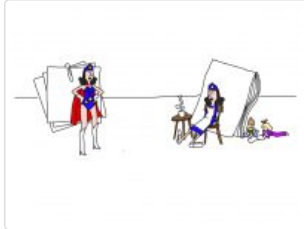




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Imperfect Personas

Posted on January 25, 2017 by Eric Meyer in Tips – 4 Comments



If you've done any UX work at all, you've probably worked with and created personas.

Personas are fictional, archetypal characters that represent the users of a site or product. Personas can be very useful: they can help us see a design from new perspectives, make decisions, and uncover blind spots.

Sometimes, personas are based on existing user behaviour and your own research. They can also be invented fictions, intended to model the different kinds of users for a completely new design—something for which there aren't any users yet, and so no existing behaviour to model.

Either way, there's often a blind spot built into the personas: they're too perfect. I don't mean that they're too well made, but that the characterisation is usually sanitised, representing an idealised state of being.

The mid-30s stay-at-home mother personas never have troubled marriages, difficulty with their kids, or worries about ageing parents—unless those problems are directly relevant to the thing being designed. For a medical-information design, sure, the personas all have medical worries. But the personas for an online retailer almost never do.

Your instinct may be to reject such things as irrelevant. But think about it: our actual users, the ones for whom we're trying to design these experiences, *do* have stresses and worries in their lives. After all, they're human. And those stresses and worries, being part of them, are also a part of their interaction with everything in their lives. If that includes your design, then they will interact and react within the complete context of their messy, human lives.

When our personas fail to include stresses and worries that have little or nothing to do with whatever we're creating, we're actually blinding ourselves.

The bright smiles of a thousand cheery stock photos distract us, and the narrowly focused descriptions lead us astray. We're more likely to think of our personas, and thus our users, as behavioural puzzles to be solved rather than as complete humans.

So as you write your personas and scenarios, don't drain the life from them: be raw. Bring in snippets of users' anecdotes if you have them, and include emotion wherever you can. Whoever picks these personas up down the line should feel as compelled to help them as you do.



Age 29
Title Stay-at-home Mom
Salary —
Education College graduate
Hobbies Baking, quilting, running, volunteerism

"I want to get this done quickly and easily, because I don't have a lot of time. I also can't spend any more than absolutely necessary."

Susan Q.

Susan is a stay-at-home mom with two children. One of the children is mildly autistic, and is currently a student at the neighborhood public school with minor assistance from the district. Her marriage is under some strain due to financial pressures, but she and her spouse love each other and are committed to making the marriage work. While much of her time is consumed with household demands, Susan does find time to volunteer for a few organizations, some of which are church-related.

Susan (never "Suzie") is familiar with online shopping, but her experience is mostly limited to Amazon. She isn't as concerned with how things look as how they work.

Shopping Goals

The right item at the right price: Susan often shops with a specific item in mind—usually household items, school supplies, or children's clothing. Susan is very price-conscious, largely due to the state of household finances, and is always keen to know if she's getting the best possible deal.

Precision shopping: In almost every case, Susan is shopping online because she knows exactly what she needs and is looking to get it. Shopping online means having items delivered to her, which means less time sunk in running errands, which means more time for her volunteer work and other demands on her time. She doesn't mind being shown related items when it's relevant, but too much distraction and she'll look elsewhere.

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