

## INNOVATION TOOLS - PERSONAS

In this and upcoming articles at Adventure of Innovation, we hope to highlight a number of useful **tools** that can be used in the design and brainstorming stages of the innovation process. This article focuses on *personas*.

**Personas** are fictitious characters created to represent the different user types within a targeted demographic that might use a site or product. Personas are useful in considering the goals, desires, and limitations of the users in order to help to guide decisions about a product, such as features, interactions, and visual design. Personas are most often used as part of a user-centered design process for designing software and are also considered a part of interaction design, industrial design and other innovative specialties.

A user persona is a representation of the goals and behavior of a real group of users. In most cases, personas are synthesized from data collected from interviews with users. They are captured in 1–2 page descriptions that include behavior patterns, goals, skills, attitudes, and environment, with a few fictional personal details to make the persona a realistic character. For each product, more than one persona is usually created, but one persona should always be the primary focus for the design.

The use of personas as a technique was popularized by Alan Cooper in his 1999 book [The Inmates are Running the Asylum](#)<sup>1</sup>. The book outlines the general characteristics, uses, and best practices for creating personas.

It's easy to assemble a set of user characteristics and call it a persona, but it's not so easy to create personas that are truly effective design and communication tools. If you have begun to create your own personas, here are some tips to help you perfect them.

### *Personas represent behavior patterns, not job descriptions*

A good persona description is not a list of tasks or duties; it's a narrative that describes the flow of someone's day, as well as their skills, attitudes, environment, and goals. A persona answers critical questions that a job description or task list doesn't, such as: Which pieces of information are required at what points in the day? Do users focus on one thing at a time, carrying it through to completion, or are there a lot of interruptions? Why are they using this product in the first place?

There is seldom a one-to-one correlation between personas and job descriptions. In some cases there will be multiple personas with the same job description; in others, a single persona can represent people with a wide range of jobs. If you were creating software used by call center agents, for example, you might have an experienced agent persona who is very familiar with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Cooper, Alan. *The Inmates are Running the Asylum*. SAMS, 1999. [ISBN 0-672-31649-8](#)

## INNOVATION TOOLS - PERSONAS

product, as well as an inexperienced agent who needs more prompts and written information. If, on the other hand, you were designing an e-mail application, one persona could represent people with hundreds of very different job descriptions, as long as they all shared similar goals and behavior patterns related to communication.

Ideally, you should have only the minimum number of personas required to illustrate key goals and behavior patterns. If you are designing a consumer product and you have a dozen personas, then you may be making distinctions that aren't very important. Remember that your marketing and sales targets may not be your design targets.

Sometimes it's easy to focus too much on a persona's biography. Personal details can be the fun part, but if there are too many of them they just get in the way. To avoid this problem, focus first on the workflow and behavior patterns, goals, environment, and attitudes of the persona—the information that's critical for design—without adding any personality.

Once you have the critical design information, add just one or two personal details, such as what your persona does after work or what personal touches there are in his office. You can also add life to the persona by using details to reinforce important characteristics. For example, if someone tends to be incredibly busy at work, don't just say she's incredibly busy; instead, say there's a pile of paper on her desk that he's been trying to find time to read for three hours. Without a little bit of personality, personas can easily turn into generalized user profiles instead of precise design targets.

Each persona should have three or four important goals that help focus the design. Keep in mind that goals and tasks are different: tasks are not ends in themselves, but are merely things we do to accomplish goals. Not just any goals will do, though, so it's important to understand which types will help you make design decisions.

Experience goals describe how the persona wants to feel when using a product; having fun and not feeling stupid are experience goals. Not every persona needs an experience goal; in most persona sets, there is one persona who represents people with a lot of anxiety about technology. One of this person's goals is to avoid feeling stupid. Other experience goals might center on the product domain. A persona using an online banking site, for example, might want to feel confident that his transactions are secure.

Most persona goals should be end goals that focus on what the persona could get out of using a well-designed product or service. End goals may involve the work product that results from using the product or service. For example, an online editor using a layout tool might want to create an award-winning website. End goals can also involve indirect benefits from using a product. If a carpenter wants to be more productive, a better cordless drill can help her achieve this goal if it makes him more efficient.

## INNOVATION TOOLS - PERSONAS

Make personas must be specific to the design problem at hand. For instance, organizations with more than one product often want to use the same personas over and over. Unfortunately, this doesn't work because effective personas must be context-specific—they should be focused on the behaviors and goals related to the specific domain of a product. A persona's behaviors and goals related to contact management have very little to do with those related to manipulating financial data. You could keep the same name and personal details, but you'd have to throw away the rest of the persona and start over. It's better to start with a new set of personas for each product.

Introducing personas into your innovation project will bring a number of benefits:

- Users' goals and needs become a common point of focus for the team
- The team can concentrate on designing for a manageable set of personas knowing that they represent the needs of many users
- They are relatively quick to develop and replace the need to canvass the whole user community and spend months gathering user requirements
- They help avoid the trap of building what users ask for rather than what they will actually use
- Design efforts can be prioritized based on the personas
- Disagreements over design decisions can be sorted out by referring back to the personas
- Designs can be constantly evaluated against the personas, reducing the frequency of large and expensive usability tests.

Personas allow you to identify and communicate user needs efficiently and effectively. By developing 'stand in' users, based on real user data, the design team can concentrate on designing for these archetypal users with the confidence that the needs of the broader user base will be met. ■