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# Create Personas to Bridge the Gap with Target Audiences

Before your organization embarks on any communications planning or implementing a campaign, it's vital to understand the wants, habits, preferences and perspectives of your base and prospects. That's the only way to connect your nonprofit's goals—be they building awareness about a new zoning issue that threatens the safety of children at a nearby school, raising funds for your just-launched capital campaign, engaging advocates to contact their state senators on a green space protection issue or motivating registration for a new parenting training—with what's important to your audiences. Personas help bridge the gap.

Traditionally, personas have been used for design of computer hardware and software, particularly website usability. But over recent years, marketers like use have realized their value in creating relevance. After all, relevance rules!

Here's how your nonprofit can put personas to work to strengthen relationships the folks you need to engage:

### How Personas Can Help Your Organization Connect with Your Target Audiences

Personas are hypothetical "stand ins" for your nonprofit's actual audiences. They enable communications and fundraising folks (and that includes planners, writers, designers and others) to stand in their audiences' shoes. They enable your nonprofit to launch campaigns to mobilize your supporters to move your key issues forward that are shaped around audience needs and interests.

You'll find far greater success designing a communications plan or a program's marketing message that works for a "specific person, rather than trying to plan or write for the hazily-defined needs of many or the typical demographically-defined audience segment.

### Persona Is Not Just Another Word for Market Segment

...But that's a common objection you may hear from the marketing traditionalists within your organization. Market segmentation — looking at how an individual has touched your org or issue, their age and income, zip code or educational level – is a great tool for identifying the groups of people you are trying to reach, and why. But

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market segmentation can't shape your marketing messages or choice of strategies.

Assume you know that 33% of women aged 25-40 are interested in supporting breast cancer research, and that messages and graphic design are key elements affecting their giving decisions. Well, that's a good start. But personas add a great deal of richness.

A persona will enable your organization to craft the right campaign to reach Miriam, age 36, who wants to give to breast cancer today, but is concerned that she doesn't know enough about how her money will be used if she gives to your nonprofit. She wants to be reassured by information showing how contributions are used.

## How Do You Create Personas that Work?

Although personas are fictional, they must be defined with rigor and exactness. Ideally, they are based on some understanding of real audiences.

It's easiest to create accurate personas if your organization has some idea of demographics and, even better, data on habits and interests. When you base personas on audience research, you'll ensure that the personas truly represent your audiences.

But remember that personas can't stand alone. Your nonprofit's marketing goals must be the overall guide for your communications planning process. Personas are just one component of the diverse audience research strategies so crucial to the success of your nonprofit marketing agenda.

Learn about others here: Getting Great Audience and Stakeholder Feedback, at Little Cost (Case Study)

Taking in what audiences are saying about your organization is another useful, easy and affordable way to get to know your community.

## What Does a Persona Look Like?

Here's a sample persona checklist. Your goal is to create one persona that typifies each of the maximum of three segments (groups linked by common habits, wants and/or preferences) within each of no more than three audiences. That means a max of nine personas for your organization.

The precise details you'll want to include depend on your organization's marketing.

Are you aiming to increase use of a new health care clinic, motivating volunteers for your mentoring program or build the number of visitors to your nature preserve? No matter your goals, here's what you'll want to include in your personas:

- What is the person's first and last name, age, gender, face (find a photo online) and personal information?
- What are a few details about the person's life—an interest or a habit—that makes each person unique and memorable? When you start here, the hypothetical constructs spring to life.
- How does this person spend their day?—Sketch out a brief outline of their daily work day or day at home, including specific habits, likes and dislikes.
- What is this person's work environment (if you're trying to reach professionals, rather than individuals) including length of time in the job, professional development habits (if marketing programs such as training for social workers on public benefits), information- seeking habits and favorite resources, personal and

professional goals, colleagues with whom the persona works most closely, etc.

- Who does this person trust?
- Where (or from whom) else is this person getting information about your issue or similar programs or services?
- What are the person's personal and professional goals in relation to your organization's programs?
- Who else is encouraging them to "do the right thing" (e.g. follow through on your calls to action for this person/group)?
- Where are they in the Stages of Change about doing the right thing (from "I don't see it as a problem" to "I can/want to do this now.")?

## Sample Persona —
### Nonprofit Communications Campaign on Community Fitness

**Context:** A nonprofit is launching a new community fitness program and needs to promote it to community activists, politicians, and citizens, and to motivate their involvement. The staff needs to know what's important to these audiences, so it can shape its messages, website and blog (a centerpiece of the campaign), brochures and events accordingly.

**Challenge:** This is the first time the organization is proactively communicating to motivate the launch of fit community programs. The campaign will center on a new blog and Web site, but the nonprofit doesn't know how to design the site and parlay the blog to most effectively educate its diverse audiences and motivate them to act.The communications team just doesn't know where to start.

**Persona (short version)**: Introducing Frank Cummings, age 64, owns his own home in a moderately-priced area of an industrial-based community in Ohio. He is married, and has two children who now live in neighboring states. Frank took an early-retirement option from the electrical contracting firm where he worked for 19 years. Now he spends a lot of his free time working on his home and yard, and walking in the neighborhood.

*Annoyed By...*
One problem Frank has noticed as he walks is that the traffic speeds along his street (a connector between two arterial streets) are often well in excess of the 25MPH posted speed limit.

Frank has made comments about the high speeds to his city council representative, who is, with Frank, a member of the local Lions Club. But the council-person, while sympathetic, hasn't done anything other than to suggest that Frank should lodge a complaint with someone at the city, or the police. Meanwhile, the speeding cars continue, and Frank feels unsafe as he walks.

*Online Habits*
Like some in his age group, Frank is a late-comer to computers and the Internet. He needed to learn to use a computer-based service mounted in his truck the last few years he was working, and struggled to keep up with the technology that seemed to come much easier to younger people in the firm.

Frank purchased a computer primarily to use e-mail with his children, but he also has used several programs such as QuickBooks and tax-prep software. His connection to the Internet is still through DSL so it's not the fastest and Frank doesn't like to wait around to see family videos on You Tube or other Web content.

*Wants*

- Slowed-down traffic outside his house to increase walker and biker safety.
- His neighborhood to be a safer and more enjoyable place to live.

**How this insight into Frank strengthened the campaign:** Once the nonprofit got to know Frank, and his persona peers, it was able to shape messages and communications to connect with these individuals' wants, habits and values.

Messaging focused on safe biking and walking, rather than the need to follow traffic safety rules. Citizen campaign recruitment efforts focused on neighbor-to-neighbor messengers, postering and door-to-door flyers. The response was strong.

## Craft Your Personas, Then Spend Some Quality Time with Them

I recommend you spend some time with your personas, so they become an organic part of your marketing and messaging perspective. Here's how:

- Cut-and-paste the core info in big type, plus the photo, into a single sheet for each persona. Print these out for all of your personas and place on your wall, door or desk. Surround sound of a different type!
- Create a poster for each persona and bring the relevant ones in with you to brainstorming and planning meetings. This sounds crazy, but keeps the conversation more audience focused. Try it.

Readers, craft a set of personas today to re-shape your nonprofit's organizational or program/service marketing plan or campaign. You'll find it invaluable to get to know these folks, and to keep up the relationship.

How are you using personas and what do they add to your marketing and fundraising? Please share your experiences here.

P.P.S. Here are my tips on doing great marketing planning 90 days at a time. Add personas to this approach and you're golden.

**Tagged as: Audience Research, Message Development, personas**

**Nancy Schwartz in Audience Research, Strategies and Campaigns | 4 COMMENTS**

4 comments

- *Sara*
  If you're making up a person, how do you know what their exact concerns are? For instance, in the example, Frank was worried about the speeding traffic and talked to his councilman friend about it to no avail, so the solution was to promote safer walking and cycling. But how did the non-profit accurately guess something that specific? What if you

know some basic demographics about your target audience, but don't have detailed information? Would you first try to get some more detailed information, lest you fictionalize characters inaccurately? Or would you make up several personas, target to them all, and see which ones get the best results?

- *lamechickaboo*
  This is a fascinating idea. Finally, a way to use all those years I spent in fiction writing classes in my marketing career.

- *http://opportunity.getsmartcontent.com Taylor Schaeffer @ Get Smart Content*
  Great initial list of questions to start asking when defining your marketing personas. Another question that I'd recommend asking is "Who is currently visiting my site? Who am I failing to connect with?" In order to help marketers define this, we've created a free tool that you can use to look at this – Audience Opportunity Tool ([http://opportunity.getsmartcontent.com](http://opportunity.getsmartcontent.com))
  Let me know if you'd like to talk more about this,
  Taylor Schaeffer
  Get Smart Content
  Content Personalization

- *http://www.HuntConsultingDFW.com Robert Hunt*
  Thank you for taking time to write out in detail persona-based marketing strategies. You did a great job of helping to explain a concept that can be very hard for non-markting types to grasp.
  Robert Hunt

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