



Personas: bringing the user alive

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User-centred design puts the user at the heart of the design process so that the resulting product is easy to use. 'Personas' are a way of bringing the user alive – constantly reminding the development team who they are designing for. Personas, for developing web sites, have become very fashionable recently and we have seen both good and bad practice in the ways they are developed and used – so just how helpful are they?

What are Personas

Personas are 'archetypal' users – they tell stories about users in ways that people in the organisation can understand the user and what they want. They act as 'stand ins' for real users and help guide decisions about site aims, functionality and design.

Personas are different to market segments. Market segmentation details the quantitative aspects of the target audience – e.g. how many users there are, how old they are, ethnicity, sex. Personas, on the other hand, focus on the qualitative aspects of the target market – what type of people they are, what their motivations and constraints are, what they do and why, what their goals are – basically, what's going to make for a better user experience on the site. Demographics only really matter for personas when those demographics directly affect user behaviour – so, for example a schoolchild is likely to have different needs from a web site to a senior citizen. Segmentation may result in a large number of user types, difficult for a development team to design for. But an analysis of user goals may lead to only three or four personas focusing on the key target users: each persona will address a range of goals – so by designing for a single persona all other users with similar goals will be catered for.

The most effective personas are created through user research – where the data is based on what real users want – not made up by developers. Target user audiences are identified, interviewed and the feedback analysed to create personas – which 'translate' the raw market research feedback into something easier to digest. We have encountered a number of developers who use personas – which, in principle is good, but make them up based on their own preconceptions without any tailored research: talking to even just a couple of 'real people' would either validate or, more likely, challenge their ideas!

What do personas 'look like'

Personas describe the user – with the focus on goals, motivations, and behaviours. Personas are brought to life by giving them names and photos – turning the abstract concepts into flesh and blood. By doing this, it helps the web development team and content providers to 'walk in their users' shoes' and look at things from a different perspective to their own. It's very difficult, for example, for a 25 year old single male web developer to understand things from the perspective of a 49 year old mother of two who's trying to juggle work and home life! They are there as a constant reminder – as an A4 print out on the pin board by the desk, as a poster on the wall, as a cardboard cut out, in the corner of the office – continually reminding you about what's important to them.

Personas are deliberately short descriptions. The role of the persona is to provide a concise but precise pen portrait of the user – the person, their motivations and goals, and how the site should help them – so that people in the organisation can quickly focus on the things that are most important to them. They are short descriptions, rather than detailed reports – they can be described easily on one sheet of paper that make them easy and quick to understand.

How do Personas help

There are a number of ways personas can help:

- They prioritise user goals, and put the emphasis on the goals that are most important to users
- They put the user and the goals in context, by understanding the motivations behind the user's behaviour, what they want from a site and how they will use it
- They enable development teams and contributors to develop a shared understanding of the relevant audiences, and the goals users have and the language they use
- Consequently, the site is developed to get the majority of target users to their goals quickly and easily, and designed in a way that has emotional resonance with users and makes them feel they're in the 'right' place
- As well as focusing on what to develop, personas highlight to web teams and contributors what *not* to develop.

So when designing a site, writing some content, or improving functionality, personas force developers

to think about what the persona wants, how they would like it and how it could be 'made good' for them: the extra member of the team who sits on your shoulder like Jiminy Cricket and comments and nags to get things right.

How Personas can be used

Specifically, personas can help in:

- Choosing features and function: The personas help guide thinking about the features, functionality and content. They help developers decide whether 'one size fits all' when thinking about functionality on the site, and can help 'make decisions' about creative design or how a piece of functionality will work
- Content development: Personas can guide the development of content – both what is written and how it is written – so that it meets users' needs and is presented in a format, style and language that is appropriate to them
- Prioritising features, functions and content: Personas can set priorities – they should represent the users that are strategically most important and relevant to the organisation. Therefore, if a web development or content does not satisfy the needs of these personas, then it's should not be on the web site
- Internal 'selling' to senior management: Personas are useful tools for communicating to management about the future of the site, as all developments can be referenced back to the persona and demonstrated how it will deliver value to the target users
- Evaluation: Personas can be used for quality assurance testing and evaluation – 'does the facility really meet the needs of the persona?' – both in terms of what and how it delivers.

How not to use the Personas

Although personas can be used to help site development in many ways, they are not a universal panacea and do have limitations:

- The persona is just an archetype – there is no substitute for real user testing as site concepts are developed; furthermore, this type of iterative research will inform and develop the persona – real people will always surface issues not anticipated by the archetype.

- Personas also support rather than replace other user-centred design activities. There is still a need to conduct analysis to understand the detailed tasks the site is to accommodate, and to understand the goals that users want to achieve, particularly if it is a new concept.
- Personas are not static – they need to be updated and revised within organisational or broader context changes
- Personas should not be 'shoe-horned' into inappropriate contexts – particularly if new sub sites are developed that are actually targeted at different user groups with different goals
- Personas should not be used when other user centred approaches would be more appropriate such as ongoing data collection or real life user testing.

In Conclusion...

Personas are a valuable tool for developing a usable, useful and relevant site – providing focus and clarity for all the team. But their validity depends on how they've been developed. WUP believes that useful personas should be based on sound user research that surfaces real users' goals, motivations, behaviours and contexts.

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