



Who *Are* These People?

Understanding Personality in Online Communities

BRIEF REPORT | 2008

Executive Overview

When considering investing in a private, online customer community as a source for insights and coinnovation, skeptical prospects will often ask in reference to the community members we recruit, “Who are these people?”

What they’re politely expressing is the concern that the only people who would spend time online almost every week sharing their experiences, ideas, and opinions are “outliers,” be they lonely introverts, rabid axe-grinders, or mercenary professional survey takers. And the reassurance that they’re generally seeking is that we at Communispace can assemble a community of “normal” customers, people who are generally representative of the market they’re trying to reach.

While we empirically know from nine years of experience recruiting and running over 300 communities that our members are indeed real and “ordinary” people, we decided to systematically gather psychographic data to complement and round out the demographic data we routinely collect. To that end, we administered a short form of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) to 3,223 members of 23 disparate Communispace communities, ranging from those comprising affluent, highly educated investors to those comprising time-starved, middle-income moms.

Developed by psychologist Carl Jung and refined by Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, the MBTI is based on the theory that individuals are either born with, or develop, certain personality types, that is, preferred ways of thinking and acting. With volumes of research supporting its validity, the MBTI is used for everything from executive coaching to marriage counseling.

What we found confirmed our gut sense, which is that our members across communities mirror the general MBTI distributions in the population as a whole. However, there was one notable exception: **Our communities attract a disproportionately high representation of individuals who are visionaries, creative thinkers, collaborators, and problem solvers.** This helps to explain why a properly-recruited private online community can be such a **powerful vehicle for engaging customers in co-innovation and new product development.**

We’ll let the data tell the story.

What is the MBTI? Psychologist Carl Jung believed that human behavior, which often seems random and unstructured, is actually quite systematic and is directly related to how people use their perception and judgment.¹ He developed a typology that sorts these psychological differences into four opposing pairs that describe how individuals perceive, think, act, and construct meaning, as illustrated below²:

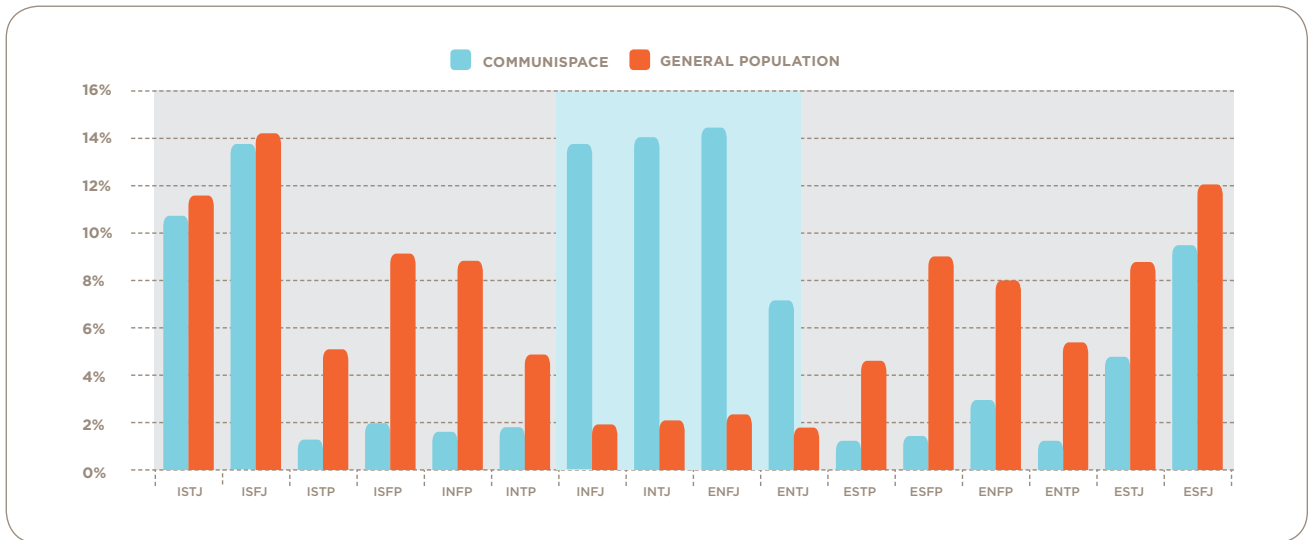
<p>EXTRAVERT Are attuned to their environment, maintain their social networks, and take action.</p>	E	I	<p>INTROVERT Pay attention to infrastructure and subtext, conceptualize the problem, and look deeply into issues.</p>
<p>SENSING Know the facts, understand the planning stages, and work out implementation details.</p>	S	N	<p>INTUITIVE (N) See the big picture, forge into new areas, and develop new possibilities.</p>
<p>THINKING Discuss issues in a logical way, consider the pros and cons of various alternatives, and spot the inconsistencies in a plan.</p>	T	F	<p>FEELING Understand what is important to people, acknowledge the human side of decision making, and help others make decisions.</p>
<p>JUDGING Generate systems, provide organization, and act with decisiveness.</p>	J	P	<p>PERCEIVING Are open to new ideas, provide insight, and react with flexibility if the system breaks down.</p>

People taking the MBTI are asked a series of questions that determine which of the two letters in each index they most closely represent. These letters are then combined and each respondent is assigned one of 16 possible personality types.

¹Briggs Myers, Isabel, and Mary H. McCaulley. *Manual: A Guide to the Development and Use of the Myer-Briggs Type Indicator*. 1st ed. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 1985

²Hirsh, Sandra Krebs. *MBTI Team Building Program: Leader's Resource Guide*. 1st ed. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 1992

Findings We fielded a version of the MBTI in 23 of our communities and have received a total of 3,223 responses to-date. All of the types were tallied and a distribution across the population was achieved. We then compared the distribution in our communities to the distribution across the general offline population.³ The pattern was similar for most types except for INFJ, INTJ, ENFJ, and ENTJ.



So what can account for this difference? The answer to this question can be seen by looking at why our clients initiate private online customer communities in the first place.

Communities as a Cauldron for Co-Innovation

Customer communities can be an ideal forum for gaining deep insights into the hearts and minds of customers. That’s why it’s important and reassuring for companies to hear that members of our community are representative of the full range of personality types.

But insight coupled with innovation is essential for the growth of any organization.

Traditionally new products and services were formed behind closed doors by a group of elite insiders. Realizing the need for outside perspectives, executives began eliciting the ideas of their employees because of their closer proximity to their customers. Now, a few forward thinking companies are taking it one step further by going directly to the source—asking their customers to help them co-innovate in the creation of new products and services.

That’s a prospect that is especially alluring to the personality types that are represented more in Communispace communities than in the general population.⁴

INTJs are *visionaries*—they think independently and work well when they are given the opportunity to develop their own strategies. INFJs are *creatives*—they are inspiring and work well when given the opportunity to apply their insightful knowledge. ENFJs are *collaborators* and are known for their responsiveness—they are supportive and work for the common good. ENTJs are *problem-solvers*—they are known for their drive and determination and work well when they are given opportunities to create systems/structure to solve problems. For the sake of this paper we can consider INTJs, INFJs, ENFJs, and ENTJs to be *co-innovation* types.

³www.myersbriggs.org

Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 1985

⁴Hirsh, Elizabeth, Katherine W. Hirsh, and Sandra Krebs Hirsh, *Introduction to Type and Teams*. 2nd ed. Palo Alto, CA: CPP, Inc., 2003.

We also asked these types how their personality is related to their participation in our communities. Here is some of what they said:

“I like problem solving, and this community is about problem solving in terms of identifying what people need, what they want to see done differently, and how you can meet their expectations.”

“According to the description I value strategic planning and thinking. This allows me to contribute by mentally planning how new concepts and ideas will effect consumers.”

“I guess what makes me is that I am a very hard worker and like solving problems. I really enjoy solving difficult problems that will help people in life/work.”

Implications In many Fortune 500 companies, the MBTI is used to help managers assemble the optimal mix of personality types to enhance the performance of their teams. When we consider the job that Communispace community members perform for our clients—not only providing insight into their needs, experiences, and preferences, but also helping companies to create new products and services—a general balance of personality types is also helpful. These data demonstrate that this mix is not only desirable, but achievable. And where there is a discrepancy between the national and community distribution of personality types, that imbalance favors visionaries and problem-solvers—the extraordinary “ordinary” consumers who will drive new product breakthroughs and early adoption.

Communispace Corporation is the leader in building, managing, and facilitating private branded communities that deliver the voice of the customer and enable businesses to generate continuous insights, drive faster innovation, and drive revenue. Founded in 1999, the company has created more than 300 customer communities for more than 100 global corporations including; Kraft, Hewlett-Packard, Charles Schwab, Hallmark, Unilever, GlaxoSmithKline, and Hilton Hotels. Headquartered in Watertown, Massachusetts, the company has offices in New York, San Francisco, London, Chicago, Austin, Atlanta, and San Remo, Italy..

For more information visit: www.communispace.com
Communispace Corporation
100 Talcott Avenue
Watertown, MA 02472
617.607.1400

Authors
Michael Jennings – mjennings@communispace.com
Julie Wittes Schlack – jwschlack@communispace.com