



Get me out of here
PLEASE!

In our race to plan successful meetings, are we alienating the introverts in our audience?

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Delivering maximum value to clients should be a primary objective for every meeting planner. However, there's a chance that a significant percentage of your participants are leaving their valuable input and insights on the table when the meeting concludes.

When it costs so much to bring people together these days, would it not make sense to get the greatest return possible for your meeting investment? By better understanding the diverse personality types of participants, meeting planners should be able to engage a wider spectrum of attendees and thereby increase the value of meetings for their clients' organizations.

Psychologist Carl Jung popularized the terms *introversion* and *extroversion* in his work on personality types. You have undoubtedly heard of *introverts*, *extroverts*, *ambiverts* (a relatively new term), *converts* and *perverts* (who aren't generally welcome in meetings). In the past few years, more than two dozen books have been written to address various aspects of the challenges facing introverts. When it comes to fully engaging meeting participants, introverts are generally a tougher crowd. For that reason, this article is focused on developing a better understanding of introverts and exploring how to design meetings that will accommodate their personality needs.

Some of the more frequent comments describing extroverts (the largest percentage of the general population) indicate they:

- are energized by what goes on in the outer world;
- think out loud;
- find social interaction desirable;
- have many relationships;
- prefer working with others to working on their own;
- show their feelings on their face;
- are comfortable in groups and group settings; and
- are energetic and expressive in their demeanour.

Comments that describe introverts (a smaller percentage of the general population) indicate they:

- are energized by what goes on in their inner world;
- think quietly to themselves;
- prefer time to themselves;
- have fewer, but closer relationships;
- prefer to work alone or in small groups;
- have limited expression of positive feelings and keep feelings to themselves;
- are less comfortable in groups and group settings; and
- are low key and calm in their demeanour.

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Some Suggestions to Meet the Needs of Introverts

The Place

- Keep the lighting calm. Lots of flashing and intense lighting can be very disquieting for introverts;
- Provide smaller physical networking spaces throughout the conference facility. Nooks and crannies are great; and
- Make good use of hallways and other places for connecting informally.

Pre/Post Meeting Considerations

- When looking for help with respect to working on or at a meeting, extroverts will often volunteer. Introverts are willing to help, too. However, they respond better to being asked to participate;
- Provide introverts with an opportunity to get involved in small committees to help plan the event. They are more likely to interact in these small groups, as well as provide design input that will better meet their style preferences. This helps to build relationships before attendees show up. Webinars, Skype and other social media platforms can be used to good effect; and
- Provide opportunities to remain connected after the meeting as well. Introverts are generally more willing to contribute this way. Again, this can be done using Webinars or other software collaboration tools.

Meeting Structure

- Structure helps to increase comfort. Have a balance of structured and unstructured activities;
- Provide slightly longer breaks. Rushing to get coffee and rushing back does not restore energy for introverts;
- Build in time to recharge the introvert's batteries. Do not program every single minute. A point of diminishing returns will quickly be reached for the overloaded introvert;
- For concurrent and informal networking sessions, provide some smaller, quieter areas for groups to congregate. Introverts will be more comfortable in those settings than in the midst of a cluster of hundreds of people milling around. This is not an either/or design challenge, it is about ways to accommodate attendees regardless of where they are on the introversion-extroversion spectrum;
- Help newcomers feel welcome without putting them on the spot. For example, welcome them individually rather than asking them to stand up and introduce themselves to the group; and
- Provide breathing space between participants. Seating placed so close together that participants' shoulders or legs touch can be uncomfortable for introverts.

Points for Presenters

- Avoid insisting that everyone hug;
- Build humour into presentations early and get everyone laughing as a way to increase comfort in a group setting;
- Ask your speakers to provide pauses and opportunities for reflection throughout their presentations. Suggest participants write down answers to questions, summarize their take-aways, etc. Introverts reflect internally to integrate learning and will appreciate this processing time;
- In large groups, do not expect introverts to ask questions or offer opinions as readily as extroverts. This has nothing to do with their confidence or ability but with their interaction preferences. Their needs can be better accommodated by providing one-to-one or small-group conversations where ideas can be shared then reported in plenary on behalf of the group – likely by someone who is more extroverted;
- Include a mix of introverts and extroverts in panel discussions – you will likely see the differences on stage (even though the differences may not be apparent to participants); and
- Notice those participants who look like they have a question, but are not raising their hand. You can gently ask if they would like to share.

There are exceptions to these generalizations; we might demonstrate the characteristics of both extroversion and introversion, and the two extremes are generally acknowledged to exist along the same spectrum. In general, meetings appear better suited for extroverts. Unfortunately, that leaves a substantial percentage of any audience uncomfortable and potentially disengaged.

I had the opportunity to interview one of the top authorities on working with introverts, Jennifer B. Kahnweiler, PhD, author of *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength* and *Quiet Influence: The Introvert's Guide to Making a Difference*. I wanted to get Dr. Kahnweiler's perspective on how to make meetings work for introverts, too.

Q Jennifer, please help me understand the difference between an introvert and an extrovert. I've heard these terms tossed about in many different contexts, and I think it might be helpful to start with a set of common definitions.

A The simplest way to understand the difference is to understand the source of people's energy. Extroverts get their energy from others – they get charged up by being around people. On the other hand, introverts are energized internally. To make this a little more complex, there are degrees of introversion and extroversion – strongly or mildly introverted and strongly or mildly extroverted. This fundamental difference shows up in a variety of ways. One thing it means to meeting planners is that while extroverts tend to enjoy (and even seek out) interaction with their fellow attendees, introverts often find that interaction draining.

Q I've also heard the term *ambivert*. Do we need to explore that term, too?

A The term ambivert has been used a lot, and mostly speaks to my comment that introversion and extroversion are on a scale, with the ambivert holding the middle ground. An ambivert is moderately comfortable with groups and social interaction, but also relishes time alone, away from a crowd. This is similar to someone who is ambidextrous.

Q For the purpose of this article, let's focus primarily on those participants who lean to introversion. In most of the meetings I've attended, the design seems to really favour extroverts, definitely in the socializing components, but also in the main meeting components. Perhaps we could start by dispelling some common myths or misperceptions about introverts.

A One of the biggest misconceptions is that introverts are negative, rude or withdrawn. They don't show a lot on their face, leaving a negative impression. This is just a gap in perception. They may very well be interested in being friendly, but because they are not particularly transparent, there is a lot of projection that results in them being judged as aloof or bored. The worst question you can ask an introvert is "What's wrong?" Usually, there is nothing wrong.

Another myth is that they are loners and don't like people. They absolutely like people, but prefer them one-on-one or in small groups. They prefer depth versus breadth in relationships and substance over small talk. They tend to have a few good friends rather than thousands of superficial ones.

Q What's lost by not responding to the preferences of introverts in meetings?

A Well, it is apparent to me that you can miss reaching 40 to 60 per cent of any given audience (percentages vary in the research) if you ignore the needs of the introvert. The style in which they learn and network best with other people is not being addressed. As a result, introverts may withhold their input, thus minimizing the value of having them at the meeting in the first place. They may not absorb or learn the important information being presented, thus decreasing the transfer of knowledge back to their workplace. Based on an individual's perception of how the meeting is going to be run, that person may choose not to attend the function in the first place.

Another possible consequence is that your meeting planning services may not be booked again if key decision makers happen to be introverts who found the meeting design and speakers did not meet their style needs.

Human beings resist being put in boxes. Labels are for jars, not for people. The terms introvert and extrovert are used to reinforce the point that attendees are not all alike. By recognizing that participants are diverse and have diverse needs, we can all be more mindful of these differences and take them into account as we design and deliver great meeting experiences. **SOI**



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Jennifer Kahnweiler is an author and international speaker based in Atlanta. Hailed as a "champion for introverts," her bestselling books have sold more than 60,000 copies and have been translated into 12 languages.

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