

The Art & Science of Buyer Personas



“What is a buyer persona?”

is a question we often field at D Custom. Buyer persona development is shaping the future of content marketing today. However, many CMOs and marketing directors have questions about how to maximize the potential and even reach the experiential.

For instance, an insurance company realized that its customer base was changing.

Like family recipes and friendships, the organization enjoyed loyalty that passed from one generation to another.

As the population aged and younger consumers started shopping for insurance products differently, the brand understood that it needed to build upon those relationships—and forge new ones.

The marketing executives at the insurance company partnered with our creative team at D Custom to strategize and create a custom magazine that bridged the generational gap and helped agents win over prospects and connect deeper with existing customers.

Buyer personas and brand journalism

“You furnish the pictures, and I’ll furnish the war.” William Randolph Hearst understood the power of content, and so should marketers.

**Long before brand journalism
even existed, publishers
focused on what entices
readers to take action.**

Buyer persona development is akin to that; it’s the process of researching what influences and motivates customers and prospects to buy, behave, and think differently.

So when brand journalism—the practice of creating newsworthy content for a brand—is united with buyer persona development, marketing is maximized into amazing possibilities.

In the case of the insurance company, we knew the magazine needed to be a vehicle for strengthening customer affinity and driving more business. But what kind of publication would it be?

We began by asking the single most important question for any would-be publisher: Who exactly is your audience?

Our clients knew they wanted to reach their existing customer base, but who were those people, really? What kinds of messages would hit home with them? What would drive them to increase or extend their coverage?

The answer was found through buyer persona development. As we discovered

through the client's research and additional interviews, there's not one customer profile, but four key buyer personas. So how could they best maximize them?

Our relationships with printers across the country helped us innovate a solution: Don't create one magazine; data-driven distribution allows unlimited customization.

So we created "four" versions, each one catering to a particular life stage. Featuring lifestyle stories and editorial content that's interesting, the focus wasn't on selling insurance—it was about the relationship.

And great content provides solutions to the pain points that consumers have, from the advantages of buying a new or used car to keeping kids safe online.

Each segmented version has its own unique cover and cover story relevant to that customer segment's life stage. After all, a young single person has different insurance needs from someone who's raising a family, or someone getting ready for retirement.

Additional printing innovations allowed us to delve deeper into another buyer persona—the insurance agent. Because agents drive sales, they need to stay top-of-mind. Through variable data fields, each magazine is personalized with the agent's contact information and a special message.

The result? A personal touch.

69%

say the magazine has given them a favorable impression of the company

57%

feel it helps them protect their property and family

64%

have taken action because of the magazine

Today the magazine has a circulation of 50,000 and is enjoying success in the field and at headquarters. Our measurement tools show the magazine is driving existing customers back to their agents to review their coverage—an opportunity to discuss and promote additional coverage options.

D Custom recently conducted a reader survey through Readex in which 69% of respondents say the magazine has given them a favorable impression of the company; 57% percent feel it helps them protect their property and family; and 64% percent have taken action because of the magazine.

You can see why we at D Custom believe so strongly in buyer personas. At the same time, we know they're sometimes not as helpful as companies would like.

What many companies don't understand is that creating buyer persona models is both an art and a science.

Yes, there's a methodology, and yes, there are ways to create models that align with your customer base. But they don't go far enough.

Drill down on details

The biggest mistake companies make is to base their buyer personas on broad target demographics. Companies will separate their potential buyers into a few distinct groups and then catalog everything they know about each one.

Typically the categories are built on stereotypes about how people think and behave.

More often than not, the categories are linked to obvious data—things like job title, geography, or gender.

While these traits may be accurate, they don't really tell you much about the actual challenges your customer faces or the goals they hope to achieve. What's really going on in their lives, and how can your product help? If you limit your buyer personas to overly broad categories, you'll fall into the mentality of selling your product rather than solving your customer's problems.

A better way is to drill down on the nuances. Begin with an interactive workshop that helps clients delve into the identities of their prospects. Consider pulling in the primary players—maybe the head of procurement and the CEO—and use detailed exercises that examine the products from the buyer's point of view. It's a rewarding experience that opens up a new perspective on the customer experience.

Targeted exercises help identify the key stakeholders. When it comes to buying your product, who holds the purse strings? Where is the resistance? Who has the most to gain or lose?

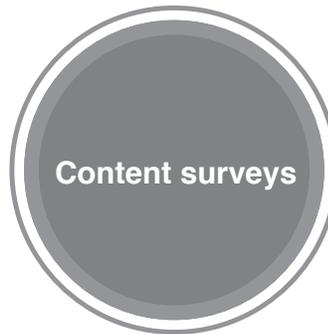
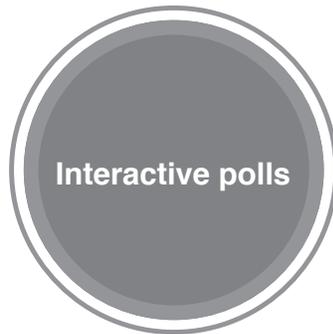
Buyer persona benchmarks

Consider creating a set of fine-tuned benchmarks, using surveys and other analytical tools that hone in on key characteristics.

At each step, identify the individuals who are critical to the decision to buy.



Some of the techniques used to measure buyer persona engagement and effectiveness include:



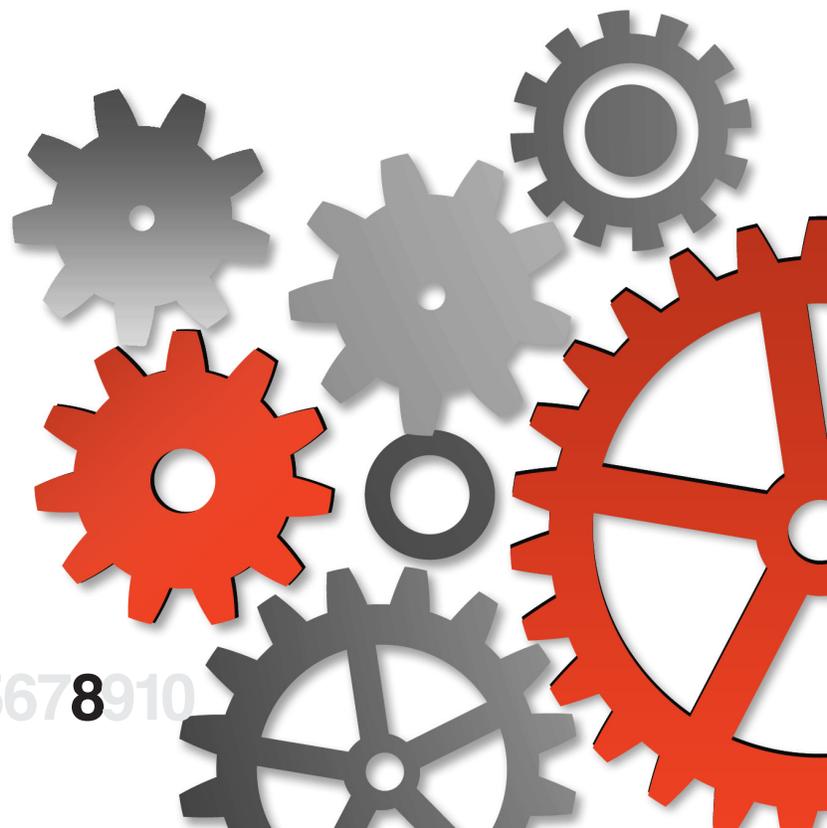
Think like a shrink

The key to success is in gaining access to the heart and soul of your prospective customer. It means getting to know them from the inside out.

Like a psychologist, think in terms of hopes, priorities, and desires.

What are their pain points? Where do they get their joy? You must be willing to examine the messy, sometimes contradictory impulses behind human behavior. Tapping into that level of information is an art. The knowledge revealed is the product of an empathetic imagination.

The second mistake many companies make is to think their buyer personas are fixed. They go through the process of creating their models and then they move on.



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Buyers change; so should buyer personas

But the world is changing too fast. The rapid pace of technology and the explosion of consumer choice have shortened the relevance and lifespan of buyer personas. Your persona biographies have to be continuously updated or they'll soon be out of date.

So think of the creation of buyer personas as an ongoing exercise. Revisit your models on a regular basis. Each time you go back, you'll learn more and more. What you learn will be woven into your content strategy.

Getting to know your customers is a mix of art and science that can't be reduced to formula.

Done right, the buyer persona process frees you up to go straight to your market, avoid costly detours, take more risks, and stand apart from the crowd.

In the end, you'll be able to say with confidence that you truly get your customers—and that's a goldmine of information your competitors won't have.

Identifying buyer personas: a checklist



Here's a checklist of crucial steps in getting to know your buyers:



Beware of broad categories.

Too many marketers lump their customers into groups based on over-simplified stereotypes. Instead of needs and wants, think in more subtle terms like priorities, hopes, motivations, and desires. With more nuance, you'll stand a better chance of reaching actual human beings.



Rinse. Then repeat.

Just like the shampoo bottle says, once is not enough. These days, life accelerates too quickly for any given set of buyer personas to stay relevant for long. Set bi-monthly meetings to review your customer profiles. Schedule regular tune-ups. Don't let your personas become passé.



Monitor, measure, confirm.

There's nothing like real-world feedback to let you know if your efforts are on track. Luckily there's no shortage of tools out there for monitoring key indicators. Be sure to measure forecasts against actual results, and if you're not where you should be, revise. A little "how's it going?" goes a long way.

About D Custom

D Custom is an integrated content marketing agency located in Dallas, Texas. We work with B2B and B2C clients around the globe to help them drive sales through content. Brand journalists at heart, we develop your message and deploy it across channels to connect you to your audience online, in print, and beyond.

We don't want to replace your marketing team—we want to refresh, illuminate, enhance, and amplify what they're doing by filling the gaps and adding depth and dimension to your marketing plan. D Custom has a history of success working side by side with brand marketers to translate their messages into compelling, engaging content using a variety of media.

Our story is our clients' story. Let us help you tell yours.



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