

Introverts, Extroverts, and Billy Joel

By Andrew Sobel

A few years ago, I found myself—unusually—at a popular bar in Boston’s North End at nearly one in the morning. After a daylong meeting, I had gone out to dinner with a group of client executives, and afterwards they had insisted on visiting the North End, which is a charming, traditionally Italian neighborhood located near Boston’s downtown waterfront. Among the group was my client’s head of global sales, Jack. He was six foot eight inches tall, and one of the most extroverted, gregarious individuals I have ever known. As we stood at the bar, he grabbed my shoulder, and said, “look there’s Billy Joel.” Sure enough, Billy Joel was leaning against the nearby wall, sipping a glass of red wine—alone.

If it had been up to me, the story would have ended there. Jack, however, called the bartender over and shouted, “A bottle of vintage Dom Perignon.” He then had the bartender take a glass over to Billy Joel, with instructions to tell him we had sent it. Joel took the champagne, and came over to talk to us. Jack had no problem starting up the conversation with the famous pop star, whose greatest hits album alone has sold nearly 20 million copies. “So what are you doing in Boston?” asked Jack, with a big smile on his face. And we then proceeded to chat with Joel for ten or fifteen minutes.

Why was Jack able to engage a rock superstar in a Boston bar, while the rest of us acted like we had lead feet and laryngitis? Very simple: Jack was an extreme extrovert. He felt quite comfortable approaching a total stranger who was also famous. In fact, he couldn’t possibly pass up the opportunity!

In building client relationships, extroverts like Jack do have, sometimes, natural advantage. Particularly when it comes to the networking and sustaining (or “staying in touch”) activities that are so important in building a client franchise, extroverts often feel more comfortable than introverts. I hear this in my workshops with business professionals: “I wish I were like...” and the name mentioned is typically a highly extroverted colleague who doesn’t mind calling up old clients on the phone to see how they are doing. So what are some techniques for relationship building if you are not strongly extroverted—if, indeed, you are an introvert? First, let’s define what we mean.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) provides a useful assessment of introversion/extroversion. MBTI is based on the work of Carl Jung, and it has been taken by millions of professionals. The first of the four Myers-Briggs categorizations is “I” or “E” for introversion or extroversion. According to the theory behind MBTI, extroverts tend to get their energy from being with people, whereas introverts tend to focus on ideas and thoughts, and therefore get energized through alone or quiet time. Myers-Briggs doesn’t say that introverts don’t like being with other humans—rather, when an introvert has spent an evening at a big, crowded dinner party, he or she needs to spend some time alone to “recharge.” About thirty percent of the population consists of introverts, seventy percent are extroverts—however, among educated professionals the proportion is around 50-50. Some, like myself, are mildly extroverted—I’m just over the line, so to speak. So how can you tell whether you are introverted or extroverted? Here are typical characteristics of extroverts:

- Sociable
- Outgoing
- Expressive
- Think out loud
- Enjoy parties and gatherings
- Like people interaction
- Get a “buzz” from being around people

On the other hand, here are some typical characteristics of introverts:

- Quiet
- Dislike crowds
- Enjoy talking one on one
- Enjoy alone time
- Entertain close friends at home
- Keep thoughts private
- Focus on ideas
- Recharge their batteries through quiet or alone time

Here are a few client development techniques or strategies for professionals who are introverted or only mildly extroverted:

Early in the relationship, structure interactions in an office environment around clear, solid content rather than through free-flowing meetings at the bar (as we did with Billy Joel!) or over a meal.

Lead with intellectual capital. If you're an extrovert, you may be quite relaxed about going in empty-handed to a client meeting, and then extemporizing and probing the client's issues. If you're more introverted, you may be more comfortable—and effective—if you lead with an interesting article, set of research findings, or case study to get the discussion going.

Try to align with clients who are similar to you. If you are highly introverted, and a client is the opposite extreme, it may be a difficult fit. You're going to prefer one-one-one meetings, while your client will want to go out with a group of people. An extroverted client may also interpret your quietness as a lack of boldness or enthusiasm rather than what it is--thoughtfulness!

Focus more of your personal time on small meetings with your clients. If you're in charge of a team, don't always bring everyone to meetings.

Team up with colleagues who are extroverted. This will greatly improve your chances of success with the client.

Always warm up a cold call. If you're meeting someone new, make sure that he or she knows something about you in advance. If you've been recommended to this person, or if they have read something by you or about you, you'll feel much more relaxed when the actual meeting takes place. Similarly, learn as much about the person as you can in advance. What are his/her interests? What has been the path of his/her career? And so on.

Practice saying it out loud. This technique is very effective in terms of making you more comfortable with uncomfortable conversations. You don't want to memorize a whole speech, but you might want to sketch out the first, exact 40 or 50 words, and then have an outline after that. Saying it out loud also helps you to refine your message—you'll find yourself stopping and thinking, "There's a better way to say that..." This is useful for calling past clients with whom you haven't spoken in years. Practice actually picking up the 'phone and starting the conversation.

If you're meeting a new person, try to have a brief phone conversation (or worst case, an email exchange) prior to the face-to-face encounter. This will greatly reduce your anxiety when the moment of personal introduction comes.

Take the burden off yourself by remembering that it's all about the other person, not about you. Unless you're giving a major keynote speech, no one expects or wants to hear you talk at length! Very often, all you need are a few well thought-out questions to engage the other person.

Remember, half of your clients are going to be introverts as well. Whether or not you're comfortable talking to rock stars in public, you can be highly successful at client relationship building.

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