Post 6 – Creating user personas

James Kalbach, in discussing aligning with user needs, advocates for the creation of user personas (2007, p. 154). Many other design guides recommend the same (among them, Jon Duckett's book on beginning HTML, 2010, pp. 358-361). While this seems to intuitively make sense, David Travis explains the pitfalls in developing sloppy or superficial personas in an article (http://www.userfocus.co.uk/articles/personas.html) on his usability consultancy's web site. It's worth a look because personas are easy to think about right up until you actually need to create one.

For me, the most important idea was that of empathy with the persona. Too often, I think we can become frustrated with or dismissive of particular users goals, desires, and needs. When we take the time to understand and empathize with the persona as an actual person—understand their problems, difficulties, and how they feel—our task transforms from catering to a special need to helping someone we actually care to help.

At my previous job, I was on a team responsible for launching a patient/device management software application. This company had sufficient budget to hire a firm to do usability testing. As part of the initial work, the company devised three user personas that were based on interaction with actual customers through field visits. The resulting personas were three-dimensional composites based on real people. The personas included names, photos, and brief personal histories as well as descriptions of their work roles, desires, needs, and motivations. It was easy to emphasize with them because they felt like real people, and the personas became key in decision making about software functionality. Each problem or question could be evaluated in light of each persona (e.g., how would Jenny feel if she couldn't access this feature from the homepage? Would her work be more taxing? Would she end up having a frustrating day?). The decisions are easier to make with personas, because you felt like you were helping real customers alleviate some of the stress of their daily activities. Not only will personas make your decision making easier, they will allow you to explain your decisions to upper management in terms of concrete customer benefits, not assumptions.

Have you used user personas previously? Do you feel they were effective?

References:
Duckett, J. (2010). *Beginning HTML, XHTML, CSS, and JavaScript*. Indianapolis, IN: Wiley.

Travis, D. (2009, August 3). How to create personas your design team will believe in [Web page]. Retrieved from http://www.userfocus.co.uk/articles/personas.html