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May 6, 2016

Boost Empathy Quickly With Proto-Personas

Digital Collaboration   Visual Thinking   Facilitation

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More and more, companies understand the importance of user-centered design. Every company should be asking, How can we strengthen empathy for customers and get closer to our users?

The first step in building empathy is gathering information and insights about your users. Depending on what kind of information you're looking for, you can run focus groups, conduct context interviews or analyze customer feedback.

But what do you do with all that information?

Personas are an effective method to develop empathy. These are user archetypes based on the actual goals and behaviors you've observed. They help capture and organize information gathered from research.

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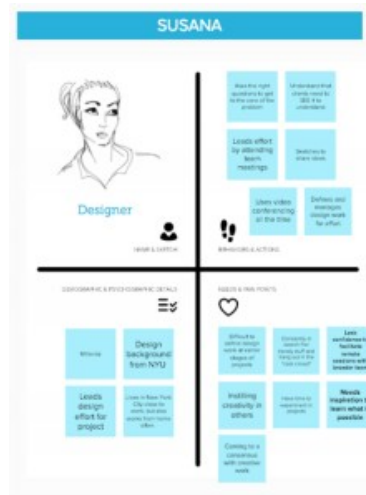
Proto-Persona example

BE PRODUCTIVE, BE AGILE

Creating full-fledged personas is time consuming. For most of us, finding the time to fill out your personas in a high level of detail is difficult.

Proto-personas are like a quicker, more lightweight version of personas. Instead of extensive research, proto-personas are based on company's assumptions. A tool that helps to build and create "fictional" characters that represent real users to build a common understanding of their needs and goals they want to achieve.

> *" Proto-personas aren't made up. They're are based on research. "*

Personas are not about defining user groups, user profiles or market segments. Instead, they are user models synthesized from real-world observations. Proto-personas aren't made up. They're based on research.

Proto-personas provide small companies and startups a faster alternative to more traditional methods, and still provide you with a helpful base of information about your hypothetical users.

HOW DO I CREATE PROTO-PERSONAS?

STEP 1

Start by brainstorming with your team to collect ideas and information about your users. What are your users' goals? What are their needs? What motivates them?

Your stakeholders have goals for your product, so encourage them to participate in the entire process. Also, seek participation from client-facing teammates. They have a panoramic view of actual users, and can help shape your personas based on real user needs and goals.

Tip: A time-saving alternative to a brainstorm is to create a short questionnaire. Ask members of your team to report their assumptions and observations about your target users, and use their responses to build a first draft of your Proto-Persona.

STEP 2

Once you and your team have collected all your information from different sources, it's time to move on to cluster up all the information and continue to sketch phase. Write down all assumptions and data you've collected about who your users are and how they use your service to start creating the proto-personas.

Give your proto-persona a name and sketch out what they might look like.**This "humanizes" your proto-persona: it creates empathy within your team and brings them to life in a way your team can easily grasp.**

Keep in mind that there might be different profiles of people using your service or interface for different reasons. You can separate these profiles into primary and secondary proto-personas.

The image below is a brainstorm and sketch for a proto-persona we've decided to name "Sofia."
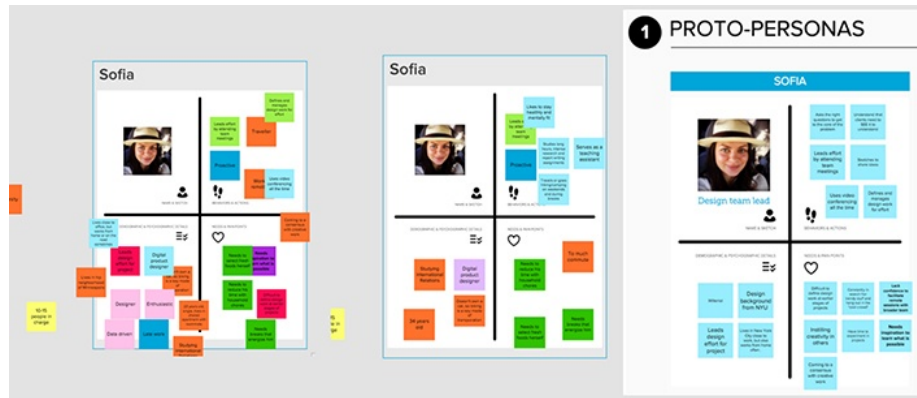
A proto-persona for "Sofia"

STEP 4

Now that you have well-defined proto-personas, clean up your insights and information into easily-understood visuals. **These visuals should effectively communicate to your team who you're creating for and what problem you're helping them solve.**

Meet Sofía and Lucas:

Sofia is our primary proto-persona. Lucas is a secondary proto-persona who interacts with Sofia.

REUSE, RECYCLE

Use your proto-personas over and over. With your team, use your

proto-personas to create a narrative: what does the experience look like from their perspective? How do you want to change it? Iterate on your personas as you continue to receive new information about your users. Make sure your observations are consistent and your assumptions check out.

For every feature of your product or aspect of your service, create a new narrative featuring your proto-personas to understand how it might affect your users.

Let's say you're creating a video tutorial for your product. Here's an example of a user story you could use to inspire your team with your proto-personas as the main characters:

"Sofia is new to MURAL and learned to use the product herself without help from any tutorials. She searches through the index to see if there's something she might have overlooked.

Sofia will be collaborating with her project team in a few days, and the team will be remote. **Lucas**, the PM, has never used the product before. Sofia wants to get Lucas and the others caught up on how to use the product before their meeting in a few days.

Lucas tries the product on his own, but doesn't get it right away. He goes through the video series, skipping the things he's already learned."

Narratives like these help you and your team keep the objectives and motivations of your proto-personas in mind as you create a better experience for your users.

WORKING TOGETHER, LIVING APART

What if you're creating proto-personas for your company, but your design and research teams are locate in different locations? You and your teammates can't be in the same place, but you still need to build proto-personas and move forward with your project.

MURAL makes it easy.

MURAL is a digital workspace to help you create with your team. Think of it like a shared whiteboard in your browser. Invite your team and work together from anywhere.

Create and setup a mural for this purpose and start collaborating with your team. Drag the proto-persona framework from the toolbar to get started. **This allows your team members to brainstorm and create proto-personas together, even when you're not all in the same place.** You will find easy identifying who is adding content and run voting session to prioritize ideas.

Collaborating together on a proto-persona in MURAL

Because proto-personas are based on assumptions, allowing others to incorporate their ideas, pictures and insights is critical.

Constantly update your mural with information as you validate your assumptions. That will make it easier for you to refine your personas.

Once you and your team have created your proto-personas, you can share them to the rest of your company to get everyone on the same page and stay focused on the goals of your user.

LEARN MORE

If you want to have the big picture on the potential work that you can approach using MURAL on the whole proto-persona flow together with others research tools like empathy maps, customer journeys, have a look at this mural.

If you plan to facilitate designing proto-personas remotely, or any kind

of remote collaboration, read this article from our blog.

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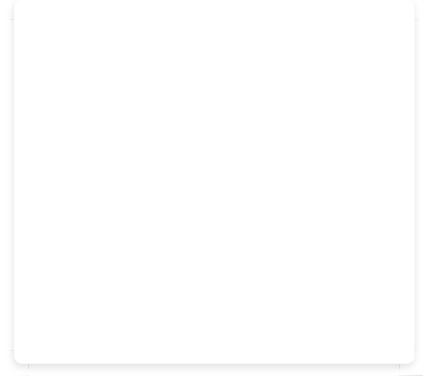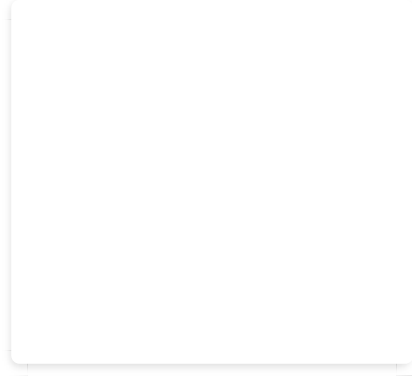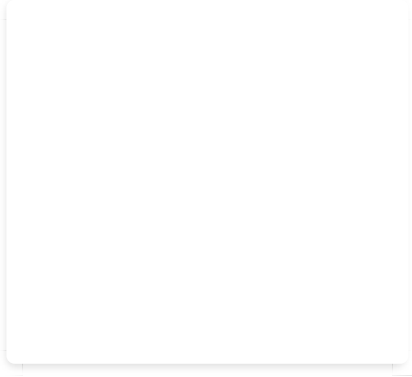
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