



Build Organizational Empathy Through Personas

Empathy: the ability to understand and share the feelings of another

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Is your business empathic? If like me, you've read Joel Bakan's 2003 book *The Corporation*, you may have a bleak perspective on the answer to that question. In his book, Bakan lays out a very compelling case that corporations are, by their very nature, psychopathic. So, can a business truly be empathic?

Yes it can. And it starts with fully understanding your customer by moving from a set of demographic data to a fully fleshed-out archetype with hopes, fears, and motivations.

Look at wildly successful companies such as Apple, Google and Audi; they are in the empathy market. They understand and anticipate their customer's needs, sometimes before their customers know what they are. Empathy is also profitable. You can draw [a straight line from empathy to the bottom line](#). If you're curious, Lady Geek publishes an annual empathy index. [Check out the 2015 list here](#).

Your business or product exists to fill a fundamental gap – something that your customer needs to be or do better. Our universal tendency is to get wrapped up in a list of our product's features; what we should focus on are the problems we solve for our clients.

A mainstay of today's marketing machine, personas are something you've probably read about; you may have even started your own. I like [Tony Zambito's](#) definition of personas from more than a decade ago:

Buyer personas are research-based archetypal (modeled) representations of who buyers are, what they are trying to accomplish, what goals drive their behavior, how they think, how they buy, where they buy, when buyers decide to buy, and why they make buying decisions.

However, it's one thing to understand what personas are and quite another to create and refine them over time. What's important is that if you haven't given them your attention you start, now. They provide your company with a focus for empathic decision making. Here's a very simple recipe for creating a buyer persona.

- 1. Define or narrow down your focus.** Most businesses have more than one persona. Instead of trying to figure out how many personas you need at this stage, approach this exercise from the standpoint of a particular problem or priority area, vertical or product offering in your mix.
- 2. Gather qualitative feedback.** Often people assume that this will be the most difficult information to pull together. What many fail to realize is that you already have a treasure trove of firsthand information about your clients at your disposal. Pull together cross-disciplinary feedback from across your organization. Find out what sorts of questions your sales or customer service teams get asked again and again. And yes, you may want to engage in one-on-one customer interviews.
- 3. Gather quantitative data.** Pull marketing and website analytics, CRM data, sales pipeline data, industry data, any data to help you fill in the picture of who your clients are. If you don't have a lot of data at this



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point, don't get discouraged. If you are missing big chunks of insight into who your customers are, then aim to find a way to narrow that gap.

4. Start filling in the picture. HubSpot has created a great road map of [20 questions to ask](#) when generating a persona. Here is HubSpot's [step-by-step online tool](#), if you want a guided exercise. For a B2B persona, you want to step into that person's shoes in a given role at a company. Instead of Mary, the individual, you'll be creating a picture of Mary, the law firm IT director, or Bob, the paralegal. However, if you find that personal details and information about who they are outside of work are relevant, by all means, include those too.

5. Refine, refine, refine. Personas are living, breathing organisms. They are never done. The idea is to create the beginning of your ideal customer's story and then optimize this story over time with more qualitative and quantitative data.

Personas can help inform marketing tactics, messaging, website copy, the customer journey and even product decisions. While some companies get caught up in robot-like marketing around their personas, personas are simply meant to be one tool in your toolbox, a tool that helps drive a much better understanding of your clients across your organization.

About the author

Kim Tidwell is an account manager with Edge Marketing, Inc. She has over 15 years of experience with brand development, retail product development and both outbound and inbound marketing. In her spare time, she loves to run in Austin's Hill Country, and enjoys cooking and yoga.



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