

Brand and Buyer Personas

Research Objective:

To achieve a deeper connection with consumers using brand and buyer personas.

Executive summary

When consumers think of your brand (or any brand), what attributes comes to mind? How do consumers relate to your product or service, and what impressions have formed around your offering with or without your intent? In the past few years, some companies have become more adept than others by using brand personas to shape the answers to these questions and embody the ideals of their brand. In industries ranging from car insurance (the All-State man, Dennis Haysbert) to home computers (Mac vs. PC in the “Get a Mac” ad campaign) marketing executives carefully craft public personalities, creating a face recognizable by the public. This paper reviews the research and reasoning behind the use of brand personas and explains how RKM Research has leveraged the most recent findings in the field to create a robust research methodology designed to help companies make a deeper connection with their target audiences.

Marketing materials should always match market opportunities. Powerful research that identifies the most strategically important consumers (along with their needs, wants and preferences) enables the development of targeted marketing activities. There is little waste in this approach. Armed with in-depth knowledge of your most important buyers helps ensure that every marketing dollar can be strategically deployed. Presenting to the world a well-developed brand persona based on targeted audiences is an investment in the future of your company. A brand persona offers a compelling display of the traits your consumers value most, creating a means for your customers to connect to your company on a personal and emotional level.

RKM Research has developed a six-step approach to the creation and development of brand personas: 1) identifying unique segments based on a host of criteria; 2) developing brand personas targeted for each unique segment; 3) identifying the content most relevant to each user/buyer persona; 4) identifying the most effective channel for each user/buyer segment; 5) describing the decision-making process – including influencers, recommenders, user/buyers and purchase approval process – within each segment; and 6) identifying the most efficient and effective way to market appropriately to the user/buyer personas within each segment. The overall purpose of the research is to provide our clients with precise information to effectively promote their brand and increase sales to current and prospective customers in the future.

Although research methods may vary, the most common scope of work associated with a brand personas project is conducting a market segmentation analysis based on the results of a quantitative online survey among current user/buyers. The quantitative research is supported by qualitative in-depth follow-up interviews that will further refine each of the personas associated with each market segment.

What is a brand persona?

Put in simple terms, a brand persona is a fictionalized personification of a brand; the creation of a character with human traits that most closely represent your brand. Although typically in the form of people, animals and entities can also be used. The objective is to develop a human or anthropomorphized non-human entity that embodies the core values of your brand and present them in a way that helps create a feeling that connects more powerfully with consumers. They can be used in almost any industry, and famous examples have cut themselves a space in the public consciousness. As John Pruitt and Jonathan Grudin of Microsoft have discovered through their research and use of brand personas, they “are a medium for communication; a conduit for information about users... derived from ethnographies, market research, usability studies, interviews, observations, and so on” (John Pruitt and Jonathan Grudin, *Personas: Practice and Theory*, 2003). Personas are characters that look, behave or speak in a specific way calculated to build an emotional connection with a specific audience.

For the purposes of branding, a persona is a fictional portrayal of someone’s character as it is presented and perceived by others. A brand persona is crafted through research to be appealing, believable and identifiable to a broad or narrow market segment. Effective brand personas embody metaphorical properties that resonate with consumer at a deeper, more visceral level.

Why use a brand persona?

Many small companies today grapple with a brand identity crisis. “Much like people need to reconsider who they are as they grow up, so do corporations” (Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, *The Guardian*, 2015). They rely on the quality of their product or service to carry their business forward, leaving satisfied customers (and detractors) to dictate their public image through word-of-mouth and reviews. Establishing their brand identity, which business psychologist and VP of research and innovation at Hogan Assessment Systems Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic describes as encapsulating their core values, mission and cultural DNA, is often brushed aside as a formality. Companies either do not have the time or the knowledge to deliberately establish their brand identity. But this is a mistake; the importance of brand in business success cannot be understated. Dan Pallotta of the Harvard Business Review put it this way: “Ultimately, brand is about caring about your business at every level and in every detail, from the big things like mission and vision, to your people, your customers, and every interaction anyone is ever going to have with you, no matter how small. Whether you know it or not, whether you have a swanky logo or not, you do have a brand. The question is whether or not it’s the brand you really want.” The Economist describes brands as “basically a promise. They tell customers what quality to expect from a product and show off its personality” (Economist.com, *Brand Value*, 2013). Consumers are more likely to choose a brand they recognize over something unfamiliar and unbranded, or generic. “Loyalty often lasts a lifetime and even transfers to future generations” (Linda Fanaras, *Millennium Integrated Marketing*, December 2013). Whether or not a company is proactive in developing its brand, brand positioning occurs. If “management takes an intelligent, forward-looking approach, it can positively influence its brand positioning in the eyes of its target customers” (Scott Jeffrey, *The Cult Branding Company*, May 2014). Successful companies intentionally build their brands in their consumers’ minds before their competitors do. Effective brand personas create a “first mover” advantage in almost any business category, or subcategory.

There are many benefits to employing a brand persona through marketing activities, perhaps none more effective than attaching consumer-valued attributes to your brand. “Consumer psychology is all about getting into that unconscious territory where people are being directed to make purchases for reasons they are not clear about” (Michael Fishman quoted by Dorie Clark, *Forbes*, August 2013). While consumers may not be clear as to why they wish to make a purchase or decision, companies understand that these reasons are driven by some affinity the consumers feels toward their brand (the brand shares their values). This affinity is manifested through the use of brand personas.

The advertising airwaves are full of such cases. In 2010, Wieden + Kennedy, working with Old Spice deodorant, famously introduced the “Smell Like a Man, Man” advertising campaign, and with it, the brand persona: “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like.” In commercials and carefully crafted Youtube videos, actor Isaiah Mustafa could be seen shirtless on a yacht, then on horseback, then holding a prize fish or royal scepter or chainsaw or other improbable item all the while explaining to women that, with Old Spice Body Wash, their man could smell like him. The “Old Spice Guy” became a cultural phenomenon, interacting with fans and celebrities through videos, acting as the voice of a brand once known to younger buyers as “their father’s deodorant.”

This Old Spice advertising campaign is often cited for its success in viral and interactive marketing, but it was all made possible by a charismatic brand persona that appealed to a target audience. Through thoughtful and intentional research, marketers were able to develop a personality that appealed to their target market. The Old Spice Guy elevated the ideals of adventurousness and manliness and affixed them to Old Spice Body Wash. Comparably, the Dos Equis creation “The Most Interesting Man in the World” functioned in a similar manner by imbuing a relatively obscure beer with the values of mystery, adventure and curiosity, implying that it is the most interesting beer in the world. Both brands have become synonymous with these carefully constructed personalities. The Dos Equis marketing also consistently encourages consumers to “stay thirsty,” implying a zest for life and the desire to quench a thirsty appeal to live a more interesting and meaningful life.

Personas “invoke [the] powerful human capability” to make assumptions about the consumer segments a company wishes to target (Pruitt and Grudin). Before the development of personas, marketing teams risk not recognizing and/or miscommunicating their “underlying assumptions about who will use the product and how it will be used” (Pruitt and Grudin). By creating a persona to represent a brand, these assumptions become explicit. Similar to movie or television actors who often study those whom they are meant to portray, personas are based on real people and real data. Personas are meant to build associations between your brand and the qualities consumers value, while also representing current and likely consumers.

Brand personas can also be used to address barriers to using your product or service. The E-Trade baby is an example of this, where the brand persona basically posited that investing is “so easy a baby could do it,” hoping to persuade reluctant investors intimidated by the complexity of online investing. The campaign succeeded in raising the brand’s profile, going viral and entering the public consciousness, but extreme care must be taken in case the brand persona overpowers the product. Maintaining a careful balance, personas should represent the attractive qualities of your brand, yet not be too far-fetched in conception that it works negatively against brand promotion. Using the E-Trade baby as an example, it illuminated how personas are incredibly powerful tools that, in some cases, marketers can lose control over. While effective as a viral ad in raising awareness of the brand, problems arose as amateur investor expectations did not align with the reality of online investing. In positing that investing is “so easy a baby could do it,” E-Trade overestimated the online investing capacity of consumers. Lisa Landsam, CMO with E-Trade explained that eventually, “the baby ate the brand”, as the brand persona was thought to be sending a message that was not corroborated by customer experience. After carefully reevaluating their customer base, E-Trade eventually retired the baby.

Buyer personas

As part of brand persona development, it is useful to consider the concurrent development of buyer personas. Of course, buyer personas can be developed as a useful independent research initiative.

While brand personas reflect a business’ associated values, mission, purpose and point of differentiation, buyer personas are a reflection of the consumers who purchase and use their products and services. Buyer personas are created by synthesizing data into profiles that mirror the real-life attributes of consumers and clients from different target markets. In an increasingly segmented marketplace, buyer personas help businesses target their marketing messages and use of media channels by developing and using unique brand personas to more accurately reach the customers and clients they want to keep and attract.

How are buyer persona created?

A buyer persona is meant to represent the typical consumer from a segment of a business's overall consumer base. The persona is not meant to be an abstract concept, but rather, it is a composite archetype of a customer, complete with a name, hobbies, ambitions, and values. Buyer personas are created by analyzing quantitative data, such as age, occupation, income or gender, and qualitative data gleaned from open-ended responses, focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

Using these data, businesses can begin to paint a picture of the types of consumers that utilize their products and services. Using measurement tools such as net promoter score (NPS), consumer efforts score (CES), or ideally an RKM Advocacy Score, businesses can determine the markets where they are strongest. After using research to identify common characteristics and attributes of consumers in each market, careful analysis can be used to construct buyer personas. Typically, there are different buyer personas within each market segment. The buyer persona is then given a name, as well as detailed attributes, such as age, occupation, hobbies, marital status and personality traits. The buyer persona typically also includes the way they interact with the company, especially focusing on what kind of media and communications that have the greatest impact on engagement. How consumers access information is an important indicator of where they place their trust. Thinking about current or potential customers through buyer personas as an actual person allows businesses to think more concretely about how to communicate with different target markets.

Benefits of a buyer personas

Buyer personas can also play a key role in developing a brand persona, because they allow a business to identify the current and prospective customers it wants to attract. Once a business has constructed buyer personas within its target markets, the personas can be compared to see what common characteristics they all share. By integrating these common characteristics into the brand persona, businesses can maintain consistency and relevance when communicating across markets.

Buyer personas also help businesses decide where to most effectively target their marketing efforts. Buyer personas can be specific enough that they provide insight into the media channels and locations where they are likely to have the greatest impact. By identifying trusted and valued sources of information, businesses can better reach its desired new customers.

Why it matters?

Buyer personas promote authenticity in marketing because they enable experiences with the brand persona to resonate with consumers on an individual level, even when they cross market segments. They create a platform for dialogue between the brand persona and current and prospective customers. When executed correctly, buyer personas help promote growth in target markets, and more effectively and efficiently allocate marketing dollars.

How to develop brand and buyer personas

The first step in developing a brand persona is understanding your current and prospective customers. While the research may highlight certain traits that appeal to a target demographic, brand personas are ultimately shaped by where you want to take your brand. A brand persona must take into consideration the ever-changing consumer base. Whether first developing your brand or re-evaluating your image due to an unexpected emergence of new brand ambassadors, “there is no shortage of circumstances where brands would benefit from a personality [change]” (Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic).

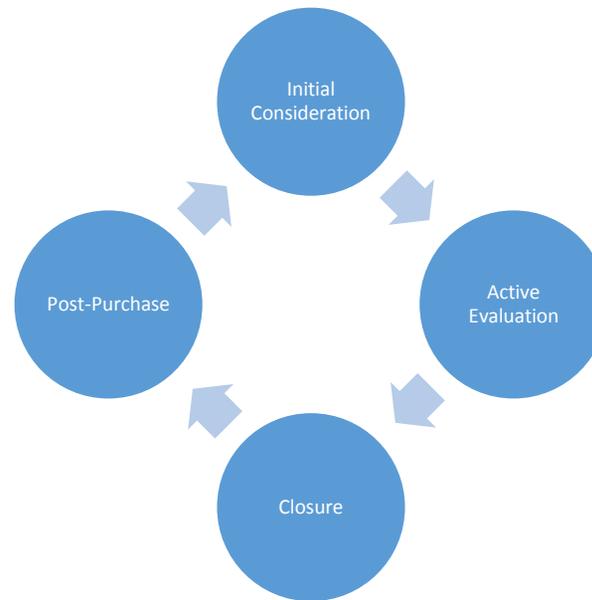
The information needed to carry out RKM’s six-step approach for the creation and development of a brand persona can be collected through surveys of current customers, and follow-up interviews or focus groups. Through qualitative techniques, not only are market segments identified, but also the needs, values and preferences of each one are clearly defined. After establishing what sets each unique segment apart, brand personas can be created.

RKM Research adopts an iterative creative process in helping you craft a brand persona by imagining your brand as a person. These traits can be tested for resonance with respondents at the outset of the project. A brand persona should correspond to the needs and preferences of a target market, so the first step is to conduct a customer segmentation analysis to identify the optimal audience. A survey of current and prospective customers will collect the necessary information to define segments based on a variety of attitudinal and behavioral characteristics. This information is then used to group respondents into homogenous clusters with unique identifiers. These clusters can then be further refined and characterized through qualitative techniques such as one-on-one in-depth interviews or focus groups. The idea is to craft a brand persona that will appeal to the unique needs of each segment. The steps involved in accurately identifying these specific, distinct segments are crucial, in that “a company... that tries to satisfy everyone, satisfies no one” (Catherine Kaputa).

During the research we may discover that certain segments are in opposition to each other and will react differently to the preferences of the other. In such cases, the research will weigh the costs and benefits and reach a compromising brand persona for maximum impact. In identifying the most efficient and effective way to market appropriately to the person within each segment, a company may need to appeal to the lowest common denominator if a market segment is of a broad distribution. For example, as Kim Goodwin writes for the journal *Cooper*, “a single persona can represent people with a wide range of jobs.”

Goodwin further explains, “If you were designing an in-flight entertainment system, a frequent business traveler – every airline’s most valued customer – would be a tempting design target” (Kim Goodwin, “Perfecting Your Personas”, *Cooper*, 2008). This, however, would be a mistake. Because business travelers are frequent flyers, they already know how to use computers and gadgets on an airplane. “If you design for the business traveler, the retired bricklayer going to see his grandchildren won’t be able to use the system. If you designed for the bricklayer,” the business traveler will likely also be happy (Kim Goodwin, “Perfecting Your Personas”, *Cooper*, 2008).

As mentioned in another white paper (see *Acquire*), the continual introduction of new technologies, competing products and media outlets has resulted in an increasingly diverse and fragmented consumer market. This fragmentation has limited the number of brands consumers recall and initially consider. When faced with too many choices, consumers “fall back on the limited set of brands that have made it through the wilderness of messages. Brand awareness matters: brands in the initial-consideration set can be up to three times more likely to be purchased eventually than brands that aren’t in it” (Court et al.). Additionally, the shift in communication from one-way to two-way (marketers to consumers back to marketers, etc.) has compelled marketers to develop a more systemic way to satisfy customer demands and manage word-of-mouth. In creating a brand persona that shares the values with current and/or prospective customers, and one that is partial toward the customer’s preferred channel of communication (this part is crucial), the likelihood of breaking through the “wilderness of messages” and being selected by the consumer increases – therefore increasing the incidence of customer loyalty, profitability, and positive word-of-mouth.



A more restricted consumer decision-making process, described as cyclical by McKinsey & Company, represents a “potential battleground” between marketers and consumers, comprised of four phases including initial consideration; active evaluation; closure and post-purchase (David Court, Dave Elinda, Susan Mulder, and Ole Jorden Vatnik, McKinsey Quarterly, June 2009). Assuming McKinsey’s model accurately explains the consumer decision-making process, the significance of the role of a company’s brand persona is undeniable. During the initial consideration phase, in which consumers narrow a large pool of options down to a smaller pool, an effective brand persona will assist consumers in narrowing down their choices to a few, including your company. “When marketers understand this journey and direct their spending and messaging to the moments of maximum influence, they stand a much greater chance of reaching consumers in the right place at the right time with the right message”, through the right channel (Court et al.).

While this decision-making cycle can be held constant across multiple consumer segments, the considerations made during each phase vary by segment. In developing distinct brand personas, the researcher and designer must answer how each consumer segment is unique in their thought processes. In the initial consideration and active evaluation phases, an effective brand persona will appeal to the consumer's ethos, and make the consumer feel comfortable in deciding to purchase/use the products or services provided by a company. "Translating what has been heard and observed into an understanding of emotions and personal human connection will require new analysis and insight capabilities" (Tony Zambito, July 2014). This will only occur when extensive research has been conducted, and an ideal persona has been crafted.

The post-purchase phase of the consumer decision-making process holds an equal amount of responsibility in determining customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth, if not more than the consideration and evaluation phases. "After purchasing a product or service, the consumer builds expectations based on experience to inform the next decision journey" (Court et al.). In conducting consumer surveys that evaluate how a product or service compared to one's expectations, companies can see how to develop brand personas that share post-purchase needs with current consumers and attract new consumers by generating positive word-of-mouth. The post-purchase phase kick-starts the cycle back into motion again and again, generating increased sales and profitability.

Overall, the key to successfully adopting effective brand personas is rooted in a genuine understanding among current and prospective customers. Through carefully designed surveys and advanced statistical segmentation techniques market segments can be identified and their unique qualities clearly defined. Determining the values, behaviors, and needs of each segment, a brand persona can be crafted for each one. Keeping in mind the ever-evolving media platforms and communication methods, the most effective channel for each segment/persona can be observed and used. Additionally, by cracking the code of the consumer decision-making model, marketers can take advantage of the right moment to reach customers at the most critical time, therefore ensuring greater customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth and profitability.

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