

H

Fuzzy Pictures

Giving Marketing Personas 20/20 Vision



ORGANIC®

A L
N C
H A
E C T N
C L O H N A
A E N L O C T



Fuzzy Pictures

Giving Marketing Personas 20/20 Vision

The better you see, the faster you'll find "aha" insights.

Imagine walking into a large conference room before the annual marketing strategy and budget-planning meeting. It's early on a dark winter morning. You walk around the dim room and look at the life-sized cutouts of your supposed customers propped along the walls. There's Mary the Maverick Soccer Mom, Upwardly Mobile Bob, Aspirational Aunt Annie, Cautious Carl the recent College Grad, Boomer Barbara -- all looming large.

Tacked on their backs are demographic snapshots about each "person" – where they live, how old they are, how much money they make, what clothes they wear, cars they drive and degree of education attained.

In less than an hour your company will make multi-million dollar marketing decisions based on these eerie cardboard cutouts, which in fact are not actual customers but distillations of data points pulled from reams of quantitative and qualitative research and then packaged into tidy, little customer personas.

Personas have been a marketing best practice for years, used as a way to align stakeholders around common conceptions of customers so they could begin to develop features and functions that meet customer needs. They also became a handy tool for advertising creatives to get a better understanding of the target customers in order to develop compelling marketing concepts.

But they do none of these well today. That's because over time, personas have evolved into oversimplifications of the complex and varied nature of consumer attitudes and behaviors. They have become lazy shorthand for understanding customers, a simple way to settle disputes about complex strategy questions and creative decisions. "This concept will appeal to Mary the Maverick Soccer Mom who reads Amazon reviews. And there are a lot of Marys in the world," someone states to try to bring the group to consensus.

"But what about Boomer Barbara?" someone adds.

"Works for her too. She also reads Amazon reviews."

Most personas lack 20/20 vision. While they may give you just enough to get around and function in the marketing world, a new prescriptive lens is required to enlighten an essential ingredient for creating effective marketing programs: Empathy for the customer.

This empathy is uncovered from looking at attitudinal and behavioral customer dimensions. Bringing this holistic view to the front end of strategy provides unusual insights, helping you to see possibilities in a customer's overall life, not just the silo that relates to a particular product category.

What happened? Hairballs and humans

Personas have become like a giant hairball where each research data point, attribute and observation



layers another strand onto the hairball. We tend to add more and more data as part of the persona development process, rarely taking anything away. Instead of helping us empathize with the customer to understand why she buys, the hairball forms into a tangled, shaky foundation on which to develop strategy and creative direction.

Further complicating the process is the widely accepted marketing practice that no decisions can be made “until we have the personas locked down.” Yet developing the personas sucks up a disproportionate amount of time in the marketing process – time that now seems wasted – considering this hairball dossier of data points is no longer a helpful planning tool.

“A hairball is bureaucracy, which doesn't allow much space for original thinking and creativity. It's the corporate tendency to rely on past policies, decisions, and processes as a formula for future success,” explained Gordon MacKenzie in his book, *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*. “All of this creates a Gordian knot of corporate normalcy. As its mass increases, so does its gravitational pull. And what does gravity do? It drags things down.”

In addition to creating uninspiring distillations of customer data points, four other trends have dragged down the usefulness of personas.

Too much what, not enough why

Personas are too often built on data that describes what the customers behavior is, e.g., Mary the Soccer Mom uses four media sites to find and post opinions on healthcare products. What's missing is the why. Why does Mary do this? What is propelling her behavior? In other words, the attitudes are more insightful than a report of the behaviors, but most personas focus too much on the latter and not enough on the former.

Composite personas have become generic and lost the humanity

Behaviors, like people, don't fit in a tidy little box of a marketing persona. Real people exist across behavior-

al segments, and are motivated differently for different categories at different times in their lives. They might act one way at work and another at home. There could be a day parting or seasonality to their attitudes. In other words, one person can have varying attitudes and multiple, sometimes contradictory behaviors. Adjacencies matter and this is where marketing can learn a lot from the design world, using more ethnographic “field research” approaches. The results are behavioral personas that break down silos and deliver insights that inspire the right creative ideas because their stories reflect the messy, untidy reality of people.

Creating experiences, not ads, requires experiential research

Creating experiences – not just static ads -- requires experiential research and a presentation of that research in multi-dimensional ways, not just as static personas. This experiential research means taking an emotional journey with customers, seeing their pain and triumph, understanding their aspirations and reasons for celebration, hearing their real voices and stories, seeing what they do (or don't) in the places they hang out, feeling their frustration and anger. Creating visceral connections can only happen with a visceral understanding of the people you're trying to connect with.

The world moves too fast

Personas have become deliverables unto themselves; they've become “fetish-sized.” Yet there is no such thing as a finished persona – it's not the end game. Personas, like people, are fluid and should be created (or re-created) continuously, especially in our fast-changing world where product choices have risen exponentially and trends come and go in months, not years. Relevance and customer attitudes are not static.

Beyond personas: the road to understanding the whole customer

There is no one “way” to understand customers, but here are five good techniques to help marketers see



clearly and understand and empathize with customers in a way that delivers creativity and innovation.

1. Track a footprint through the entire market ecosystem to get attitudinal + behavioral insights

The secret sauce to uncovering true customer insights is to look at both customer attitudes and behavior. Traditionally attitudes are looked at during the front-end of the research process, while behavior is factored in on the back end as part of optimization.

To get a more holistic view, create a disciplined approach to track what people do versus assuming who they are based on off-the-shelf segmentation and psychographic research. . This ecosystem tracking includes both online and offline activities relevant to the category and consideration process. It reflects an understanding of behavior over a span of time versus a point in time. Dig for not just behavior but motivations driving the behavior. What do people do every day as part of the rhythms of their lives? What makes them tick? What topics turn them from lurkers to participants and why? These insights will reveal how you can engage your brand with them as part of their daily rhythm.

2. Learn from the product design innovators and get out into the real world

Ethnography and cultural anthropology are two highly effective tools in the product designers' toolkit. Why? Because they allow the designer to really walk in the customers' shoes. This means observing people and talking with them while they're doing whatever it is they do. It means entering the customers world for a while, experiencing the context of their lives. "If you want to understand what motivates a guy to pick up skateboarding, you could bring him into a sterile laboratory and interrogate him... or you could spend a week in a skate park observing him interacting with his friends, practicing new skills and having fun," advises cultural anthropologist LiAnne Yu.

3. Hang in their digital communities

Go online and hang out in the customers' communities, forums and social networks to see what real people are saying about a product or category. Think beyond segmentation questions and ask not just what are people doing or saying, but WHY? Why do some questions or topics elicit huge retweets or responses – and others very few? What emotion, need or interest did the question tap? Why are some people in the community so popular and influential? The other value of hanging out in communities is hearing people express themselves in their own words and images. Marketers too often hurt their brand appeal and credibility by using language that doesn't connect with their audience, especially when there are generational differences between marketers and their customers. For example, youth marketing is filled with adults trying to recreate teen lingo often with embarrassing and alienating results.

4. Look at barriers and problems

The best insights plant seeds of differentiation. To find those insights, probe the obstacles and constraints that keep your customers from doing the things they want to do. Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen calls this the "jobs to be done" approach to marketing. "With few exceptions, every job people need or want to do has a social, a functional, and an emotional dimension. If marketers understand each of these dimensions, then they can design experiences precisely targeted to the job," he says. Ultimately, personas that reflect the behaviors and attitudes of people who are unable to accomplish what they want (as opposed to reflecting what they do accomplish) will help marketers deliver stellar experiences with true competitive advantage.

5. Develop a working hypothesis and test it

A marketing persona is a hypothesis, and as such should be tested before expensive, large-scale marketing campaigns are developed based on it. This is



critical for next-generation personas that shed light on a whole individual who, through the different modes of their life, may exhibit distinct and sometimes contradictory behaviors. The optimal way to test the customer hypothesis is to create a small experience, like a Facebook or iPhone app, and see if it gets a reaction from your customers. Seeing what the target customers do (versus what they say in traditional market testing), used to be unrealistic due to costs. Today, however, it's far wiser to launch multiple small experiences and track what's working or not, and then scale those that are successful.

Conclusion

For today's persona to provide value to marketing, it has to evolve beyond the artificial construct it is today. In its fiction, the marketing persona has to provide a more nuanced view of the customer, uncovering a deep understanding of attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, patterns and belief systems. To be useful, it can't be a giant hairball with five million facts about a customer segment. To be insightful, it should look at the customer as a person whose interests and behaviors extend far beyond your product category.

Personas are no longer static snapshots in time. If we've learned anything in this Web 2.0 world, it's that life is more fluid than the current persona allows. People change their behaviors, perspectives, activities and tasks frequently. The next generation persona must account for all this complexity and messiness.

Improving how we see customers will give marketers a more complete view of the customer and provide the flow of insights needed to inspire, delight, engage and set a brand apart.