

How to create insightful buyer personas
to inform and shape your content

THE INSIDER GUIDE TO DEVELOPING AND USING BUYER PERSONAS

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You are aware of your target market, and you have an understanding of their needs, but have you attempted to define exactly who you are selling to?

In this eBook, we aim to guide you in creating insightful buyer personas that will inform and shape your content, so that you can generate more leads and convert more customers.

We will cover:

- What is a buyer persona?
- Why are buyer personas essential?
- Creating buyer personas - the buyer persona development process
- Using buyer personas to map content

WHAT IS A BUYER PERSONA?

Buyer personas are a semi-fictional representation of your ideal customer based on market research and real data about existing customers. They go beyond the demographics of your target audience and represent their attitudes, behaviours, challenges and aspirations. And they are based on your experience and interviews with real customers.

Buyer personas should be detailed and comprehensive. Typically, they will cover things like:

- Demographics
- Job role and responsibilities
- Goals and aspirations
- Challenges and pain points
- Sources they go to for information
- Decision criteria

Any business using an inbound marketing approach can benefit from creating buyer personas. In fact, they are essential. If you sell products or services, developing buyer personas is vital to creating content that will resonate with your audience.

Many businesses market to more than one type of customer and need to develop personas for each of them. In fact, it is highly likely there is more than just one person influencing a decision to buy from you. So developing key influencer personas can also be important. Each persona should be distinct, with clear characteristics.



WHY ARE BUYER PERSONAS ESSENTIAL?

The purpose of inbound marketing is to attract new prospects, create new leads, and convert them to customers and keep those customers. To do this well, you need buyer personas to help shape and form both the content and the context required at each touch point throughout the buyer's journey.

Good buyer personas help answer questions like:

- What messages should I focus my content around?
- What questions do I need to be answering?
- What types of content should I create?
- Where should I share my content?

If you know your buyer personas fears, aspirations, interests and needs, you can create content that speaks directly to him. If you know what type of content he responds best to you can create content that engages him. And if you know what media channels he uses, you can be certain your content reaches him. The result? More leads.

Buyer personas are also valuable in helping to:

Shape marketing and sales strategies - Buyer personas can help you better understand the customer journey. Understanding behaviours and needs at each stage enable you to create a content plan that will guide them through their journey. Your personas should guide the decisions of your marketing team and help sales to pre-empt the needs and objections of prospects.

Align your sales and marketing teams - Buyer personas can create a common language across your sales and marketing teams and ensure everyone is on the same page.

Inform product development - Your buyer personas can tell you what's important when choosing a new solution that your business might offer. Understanding this allows you to develop products that will appeal to them.



CREATING BUYER PERSONAS

The quality of your buyer personas will determine whether they positively impact your content creation, lead generation and sales. To create actionable buyer personas, you want to build them around the Buyer Persona Institute's 'Five Rings of Buyer Insight™'.

Priority Initiatives: What causes buyers to invest in solutions like yours, and what is different about buyers who are satisfied with the status quo?

You may find it helpful to think of Priority Initiatives as 'triggers'. What triggers buyers to search for a product or service like yours? What potential situation or circumstances might lead them to seek it out?

When you understand the reasons that cause buyers to look for a solution like yours, you have a strong foundation for content that will resonate with them at the start of their journey. For example, you can create content that says "You may not have experienced this yet, but it's coming soon. Here's how to avoid it."

Success Factors: What operational or personal results does your buyer persona expect to achieve by purchasing this solution?

Success Factors are not simply 'benefits', as these can often be reverse-engineered from the capabilities the product can deliver. Success Factors are the results and the outcomes that buyers want a solution to deliver. A B2B buyer might expect a tangible Success Factor, like improving productivity or reducing costs, for example. Or, rather than a measurable objective, they may have something at stake (perhaps even personally) that makes it important they make the right decision.

By understanding the outcomes your buyer is looking for from a solution like yours, you can create content or choose marketing tactics that lets them know how and why your solution will achieve these results.

Perceived Barriers: What concerns cause your buyer to believe that your solution or company is not their best option?

Barriers are the reasons buyers may choose a competitor's solution over yours, or decide not to purchase any solution at all. Your persona could have negative perceptions based on past experiences with similar products or your company, or based on research, or arising from feedback from peers. Their perceived barriers could also emanate from personal or business obstacles, such as gaining acceptance from end users, or internal political issues.

By understanding their Perceived Barriers, your marketing approach can seek to reassure buyers that your solution is capable of helping them overcome any obstacles in the way of their buying decision and ultimately, achieve their Success Factors.



Buyer's Journey: This insight reveals details about who and what impacts your customer as they evaluate their options and select one.

You may want to think of this as the 'evaluation process'. This is what your buyer does to explore and identify solutions from multiple companies, evaluate their options, and make a decision. It provides insight into what information they look for to help them assess their options, where they go to find this information, and the sources they trust.

In understanding the Buyer's Journey, you can create content that reaches and resonates with them at each stage of the journey; you can look to facilitate how they compare your solution with others and ensure that information you provide makes their decision process a simple one.

Decision Criteria: Which aspects of the competing products, services, solutions or company do your buyers perceive as most critical, and what are their expectations for each?

Here you identify the factors your buyer uses to compare different solutions and make a decision. For example, if choosing a new delivery service for your business, you may be focused on reliability, tracking options, and costs.

With this insight, you can identify which of your capabilities will have the most impact on your buyer's choice to do business with you and create content that highlights these aspects.

By using the 'Five Rings of Buyer Insight™' you can gain an in-depth understanding and a full picture of your buyer personas. Focusing on these five things will ensure your buyer personas positively impact your content creation, lead generation, and sales.

THE BUYER PERSONA DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

You know what you need to learn to build your buyer personas, but how do you go about it? Your buyer personas need to deliver as much insight as possible, and getting them right can take time.

The following three stage process will help guide you in developing your personas. At each stage, remember to build the picture around Change Drivers, Success Factors, Perceived Barriers, Buyer's Journey and Decision Criteria.



Holding an internal workshop with key members of your marketing and sales teams will be a useful starting block in building a picture of your buyer personas. The aim of the workshop would be to scope out a top-level sketch of your personas based on existing knowledge, data and feedback.

Your marketing team should have data on where your current online visitors are located, how they found your website, and details about their demographics and the types of roles they are in. They may also have collected data through previous market research, such as customer satisfaction surveys.

Your sales team have a strong awareness of the types of customers your business attracts, what they want to achieve by investing in a product or service like yours, and what the common objections to purchasing are.

It's useful to capture this information ahead of time so that you can focus the workshop on coming to an agreement on your draft buyer personas. Getting each member of the sales and marketing team to complete a short questionnaire from the point of view of the customer is a simple way to capture this information.

The questionnaires should capture insights on the customer's basic demographics, their industry, and job role, as well as the 'Five Rings of Buyer Insight'. You want everyone to answer a separate questionnaire for each type of customer they can think of.

One person should then be tasked with collating all the responses and presenting them in the workshop to generate further discussion.

Questions to ask your sales and marketing teams

Demographics

- *How old is the persona?*
- *What is their gender?*
- *What is their name?*

Industry and job role

- *What is persona their job title?*
- *What is their job description?*
- *Where do they sit within the structure of the company?*
- *Who do they report to?*
- *Who reports to them?*
- *How long have they been in the job?*
- *What is their role in the buying process?*

Change Drivers

- *What causes you persona to invest in solutions like yours? I.e. what are the triggers?*

Success Factors

- *What operational results are they looking to achieve by investing in a solution like yours?*
- *What personal results are they looking to achieve by investing in a solution like yours?*

Perceived Barriers

- *What concerns or objections do they have about investing in your solution?*

Buyer's Journey

- *What online and offline sources do they use to find out about solutions like yours?*
- *What questions do they ask about your company or solution?*

Decision Criteria

- *What aspects are most important when looking for a new solution? E.g. company reputation, price, service, support, specific options etc.*
- *What reasons do they cite for selecting you over a competitor?*
- *What are their most common objections to your solution?*

At the end of the workshop you want to have developed a solid foundation for at least one persona which can be built on further from the information you capture in interviews with real customers.



Example Persona Output

BUYER PERSONA PROFILE	TRIGGER CONDITIONS	SUCCESS FACTORS	PERCEIVED BARRIERS	DECISION CRITERIA	BUYER'S ROLE
<div> <div> PERSONA NAME DAVID (IT DAVID) AGE 45 ROLES IT DIRECTOR / INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL ADVISOR REPORTS TO MD / SHAREHOLDERS / FD EDUCATION UNIVERSITY DEGREE / PERHAPS AN MBA </div>  </div>					
My responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversees full IT operation • Senior management team of medium-sized (mid-market) business (£5 million - £50 million) • Non technical but previous project mgmt and director roles • 5 direct reports 		Pressures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Board is looking for cost savings • His resources in terms of staff are stretched, but he needs to deliver more to support the growing needs of the business – specifically new projects • Needs to find new people or skills to deliver • IT Infrastructure & Systems not meeting business requirements • Business continuity 		Information sources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peers • Networking events • Staff • Internet 	

Prepared by Equinet Media Ltd

BUYER PERSONA PROFILE	TRIGGER CONDITIONS	SUCCESS FACTORS	PERCEIVED BARRIERS	DECISION CRITERIA	BUYER'S ROLE
<p>What business conditions trigger this buyer's decision to look for an outsourced managed IT solution?</p> <p>Decision to outsource for is triggered by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business ambitions/requirements • IT department is struggling to meet the demand caused by new projects • The work for his department is increasing • He doesn't have the skills or the people in house to complete it • Reduce costs • Upgrade infrastructure • Move infrastructure/systems offsite (to the cloud) <p>Board signs off David's recommendations</p>					

Prepared by Equinet Media Ltd

BUYER PERSONA PROFILE	TRIGGER CONDITIONS	SUCCESS FACTORS	PERCEIVED BARRIERS	DECISION CRITERIA	BUYER'S ROLE
<p>What results or outcomes does David expect from engaging an outsourced managed IT solution?</p> <div> <div> Operational Success <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to expertise he doesn't have • The project is delivered on time and on budget – no scope or budget creep • Expectations have been met • Trusts MS Partner • There will be positive feedback from internal people about the work the partner is doing • IT support responsiveness • System performance • Increased staff productivity/happiness • Value for money • Improved security • IT disaster recovery achieved </div> <div> Personal Success <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He will get peace of mind • Ongoing success will help his career progress • Board satisfaction • Personally added value </div> </div>					

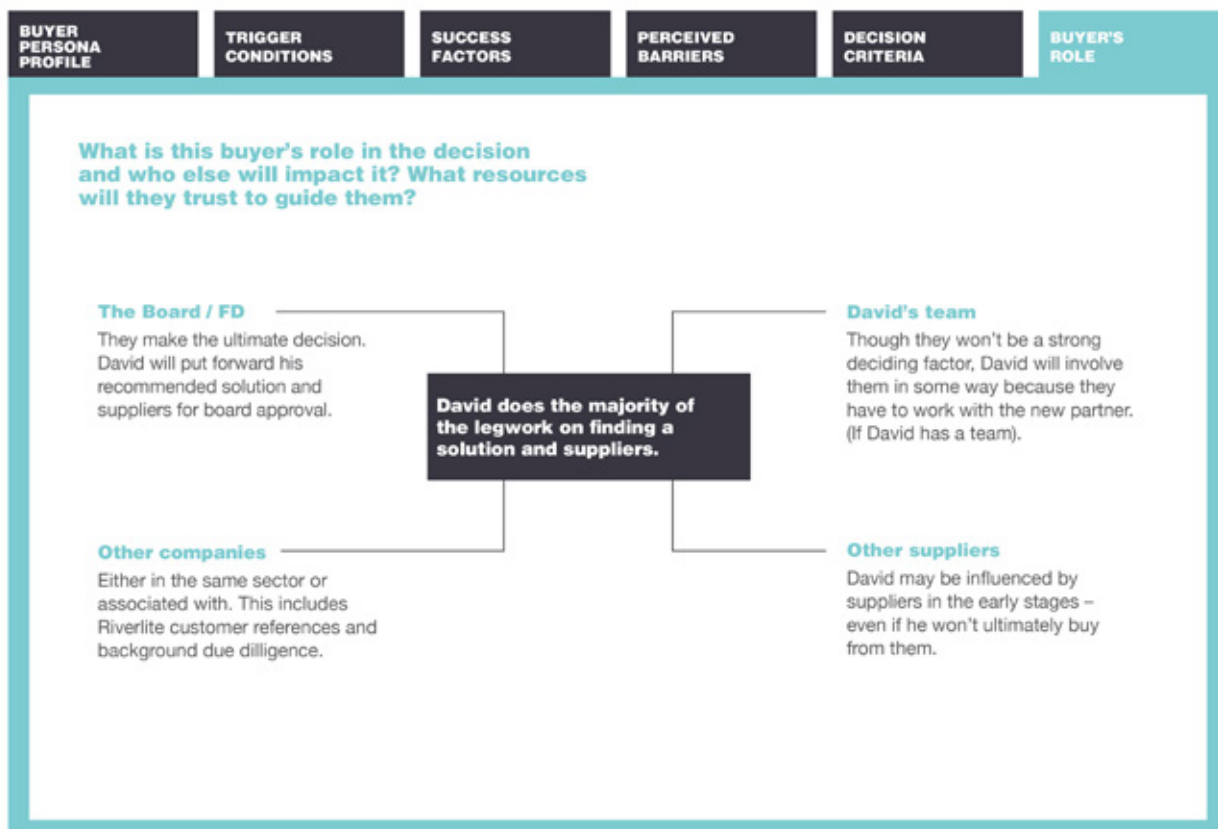
Prepared by Equinet Media Ltd

BUYER PERSONA PROFILE	TRIGGER CONDITIONS	SUCCESS FACTORS	PERCEIVED BARRIERS	DECISION CRITERIA	BUYER'S ROLE
<p>What attitudes or concerns prevent this buyer from investing in an outsourced IT solution? Or why not from you?</p> <div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of control through outsourcing – how will I know what is happening? • Though they aren't delivering a good service, at least I know our current outsourcing supplier – "better the devil you know." • On the other hand, frustration with the current supplier could colour his thinking about outsourcing, making him think twice. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's too much trouble to switch • Lingering concerns about outsourcing and cloud services in general • Cost of change • Job security </div>					

Prepared by Equinet Media Ltd



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Buyer personas shouldn't be built from a business's internal knowledge and experiences alone. You want to truly understand the buyers point of view, and the only way you can really do this is by speaking to your customers.

Who to speak to

Existing customers – Your current customers are a key group to speak to because they've already purchased your product and engaged with your company. You may be tempted to only reach out to customers who love your product, but ideally you want to speak to a mix of both satisfied and less satisfied customers to gain a balanced insight.

Prospects – It's a good idea to speak to people who have not purchased from your company to balance out your interviews. You can use the data you already have in your CRM about them to identify who might fit your buyer persona. Consider also speaking to "closed - lost" prospects, who chose a competitor product over your own, as they can tell you how and why they concluded that your solution was not as good as the one they purchased - their Decision Criteria. In the same way, it's also useful to speak to those who decided to keep things as they were. The prospects you want to avoid speaking to however are those who have not yet made a decision, as you want your salespeople to manage these exchanges.

How to conduct the interviews

Interviews should be conducted over the telephone as one-to-one to gain the most in-depth insight. It's also an easier way of reaching a larger sample as you are not constrained by location. However, if you have local customers, or your products have a high ticket value, you could consider face-to-face interviews. There can be real value in conducting them at the buyers' place of work, as this will help build a stronger understanding of a day in their life.

Who should conduct the interviews

To get the most out of your interviews, you need your subjects to be completely open and honest. Therefore, it's important to consider who conducts the interviews. The interviewer needs to be someone impartial, someone who is naturally inquisitive, and someone who is going to dig deep into understanding the buyer.

Tips for conducting the interviews

Ask 'why?' - This should be the follow up to almost every question you ask. People don't always find it easy to tell you the motivations behind their behaviours. Start with a broad question, for example "What are your most common objections when buying a product or service?", then spend time digging deeper into that one question. It may be useful to know that poor service is a barrier, but it's more valuable to know that it's a barrier because poor service can lead to customers not renewing their contract and your buyer missing their targets.

It's important to remember what you are trying to achieve. It's useful to have a copy of the 'Five Rings of Buyer Insight™' handy during the interviews; this way you can refer to it at any point to ensure you are covering them off.

Use an audio recorder – When it comes to analysing and building your buyer persona profiles you may find it useful to listen back to your interviews. There is also great value in using real quotes when building your persona profiles and this way you'll have access to them (They are, of course, internal documents).

Questions to ask

The specific topics and questions you ask your customers may depend on your business or industry, but generally, the following can be universally applied.

Demographics

Even for B2B buyer personas, understanding basic details is a useful starting point. It's also a good way to get the buyer warmed up and build a rapport.



What are your details?

- *What is your age?*
- *What is your gender?*
- *What is your marital status?*
- *Where do you live?*
- *Who do you live with?*
- *Do you have children? If so, how many?*
- *What is your household income?*
- *What is your highest level of education?*

When capturing more sensitive details, like household income, you may want to provide income ranges to make them more comfortable in providing this information.

Job role and responsibilities

You want to know who your buyers are; the industries and businesses they work in, what their role is, and what their everyday life looks like.



In which industry do you work?

It's important to know what industries your products are of interest to. It's also worth noting that one product may appeal to buyers in two very different industries, with two very distinct personas. It's important to account for this when creating your buyer personas.



What is the size of your company?

This is useful context for understanding the needs of your persona. Their needs may differ depending on how many employees there are. For example, an Operations Manager in an SME may have very different needs to an Operations Manager at a large enterprise with 1000+ employees.



What is your role in the business?

You want to understand where the buyer fits within the wider business. What are they responsible for? Who do they report to? Who reports to them? This is crucial context for understanding their challenges and aspirations, and for how they make purchase decisions.

Q***What does a typical day look like?***

Ask them to describe their whole day. By letting them speak naturally they will describe the details that are most noteworthy to them. This signals to you what they consider most significant. Then dig deeper with further questions into areas that are important to you.

Q***What does it mean to be successful in your role?***

If you know what success looks like for your buyer, you can identify ways your solutions can help them to be more successful, and use your content to highlight this.

Q***What are your career aspirations?***

What are their future career goals? What path will they take to get to this? This insight enables you to demonstrate ways your solutions can help them in their route to achieving their goals.

Challenges and pain points

Understanding your buyers' frustrations and challenges - their pain points - enables you to identify where your product or service can help and create content that demonstrates this.

Q***What are the biggest challenges you face in your role? How do these affect your day-to-day life?***

If one of your personas biggest challenges is getting sign off from the CFO or other senior team members when making a purchase, they may respond well to a blog post titled 'How to convince your CFO to invest'. And knowing what impact these challenges have will provide you with material to engage your audience at the start of the blog.

Q***What is the least favourite part of your job? Why?***

If you know that your buyer doesn't enjoy reading through the long monthly reports generated by one of his suppliers, then he may respond better to easily digestible content like infographics.

Q***What do you find stressful? What do you worry about?***

Perhaps inefficiencies are having an impact on your ability to meet customer demand, or you want to spend more time on strategy and design but this is being jeopardised by other priorities. Your goal is to demonstrate that a solution like yours will alleviate these stresses.

Information sources

It is important to identify the sources your target audience are using for information, as well as why they use them. This will help you understand the type of content that will resonate best with your buyers.

Q *Where do you go to learn about new information for your job? Why?*

Some individuals will be comfortable using the internet as their main source of information. Others may be more likely to speak to others' in their industry and look for recommendations. These buyers may respond better to content that reviews industry research, or case studies.

Q *What online sources do you use? Why?*

Here you want to explore all the online resources they use; industry bodies, blogs, online trade journals, and social networks. It is also useful to explore why they use these sources. Do they pay attention to a certain blog because they trust the source? Or is it because they have content that is easy to digest?

Q *What type of online content do you prefer? Why? Tell me about a piece of content you have seen recently that you liked and got value from*

Do they prefer blogs, eBooks, infographics, podcasts? This may not be easy for them to answer – they may not have thought about it before - so asking them to give a real-life example is a good way of getting to this. You can then probe deeper into what it is they liked about that piece of content.

Q *What device(s) do you use to access information online?*

Identifying whether a buyer is more likely to use a smartphone or a desktop computer allows you to create content that works for that device. For instance, if you know they only ever use their smartphone, you may want to consider writing more short-form blog articles that are easier to engage with on a smaller screen.

Q *What offline sources do you use? Why?*

Buyers may belong to social, professional or networking groups, or attend industry events and conferences. You need to know if these are valuable to your target audience.

Decision-making behaviours and experiences

The behaviours and preferences of your buyers have implications for how they evaluate their purchasing options. It's crucial to understand these to build a picture of the Buyer's Journey and Decision Criteria.

Q *When buying new products or services, who is involved in the decision-making?*

Often in B2B there will be several people involved. Your buyer may be responsible for researching and evaluating the options, but there may be someone above them that makes the final decision. The number of people and levels involved in decision making can have implications for how you direct your content.

Q

What do you value most when purchasing a new product or service? What factors influence your decision? Why?

Identifying the aspects or features critical to your buyer means you can create marketing content that demonstrates that your solution has these capabilities. For example, knowing that supply flexibility is important to a Procurement Manager means you can create content that highlights how you respond to changing requirements. And understanding why this is a critical aspect will enable you to give more depth to your content.

Q

What are your most common objections when buying a new product or service? i.e. what are the barriers to purchase? Why?

Knowing what the barriers are to investing in your product or service enables you to create content that breaks down these barriers.

Q

Can you tell me about a recent experience you had of purchasing a new product or service for your business, starting with the moment you decided to seek out a solution to your problem, to when you made the purchase?

It can be difficult for people to explain how they behave without context. This way they can walk you through their journey and quite literally provide you with your 'Five Rings of Buyer Insight™'.

Get them to talk it through naturally, and then probe further to make sure you cover the important details, like what triggered them to seek a new product, who was involved in the evaluation process, and what factors they used to evaluate competitors.

Once you have carried out your interviews, you will need to analyse your findings and use them to build on the sketches you drew up in the workshop. This will take time and may require further discussions as a team. You may find that your personas change a lot from your initial work, and this is ok.





CREATE BUYER PERSONA PROFILES

You've gathered all your information, and now you need to create comprehensive profiles for each of your buyer personas. These profiles should be shared to all personnel across the business and shape the foundations of your inbound marketing strategy.

Your buyer personas should include the following elements:



Name – Marketers often use descriptive names that are catchy and memorable. Marketing Mary, Procurement Phil, or Director Darren for example. These names can help your team use a common language to create short-cuts to understanding... 'What would Marketing Mary do?' for example, or 'What would Marketing Mary think of this offer?'



Image – It can be helpful to include an image for your persona. You can use stock imagery, or if interviewing your customers face-to-face, and they are willing, you could use a photograph of an actual buyer.



Quotes – Real life quotes from your interviews hold great value in bringing your personas to life. They also provide an insight into the language your personas use which can be useful for your sales team or for creating marketing messages.



Description - Each profile needs to include a detailed account of the persona's demographics, role and responsibilities, and their values and pain points.



Sources - Each profile should include details of the persona's 'go to' sources; both online and offline.



Traits - Each profile should include a list of traits that your sales team can use to identify personas when talking to prospects. Examples of traits could be "preference for email communication", or "likely to have an assistant screening calls". Here it can also be useful to include buzzwords and language they use that you may have picked up from your interviews.



'Five Rings of Buyer Insight™' - Each buyer persona profile should provide a detailed narrative of that persona's Change Drivers, Success Factors, Perceived Barriers, Buyer's Journey and Decision Criteria.

Once you have created your personas you need to ensure they are regularly reviewed and updated. Your target audience's needs are not static. They are subject to change; due to shifts in the economy, introduction of new technologies, or changes to the organisational structure of their business. Change may occur at your end too, with alterations to products or services, or expansion into new areas. In these circumstances, it will be especially important to review your buyer personas.

USING BUYER PERSONAS TO MAP CONTENT

Now you have your buyer personas, you can use them to develop a content strategy. Every piece of content should be created with a clear intent: to meet an anticipated or known need of your target audience. Your buyer personas are illustrative of the needs of your target buyers, and the profiles you create for each will be bursting with opportunities for content that will respond to those needs.

Content mapping

Content Mapping is a process that ensures your content meets the needs of your buyer personas at each stage of the buyer's journey. It allows you to create multiple pieces of content that work effectively together in sequence.

It is important that you create a content map for each of your personas. Remember, they are distinct, with different needs, and their needs will vary depending on which life cycle stage they are at.

Mapping content at each stage of the Buyer's Journey

By combining buyer personas with each specific stage of the buyer's journey, you can really tailor your content to resonate with your audience.

The buyer's journey can be split into three stages: Awareness, Consideration, and Decision. At each stage, consider what questions your buyer will have at each stage – every piece of content you create or map needs to answer at least one of these questions.





Awareness Stage

Identify a symptom affecting your persona and create content that will help them get to the root of their pain. At this point your buyer is looking for high level, educational content to help them identify and understand their problem. Your buyer persona profiles will tell you your buyer's pain points, and you should be creating content that will help them to understand their pain.

Consideration Stage

Create content that helps your persona define what is important to them in managing the symptom identified in the Awareness stage, and educate them on solutions. Here your buyer knows they have a problem that needs solving, and they are seeking out solutions. Think about your buyer persona's Success Factors, and create compelling content that guides them through their problem and towards viable solutions.

Decision Stage

Create content that helps your persona make the most educated buying decision possible and that supports your product or company as the best possible solution.

Your buyer is now ready to make a purchase decision. They may just need a final nudge that yours is the best solution for them. You will know what factors are most critical to their decision criteria, so you can create content that demonstrates how your solution is the best option. And ensure you bear in mind who helps them make the final decision. If the purchase has to be signed off by the C-suite, they may find a blog titled 'How to convince your C-suite to invest in x' useful.

Distributing and optimising your content

A content map is not just about creating the content, it's also about ensuring your audience find your content.

Your buyer persona profile should guide how you distribute your content. For example, if you know your persona regularly uses and trusts LinkedIn then this is an ideal platform on which to promote your content.

And your buyer personas have told you how they look for information and what resources they use. With this insight, you can ensure your content is optimised for them to find. Knowing their behaviours, experiences and preferences will help you decide how to formulate a title, what calls to action to use, and generate ideas for keywords.

You may have developed well-considered and thorough buyer personas, but to see results, you need to create an effective content strategy based on the insights you have gathered.

CONCLUSION

You now have a framework for developing buyer personas for your business.

Buyer personas are useful for creating a common language between your sales and marketing teams, and for helping you to deliver products and services that meet the needs of customers. But in the main, this eBook has focused on the value of buyer personas in understanding what content you need to create, and how to map it across the buyer's journey, so that you can provide value, build trust, and create a relationship with prospects.

It all starts with your personas and your content will reflect what's important to them. So now you need to think about how you are going to promote it. CTA's in your blog, your social media channels, influencer outreach, and even PPC; so it gets found by people searching for it, when the time is right for them, and on their terms.

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