



THE HUB PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

# WHY PERSONAS DRIVE SUCCESS

Creating personas or fictional representations of customers gives clarity to user needs as early as the product blueprinting stage.

By Dan Adams and M. Muneer

**E**VEN THAT THREE OUT of four new products fail dismally in the industrial or the business-to-business (B2B) market, there has to be a better way to developing new products. We outline a model that may not seem hugely significant at first, but it is both effective and powerful.

When companies attempt to design new products, the difficulty is to get the combined marketing and development teams to agree on decisions. Poor decisions result in suboptimal products that are either too expensive or useless in terms of value addition. Poor products destroy resources, brands, companies and careers. So, the use of personas is a new way to keep customers in mind throughout the development process.

Personas are hypothetical archetypes of real persons, and we essentially define them



by their objectives, which means the ‘job to be done’ (JTBD) by each category. In brief, a persona will represent the individuals within a market who seek to accomplish the same task, solve the same problem or achieve the same goal. But rather than branding them as soccer moms or metrosexuals, we give them identities so that we can easily empathise with their issues.

For instance, instead of solving a problem for the oil drilling industry, let us solve a problem for Mukesh. He is a fracking technician from Jamnagar and spends 70 per cent of his time on the road, travelling to remote corners of Gujarat and trying to coax stingy oil reserves out of their prehistoric hutches. The Income Tax department may not find Mukesh in the tax register as he is, well, fictitious. But he is very much alive in our imagination, living the pain and frustration that actual customers experience. So, we have created Mukesh. We started with his JTBD, which was opening oil wells via fracking, and continued his development with demographic descriptors (age, race, appearance and so on), and of course, gave him a name.

The persona technique rose from software development when savvy product managers realised the difficulties that an experienced developer had while trying to understand the expectations of technically challenged customers. It will ultimately prove useful for B2B and B2C segments.

Here are four best practices to trigger growth for your clients:

**Design for just one person.** Does it seem counterintuitive? Think about breakfast cereals. Hari, the jogger, is male, 42 and active. His breakfast JTBD is to maintain his energy throughout the long run every day. On the other hand, Nishi, the busy mom, is 33, struggles with her weight and barely has the time to get her kids off to school every morning. Her JTBD is to lose a few pounds. If we were going to create a breakfast cereal for a generic user, we might somehow average these objectives. But combining Hari’s high-energy needs with Nishi’s low-calorie requirements could result in an outcome that neither wants. Trying to please everyone, we end up pleasing no one.

**Give specific details.** After defining the JTBD, we assign all relevant demographic details to each persona to make him/her as credible as possible. Consider healthcare, a common B2B space. If we are doing a product blueprinting for a new medical device, we may have Deshmukh, the Doctor, and Nigam, the Nurse, as personas as both of them may use the device.

**Go for precision rather than perfection.** Precision reduces uncertainty during product development and keeps the design team aligned so that everyone can work towards the same outcome. A suboptimal decision in which a team acts cohesively is preferred than the perfect decision executed with doubt and vacillation. In this year’s FIFA World Cup final, champions France went for precision play to score goals. All 10 members (barring the goalkeeper) of the team executed the same precision play as per their strategy. When we say precision, we mean a precisely defined person and a precisely defined job. There should be no wiggle room and no scope for confusion.

**Separate user and buyer personas.** Imagine you are in the business of developing chemical pesticides and want to have a better understanding of all stakeholders. For this market, you have created a persona for the worker who applies the chemicals and another one for the on-site supervisor who is responsible for the results. These two are the main users. But in the B2B space, you also have purchase influencers and need to create buyer personas. In this case, it should be the company owner and other relevant people such as quality and safety managers, procurers and so on.

That brings us to the question of whether or not all types of B2B companies should leverage the persona factor. Buyer and user personas are research-based profiles that represent your target audience and can help you unearth key insights on developing new products. If there is one thing that separates profitable businesses from the rest, it is their ability to unearth unique insights into customers. Getting clarity on the types

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of customers who benefit from your offerings and the challenges you solve for them is critical to growing your business profitably.

Initially backed by customer advocates within the community of software developers, the persona model later found allies in design thinking pioneers and finally, the broader research and product development community. Because, in spite of differences among product development cultures across industry segments, all businesses must address customer needs and the persona model will have a broad application as it helps companies develop a common understanding of their customers.

The model can also accelerate development for B2B owners and CEOs by driving alignment around key findings from new product blueprinting projects. In that sense, it is a communication tool to amplify what has been learnt. Businesses can also use it as part of product objectives post preference ranking, a technique used to convert stated preferences into purchase probabilities. As personas are developed based on qualitative and quantitative insights, they will live throughout the development phase and even during the product launch. **BT**

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