

Personas – A Literature Review

Andrea Richeson

What is a Persona?

Personas are archetypes based on qualitative and quantitative user research. They are behavioral models used to make research understandable and actionable and focus design on the needs of the users.

Alan Cooper's book published in 1998, *The Inmates are Running the Asylum*, introduced and popularized the use of personas as a tool for interaction designers. His book, *About Face: The Essentials of Interaction Design*, further explained how personas could be put into practice. Cooper, the person, and Cooper, the design agency, remain authoritative voices about the creation and use of personas.

What makes up an effective Persona?

Personas are most effective when they are created from ethnographic user data (interviews and observations of real users) as well as site analytics, market segmentation data, and other real-world information, such as interviews with people who support users (tech support, sales team). Personas should always be based on real data – and not created from the design team's or other internal stakeholders' assumptions. Kim Goodwin of Cooper noted in her 2002 article, *Getting from Research to Personas: Harnessing the Power of Data*, that, "if every aspect of the description can't be tied back to real data – it's a creative writing project that should not be used for making critical design and business decisions."

While it may be tempting to use a single user as an archetype, this can be counter-productive. Individuals are idiosyncratic. A single user may have an uncommon physical limitation that influences their preferences. They may have color preferences that are unusual, or prefer a particular type of layout. Sifting through data about many users helps reveal common patterns, which are used to create an archetypical user. Largely free from idiosyncrasies, personas embody common needs and goals of whole segments of the user population.

Research published by Frank Long in 2009, *Real or Imaginary; The effectiveness of using personas in product design*, studies the use of personas as a method of communicating user requirements. Long concludes that the most effective persona deliverables, those that produce sites with superior usability characteristics, include a photo (rather than a sketch) and illustrated storyboards presenting task scenarios.

Personas should be given a name (that is not silly) rather than a role, and just a few personal details. The reasoning is that personas should engage the design team but not distract them with unrelated, overly cute personal information.

Other components of a well-developed persona include key demographics, and information about the user's goals, experience with the site, experience with the internet and related technology, behaviors and attitudes, and a short, cohesive narrative (a story), and scenarios that explain how the persona would use the site. Peter Merholz in his article *The Best Way to Understand Your Customers*, also suggests including a mention of what keeps the persona up at night, so that the development team can focus on minimizing or eliminating those pain points.

It is handy when personas are mobile, that is, when they are created in a format that can easily be passed around and discussed.

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Why Use Personas?

Personas help a team avoid designing for themselves. Personas focus the team on user needs and build empathy for the user community. They facilitate an ongoing dialog between the development team and the users.

Personas facilitate communication among the team and between the team and executive stakeholders. Developers and others can talk about what the persona wants, instead of focusing on their own personal tastes and goals.

Personas help decide who the site's critical users are and foster a shared understanding of those users.

Personas foster a common understanding of the site's scope early in the development process, saving time and effort over the long term. To avoid scope and functionality creep, designs should be evaluated against the personas throughout the life of the project. When personas are developed with both business and customer goals in mind, they help guide business decisions.

Personas can also be used to guide usability reviews and testing, marketing efforts, user documentation, and overall site strategy.

The Argument Against Personas

Steve Portigal in his 2008 article *Persona non grata*, describes his visceral dislike for personas. Portigal claims that the use of personas is dehumanizing and distances the development team from the real concerns of real users. The personas he describes have silly, alliterative names, unrealistic photos from stock photography sites, and traits based more on the product and sales goals of the development team than the reality of real users' lives. Portigal claims that the use of personas creates a facade of user-centeredness.

Like Portigal, 37Signals' Jason Fried characterizes personas as "artificial, abstract, and fictitious."

Answering Portigal's and Fried's concerns directly, Peter Merholz and Jared Spool point out that both Portigal and Fried aptly describe the misguided use of poorly constructed personas. What's missing in the analysis, both Merholz and Spool claim, is the use of personas built from real user data, observations and interviews. Also noteworthy is the fact that 37Signals builds products that they, themselves use. 37Signals does not need personas because they use their own preferences and goals as guides.

How to Gather Reliable Data and Build Effective Personas

Kim Goodwin's rules of thumb, described in her 2005 article, *Perfecting Your Personas*, include:

1. Keep the persona set small and memorable. If you can't readily access the personas' stories, they are not usable design and development tools.
2. Personas should be separated by their behavior, not their demographic makeup. Individuals with similar demographics may exhibit vastly different behavior on the same site.

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3. Marketing and sales targets (market segments) are not necessarily your design targets. Focus design efforts on what elements can satisfy the widest audience. Add targeted functionality to satisfy key users.
4. Add just a little personal detail. Overly detailed personas can feel phony and create distractions.
5. Focus on just three or four end goals, per persona. Only include relevant life goals (retire at 55) or experience goals (how a user wants to feel). End goals are the most important goals to include and should focus on what experience a well-designed product would offer the persona.
6. Create personas specific to each project's context. Don't reuse old personas for new projects.

Tina Calabria in her 2004 article, *An Introduction to Personas and How To Use Them*, suggests that you should conduct qualitative research: interview real users in the environment where they use the site. Onsite interviews can uncover actual usage patterns in a way that offsite interviews and surveys cannot. Users do not always do what they say they do. Once patterns emerge in behaviors and attitudes, Calabria suggests that there is enough data to create personas. Calabria also advocates interviewing and surveying business stakeholders, such as sales and support people and market researchers, in order to gain additional information about how users interact with the site.

Steve Mulder in his book, *The User is Always Right*, notes that qualitative research answers the question of why things happen and quantitative research (surveys and site traffic analysis) can answer the question of what is happening. He suggests that quantitative research can validate the findings from qualitative research. Mulder uses informal, loosely structured interviews to uncover users' goals, behaviors, and attitudes. Then he segments users based on what has been learned.

Example Personas

From: <http://www.bobulate.com/documents/scenarios.pdf>

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1 the learner

Sandy Kelchwick



"I'm interested, but I'm not sure how to go about it."

Personal Profile

Sandy's work life is hectic, and "learning about investing" has been just another item on her to-do list. She has money in a 401(k) plan, but her conservative investment picks have been underperforming the market rather seriously. She recently received a \$10,000 bonus at work, and for the first time, she doesn't need the money to pay off bills.

Sandy is mainly interested in building wealth. She's concerned about having enough money to retire comfortably, and she doesn't have any rich relatives to count on. Recently married, she and her husband are starting to talk about buying a home and starting a family. As a teacher in a private school, her husband has a moderate income, but a rather meager pension plan.

Before making any major decision, Sandy likes to thoroughly research and understand her choices. She is conservative with money and has a low risk tolerance. While Sandy is concerned about making smart investment choices, she has been feeling lately that she's missing out on the hot stock market.

With \$10,000 to invest, Sandy feels that it's time to start investing more seriously. She doesn't want investing to take over her life, but she would like to learn enough to feel comfortable making decisions. She'd be most comfortable having a professional manage her money, but she doesn't think she has enough money to justify hiring someone. And she doesn't expect her small portfolio to get much attention from a professional.

background

- 30-year-old, married, woman.
- Received a BA at Cooper Union and a masters in architecture at Columbia University.
- Works in a 20-person architecture studio in Manhattan.
- Intermediate Internet user, has fast connection to PC at work and slow dial-up line on an iMac at home
- Has about \$20,000 in a 401(k) plan her employer set up for her
- Wants to learn how to better manage her investments.
- Knows a little about mutual funds, and would like to learn about stock investing

attributes

- Younger
- Female
- Less wealthy
- More experienced with computers and the Internet
- Inexperienced with investing

customer needs

- Simplicity and ease-of-use
- Guidance
- Learning tools
- Planning tools
- Help moving from big picture to specific actions
- Proactive communication
- Service
- Validation of decisions

Scenario	Needs	Feature	Behavior
Sandy wants to learn enough about investing to understand how to pick the right stocks, and how to decide when to buy and when to sell. She is particularly interested in socially responsible stocks. She picks up a book called "Investing for Dummies," and visits the Motley Fool website after hearing about it on the radio.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Guidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly Newsletter • Market Hittles 	<p>Sandy goes to her MySchwab page and sees that the Monthly Newsletter provides xx.</p> <p>Sandy tries looking up a stock in Quotes & Research. She notices that on this page, she can subscribe to Market Hittles. She feels that this would be a good overview of what's happening in the market and a complement to her learning.</p>

Based on her research, Sandy decides to invest part of her money in index funds, and use the rest to buy individual stocks. She'll identify a few stable, well-established and socially responsible companies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance • Validation of decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly Newsletter • Full Closing Bell 	<p>Sandy finishes the Retirement Planner and notices the Monthly newsletter. She applies.</p>
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Because Sandy has very little time to actively trade, her strategy is to monitor these companies' stocks and buy them when there is a dip in prices. She plans to watch them over time, but hold onto them for the long term.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance • Validation of decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Price • Volume • Early Closing Bell 	<p>Sandy adds these stocks to her Watch lists. While on this page, she realizes that she can sign up for Price and Volume Alerts so she won't have to manually monitor these stocks.</p> <p>After placing a trade, Sandy notices that she can receive an Early Closing Bell. She can just take a glance over that once during the day to check out the unofficial prices.</p>
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2 the active trader

Jason Weyrich



"I'm interested, but make it work for me."

Personal Profile

Jason's first email experience was a bad one. He signed up for MSNBC's "digital clipping service," which interrupted his work with a blinking light every time he received a message. He found this very intrusive and realized that MSNBC had downloaded an applet into his browser without asking him. It took Jason 2 hours to "de-install" what he now refers to as a "that crappy virus."

He has, however, been using alerts from Yahoo!, WSJ and United Airlines for over a year. He knows what to expect from them and enjoys the new features United has recently added.

Jason was first introduced to Schwab Alerts three months ago, when he received one at work. He decided to try the service, but by just scanning the email, Jason didn't realize he could go to the website to select additional products, change the frequency of delivery, or the format. Therefore, he continues to assume that Schwab only delivers Closing Bell information...which he is unimpressed by. Likewise, the News Alert he receives seems too general and lacks the detail he enjoys from Yahoo! and WSJ.

He is completely unaware of connection between the emails he receives and the schwab.com website. Because he is not aware that he can specify delivery, content, frequency in the Customer Center, he is unsatisfied with the "one size fits all" product. He is not aware of the HTML format, nor would he find value in it; he would only use PDFs to archive trade confirmations.

background

- 35 year-old white male
- Educated
- VP of Sales @ high-tech Silicon Valley company
- Single, no children
- Lives in Sausalito, owns home outright
- Highly involved in managing their money, self-reliant
- Want special services and recognition

attributes

- Self-described as risk tolerant, savvy, confident and knowledgeable
- Very demanding
- Likely to have lots of techno-gadgetry
- Smart about price/value relationship
- When dissatisfied, will move accounts and change allegiances quickly
- Doesn't want to seem stupid if they have questions

customer needs

- The solution/tool must be "best-of-breed"
- Timely
- Fast
- Detailed, but to the point
- "Insider" information (what you couldn't find just anywhere)
- Customizable

Scenario	Needs	Feature	Behavior
Jason gets into the office at 8:45am, immediately turns on Bloomberg, and launches his email client and his browser (default set to Yahoo!). As he listens to the market news coming from the TV, Jason reads Yahoo's market snapshot and checks his Watch list.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor • Validation of decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stock News • Earnings 	<p>Jason notices the link to Alerts from the Positions page. When he clicks, he sees that he can get News on all his positions and watch lists in one click.</p> <p>He can also get Earnings releases at the time they happen.</p>

If timely and personalized, Jason thinks Alerts are preferable to a time-consuming browser experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor • Drive a decision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market Highlights • Closing Bell 	<p>Jason counts on receiving updates on the U.S. indices on hour and a half after the market opens. He can do that with Morning Call (included in Market Highlights).</p> <p>Jason doesn't really have much need for the Alerts toward the end of the day, but he could use the official closing prices to review first thing in the morning.</p>
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Jason now sees two Schwab Alerts in his email queue. He is about to delete them both because he assumes already got the information from both Yahoo! (online) and Bloomberg (TV).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drive a decision • Validation of decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Price & Volume 	<p>After selling 300 shares of AMKR after the price went up this morning, Jason sees something new on the confirmation page. He notices he can automatically get Price & Volume Alerts on this stock. He subscribes.</p>
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3 the serious investor

Howard Erickson



"It's good to keep an eye on things from time to time."

Personal Profile

Howard had been using Morgan Stanley Dean Witter for 15 years. He was attracted to Schwab, ironically enough, by his daughter. He liked that Schwab has a branch near his office and one near his home, as well as online services. Until his children moved away, he didn't use the Internet that often. But now, he uses email to communicate with them almost every day.

He has taken the Customer Center Demo and learned how to use the Analyst Center. He appreciates the simple terminology and QuickLinks used throughout the site. He likes to customize his Overview page.

Howard, however, sometimes take extended breaks from email. He and his wife have been going on vacation more and more, so he needs a service that can keep up with their pace. Morgan Stanley had a convenient Asset Management service that he used for years. He's still not convinced that the online site can provide the same service.

Howard has issues with paperless trade confirmations. He has always filed each confirmation away for his accountant, and brings them to him in one folder every February.

Howard normally checks his email from home computer, where he has a 38.8 connection using AOL.

background

- 55 year-old white male
- Nearing Retirement
- Married, 3 children and 2 grandchildren
- Lives in Manhattan, owns brownstone and vacation home outright
- Goes online once or twice a day, but may take extended breaks

attributes

- More affluent
- Older
- Skeptical of the web, or see it as a complement to the branch
- Knowledgeable and self-confident, but would occasionally like validation from a broker
- Very demanding. Want special services and personal attention
- Likely to be moving from FCB, and want to "test drive" services and products before moving large amounts of cash
- Don't want to seem ignorant if they have questions

customer needs

- The assurance that "there's still always paper and people"
- Personal Service
- Account Protection
- Step-by-step introduction
- Option to back out or customize
- No techno-jargon, acronyms

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Resources Reviewed

The most current list of resources collected is at: andrearicheson.com (Usability & Information Architecture page)

- [Personas](#). (an annotated resource list) by Dey Alexander Consulting
- [Long Live the User \(Persona\): Talking with Steve Mulder](#). by Liz Danzico and Steve Mulder
- [The User is Always Right. A Practical Guide to Creating and Using Personas for the Web](#). by Steve Mulder with Ziv Yaar
- [Podcasts: The User is Always Right: A Practical Guide to Creating and Using Personas for the Web](#). by Steve Mulder
- [Observing the User Experience: A Practitioner's Guide to User Research](#). by Mike Kuniavsky
- [The inmates are running the asylum](#). by Alan Cooper
- [About Face 2.0](#). by Alan Cooper, Robert Reimann
- [Information Architecture for the World Wide Web, Third Edition. Designing Large-Scale Web Sites](#). by Peter Morville, Louis Rosenfeld
- [Research Paper - Real or Imaginary: The effectiveness of using personas in product design](#). by Frank Long
- [Extending a Technique: Group Personas](#). by Mike Kuniavsky
- [Personas: Matching a Design to the Users' Goals](#). by Christine Perfetti
- [Personas and the Role of Design Documentation How it's less about deliverables, and more about design](#). by Andrew Hinton
- [The Best Way to Understand Your Customers](#). By Peter Merholz
- [Personas 99% Bad?](#) by Peter Merholz
- [Personas and the Advantage of Designing for Yourself](#). by Joshua Porter
- [Persona non grata](#). by Steve Portigal
- [Making Personas Work for Your Web Site: An Interview with Steve Mulder](#). by Jared Spool
- [Three Important Benefits of Personas](#). by Jared Spool
- [Personas are NOT a Document](#). by Jared Spool
- [Crappy Personas vs. Robust Personas](#). by Jared Spool
- [An introduction to personas and how to create them](#). by Tina Calabria
- [How personas and scenarios can change your website for the better - Part 1](#). by John Wood
- [How personas and scenarios can change your website for the better - Part 2](#). by John Wood
- [Does your persona eat twinkies?](#) by Steve Calde
- [Building a Data-Backed Persona](#). by Andrea Wiggins
- [Goal-Directed Design: An Interview with Kim Goodwin](#). by Christine Perfetti
- [Perfecting Your Personas](#). By Kim Goodwin
- [Taking Personas Too Far](#). by Kim Goodwin
- [Getting from Research to Personas: Harnessing the Power of Data](#). by Kim Goodwin
- [Ignore that designer behind the persona](#). by Chris Noessel
- [Using Personas to Create User Documentation](#). by Steve Calde
- [The Origin of Personas](#). by Alan Cooper
- [Reconciling Market Segments and Personas](#). by Elaine Brechin
- [User Research for Personas and Other Audience Models](#). by Steve Baty
- [Just Ask: Integrating Accessibility Throughout Design Accessibility in User-Centered Design: Personas](#). by Shawn Lawton Henry
- [Just Ask: Integrating Accessibility Throughout Design Accessibility in User-Centered Design: Example Personas](#). by Shawn Lawton Henry
- [Making Personas Sparkle Like Diamonds, Part 1](#). by Bryan Eisenberg
- [Making Personas Sparkle Like Diamonds, Part 2](#). by Bryan Eisenberg

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- [Feature: The Return on Investment \(ROI\) for Personas.](#) by John Pruitt and Tamara Adlin
- [Persona Examples.](#) (pdf format) by Razorfish