

What a persona is

Personas are fictional characters that represent sets of users for the purpose of formalizing and sharing insights into who they are. Personas are composites of actual users who share similar needs, goals, behaviors, etc. The persona deliverable is a combination of profile data and narrative.

Personas bring user research to life. Good personas will evoke the empathy of the design, development and management teams, helping members to effectively internalize the users' experiences on both analytical and emotional levels. They become a powerful tool for communication within and across teams, and for establishing a common and profound connection with the users' need.

What a persona is not

A persona is not a profile or a market segment. Profiles and segments are sets of data points (demographics, purchasing behavior, etc.). While personas do take into account such data they are primarily narrative, have different goals, and are achieved through different research methods. Data do not convey experience, stories do.

What personas do

- Cultivates a sense of empathy in team members with this fictional user.
- This allows team member to step outside of themselves and see the world through a single set of eyes
- This provides the team a standard, shared frame of reference and language free from hidden assumptions, shifting interests, and individual idiosyncrasies.
- Reveals critical nuances of human experience that otherwise remain hidden
- Provide a quick and cheap tool the team can use to reality check their decisions, asking "Would Dave understand this?"

Persona research methods

- *Contextual Inquiry.*
A "fly on the wall" method, where observer remains unnoticed by users. Important when there are lots of unknowns.
- *Participant Observation.*
A "master-apprentice" method where observer learns to become a user. Important to understand complex workflows.
- *Ethnographic Interviews.*
A "Charlie Rose" method where observer elicits direct responses from users.

Persona research is qualitative, and does not require the sample sizes necessary for statistical significance so important in market research.

Final Note

Market research does not provide the right data for persona creation. Market research methods focus on understanding buying behavior. To develop personas we must understand the human experience of goal achievement.

Furthermore, there often is no 1-to-1 relationship between market segments and personas.

That said existing market research is often the best place to start in order to define scope, context, and to target study subjects. One way to think of the relationship between these two kinds of research is that persona research picks up where market research leaves off.

