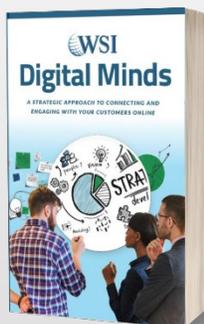




DIGITAL MINDS CHAPTER 2

DEFINING YOUR IDEAL CUSTOMERS

Written by: Cormac Farrelly



The following is a chapter from WSI's 3rd book, *Digital Minds: A Strategic Approach to Connecting and Engaging with Your Customers Online*. If you'd like to reach the book in its entirety you can purchase a copy on Amazon.com here:

<https://bit.ly/wsibook3>

“Our jobs as marketers are to understand how the customer wants to buy and help them do so.”

– Bryan Eisenberg

NY Times Best Selling Author

Defining the perfect target audience or market is a challenge faced by brands in all industries across the world. Assuming you have a great product or service, getting this right usually means success but getting it wrong often leads to failure.

In this chapter, we’ll introduce the concept of buyer personas and how we can use these fictitious representations of your ideal customer to get a clearer picture of your target market.

Let’s set the context with two real-life examples of how this works.

I travel a lot for business. I’m not a huge fan of hotels, so I like to book accommodation with Airbnb whenever it’s possible. I love to experience living in the city I’m visiting, even if it’s just for a couple of days. I like to pop into the local coffee shop in the morning or chat with locals in the neighborhood bar at the end of the day—it’s also excellent value. The clincher for me, though, is having a quiet space where I can set up my temporary office.

Although Airbnb is always my first choice, I do have a few issues.

In some Airbnbs, I struggle to find a good setup for my temporary office—sometimes I find a nice big desk and other times I have to huddle around a small coffee table.

The other issue is that I often have to wait around until 3 pm to check-in.

Imagine my reaction when I received an email from Airbnb announcing “new changes to improve my experience.”

The first was a new filter enabling me to shortlist units that had a “laptop-friendly workspace,” while the second was a “check-in early” feature.

However, it was not the new features alone that won me over—it was how Airbnb demonstrated that they understood what I wanted. The email referenced the fact that I was based in Ireland and traveled to other countries on business. They understood the stress and fatigue I regularly experience when I arrive after a long flight.

In other words, they made an emotional connection with me. It felt like they had introduced these new features just for me!

This is an example of great marketing—Airbnb had done their homework, and this email most likely went out to thousands of Airbnb customers who, as a result, felt special.

Here's the second example. My kids are sports enthusiasts, and we seem to be in our local store every other weekend picking up gum shields (mouth guards). Somehow they keep vanishing after their last training session! During the store visit, we often end up buying other sports accessories.

I received an email from this local sports shop that stood out and got my attention. The subject line stated: "How is it that your kid's gum shields disappear at the worst possible moment..." I was immediately intrigued and clicked to open. The email was witty and empathized with parents who often dashed to the sports shop for emergency supplies right before the game. They also offered a 10% discount on any future purchase over a certain value.

In both of these examples, the seller demonstrated that they understood my pain points as the buyer. So how do you take this type of information about your customer and translate it into defining a target market that scales?

The answer is to define and develop buyer personas.

What is a Buyer Persona?

A buyer persona is a semi-fictional representation of your ideal customer based on a combination of market research, customer demographics and behavior, real data about your existing customers, and your understanding of their motivations and challenges.

The concept was developed by Alan Cooper, a pioneer software developer in the early eighties. Cooper, widely recognized as the father of the visual basic programming language, published his findings in a book titled *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum* in 1999. His personas were actually user personas—fictional characters created to represent a user type that might use a website, a software package, or a product in a similar way. This methodology was the precursor for today's UX (user experience) design.

The marketing profession has since widely adopted this concept of buyer personas. Through the process of probing your customer's buying decisions, personas help businesses and marketers gain insights about how, when, and why a buyer decides to purchase.

The word "buyer" in "buyer personas" is not accidental. The focus is on prospects that are likely to buy. We're not trying to identify an audience of "tire kickers" that might be interested in your content but have no intention of making a purchase!

When developing buyer personas, it's often tempting to map out all sorts of demographic details for your ideal customer. There is no problem in doing this if it helps your company become more familiar with the persona and identify with them better. However, ask yourself if the data you are collecting is useful to your marketing campaigns.

In the first example about Airbnb, the fact that I'm married with kids, aged 45–54 and had a degree in economics wasn't relevant.

However, in the second example, the fact that I had kids *was* relevant, as it helped the seller demonstrate empathy with my situation.

It is interesting to note that the seller made an emotional connection with me in both examples.

Why Do We Need Buyer Personas?

“A major virtue of personas is the establishment of empathy and understanding the individual who uses the product.”

– Donald A. Norman

Co-founder of Nielsen Norman Group

It's impossible to put a successful marketing campaign together if you don't know who you're marketing to!

If you try to communicate with everyone, no one hears your message. You need to understand the specific buyers you are trying to reach—what keeps them awake at night, what they're interested in, what disinterests them. This information, along with your company's differentiators, are selling points you want to include in your marketing messages.

Here are the top five reasons why your organization needs to embrace buyer personas.

1. Win More Business and Increase Your Revenue

Buyer personas, if developed correctly, represent the type of customer that gives you the most revenue, with the least objections, over the longest timeframe. Your goal is to target this “right” person with the right message at the right time. Combine this with measuring results the right way, and you'll unlock significant growth for your business.

2. Understand Your Unique Selling Points

Part of the process of creating strong buyer personas is understanding your unique selling points. Ask yourself:

- How does your ideal customer engage in your sales process?
- What problems do your customers or clients need to solve, and how does your business help them?
- What type of content will most likely persuade your customer to take action?

3. Avoid Boilerplate Marketing

You need buyer insights to create effective messaging in your marketing. Otherwise, there's a risk that you will over-generalize in your marketing copy and not speak to your audience's real interests.

It can be challenging to develop succinct marketing messages that get the point across. Especially when dealing with "high-consideration" products or services where the sale is complex and executed over a longer timeframe. If you don't take the time to understand your customer's pain points and objections, it is easy to fall into lazy jargon-laden marketing messages like "industry-leading," "paradigm shifts," and "scalable solutions." Nobody likes this jargon, and this sort of boilerplate messaging isn't likely to woo your prospect.

4. Crafting the Perfect Message to Woo Your Prospect

Buyer personas allow you to discover the gaps in your marketing messages. It provides you the opportunity to see the difference between what your company thought it needed to say and what your buyers want to hear. Using the information you know about your personas does two things:

- It highlights benefits your customers are interested in—those that your product or service already offers but you didn't realize were worth mentioning. We've often heard reactions like "wow, they think that feature is important—we've been doing that for ten years!"
- Buyer personas help your company prioritize the new features or service elements that you should be focusing on in the first place.

Let's say you are a software company and your development team is planning a new release. There is a laundry list of features that the developers think should be included in the marketing message.

After many sleepless nights, lots of coffee and cold pizza, the Head of Development calls a meeting with the Support and Marketing Departments. They excitedly walk through all of the features included in the new release. They want Support to get a message out to the customer base as soon as possible, communicating these significant changes—and they want Marketing to advertise these new features to prospects.

But wait! No one has asked the customer if these features will actually help them achieve their goals. Even though these features are new and often very intelligent, they may not be as attractive to the person who will be buying and using the product.

Leveraging the buyer personas, Marketing can quickly identify this misalignment and push back on development priority. They can also ensure all marketing collateral is written to highlight key customer benefits—not the interests of the brand or business.

The intersection (illustrated in Figure 2) between what we think we want to say to the buyer and what the buyer wants to hear is what we call our optimum marketing message. Buyer personas help you understand this intersection better, allowing you to compose much more persuasive sales copy.

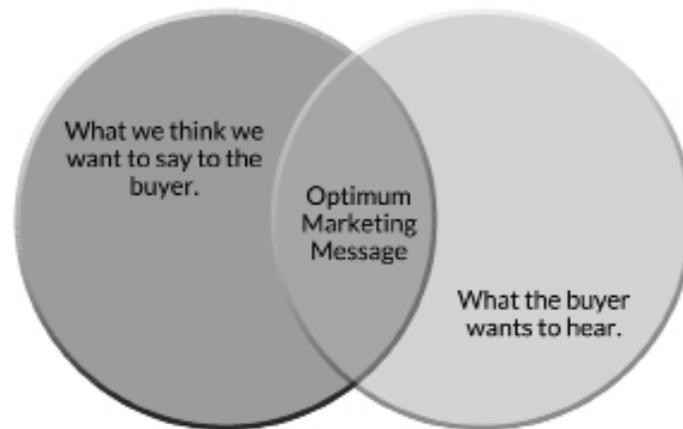


Figure 2: Persuasive Intersection

5. The Missing Link in Your Content Strategy

“Content marketing is more than a buzzword. It is the hottest trend in marketing because it is the biggest gap between what buyers want and brands produce.”

– Michael Brenner

CEO, Author and Keynote Speaker

Buyer personas are the missing link when it comes to getting results from your content efforts. We often hear clients say, “content marketing doesn’t work.” They spend lots and lots of energy in developing content—blogs, whitepapers, Facebook posts, etc.—but this does not translate into leads! If this is your experience, then this chapter is written for you. Chances are, you have not built out (and used) effective buyer personas.

Personas set the tone, style, and delivery strategy for your content.

Once we shed light on the top concerns faced by your buyer persona and understand how they make decisions, we can start making realistic assumptions about the type of content that will engage them at the different stages of their journey.

Buyer personas help us make informed decisions about our overall content and messaging strategy. They also help us see how this messaging aligns with our demand generation activities so we can be confident in the effectiveness of our customer communications.

In the Airbnb and sports shop examples at the beginning of the chapter, the Marketing Team clearly understood my pain points, so writing content that would resonate with me was easy to do, scalable and very effective.

What Sized Companies Need Buyer Personas?

Are buyer personas only for large companies with big budgets?

Size doesn't matter. What does matter is this: if your company can't afford to be wrong in your marketing, then you need buyer personas!

For example, let's say you are planning to redevelop your website and commission lots of content to be written or are planning to launch an advertising campaign. If you haven't considered your buyer personas during this process, then you are at risk of developing messaging that won't resonate with your audience. And ultimately, your campaign will fail, and your new website will produce poor results.

This concept is also true for product development. Very often, companies start developing a product or service and then try to figure out who might buy it. Doesn't it make more sense to start with the buyer personas? This way, you can use their insights to inform new product features or the critical aspects that you should include in your service?

Can Buyer Personas Be Used for B2B and B2C Audiences?

Absolutely. Rather than thinking B2B or B2C, it is more about the amount of consideration that goes into the purchase.

The more time your buyer invests in the buying decision, the more insight you will get out of the evaluation. According to Adele Revella (2015, p.14), author of *Buyer Personas: How to Gain Insight into your Customer's Expectations, Align Your Marketing Strategies, and Win More Business*:

"A person's thoughts about an impulsive or low-consideration buying decision usually reside in the realm of the unconscious. Conversely, high-consideration buying decisions involve, by definition, considerable conscious thought that can be expressed, evaluated, and analyzed"

One scenario might be a B2B company executive who is planning to invest in new plant machinery for their plant hire business. Let's call him Rick. This financial investment is significant, and as CEO, Rick will likely dedicate a lot of time and energy to ensure he makes the right decision.

A second scenario might be where Rick is planning to renovate his home (B2C). This transaction may cost a lot less than the plant machinery, but the project is just as important to him. It may be even more critical as it impacts him personally—and he will devote a lot of time and energy to getting this right.

In both cases, Rick will evaluate his options thoroughly before making his final decision. These two scenarios are examples of "high-consideration" buying decisions.

If you interviewed Rick on the completion of either of these projects, he would have so much information to share, including:



- How the project came about in the first place
- What factors influenced his decision
- What research he conducted
- The impact of the different sales and marketing tactics from competitors
- Why he chose your solution over others

However, let's say that Rick—that same busy executive, drops into the grocery store on the way home from work to pick up something for dinner. This scenario is another example of a B2C buyer persona—but this time, the decision is a low-consideration decision. The impact of Rick making the wrong dinner choice is relatively low. So it is unlikely that he will have as much insight to share if you were to conduct a similar interview.

That said, we've worked with several FMCG (Fast-Moving Consumer Goods) companies that sell low-consideration products on the supermarket shelf. Understanding their target market is just as important as the higher consideration purchase—but the buyer persona process is a little different. The key here is to understand what it is about your product that makes it worth a "higher-consideration" by the consumer.

For example, a food company that sells a gluten-free product needs to link the benefit back to an issue experienced by its top customers that is hugely important to them. The food company needs to identify with the questionable food choices that a gluten-intolerant consumer faces every day. Then, they need to display genuine empathy to create a bond with the consumer that ensures the brand is top of mind next time that consumer visits the supermarket.

"It's hard to target a message to a generic 35-year-old middle-class working mother of two. It's much easier to target a message to Jennifer, who has two children under four, works as a paralegal, and is always looking for quick but healthy dinners and ways to spend more time with her kids and less time on housework."

– Elizabeth Gardner
Founder of Garnish Media

How to Create Buyer Personas

Hopefully, at this point, you can see the value in creating buyer personas. Let's shift gears now and talk about creating them.

Sometimes the first step is the hardest—how do you identify the buyer personas that you want to build out?

For most companies, this is pretty straightforward, especially if your product or service has been around a while. A perfect way to start is to review your existing customer base. Then identify contacts within the customer organization that influenced the initial decision to do business with you.

If you are selling a low-consideration product, it isn't as easy to identify specific customers who have made a purchase. However, it is possible to use your existing marketing data to establish a solid persona profile that matches the specific demographic and behavioral characteristics of your customers.

Google Analytics is a great place to start. You can gain some great insights into your website visitors—demographics like gender and age, visitor location, and their interests. Another great place to look is Facebook's Audience Insights tool. Similar to Google, you can analyze people connected to your company's Facebook Page and establish characteristics like demographic make-up and interests.

Introducing the “Empathy Map”

Initially developed by David Grey, an empathy map is a visual tool that helps teams develop deep, shared understanding and empathy for other people. People use it to help them improve customer experience, to design better work environments, and a host of other things.



Figure 3: Buyer Persona Empathy Map

Using the above example of an empathy map we created at WSI, let's discuss the process of creating a map like this.

Creating the Empathy Map

Once a shortlist of potential buyer personas has been drawn up, the next step is to pull together an internal team, ideally with representatives from Sales, Customer Service, and Marketing. Get the team together in a workshop setting and nominate a suitable candidate to chair the session. This workshop is often best facilitated by an external consultant.

Make it clear to the internal team that the goal of the workshop is to complete a buyer persona profile for each of your top customer types. This way, you can develop a solid marketing strategy for reaching and communicating with similar prospect profiles.

Some of the customer-related questions that we include and need answers to are:

- What do we need to know about them?
- Who are they? What are their demographic characteristics?
- What are their problems and challenges?
- What is important to them?
- What influences their decision to buy or take action?
- What sorts of content & information appeal to them? What doesn't?
- How do we communicate with them in terms of language, tone, and emotion?
- Why do they choose us?
- How do we find them, and how do they find us?

Now it's time to introduce the empathy map. If you are conducting the meeting in a face-to-face setting, we recommend printing a large scale version of the persona and hang it on the wall of the meeting room. The facilitator will introduce each of the sections on the empathy map, so everyone is clear on the type of information we want to capture in each section.

This empathy map workshop is essentially a brainstorming session, and it's an excellent opportunity to capture everyone's input. The facilitator can use sticky notes to record the team's feedback—each color represents a different section on the empathy map.

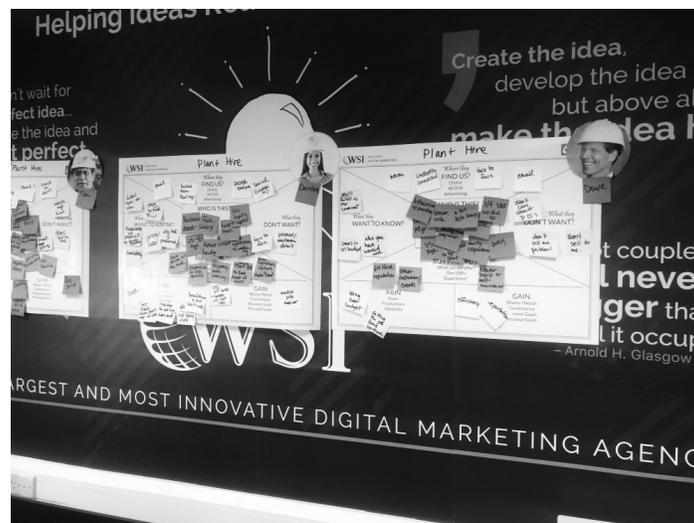


Figure 4: Empathy Map Workshop

Here's a walkthrough of the seven sections that we recommend including on the empathy map:

1. Who Is This?

Start by giving the buyer persona a name and selecting a photo that helps the team get a good visual representation of the persona. Next, add some demographic details, including gender, age, geographical location, and information relating to the role he/she performs at his/her company. If the information is forthcoming, continue, and record other personal information about the persona—kids, hobbies, etc. Depending on the particular buyer persona, some of this information may not be relevant. However, the value of collecting this information is that it helps your team “get into the persona character.”

2. Pain Points

Now we record the pain points relating to our buyer persona. It's important to consider pain points in the context of the buying journey for your product or service. We want to understand what keeps your customers awake at night—what are their fears, frustrations, and obstacles to overcome?

3. Gain Points

What is it that helps this persona meet or exceed their business or personal goals? What are their wants or needs? What makes their lives easier? For example, a potential gain in a B2B context could be to make the persona look good in front of their boss.

4. What Do They Want to Know?

The purpose of this question is to guide the company's content strategy. We often find that the information they want to know changes as they move along the buying journey. For example, they may initially be looking for validation to a problem that needs solving. Their search then progresses to understanding what solutions are available and ultimately why they should pick you (e.g., case studies, testimonials, etc.)

5. What Do They Not Want to Know?

It's also essential to record the type of information that the persona has no interest in knowing. Just like the previous section, this helps inform your content marketing strategy.

6. Why Do They Buy from Us?

Use this section to understand the unique selling points that are relevant to this particular buyer persona. What has been their experience of the buying process, and what is it that you can offer to improve the experience?

7. Where Do They Find Us?

The purpose of this section is to help with demand generation. For example, is the prospect likely to search for your company on Google, will they connect with you on LinkedIn? Does this buyer persona tend to hang out on

forums, or consume traditional media like books and television? (More info on how you create a demand for your product or services in Chapter 4).

Completing the Buyer Persona

“Amazing things will happen when you listen to the consumer.”

– Jonathan Mildenhall
Former CMO of Airbnb

The empathy map is a great way to get a good handle on your buyer personas. However, there is no substitute for speaking with a real customer or prospect to understand their buying journey.

Don't be afraid to include prospects who have decided not to do business with you. This feeling of apprehension is often a little like a relationship that has ended badly. There's a good chance they spent a lot of time with you and your team during the sales cycle, and they got to know you quite well. Although it may feel awkward, these prospects often have valuable information to share.

It is crucial to keep the interviews open-ended so that the interviewee opens up about their experience. Ask the person to think about when they first started looking for your product or service, and then listen to the buyer's story. With this unstructured approach, it is imperative to record the interview. The overall goal is to mine the unstructured data that comes from the conversation and use this to extract clear insights that you can apply to the buyer persona's profile.



Figure 5: Sample Buyer Persona Profile

Once you have answers to your questions, convert the data into a story similar to the profile outlined in Figure 5. Your persona's story should be more about making an emotional connection with the buyer rather than listing benefits and features.

Pitfalls to Watch Out for When Creating Buyer Personas

The first pitfall to avoid is including too many different personas. Let's say you operate in three different vertical markets, and the decision-maker is usually the Chief Operations Officer (COO). If the decision-making process is very similar from vertical to vertical, then you only need to create a *single profile* for this persona.

Ultimately, the goal of this exercise is to uncover the way your customers behave when they're making a decision.

Your buyer persona should always be based on facts. A buyer persona is only ever as good as the data behind it. Make sure yours aren't based on guesswork or assumptions.

Finally, avoid what we call "Elastic Emma." This is when you try and "bend" the persona to justify your current marketing and sales strategy.

Now We Have Developed a Persona—What's Next?

Now that you've put significant effort into building buyer personas don't just leave them to gather dust on a digital shelf!

According to the Buyer Persona Institute (2017), only 10-17% of marketers are using their business personas effectively.

We said earlier that if you try to communicate with everyone, no one hears your message. We promised that buyer personas would solve this problem and enable you to create compelling and persuasive marketing messages that would woo your ideal customer.

Now it's time to deliver on that promise.

Now that you know who you are targeting, there is no excuse for boilerplate content. Just like Airbnb did in the example at the start of this chapter, you can create great content that resonates with your audience. Every piece of content you develop and publish should be designed to meet a need experienced by this person.

Using Segmentation

The secret to using your personas well is by implementing segmentation. If you have an email list, there is still some work to do—you need to assign a buyer persona tag to each of your email records.

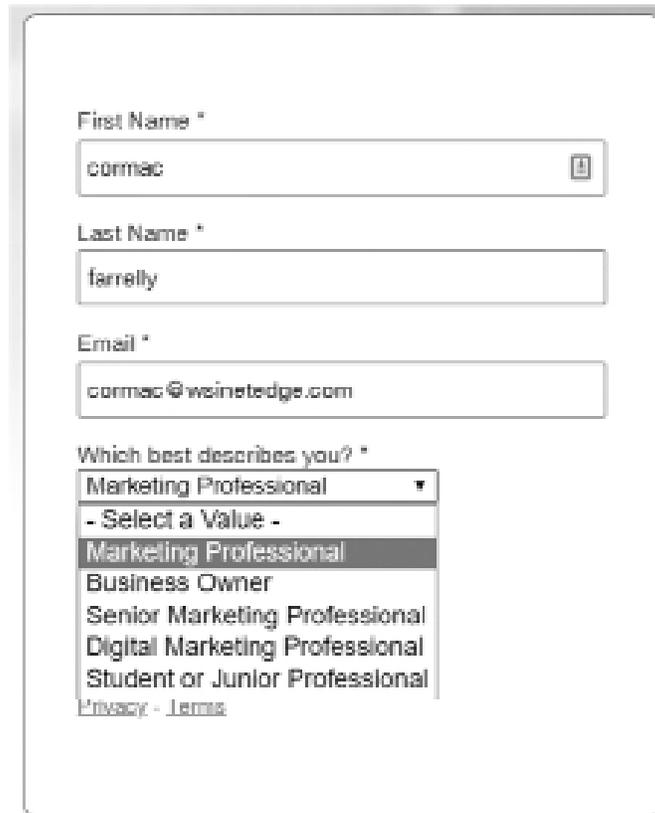
Is it possible to automate this laborious activity? Yes! Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, which are databases dedicated to holding customer data, have become smarter and smarter in recent years. Most of

them include marketing automation features that do a lot of the heavy lifting around segmentation. These systems help to ensure the right message is delivered to the right customer at the right time (we'll cover this in much more detail in Chapter 10).

Ask Your Customers to Self-Identify the Persona

So now that you know who you want to market to, how do you classify website visitors, so you know which buyer persona they fall into?

The easiest way is to ask them!



The image shows a lead capture form with the following fields:

- First Name ***: Text input containing "cornac".
- Last Name ***: Text input containing "farnelly".
- Email ***: Text input containing "cornac@wsinetedge.com".
- Which best describes you? ***: A dropdown menu with the following options:
 - Marketing Professional (selected)
 - Select a Value -
 - Marketing Professional
 - Business Owner
 - Senior Marketing Professional
 - Digital Marketing Professional
 - Student or Junior Professional

At the bottom of the dropdown menu, there are links for [Privacy](#) and [Terms](#).

Figure 6: Identify Personas on Lead Capture Forms

A common strategy is to produce really good content, like an ebook or a whitepaper, that tackles one or several of the pain points identified by the buyer persona. As long as the potential buyer sees value in this content, they are happy to trade their email address to get their hands on the ebook. As they are sharing their emails, this is the perfect time to qualify them a little by including a simple question on your lead capture form, like, “which best describes you?” Then present a list of your personas in the dropdown for the user to select from.

Digital marketers refer to this as a lead magnet, and Chuck covers best practices on this topic in Chapter 6.

Here's where progressive profiling comes in handy. It enables you to queue up a series of questions to ask the website visitor. As they return to your site to download more content, you can ask different questions until you build up an excellent profile of the contact.

An added benefit of having your visitors self-identify their persona type on your forms is you now know how many contacts in your CRM fit a particular buyer persona. Using that information, you can then measure the progress of each of your buyer personas as they move through the buyer's journey. This enables you to measure how successful you are in reaching this persona with your marketing campaigns.

Using Personas to Personalize Content

Now that you know the buyer persona identity for your contacts, how do you serve them up personalized content?

First, try personalizing your landing pages, so they speak specifically to your buyer persona. Many landing page editing programs have dynamic content capabilities that enable you to connect your landing page content directly to your CRM. As illustrated in Figure 7, you can customize the landing page copy dynamically, so it displays different content depending on the persona.

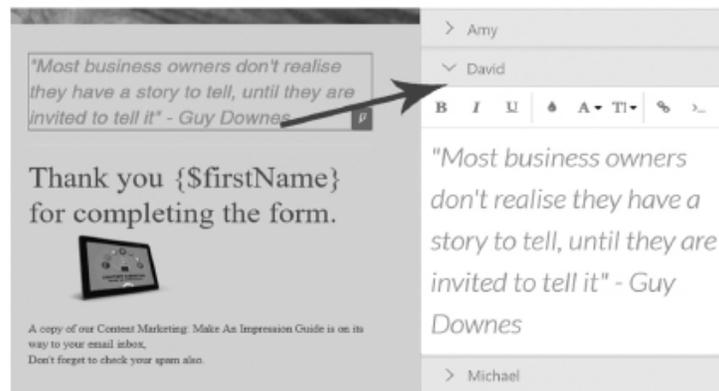


Figure 7: Personalizing Landing Page Content for Personas

Additionally, try customizing your email copy by persona, as illustrated in Figure 8. Typically, all you need is some small tweaks to personalize your message. It's not a case of entirely rewriting your copy for each persona. It may just be the opening sentence that needs changing or perhaps the email subject line.

In the *State of the Connected Customer* survey from Salesforce (2019), close to 50% of respondents said: "I generally ignore communications from companies unless they're personalized for me."

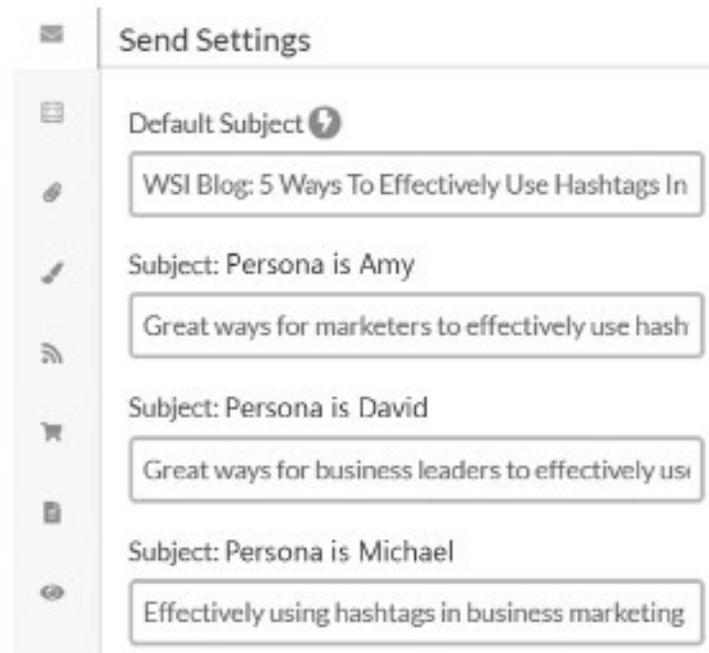


Figure 8: Customized Email Copy by Persona

As much as we'd love all new prospects to self-identify by filling out forms on your website, it doesn't happen as often as we'd like! So what happens if the lead comes to you by phone? The trick is to have a solid sales process to fill in any gaps in the data. For example, if someone phones our agency to ask about our services, we immediately send them a follow-up email with a brief qualifying survey to see which persona they fit. This helps us keep our CRM updated and have the option of offering personalized content when we communicate with this prospect at a later time.

Closing Thoughts

At the start of the book, we talked about the customer being front and center of every successful digital marketing strategy. In this consumer-driven world there is a higher demand for personalization—more and more, customers are choosing to engage with brands that are relevant, helpful, and personal. As inboxes get more and more cluttered, and potential customers are bombarded daily with more content than they could ever hope to read in a lifetime, it's more important than ever to stand out.

Defining your buyer personas will help you build an in-depth understanding of your target market, have a significant impact on your bottom line, and is an important precursor to defining your digital marketing strategy.

TIP: If you are looking to get a jump start on creating (or updating) your buyer personas, visit www.wsiworld.com/book-resources.

About the Author

Cormac Farrelly



Cormac is a Digital Marketing Strategist. He enjoys helping executives and management teams understand how to take advantage of digital technologies to grow their brands online. He runs a WSI digital marketing agency based in Dublin Ireland and directs a team of creative, analytical, and technical marketing professionals to develop strategically relevant digital campaigns for his clients. Before joining WSI in 2007, Cormac spent 15 years running large scale consulting projects for professional service companies like KPMG and BearingPoint. He also managed Oracle's consulting practice in Ireland through a period of significant growth where delivery capability doubled to meet and drive aggressive revenue projections. Cormac is a regular speaker on Digital Marketing topics at International conferences.

About WSI

For 25 years, WSI has been providing digital marketing services and comprehensive marketing strategies to businesses of all sizes and across various industries. We are the largest network of digital marketing agencies around the world.

We are a full-service digital marketing agency that helps elevate your online brand, generate more leads and sales, and improve your overall marketing ROI. Our Digital Marketing Consultants use their knowledge and expertise to make a difference for businesses all around the world.

We don't believe in the "one-size-fits-all" approach to digital marketing. Instead, we take the time to understand your organization and customers so we can recommend a strategy based on your individual business needs. When you invest in any of WSI's digital marketing solutions, you'll have some of the top minds in the industry, contributing to your goals and vision.

You have a vision for your business. We can help make it happen. Reach out; we're happy to help.

