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**CUSTOMER INSIGHT GROUP**



# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SHARING: WHY DO PEOPLE SHARE ONLINE?

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# Introduction

Despite a profusion of articles and information surrounding social media and content sharing, the basic question of why people share content online has slipped by largely unanswered. This study, a comprehensive, three-phase research initiative undertaken by The New York Times, is the first to analyze the consumer motivations underlying online content sharing. In addition to identifying the five primary motivations for sharing, our segmentation analysis differentiates between sharing consumers and identifies the six primary personality types of online sharers.

Based on these findings, we offer seven practical and actionable recommendations to help marketers create and distribute the kind of content consumers will be motivated to share.



Research was conducted in three phases between January and April 2011:

- **PHASE 1:** Ethnographies, consisting of interviews and observations, were conducted in New York, Chicago and San Francisco in January 2011.
- **PHASE 2:** Deprivation and Immersion
  - A deprivation study was conducted among “heavy” online content sharers across the country in February 2011. Participating sharers were required to cease and desist in all online sharing activity.
  - An immersion study conducted among “light” online content sharers across the country in February 2011. Sharers were encouraged to share as much as possible.
- **PHASE 3:** A quantitative survey was conducted among 2,515 online content sharers in April 2011.



# Findings

## TO SHARE IS HUMAN

When consumers encounter great content - useful, enlightening or simply entertaining - they feel an instinctive need to share it. Two in three (65%) report that when they find valuable information, they have to share it. Three in five (58%) say it would be difficult to stop sharing information online. Indeed, the very act of learning and discovering information is inseparable from sharing it, as three in four (76%) say that sharing is half the fun of finding information.

So, while technology has enabled consumers to share more content with more people more often, the compulsion to share and the enjoyment of sharing are, on their own, important parts of consumers' lives.

## INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Online sharing is having an impact on how we process and manage information. Three in four (73%) report that they process information more deeply, thoroughly and thoughtfully as a result of sharing it with others. Further, four in five (85%) say that the responses they get to shared content help them to understand and process the information more thoroughly.

Interestingly, as the volume and pace of content increases and its shelf life shrinks, consumers are sharing more and labeling and filing things away less.



# Sharing Personas

Our research identified six sharing personality types, or Personas:

- 1. Altruists:** They are primarily motivated by a desire to bring valuable content to those they care about and to let them know that they are thinking about them and that they care. Altruists are also motivated by a desire to get the word out about causes - and brands - they believe in. While this group is less motivated by self-interest, they still like to know that what they share was received and appreciated.
- 2. Careerists:** Focused on developing a strong network of personal and professional contacts, Careerists like to bring content and people together in ways that are meaningful and actionable. They also enjoy getting credit for doing so. They share to create discussion and debate and to elicit useful recommendations. For Careerists, the process is not one-directional; they engage seriously with content that is shared with them, as well.
- 3. Hipsters:** Online content sharing is a part of the Hipster identity. They like to start a conversation, debate or controversy. They are also strongly motivated by a desire to cultivate an online identity and stay connected with the world. It is important for Hipsters to be the first to share things with others, and they are always looking to connect with like-minded people. Sharing is so important to this group that they actively seek out content simply to create more opportunities to share.
- 4. Boomerangs:** Motivated primarily by the reaction they get back from sharing, Boomerangs like to stir the pot, start a debate and generate a lot of comments and “likes.” For Boomerangs, a negative response is better than no response at all. Sharing for this group is driven, in large part, by a need for validation. Similar to Hipsters, it’s important for Boomerangs that they are the first in their networks to share new content.
- 5. Connectors:** Sharing for Connectors is about mutual experiences and staying connected. For Connectors more than any other segment, sharing is not just about distributing content, it is about including others in a shared, content-based experience. They especially enjoy sharing content that is entertaining. Connectors also share things that will bring them together in person, such as coupons for shopping or restaurants, and they like to share to create new connections with like-minded people.
- 6. Selectives:** This segment shares information that they feel will be of value to a particular person, and only if they think the recipient would not have found it on her own. Given the time and consideration invested in what they share, Selectives expect that the recipient will respond and express her appreciation.



# Motivations for Sharing

Our research identified consumers' five primary motivations for sharing content online. Bear in mind that while we explore these motivations one by one, they rarely operate in isolation:

**1. To bring valuable, enlightening and entertaining content into the lives of people they care about:** The primary motivation for sharing content is to improve the lives of those who consumers care about. Virtually all respondents (94%) consider the value and utility that the information they share will have for the recipient(s). Nine in 10 (90%) share to help someone have a positive experience (or avoid a negative one), and nearly as many (89%) share to help others save money. Half of all respondents (50%) share to inform others about products they know the recipient to be interested in and possibly change their opinion or motivate them to act. As one Immersion respondent observed, “[I share] to enrich the lives of those around me.”

**2. To define themselves:** Two in three (68%) share to define themselves both to others and to themselves. Often, sharing helps them cultivate an idealized online persona. As one Deprivation respondent explained, “I try to share only information that will reinforce the image I’d like to present: thoughtful, reasoned, kind, interested and passionate about certain things.” Our study also found that online content sharing is founded on a strong desire for validation. For many, it seems, sharing content is very much about anticipating and enjoying the responses that the content elicits. One respondent compared sharing without receiving a response to “giving a speech where no one claps.” Moreover, respondents indicated that they are careful about when they share content online, preferring to share when many are online, and avoiding times like Saturday nights, when few are online to react.

**3. To grow and nourish their relationships:** Sharing keeps consumers connected, strengthens their relationships and occasionally creates new

connections. Four in five share information with others as a means of staying connected when they wouldn’t otherwise keep in touch. And three in four (73%) share content online to help them connect with others who share their interests.

**4. Self-fulfillment:** Consumers derive satisfaction from bringing valuable information into the lives of people they care about. And they enjoy getting credit for doing so. As one Ethnography respondent explained, “I enjoy getting comments that I sent great information and that my friends will forward it to their friends because it’s so helpful. It makes me feel valuable.” Our study also finds that consumers enjoy content more when they share it, and that they enjoy content more when it is shared with them. And, when they get feedback - comments, debate and suggestions - it frequently gives them a new perspective on what they shared. Finally, sharing keeps consumers connected to more than just people or content, with seven in 10 (69%) reporting that sharing information makes them feel more involved with the world.

**5. To get the word out about causes they believe in:** Four in five (84%) share information as a way to support causes (or brands) they care about. As one Ethnography respondent recalled, “I was so angry when I learned about the vote, I composed an e-mail and Facebook posting asking my friends to contact their representatives, and almost all of them did!” Several respondents observed that when it comes to getting the word out about causes they believe in, social media has made them feel empowered.

In all, these five motivations for sharing come down to the relationships consumers have with one another. Even more self-directed motivations, such as self-fulfillment and identity, are ultimately defined in relationship to others.



# Implications for Marketers

The motivations for sharing and sharing personas provide valuable lessons for marketers seeking to align their content-sharing strategies with consumer sharing psychology:

**1. Appeal to customers' motivations to connect with each other - not just with your brand:**

As noted earlier, all motivations for content sharing are driven by the relationships consumers have with one another. Messaging that strengthens your brand's relationship with your consumer is certainly essential, but if you want consumers to share that message, it must be embedded in content that takes into account what matters most: consumers' relationships with one another.

**2. Trust is essential:** Consumers will not bring content into the lives of people they care about if they cannot trust the source, accuracy or motivation behind it.

**3. Keep it simple:** Certainly not a new maxim for marketers, but it's even more important in the age of online content sharing for two reasons. First, the message not only has to be straightforward enough to appeal to consumers, it now has to be clear enough that those we choose to share it with - be it narrowly or broadly - will understand it. Second, when marketers create content for consumers to share, they cede the role of messenger and, with it, a substantive amount of control. The more complex the message, the more likely it will be misinterpreted and distorted as consumer share it.

**4. Appeal to consumers' sense of humor:** We certainly do not need research to tell us that funny content gets shared, but our study has provided some insight on the motivation for doing so. Sharing is essential to the act of enjoying. It is little surprise, then, that consumers indicate that when something is very funny they feel an instinctive need to share it with others. Unlike a joke told in person, where listeners laugh (or don't) immediately, when people share humorous content online they have to wait for a response. Their enjoyment depends on it. A non-response assumes that the recipient did not think it was funny, like when you share a joke and no one laughs. Our study further found that there is substantial social cache or credit in being the one to bring humorous content to others.

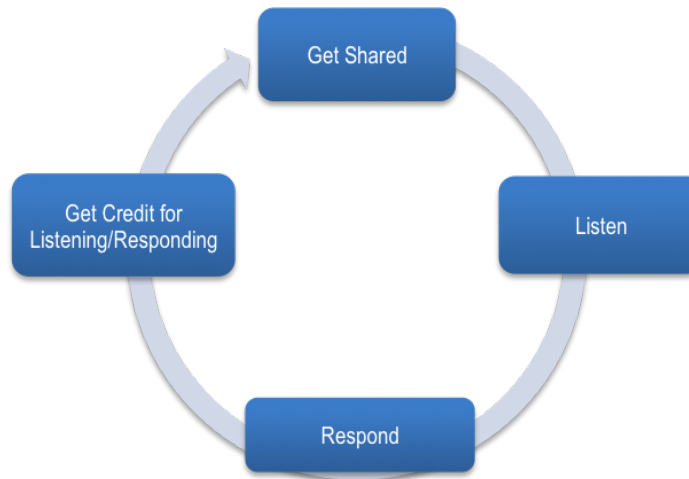
**5. Embrace a sense of urgency:** As observed earlier, sharing has become the new means of information management. If we set things aside with the intent of coming back to them later, we usually don't. It's essential that content get shared quickly if it's going to get shared at all.



# Implications for Marketers

## 6. Getting content shared is just the beginning:

For marketers, the job does not end when their content gets shared. Real success comes from listening and responding and getting credit for doing so. Consumers will often give a brand credit for listening to their comments and responding by sharing the fact that it did so with as many people as possible. A warning to brands that don't listen or respond: consumers will share that, too.



**7. E-mail is still #1:** Despite all the excitement about social media, e-mail is still the primary platform for sharing content. When e-mail first debuted, it was compared to postcards for its brevity, poor grammar and impersonal nature. Ironically, in today's world of texts, tweets and instant messages, e-mail is now the long-form, personal means of online communication. And when it comes to content sharing, e-mail is still the most personal means of doing so and continues to thrive as a sharing tool, even in the age of social media. This is because, for one, not everyone uses social media, and even those that do need to reach those that do not from time to time. Furthermore, our research found that e-mail is perceived as the most private and secure means of sharing content online. Finally, respondents indicated that when they share content by e-mail, they are more likely to get a response. Social media is all about serendipity; with e-mail there's certainty that recipients will see what's been shared in their inbox and respond, if appropriate.

Content Sharing by Platform	
1	E-mail
2	Facebook
3	Message boards/blogs
4	Twitter
5	LinkedIn
6	Social bookmarking tools





# Next Steps

The next phase of this study is a comprehensive exploration of five consumer categories: Personal Finance, Electronics, Entertainment, Retail Fashion and Travel. In a forthcoming report, we will provide an in-depth, category-level analysis of the motivations for sharing, taking a persona-based approach with category-specific recommendations for marketers.

For further information on this study, including more detailed results and category studies, please contact Brian Brett at (212) 556-7057 or at [brian.brett@nytimes.com](mailto:brian.brett@nytimes.com). Or contact your New York Times Advertising Sales Representative directly.