

Personas:

Useful design tool or the latest fad?

By: Perceptive Sciences Corporation

- Who are my users and what do they need from my product or service?
- How can personas inform the design of my product or service?
- How are personas created and are they useful?
- Are personas a replacement for testing actual users?
- Are there any negative aspects of using personas, and can these negative consequences be avoided?

What are personas and how are they created?

A particular design technique that has recently received a great deal of attention is the usage of personas. Basically, personas are fabricated representative users, created for the sole purpose of aiding in product and service design. Specifically, personas have names, ages, ethnicities, occupations, and families. They participate in leisure activities, and possess unique personality characteristics. When designing a product, personas are used to represent the users for whom the product will be designed.

In order to create the persona, design teams typically gather user information from sales and marketing data, and/or conduct interviews with members of the identified user group. This information gathering helps design teams construct personas that most accurately reflect the needs and interests of the potential users. Next, the designer and/or research team synthesizes this information to construct a very specific profile of the user group(s). Typically, 3 to 12 different personas are created, each having a face, a family, a career, goals and intentions, and thoughts and feelings that represent the “typical” member of a particular user group or market segment. Graphical renderings of the resulting personas are then circulated to members of the design team, who are encouraged to keep them visible in their work space. Additionally, the personas are posted during design development and review meetings as focal points for discussions of features, labeling, and aesthetics.

The goal of personas is to create a character with whom designers can identify. Ideally, personas eventually become humanized in the designers’ minds as actual users of their products, with specific wants and needs that must be considered. As a result, personas can redirect designers’ focus away from

themselves and what they would want in a product and toward the actual user. Giving designers the opportunity to take a walk in the users' shoes, so to speak, increases the likelihood that designers will create products that appeal to the target users.

Are personas a useful design technique?

Personas can be a very useful tool, especially at the initial stages of the design process when designers are defining a product's feature set or the components of a service offering. In addition to identifying and prioritizing the features to include—personas can also help designers to narrow down the plethora of potential features and options that could be crammed into a product in order to focus on those the target users are most likely to find valuable. For instance, cell phones are now comprised of a wide range of features and accessories, such as cameras, calendars, calculators, notepad, alarm clock, instant messaging, emailing, music, tip calculator, and some of them even have barcode readers. And, somewhere in all those features actually resides a mechanism for making phone calls. Trying to incorporate too many features into one device can cause the device to have "feature-bloat" and thus make the device less usable. Usage of personas can help narrow down the potential feature set to a manageable amount that only the target user desires.

Similarly, personas can play a big part in designing websites. Websites often target a wide range of individuals, each with slightly different interests and needs. Formulating personas for each of the anticipated user groups can inform the types of information included (and excluded) from the site and its organization into categories the users will find meaningful, ensuring that the site addresses the needs of each user group more effectively. For instance, navigation menus consist of category labels/headings that are supposed to inform the user what type of information they will find if they click on that specific menu option. However, labels that make sense to a designer might not be informative to the user. Moreover, menu labels for one group could be inconsistent with the intuition of another. Informed personas can assist designers in finding labels and organize information in a way that is informative to the user. In addition, creating a persona for each user group allows for the discovery of labels and organizational schemes that are informative for all user groups.

Do personas replace user testing?

Persona formation has the advantages of bridging the gap between designers and users, and focusing attention on the users' primary needs in order to prevent feature-bloat. When done properly, and in the right context, personas can add a great deal to the overall success of a design. They do not, however, ensure that a product or website will be easy to use or easy to learn. Achieving these objectives will require other user experience tools, such as one-on-one testing.

Eliminating real users from the equation is never a good idea. Once the product, site, or service exists as a prototype or conceptual model, one-on-one end-user testing by human equivalents of each design persona helps designers both validate and improve the design. For instance, using a persona to design a document editing package is a wonderful start. However, including all the necessary tools to create a well crafted and readable document does not ensure that these tools will be easy to use, easy to understand, or easy to remember. Actually having a user perform editing tasks in a controlled environment provides useful quantitative as well as qualitative data identifying where problems lie, why problems are occurring, and what can be done to resolve them.

By providing real user feedback, end-user testing also provides a means of validating and refining the design personas, improving them for future projects. Specifically, gathering first-hand user feedback and performance data can help researchers and designers modify the existing personas to increase their accuracy. Perhaps, one group of users performs a sequence of tasks in an order unforeseen by the original creator(s) of the personas. This data can be very useful for informing the future designs of similar products and service.

Additionally, a variety of methodologies, such as attribute mapping exercises, feature trade-off scenarios, and card-sorting techniques, can be used to indirectly determine what users want and need in a product without directly asking them. This valuable information can be used to create and refine personas, which help validate market research data and correct in misconceptions about the target market.

What are the pitfalls of personas?

The primary pitfall of using personas is the lack of first-hand target user feedback that often goes into constructing them. Information used to construct personas is gathered from marketing and sales data, most often not through in depth interviews or observations with users. Using personas that do not have a strong foundation derived from user feedback can result in a design or service that is tailored to the wrong user.

Perceptive Sciences avoids this hazard by implementing various scientifically-based qualitative and quantitative methods to collect informative data about how user(s) interact with products and what the user(s) want and need from a product or service. Then, this information is used to create valuable and accurate personas that can aid in the design of products and services that meet the needs of the user(s).

Moreover, after the design phase is set in motion, Perceptive Sciences employs one-on-one end-user testing techniques to examine the overall usability of the product. These techniques determine whether the product or service is meeting the wants and needs of the target user. These results can be fed back into the design process to improve the current product or service, or can be used in the design of future products and services.

Using these techniques in combination, design personas coupled with end-user testing, Perceptive Sciences researchers can inform Product Development managers and their design teams with valid and reliable design guidelines for producing products that work in the market place.

Perceptive Sciences Corporation is a science based market research, user interface design, and user testing firm, employing experts in the fields of cognitive psychology, information sciences and human factors studies. Perceptive Sciences serves best-in-class technology based companies and market leaders in a wide range of industries in the U.S. and Europe.