically in their frontal lobes. They enjoy in-depth discussions, take longer to make decisions and use their short-term memory less often than extroverts. Introverts prefer depth to breadth, are more likely to have fewer but more intimate relationships, and know particular topics in-depth. Conversely, because extroverts have more activity in the back of their brains, they are energized by external stimuli. Extroverts like breadth - they consider lots of people friends, think variety the spice of life and are OK with knowing a little about a lot. Things usually move faster for extroverts and in a more measured direction for introverts. Introverts tend to work out their insights slowly and carefully whereas extroverts often have an urge to communicate and put their inspirations into practice. As a consequence, extroverts may serve up more responses or ideas but introverts' insights may prove more profound.

Introverts notice details and absorb a lot of information. They have a strong ability to concentrate without being affected by the external environment and thus may not be as likely to be swayed by group-

think. While they may appear withdrawn or uninvolved, in reality they are often focusing, thinking and reflecting. Introverts find interruption frustrating as it breaks their concentration. The characteristic pause frequently found in the introvert's communication style serves a valuable purpose. It gives them time to study a new situation so the corresponding action will make sense. How many times have you noticed that a particular respondent doesn't say much but when she speaks she provides very valuable information? That respondent is probably an introvert!

Myers uses an analogy to common geographical associations to help further crystallize some of the differences between extroverts and introverts. She compares the introvert temperament to the New England stereotype of silent, reserved, slow-to-bend, inclined to mind their own business and leave others to do the same. Myers compares the extrovert temperament with descriptors often used to describe the traditional Southern characteristics of openness, accessibility, communicativeness and friendliness.

Different gifts

Does this suggest we should conduct groups exclusively among introverts now? Certainly not. The two temperament types bring different gifts to the discussion. Extroverts are innately relaxed and comfortable in a group environment and help get the initial stages of conversation started. They tend to be articulate and accessible, and are likely to be the first to respond as we segue into other topics. We extroverts tend to talk first and think as we go. Thinking out loud is not necessarily a detriment in focus groups, as it gives introverts time to think and process internally, without the loss of too much time and energy between dialogue. A weakness of extroverts, especially in extreme types, is a tendency towards intellectual superficiality, i.e., grasping at

the first or most obvious answers versus thinking deeper about alternatives and implications. Pat Weaver, a counselor in Winston-Salem, N.C., says that, "After the fact, the introvert is more likely to say, 'I wish I had said...,' whereas the extrovert will say, 'I wish I hadn't said...'. Extroverts talk until they find out what they want to say. Introverts stay silent until they know what they want to say."

Not the same as shyness

So how do you know if you have an introvert as opposed to someone who is just shy, tired or preoccupied by wondering if they're going to get a ticket for being parked illegally during the focus group? First of all, introversion is not the same as shyness. Introversion has to do with how a person is wired. Conversely, shyness is extreme self-consciousness and a lack of confidence, usually as a result of life experiences. Some of the behaviors that may signal you have an introvert respondent include:

- may look blank, as if not listening;
- reflects before speaking;
- looks away when speaking, enabling them to concentrate on what they want to say;
- more eye contact when listening to instructions or getting new information (It's very important to introverts that they have all the information and know exactly what is expected of them.);
- observes before jumping in; hesitant to interrupt others;
- speaks slowly, often with pauses, sometimes seeming to hunt for words;
- listens more than speaks;
- think they have told you something that they have not, because they have been mulling it around in their head;
- able to see both sides of an issue; less likely than extroverts to argue vehemently for only one position;
- start in the middle of their idea, or just speak their final thought;

- may speak softly, and with a minimum of variation in pitch;
- often reveal they possess a surprising amount of information, if given the chance and made to feel comfortable;
- uncomfortable when too much attention is focused on them;
- can more easily articulate thoughts and ideas in written form.

How do we help them?

Once we realize we have one or more potentially valuable introverts in a group, how do we help them tell us what we need to know? Foremost, it is our responsibility to honor the fact that these individuals are hardwired to think inwardly and give them an opportunity to do so. We need to create an environment that gives them time (sometimes tricky in a focus group) and ways to let ideas gel and expand. Usually, we will need to inquire about what introverted respondents think. Invite them to speak, but always do so in a welcoming, non-threatening tone. Admittedly, this can be frustrating and seem like a lot of extra work. However, the payoff can be worth it. Introverts often provide new insights, depth and unconsidered views to discussions.

When talking with introverts, we need to match their pace, go slower rather than rushing them, speak softly, keep some physical distance versus getting "in their face," and not interrupt. Don't force them to go first. Rather, let them have a little time to think. Trying to force the introverts to "spit it out" is ineffective as it only serves to increase their anxiety. Try to keep in mind that being in a group of extroverted respondents (and often moderator) for an extended period of time, especially if things are consistently chaotic or lively, can be exhausting for introverts. Excessive noise, consistent activity or too many forms of outer stimuli can cause introverts to shut down as a means of limiting input, sometimes referred to as a mind/vapor lock.

Homework is a wonderful tool

for introverts and extroverts.

Assignments such as collages, reflective writing and photo stories allow introverts to take as much time as needed to express what they want to communicate. Giving respondents forewarning that they will be asked to explain/present their homework helps reduce the stress of suddenly and unexpectedly being found on center stage.

Providing mental breaks helps introverts recharge. Such breaks may be achieved through introducing individual written exercises, involvement in projective techniques such as visualization or storytelling, or dyad activities where the Introvert is communicating with only one other person.

Introverts frequently have a much easier time communicating words or thoughts in written versus verbal form, coming to life when engaged in reflective writing. Introverts are often in their comfort zone with writing exercises that allow them to reflect, focus on what to include, and exclude what they consider extraneous. The characteristic verbal pause seems to disappear, with words flowing much more fluidly on paper. Writing gives introverts the opportunity to order their thoughts in a certain way that will lead to a particular perspective, and ultimately exploring and imagining alternatives that may result in those wonderful "aha" moments.

Help both

We will likely continue to devise screener questions aimed at helping identify articulate, creative respondents. However, it's more important that we provide an environment and utilize tools to help both inner- and outer-directed respondents formulate ideas and voice their opinions. The next time you have a quiet, reserved respondent in your group, look for the signs of the introvert. Don't mistake a quiet respondent for someone with nothing to say. | Q