

Module: User Personas



Key concepts and terms

User: In human-centered design terms, the person you are trying to reach is usually referred to as the “user” - as in the person using the website, accessing the service, or interacting with the product. But in activism your user might also be a person who is engaging with your organization, accessing your information or message, or participating in an event. When you see “user,” just think “individual we are connecting with.”

User persona: A user persona is a fictional representation of an individual that incorporates the needs, goals, and observed behavior patterns of your target audience.

User flow: The user flow takes the user persona and puts it in an everyday situation or scenario in engaging with a campaign or using a product or service. For example, a user flow could read “Maria, a forty year old mother and teacher, uses X when she does Y and Z.” It helps situate and create real cases to help iron out details on building, iterating and creating user engagement.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is an analytical framework for understanding how aspects of a person’s social and political identities combine and interact to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. While members of marginalized groups share common barriers, exclusion is rarely the result of any single identity factor. There are important variations in age, socio-economic status, gender, geography and other factors that impact individuals’ experiences. At the same time, individuals exist within a context of interconnected power structures - such as laws, religious institutions, social norms - that shape to what degree their identities exclude them.

When to use this module

This module should be used to develop a richer picture of your target audience. This module is best used once you have identified your target audience and before coming up with product, service, or campaign ideas. If you would like to do user research before developing your persona, proceed to the “non-directive interviewing” section of the “user research & assumption testing” module and then come back to this activity.

A user persona is like a description a novelist would create of a character before writing them into the story. You create a persona that resembles someone you are actually trying to reach in order to help you understand how your product, service, or campaign would fit into their day-to-day life. Basically, a persona is a tool to help you build empathy with your audience. The persona should include things like age, vocation (or lack of one), sexual orientation and gender identity, race, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion, geographic location, education level, and interests. These kinds of demographic information is helpful in creating a fuller picture of the user and to better understand their needs. It’s also helpful for you in seeing how different kinds of groups can engage with your product, campaign or service. Once you have made a persona, it can be a useful tool for you throughout the design process. You can refer back to it and say “what would this persona think of this?” Sometimes that simple check and result in insights that change your thinking about your approach or the words or aesthetics you choose.

How to use it

For this module, you will be creating personas. [Each worksheet](#) will represent a single persona. You can create as many as you like and then pick the ones that seem most important to use as you go forward.

Exercise: creating draft personas

Time required: 30 minutes

Supplies: two or more copies of the [persona canvas](#) per participant, sharpies.

Facilitator: Not required.

This exercise assumes that you have at least two people participating, but you can also generate personas on your own.

1. Within your team, pair up. Each pair will create two personas based on the target group or groups that you are trying to reach. These two personas must reflect three or four differing identities (i.e. different sexual orientations and gender identities, races, age, disabilities, and ethnicities). Think about how these identities affect their power and privilege.
2. As you work with your partner on your personas, ask at each step, “how can we make this person more real? What other details can we include about their life and experiences? What are their wants and needs? What are their goals? What barriers do they face? What is their level of access to decision-making authorities? What is their level of access to information?” The goal is that by the time you’re done, the persona feels like a real, specific individual, and not just a stereotype or generic example of your target audience.
3. After all pairs have completed their personas, each pair should present their personas to the group and the group is invited to provide feedback, ask questions, and understand who these personas “are” as people. Edits to the personas through this process are okay. The goal here is to be critical and helpful.
 - a. Amplification:
 - i. What assumptions and unknowns do we have in each persona? How would we research them?
 - ii. Are any of these personas groups that we would especially want to target? Are any of them less relevant?
 - iii. Returning to our target audience, are the group or groups we identified still correct? Can we subdivide them, make them more specific?
 - b. Put the personas up on the wall and use them as reference points throughout your design sprint.

I'm stuck...

- Go interact with potential users! Building in opportunities for interacting with potential users before and after building your user personas can help identify assumptions and make the personas more realistic. The next module will walk you through non-directive interviewing, observing, and other techniques to engage with potential users.

Don't forget!

Inclusion Tip: Think back to the intersectionality definition above. If you are trying to change the mind of that MP, who is that MP really? What are the other identities that person holds? How do these identities form this MP's sense of power and how does this direct or indirect influence and privilege impact the way they make decisions or do their job?

User personas can be developed prior to user research in order to help clarify avenues for exploration, or after, in order to memorialize and generalize the findings of the research. In either case, it is important not to simply generate personas based on your group's assumption. Be sure to explicitly note down the assumptions that came up during the user persona exercise. An important part of the persona development process is identifying assumptions and unknowns about our users and disarming stereotypes.

What's next?

If you developed your user personas before doing user research, it's time to move on to the "User Research & Assumption Testing" module to validate and update the user personas. It's important to make sure the personas pull from research, real user wants and needs and not just assumptions.

If you have already done non-directive interviewing prior to this module, go back to the "assumption testing" section of the "user research & assumption testing" module.