

Persona

User-centered design, not surprisingly, involves centering the design around a user. However, it is much easier for us to think about specific people than to think about general user categories. A user profile lists a set of key characteristics that define the target audience; a persona brings those characteristics to life.

Personas are imaginary people who illustrate the characteristics of your target audience. They help designers to envision how people interact in real-world settings. Pruitt and Adlin (2006) have written an entire book about personas, from a business as well as a design perspective. You can create personas that represent typical members of your target audience; you can also create ‘extreme characters’ (Djajadiningrat & Gaver, 2000), who push the limits of the situation. For example, imagine that you are designing a mobile device for helping diabetics keep track of their insulin update. Several normal personas might include a working mother, a teenage boy and a retired truck driver. An extreme character might be a junkie or a paraplegic. The advantage of designing for extreme users is that you add constraints and that often forces you to be more creative. Even if you end up rejecting the situations that involve extreme characters, considering how they behave and what they need may lead to more innovative solutions for the rest of your target audience.

For example, many designers create tools for the kitchen, for ‘normal’ cooks. The Oxo Good Grips brand was designed for elderly people with reduced mobility and weak hands. This constraint led them to design a series of very clever tools and utensils, such as a one-handed salad spinner and a an easy-to-turn pepper grinder, that were so elegant and easy to use that they are now available in exclusive kitchen stores such as Williams Sonoma. Relative to the rest of the industry, they were working with ‘extreme users’; but the limits these users imposed on them forced them to create better designs, which were then appreciated by a much wider audience.

In any case, whether you create a persona or an extreme character, be as specific as possible. Although it is tempting to design a system that “works for everyone”, it is much more difficult. Draw from the specifics of your interviews, observations and other user studies to clearly target your audience. You can always generalize later.

Exercise: Persona

Group: _____

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Create three personas who represent different members of your target audience. Include at least one extreme character. (You will use these personas in your future scenarios, so choose carefully!)

1. Name (persona):

His/Her characteristics:

2. Name (persona):

His/Her characteristics:

3. Name (persona):

His/Her characteristics: