10 Tips for Developing Buyer Personas

How well do you know your customers? If you're like most marketers, the answer is "not as much as we'd like." Less than half of today's marketers feel they know what channels customers prefer to receive their communications, and only about a third understand when customers want to hear from them and how frequently they want companies to contact them throughout the customer lifecycle.[1]

Developing buyer personas can help increase this understanding. These iconic representations of your ideal customer are research-based, grounded in data, facts and interviews with recent buyers (and even people who deferred a purchase decision or purchased a competitive solution). In addition to helping drive stronger engagement with customers and prospects, buyer personas can also help improve your bottom line: Marketers who use personas and map content to the buyer's journey enjoy 73 percent higher conversions.[2]

Creating buyer personas will typically take about six to eight weeks, and the process is both an art and a science. Doing a thorough job with the 10 steps outlined below will help ensure you're able to build comprehensive personas and provide a firm go-to-market foundation for your marketing campaigns.

1 Communicate your mission.

As the marketing executive sponsoring your buyer persona project, let your sales management know what the project is and that you'll be contacting recent wins as well as clients that deferred their buying decision or purchased from competitors to ask them if they would be willing to participate in an interview. Explain that they are going to get some key upgrades to their sales tool kit at the conclusion of the project.



2 Develop a high-quality list of recent buyers to interview.

Look at sales history in your CRM or order management system and run a report of recent purchasers. If you also track deferred purchases and lost deals, then include them in the report. Develop a list of about 50 to 75 potential interviewees.

Leverage your inside sales team, call center or support desk to recruit people for interviews. Send follow-up emails to those that you leave voice mails for explaining what the project is about, letting them know that the interview will be recorded, and asking for their help. Hopefully out of your 50 to 75 contacts, you'll have eight to 12 people who agree to the interview process.

3 Supplement your list with analytics.

As you're pulling together your list, you might find you already have some demographic and behavioral information that provides valuable customer insights. Feel free to supplement your customer records with these insights, but keep in mind that Information such as "Reads *Fortune* magazine," "active on Twitter but not Facebook" or "Always attends XYZ conference" is usually too high-level to help you create differentiated messaging. So, don't forgo the interview process because you already have a lot of information about your customers and "think" you know what you need.

4 Conduct thorough interviews.

To help make sure you get the most out of your interviews, you'll want to approach these conversations like a professional investigative journalist. For starters, this means remembering to turn on the tape recorder and reminding the interviewee that you're doing so. If you don't have that fearless "get to the bottom of it" mentality, then you'll need to get someone else to do the interviews.

Whoever is doing the interviews should ask probing questions and listen carefully to the answers, digging deeper where appropriate as customers are sharing their insights on how their evaluation and buying process went. The goal should be to find out:

- Why interviewees decided to look for a new product or solution
- What brands they initially considered (and why)
- How they evaluated those brands, what was important to them and what concerned them
- What other initiatives took precedence (if they put their buying process on hold)

Try to get them to remember and explain how they felt and what they were thinking as they moved through the buying cycle.



2 Common Mistakes When Creating Buyer Personas (and How to Avoid Them)
View the video ▶

5 Review the interview transcripts carefully.

After (and only after) you have eight to 12 in-depth investigative interviews, you're ready to compile the results. To save time, consider shipping off your recordings to a professional transcription company to transform the audio recordings into printed documents. Then, go through each interview and begin highlighting key phrases or passages. You'll want to capture key information such as:

- What triggered the buyer to begin a search for a new product or solution?
- What were their decision criteria?
- What results or outcomes were they looking to achieve?
- What other products or vendors did they consider?
- Why did they eliminate or select them?
- What where they feeling as they moved through the buying process?
- What did they perceive as risks with the project/ product/decision?

6 Distill key interview themes.

Once you've marked up each interview, go back through and cut/paste the key findings you've highlighted into a spreadsheet, grouping common themes and answers from all your interviews. When this is finished, you should have three to five phases or aspects of the buying cycle fully supported and documented using the buyers' viewpoint, with six to 12 interview quotes for each phase. Either incorporate all your highlighted comments into each aspect or put them into an additional comment area for further consideration during the messaging exercise.

7 Determine how many personas you need.

Your initial reaction will likely be to create many buyer personas because you have a lot of unique data. Just keep asking yourself if you need a separate message for each potential persona, or if the same messaging will work and address the different need. If there are completely separate expectations for the purchase and you need a unique messaging approach, then you may well need an additional persona. Don't forget that it's perfectly OK to end this exercise realizing you only need one persona to have an effective marketing program.

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8 Perform a content audit.

You can perform this step earlier if you prefer, but regardless of timing, make sure to inventory all the content you have on hand at some point in the buyer persona development process. Review white papers, blogs, videos, how-to guides, infographics and more, noting the date launched and intended target audience. If possible, report on which stage of the sales cycle the content was consumed. Once you have a clear understanding of the areas in which you have an abundance of materials, and where there might be some gaps, you'll be well-positioned to either update the old content or create new pieces to match particular buyer personas.

9 Translate interview findings into marketing messages and content.

If you've done the right job synthesizing your buyer persona interviews and have aggregated and summarized the salient points the contacts shared about their buying process, you'll be able to funnel this information directly into your messaging and then to all of your content plans.

You might, for example, glean some blockbuster benefits prospects are looking to achieve that could provide the headline theme for an entire campaign. Build out your content framework, mapping stages of the customer journey to what each persona is looking to hear, observe and learn at each step.

Make this a clean-sheet exercise rather than trying to retrofit all your existing content into this new framework. Continue to use the personas to define the perfect content they would use to address their needs. Only after you've done that exercise can you review existing assets to determine what modifications need to be made or how older pieces can be used.

Being armed with comprehensive buyer personas will give you the detailed insights you need to make campaign and content creation so much easier — and it will resonate beautifully with your prospective customers.

Buyer Personas Success Story: Georgia Aquarium

Georgia Aquarium is the world's largest aquarium, and its marketing team was ready to get to know its customers better in order to retain loyal fans, provide consistent value and drive more revenue. However, its data was stuck in silos and the team consisted of just one person.

Hired to act as an extension of the Georgia Aquarium marketing team, Silverpop Professional Services supported the Aquarium's efforts by helping it answer two key questions: what is our ideal customer, and what path do we want them to take? First, the team worked in sync to identify the Aquarium's key personas — Ticket Purchasers & Event Attendees (Non-Members), Members/Pass Holders, Oceans Society and Donors. Then, it matched these with the Aquarium's primary goals — Acquisition/Welcome, Loyalty, Renewal and Reactivation — and brainstormed nurture campaigns to target each "bucket" of subscribers.

After mapping and strategizing for months, the Aquarium began using automated programs, preference centers and reporting to help launch and execute three different campaigns: Pre-Visit Experience, Post-Visit Follow-Up and Welcome Series.

Not only is the journey improving for Georgia Aquarium's different personas, but the digital marketing team is seeing success as well. The results include a 60 percent unique open rate for all expanded campaigns and a 32 percent lift in revenue from the email channel. On top of that, leadership saw enough value from the results to bring another team member on board.

"Silverpop has supported our communications goals at Georgia Aquarium since the beginning of our partnership, with a commitment to growing our database and customer engagement," says Rosie Judd, director of digital media, Georgia Aquarium. "Working closely with various departments throughout Silverpop, including the Professional Services team, we have been able to increase our customer touch points 3X over the last year, leading to a more engaged and loyal customer base."

GEORGIA AQUARIUM

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10 Migrate your persona messaging into sales enablement tools.

Once you've fleshed out some of your potential marketing content, look to incorporate this new persona messaging into your company's sales enablement tools (if applicable). Some of the persona findings will be helpful in the sales discovery process or perfect for training your inbound call center. Other elements will help your sales reps address competitive threats. Take the time to think about what makes sense where, and make sure these buyer persona insights are formatted and migrated into existing sales enablement processes and documents.

Once your buyer personas are established, marketing should be on the customer's time frame, not the marketing department's schedule. That shift should help power a more rewarding customer experience and an increase in revenue, so get started building your buyer personas today!

Footnotes

1-IBM and Econsultancy, "The Consumer Conversation," 2015

2-Maribeth Ross, Aberdeen Group, "5 Habits of Highly Effective Marketers," Dec. '13

Silverpop, an IBM Company, is a cloud-based digital marketing provider that offers email marketing, lead-to-revenue management and mobile engagement solutions. IBM Marketing Cloud — built on the foundation of Silverpop Engage — uses customer data and individual behaviors, collected from a variety of sources, to inform and drive personalized interactions in real time. IBM Marketing Cloud powers the delivery of exceptional experiences for customers across the buyer journey.

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