Personas

A technique that employs fictitious users to guide decision making regarding features, interactions, and aesthetics.

The design that seeks to accommodate everybody generally accommodates nobody well. For example, the percentage of visitors who actually buy products on an e-commerce website is typically quite small relative to the total number of visitors, but most website designs (and redesigns) fail to consider the differing needs of buyers versus browsers—that is, they design for the average visitor, an impersonal and homogenized construct derived from sources such as visitation statistics, surveys, and usability testing. It is better to understand and perfectly meet the needs of the critical few than to poorly meet the needs of many. It is this specific problem that personas seek to address.[1]

Personas involve the creation of profiles for a small number of archetypal users, each profile representing a composite of a subpopulation of users. Information for the profiles is derived from user and stakeholder interviews, reviews of market research and customer feedback, and statistics about how a product is used when available. Done right, the number of personas is small, with typically no more than three primary personas representing the primary target audience, and up to four secondary personas when the needs of the user population are highly stratified. Each persona is typically represented with a photograph, name, description, and details about specific interests and relevant behaviors. It is often useful for members of the design, development, and testing teams to role-play different personas. This clarifies user needs and behaviors and is an effective means of creating empathy for the user perspective. Personas not only make the target audience more real to designers and engineers, they also ensure that requirements are prioritized to specifically meet the needs of high-value users.

The use of personas in the design process is increasing in popularity, though empirical evidence for the technique as compared to more traditional approaches is lacking. The measurable merits of the approach are difficult to ascertain due to the proprietary and relatively secretive nature of the methodology developed by Cooper. The unfortunate result is an abundance of teachers, consultants, and practitioners engaging in their own version or interpretation of personas. Nevertheless, the anecdotal evidence for the general approach—especially its user-sensitizing impact on designers and developers—is compelling.

Consider personas early in the design process to define and prioritize require-ments. Keep persona profiles short, preferably one eye span, so that the information can be easily consulted. Limit the number of primary personas to three and secondary personas to four. Base personas on interviews and market research—do not make them up or recycle personas from past projects. The time required to research and develop personas is generally less than one month.

See also 80/20 Rule, Desire Line, Iteration, and Normal Distribution.

[1] The seminal work on personas is *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum: Why High-Tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity* by Alan Cooper, SAMS, 1999. See also *The Persona Lifecycle: Keeping People in Mind Throughout the Product Design* by John Pruitt and Tamara Adlin, Elsevier, 2006.

	AMANDA	GLORIA	CHARLES
Age	7	34	66
Occupation	Second grade student	Part-time office administrator	Retired accountant
Home Life	Lives with her mother, father, and younger sister in the suburbs of a large city.	Lives with her husband and two children in a mid-sized city.	Lives with his wife in the suburbs; has four children and six grandchildren.
Education	In elementary school	Has a bachelor degree	Has an MBA
LIFESTYLE			
Activities	Plays soccer, reads, and takes ballet lessons; saves her birthday money and allowance to spend at the mall.	Enjoys crossword puzzles and reading mystery novels. Spends a lot of time driving her children to activities.	Likes to work in the garden and drink wine. Enjoys traveling with his wife and investing in the stock market.
Ultimate Goal	Goal is to turn 10 so that her parents will let her baby-sit her cousins.	Goal is to make sure her family is taken care of and to find a little time for herself each day.	Goal is to make sure he and his wife have enough money to enjoy retirement and leave his children an inheritance.
WEB USE AND INFORMATION NEEDS			
Web Usage	Uses the Web for school projects and playing with Webkinz.	Uses the Web for shopping, news, and communication. Restricts the websites that her children visit.	Uses the Web for email and occasional research. Also shares images and videos of his grandkids.
Web Competency	Moderate competency	High competency	Low competency
Frustrations	Gets frustrated because her parents don't always buy her the cool stuff that her friends have.	Gets frustrated by traffic and waiting in line. Feels like there is never enough time.	Gets frustrated when he calls customer service and can't get a human on the phone.
Frequent Sources of Information	Friends, school, and parents	*Oprah*, amazon.com, and local TV news	Cable network news and *Consumer Reports*
Quote	"I can't wait until I'm in the fourth grade and get a locker at school."	"I love being a mom but I often feel stressed and need more balance in my life."	"I worked hard my whole life and now I am enjoying my retirement with my family."

Three personas illustrating the varying needs and behaviors of users for an e-commerce website for toys. Amanda is not generally a buyer, but she is an influencer. She likes entertaining and interactive websites. When she looks for toys, she wants an easy way to communicate (and lobby) her wish list to her friends and family. Gloria is the prototypical buyer. She is an overworked mom who worries about her children being on the Internet. When she visits the site, it is because her kids are pestering her to buy something. Charles is an infrequent visitor. He typically visits to buy his grandchildren toys. He has no idea what toys are "in" or what toys his grandchildren already have. When he tries to buy, he may need a lot of support.