

Getting the most out of personas

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Personas are great. No seriously, they are the best thing since sliced bread. I can't think of any project involving UX that doesn't benefit from the addition of good old personas. So what are personas I hear you ask and what makes them so great? Like all good things personas are actually very simple – they are basically fictional (but based on fact) representations of your users. They represent the goals, motivations, characteristics and behaviours of a real group of users (the most important part). For example, if you're designing an ecommerce website you might create a new shopper persona, and a frequent shopper persona (among others) to help with the design. Of course a picture speaks a thousand words so I've included an example of a persona below to see what I mean.

Peter

The busy parent

About Peter

- Works in London for an advertising firm
- Lives in Surrey with his wife and 2 young kids
- Has a busy life so is a big fan of time savers
- Is comfortable online and does a lot of shopping online (as it's more convenient)
- Is a 'hunter' shopper – wants to get in and out as quickly as possible
- When shopping usually just wants to find something that ticks all the boxes
- Wants to get good value – preferably the best price possible
- Gets frustrated by not being able to specify a delivery window for online purchases
- Gets annoyed by slow and clunky websites



*"I don't want to have to
faff around"*

Key goals

- To get the best price possible
- Be inspired
- A quick and painless online purchase

An example persona for an ecommerce site

So what makes personas so great?

Put simply personas help to put a human face to users. They encourage everyone to design for real people, rather than faceless and homogenous users. Real people have needs, motivations, emotions and frustrations (among other things) that can be captured and communicated using personas – things that are all too often lost when speaking about generic 'users'. Personas also help to build consensus within a team, or at least exposes those areas where there isn't consensus. By making it explicit exactly who the product or site is being designed for (or more precisely those people the design needs to accommodate), you can ensure that everyone not only knows who the end users will be, but also have a common view of who they are. Personas by their very nature also provoke discussion and dialogue about users. Would Sarah find this feature useful? Do you think that Ted would be able to use this screen? People love talking about people and by using personas you're giving everyone in the team the platform to do just that. They are also a brilliant design tool. Want to prioritise some features – your personas can help. Want to evaluate a design – your personas can help. Want to recruit participants for user testing – your personas can help. Want to get rich quick – your personas can..., hang on maybe not the last one!

Last and not least, what makes personas so damn great and useful is that they force you to go out and find out as much as you can about your users. As wise man say (well me actually) 'The journey is sometimes more important than the destination'. Put another way – the process of finding out about

your users and creating your personas is just as important as the personas themselves.

Like all the best techniques there is no right or wrong way to create and use personas (well there is probably a wrong way – like using your favourite TV show characters as your personas). I therefore thought that I would share some tips to consider when researching your users and when creating and using your personas.

Tips for researching your users

Do your homework

I simply can't emphasise this one enough. You get out of personas what you put in and to get the most of out them you really need to do your homework when it comes to finding out about your users. This means putting on your deer stalker, getting your best pipe and doing some detective work. It means talking to users. Talking to the people who talk to your users. Surveying your users. Observing your users (observe, don't spy – that's just rude). Reading as much research as you can find about your users. Find out who they are, what makes them tick and what their goals, need, motivations and drivers are. Don't use the old 'the dog ate my homework excuse' because even if there is very little time you can always carry out some quick and dirty user research!



Elementary my dear Watson

Map out your persona characteristics

OK so you've spoken to your users. You've found out lots of stuff about them but are not sure where to start when it comes to drawing up your personas. A good place to start is by mapping out the different characteristics for the people you spoke to (as always post-it notes are good for this – find a bit of space and go post-it note crazy). For example, a characteristic might be the amount of time they spend using your website; their level of comfort with technology; or the amount of time they have been a customer. Look for the similarities (i.e. trends) and the differences in characteristics and behaviour between your users, because this will help highlight the different user groups and suggest what they have in common, and what makes them different.

Identify your user groups

When putting together your different user groups don't forget that groups don't have to be restricted to demographics, or market segments. A group merely implies commonality between those users so could be based on common behaviour, goals, attitudes, levels of engagement, experience, usage or even hair styles (hmmm... maybe not the last one). For example, if you were drawing up iPad personas (I'd love to see Apple's version of these) you could have a Apple geek persona, with a very high level of brand attachment and an Apple sceptic persona, with a relatively low level of brand attachment.

Set your persona boundaries

Having identified your different persona characteristics it's a really good idea to get everyone in the team together and mark out where on the spectrum for each characteristic (e.g. Expert to novice, Brand champion to brand sceptic) your design will need to support. For example, if you're designing an application for programmers you might decide that you're going to design something that assumes that someone has some programming experience. This is a bit like designing for the 5th percentile to 95th percentile range of body sizes within [ergonomics](#). If you're designing a car you're unlikely to be able to design something that [Shaquille O'Neal](#) (at 7 ft 1in) can easily fit in (unless it's a convertible) – but then you don't need to because most people are much smaller!

Tips for creating your personas

Focus on a few primary personas

If you're designing a website that anyone can use you need to create lots of personas right? As there are so many different people out there. Well you could – but it would not only take ages but would also be of limited use because you'd have personas coming out of your ears and you can't really design something for everyone anyway. Instead it's better to concentrate on 2 or 3 'primary personas'. These will usually be the users that are most valuable to you, or could be the users that pose the greatest design challenge. For example, if you're designing a car park ticketing machine one of your 'primary personas' could be an elderly gentleman (assuming he would actually use a ticket machine rather than speak to the nice young man behind the counter) as he's likely to pose a significant design challenge.

The number of personas you create is really dependant on the size and diversity of the user base for your product or application. If 2 or 3 primary personas don't cover enough of your users then you can always create some additional 'secondary personas'. Be mindful however that you'll still want to concentrate on your primary personas because otherwise you'll end up trying to design something to please everyone – which is really an impossible task!

Make your personas believable

First and foremost your personas must be believable. They must feel and smell right (I wouldn't worry about scented paper though). If a persona isn't believable then people won't buy into them, they won't empathise with them and you'll only end up discussing how unbelievable the persona is, rather than utilising the persona.

A good way to make sure that you're personas are believable are to show them to people who know your users and ask for their feedback. Have they met people like this? Does the personas seem plausible to them? You also want to be able to relate your personas back to your user research because otherwise it's all too easy to invent an imaginary user who really wouldn't exist in the real world!

Give your personas memorable names

A really good tip this one. Give your personas a memorable name because this will help people to remember them. Think of your personas as brands – the more easy to remember the brand name the better. For example, you could have a persona called ‘Stu the thrifty student’ or ‘Penny the pensioner’. Don’t get give them silly names, but try to come up with a name that is memorable and that easily rolls off the tongue.

Use an appropriate persona photo

A picture paints a thousand words which is why the picture you use for a persona is so damn important. Use a photo that doesn’t seem to fit the person described and people will notice. Use a photo that is obviously posed (like a lot of stock photography) and people will notice. Use a photo of a Z list celebrity and people will notice. The best persona photos are:

- **A good size** – You don’t want people squinting to make out the person shown.
- **A head shot** – you don’t need the whole person shown (unless it’s important to the persona, like a sportsman perhaps)
- **Natural** – Think holiday snap rather than catalogue photo
- **Royalty free** – be careful about copy protected photos



Persona photo = BAD

Some good photo websites for finding possible persona photos include [Flickr](#), [Stock.xchng](#) and [Fotolia](#).

Use a persona template

You can speed up the persona creation process by using a template for your persona, or by taking a persona from a previous project to use as a starting point. Setting up a simple Word template is quick and easy and will help ensure that you include all the stuff that you need to for each persona.

Cut out any unnecessary detail

When you’re creating personas it’s tempting to throw in lots and lots of detail. What the person’s best friend’s name is. What car they drive. What their favourite TV show is. What type of underwear they prefer. Whenever you add detail for a persona take a step back and think – is this important? Does this information matter when it comes to designing for this person? If it’s not really relevant then take it out because you want your personas to only be as detailed as they need to be.

Make your personas challenging

When creating your personas don't make them too easy to design for. They need to be a challenge, because in the real world your design will be used by challenging users every day (much as you'd like to think otherwise). By including the goals, behaviours and characteristics of some of the more challenging users, the design should also support those users in between. For example, the sort of help and instruction provided for novice users is also likely to be useful for those more infrequent users who sometimes forget how something works.

A good way to ensure that your personas are challenging is to think of as many reasons as possible as to why each persona is a challenge, and to list what these key challenges are. For example: Can we design a website that is easy enough for Sarah to use? Can we design an application that is reliable enough for Terry?

Don't spend any more time on your personas than you have to

Like a great painting or sculptor, a persona is never truly finished. You can always keep refining it, perhaps adding a little more detail here and there but you should resist this temptation. Spend as much time as appropriate on your personas but no more. If it's a small project, or time is very limited then do a quick and dirty persona. If it's a very large project then you might want to spend weeks on creating your personas but don't forget that personas are only a means to end – not the end itself.

Make your 'best guess' personas clear

To all intents and purposes a 'best guess' persona looks exactly the same as one that has been carefully crafted from lots and lots of empirical research. This can be very dangerous because you don't want people assuming that your personas are based on fact when they are not. A good way to make it clear that a persona is a 'best guess' or 'assumed persona' is to use clipart, or a sketch instead of the usual photo. Make it clear to people that a 'best guess' persona will only become a bonafide persona once the assumptions made have been checked and the persona validated.

Think of your personas as a marketing campaign

OK so you've created your personas, you've emailed them to everyone on the project but people aren't really engaging with them – they're not feeling the persona love like you do. You've got to get people to engage with your persona, dare I say it even excited by the personas (Hmm... sexy personas perhaps) so think of your personas as a mini marketing campaign. You might create eye catching posters for people to read. Create persona top trump cards for people to trade or send out enticing teasers to get people's attention. Anything you can do to get people thinking about the personas and therefore thinking about the users.

Tips for using your personas

Get the maximum use out of your personas

Don't just create your persona and then let them gather dust on your desk or office wall. Use them – as much as possible! Personas are the vinegar of the UX world – they have a thousand uses. You might use your personas to:

- **Brainstorm features** – Take it in turns to role play as your personas and think of what features he or she would find useful.
- **Prioritise features** – If you've got a bunch of features then you can use your personas to help priorities them. Got through each feature and discuss whether each persona would love, like, loath or be non-fussed about it. By giving a score for each you can, and perhaps weighting personas depending on their importance you can rank your quickly features by user preference (well best guess anyway).
- **Drive scenarios and designs** – Use your personas as a basis for your scenarios, designs and user journeys. What context would Jake be using your application? What would he need to do? How might it work for him?
- **Evaluate and test designs** – If you've got a design then take a persona and think about how he or she would react and interact with that design. Would Sarah know what to do? Would this design be clean and clear enough for Mark?
- **Role-play** – Everyone loves a bit of role playing so put your persona's hat on (metaphorically although it could be literally) and pretend to be them . You could do some quick user testing by asking someone to role play a persona (or even better hypnotising them) and asking them to carry out some tasks.
- **Help recruit participants for user testing** – Persona make a great starting point for recruiting participants for user testing. You can use your persona to define the sort of participants you need, or even give your personas to your recruitment company and ask for 3 Peters, 2 Johns and 3 Marinas!

Keep reminding people of your personas

Like those relentless TV ad campaigns you want to be reminding people about the personas as much as possible (don't bore them to death though – there's a fine line!). Mention your personas in documentation, in presentations and during stand ups. Put up posters. Create screen savers. Send holiday postcards to the office from your personas (this really freaks people out!). Anything you can do to keep the personas at the front of people's mind.

Re-use your personas

Creating persona takes time and considerable effort so if you can re-use a persona, or at least use it as a starting point do so. Of course you need to use your judgement – shoehorning a square persona into a round persona doesn't make sense, but then neither does throwing away all that great user research because you want to start over again.

Finding out more about personas

I've outlined some of the tips that I've found useful when it comes to getting the most of personas but it's a big subject, and one that I've only really scratched the surface of. If you want to find out more about personas and how they can be used then I can heartily recommend getting hold of a copy of [The Persona Lifecycle: Keeping People in Mind Throughout Product Design](#) by John Pruitt and Tamara Adlin. It's a great book and has lots of information and advice about creating and using personas.

You can also view and download a talk I delivered about personas at the Cambridge branch of the [Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators \(ISTC\)](#).

- [An introduction to personas for technical authors \(presentation\)](#)