

AXONN

# 4 SIMPLE STEPS: CREATING YOUR DIGITAL PERSONAS





So while marketers have always considered who they are advertising to, we now have access to a more concrete, intricate picture. Once upon a time we might only have known that we needed to target stay-at-home mothers living in London, but now we can find out so much more - from where a certain demographic shops online and what will make them click on that 'purchase' button to their favourite newspapers and celebrities. When it comes to creating needs-based personas, we don't always need to go into such detail - but when it's relevant, we have the tools and knowledge to do so.

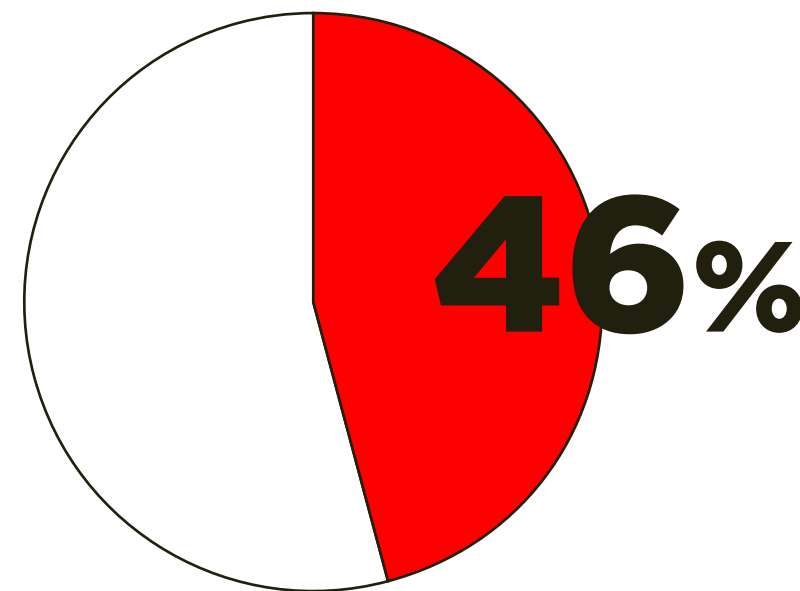
You've created your content, you've published it online, and yet you're not seeing the results you hoped for? Why?

Without a strong and well-planned strategy behind your digital marketing efforts, they're unlikely to go far. At the heart of this is persona profiling. How can you effectively communicate with potential customers online if you don't know who they are, where to find them or what makes them tick?

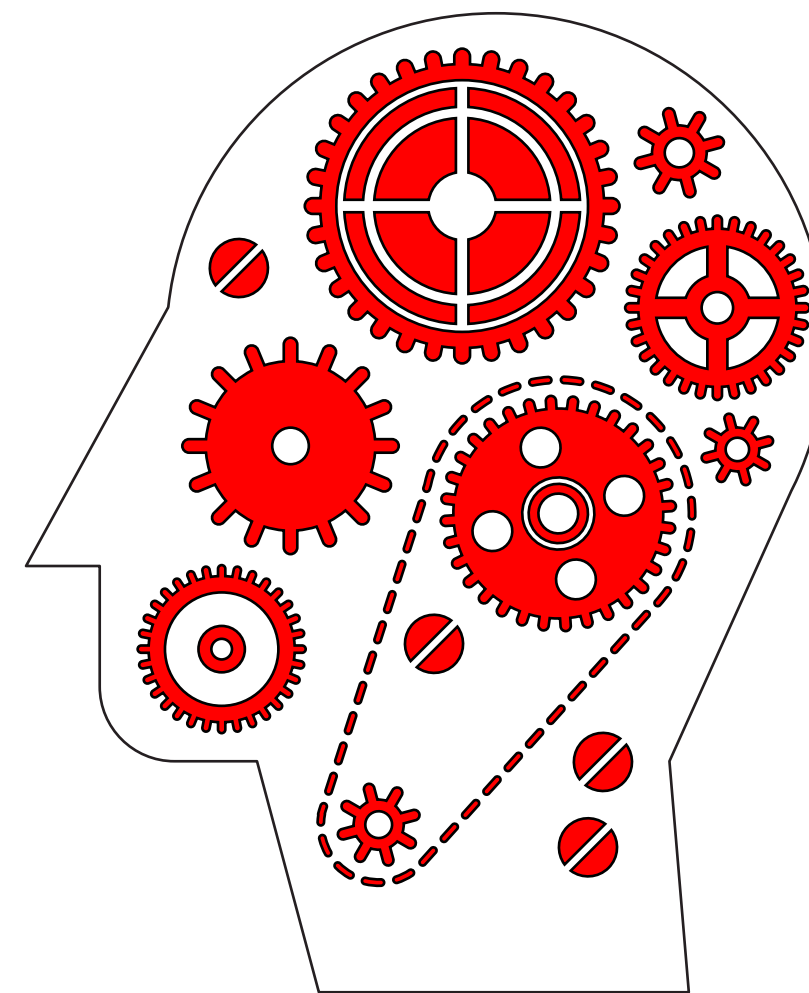
As long as marketers have walked the earth, persona profiling has existed in one form or another. Whether referring to it as 'trend analysis', 'customer segmenting' or 'focus groups', marketers have always understood that getting under the skin of their audience is vital when it comes to hitting their goals.

Over the past few years, the general concept of getting to know your audience has evolved into its most sophisticated form yet: persona profiling. This is due in part to the development of tools and technology that make marketers privy to more audience information than ever before and allow us to track performance, as well as the increasingly competitive nature of online marketing.

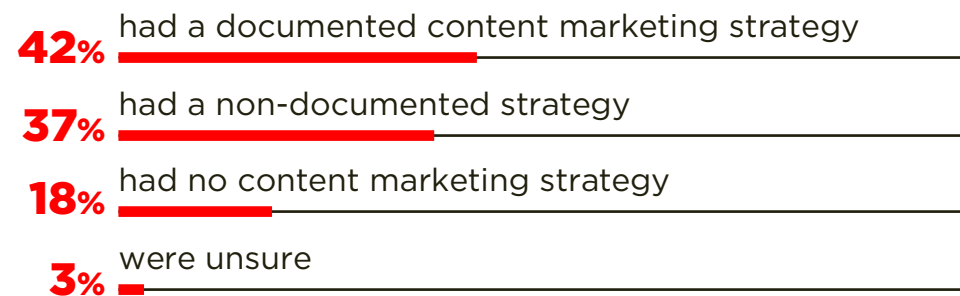
Indeed, **the Content Marketing Institute's (CMI) UK 2016 'Benchmarks, budgets and trends' report** revealed that 46 per cent of content creators said gaining a better understanding of their audience was a top priority for 2016.



**OF CONTENT CREATORS SAID GAINING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR AUDIENCE WAS A PRIORITY FOR 2016**



Of course, persona profiling is just one element of a wider content strategy, and having one of these is instrumental when it comes to marketing success. Despite this, only 42 per cent of UK marketers who responded to the CMI survey said they had a documented content marketing strategy. Thirty-seven per cent said that while they did have a strategy, it was not documented, indicating that these strategies are far from well-planned or effective. Another 18 per cent said they had no content marketing strategy whatsoever, and three per cent labelled themselves 'unsure'.



This suggests that while marketers know they need to get better at understanding their audience - and that the tools are out there for them to do so - they're not sure how to go about it. And what's more, they don't realise that effective persona profiling means using the finished personas as part of a wider strategy.

So what should marketers be doing when it comes to persona profiling? And what have we been doing wrong so far? We sat down with some members of our strategy team at Axonn Media to gain insight into the big questions surrounding persona profiling - and to learn how they go about creating a persona.

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# WHAT IS A PERSONA

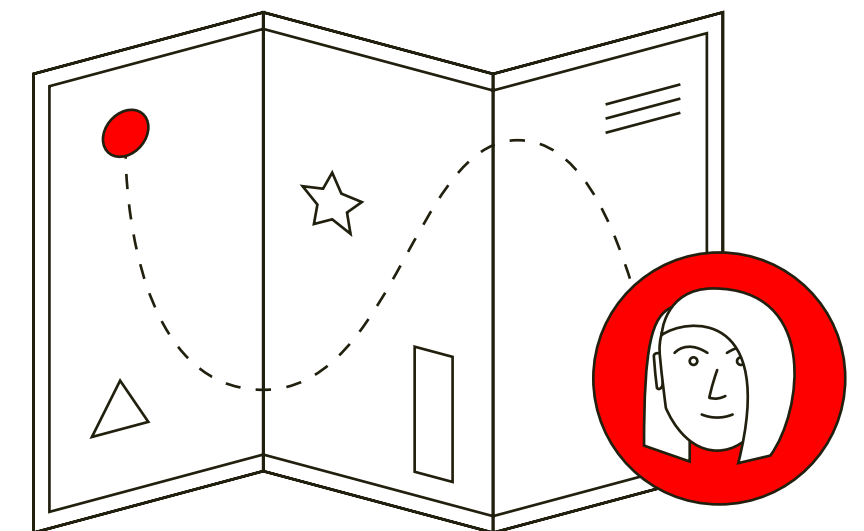


The term 'persona' has established itself as something of a buzzword in the marketing industry over the past three years or so, and different people interpret the concept in slightly different ways.

However, at a very basic level we can describe a persona as a particular segment or grouping of your ideal audience. Broadly, it should comprise an archetype of the key behaviours, motivations and needs that define this audience segment, and - vitally - must be data-driven, with all the information it contains based on data analysis. Thanks to the development of relevant technologies, personas can now be extremely detailed and specific.

Persona profiling, meanwhile, is the process by which you create a persona. Put simply, it is a way to provide a snapshot or overview by synthesising information gleaned from multiple research techniques.

Once personas are developed, you can travel through the user journey with them - considering what your persona is thinking, feeling and doing throughout their relationship with you. The profiles should help you to make decisions about what to stop doing, what to start doing, and what you should continue to do.





# 1ST STEP

*The trigger for providing audience insights of any kind is identifying something a brand is trying to do better as a business or marketing team, and agreeing that understanding their audience better is something they need to achieve whatever that is.*

JOE LIVINGSTONE, director of **strategy services** at Axonn

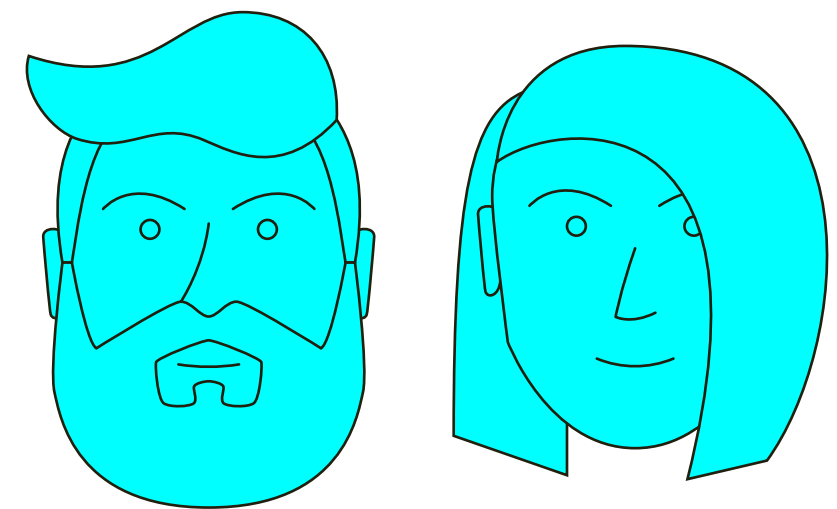
# WHAT DO YOU WANT TO USE YOUR PERSONAS FOR?

It's vital that the persona profiling process is not started before the reason for carrying it out has been established, and it is clear how having personas will improve a brand's marketing efforts.

Personas must always be actionable, and they have multiple potential uses which must be identified before the persona-building process begins. Knowing what you want to do with the persona will dictate the type of data you look to collect and how you distill and combine findings from the research. This then structures how you shape the persona itself.



This is an important distinction because at Axonn we do not view personas as a white-label product that consistently delivers the same outcome regardless of circumstances. As they are tailored to perform different functions for different brands, by their very design, needs-based personas will look very different from one another.



A group of young people at a festival at night, smiling and looking up. The background is filled with warm, bokeh lights, suggesting a lively outdoor event. The people are dressed in casual, summer-appropriate clothing. A man in the foreground has a tattoo on his chest that says "Hello".

# 2ND STEP

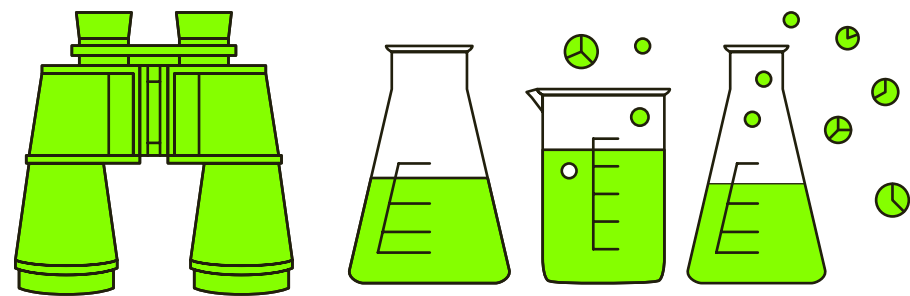
*Data is only a representative of human behaviour so it always needs context and real world emotion on it. But then data allows us to understand trends on a bigger and more influential scale.*

BETH KELLEHER, [data insights](#) lead at Axonn

# RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The collection, collation and interpretation of data when it comes to persona profiling is both a quantitative and qualitative process; one type of analysis will not work without the other.

It is also important to note that as personas are tailored to the needs of the brand in question, the data gathering process will vary.



The research and analysis section of the process kicks off with interviews with the stakeholder at the brand in question. This gives us an insight into business priorities and what the company's marketing goals are - incredibly important information when creating personas.

The brands we work with usually have an idea of what their personas are. This is a good place to start - and informative - but cannot be taken at face value. Sometimes our research will confirm the brand generally has the right idea about its personas, while on other occasions it will take us in a completely different direction.

We'll also use internal sales team questionnaires to validate these details and add some depth to them. Through this exercise we also want to gain an understanding of employees' engagement with their products, as well as any pain points they know of in the buyer cycle.

To validate the above findings, we then run an external questionnaire targeted at the brand's customers. This is a deeper dive in order to find out where else they engage online and what they care about. It is a necessary activity, as the rich information we gather here could not be found out from the sales team.

Social listening also forms a large part of our research. During this we will use top-level personas to discover triggers

and engagement levels online. Additionally, online press monitoring is useful to find out what types of content are already available on the topic and how much reach they have. Competitor analysis will be carried out to look at what other brands in the same sphere are doing differently in terms of their content marketing, and to see if it is working.

It is also important to use search data in some cases, in addition to the brand's own Google Analytics data. This will inform the target persona social listening research.

We then create a map of the entire customer experience - known as a CX map - of target personas and their triggers. This allows us to understand the behaviour and attitudes of these personas in the case that they are seeking a solution. It also helps us to identify at what stage they interact with their peers on social platforms and see when they go to search engines for information answers. Ultimately, the CX map sets out the interaction between the persona and the brand's sales process, to see where improved conversion tactics could be put in place.





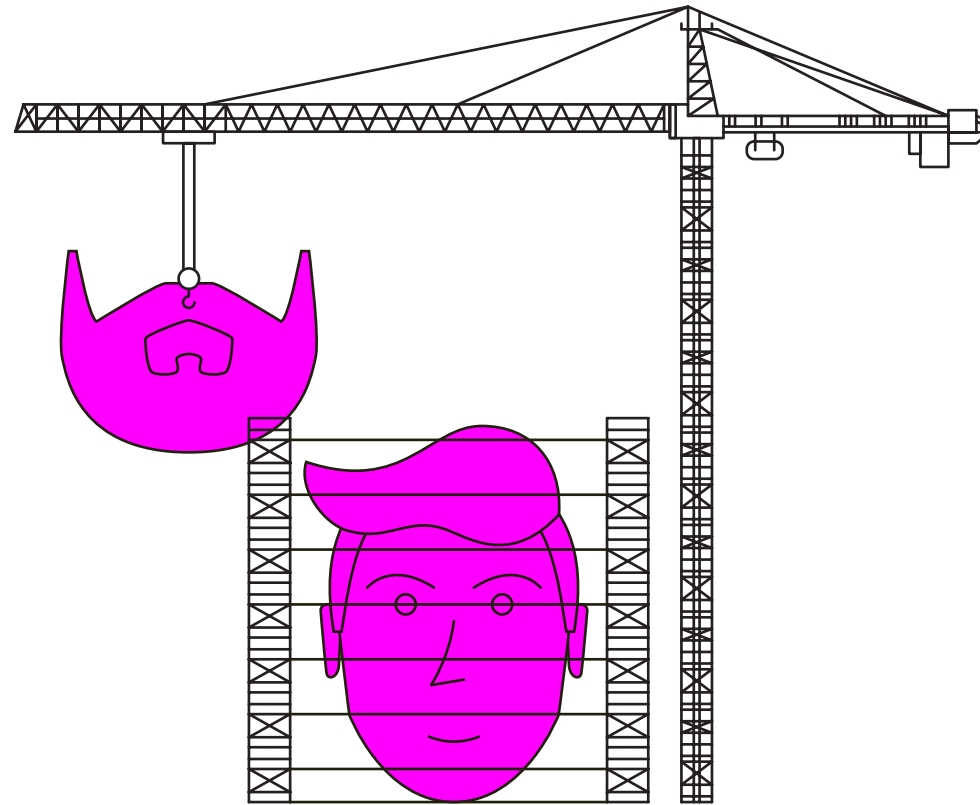
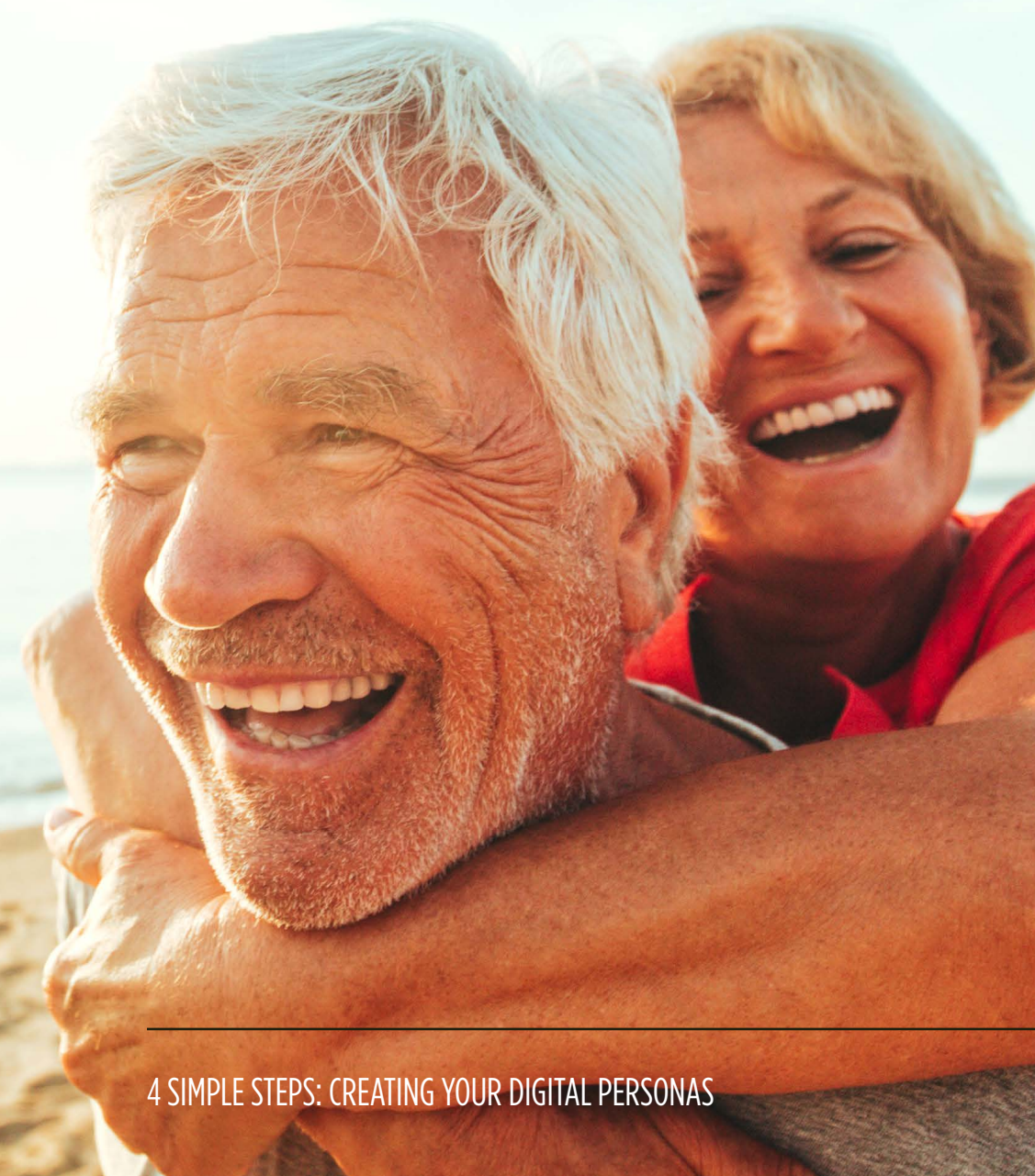


# 3RD STEP

*Everyone is an individual. The challenge of personas is to find out what people have in common and to group them. Focusing on needs and attitudes relating to the brand makes this simple - especially for tasks like website design.*

CATHERINE COOKE, head of [social engagement](#) at Axonn

## PERSONA CREATION



Once all the above tasks have been completed, we move onto the persona creation section of the process.

The first activity is to summarise the CX mapping results, pulling out the core points of the personas' needs, behaviours and attitudes.

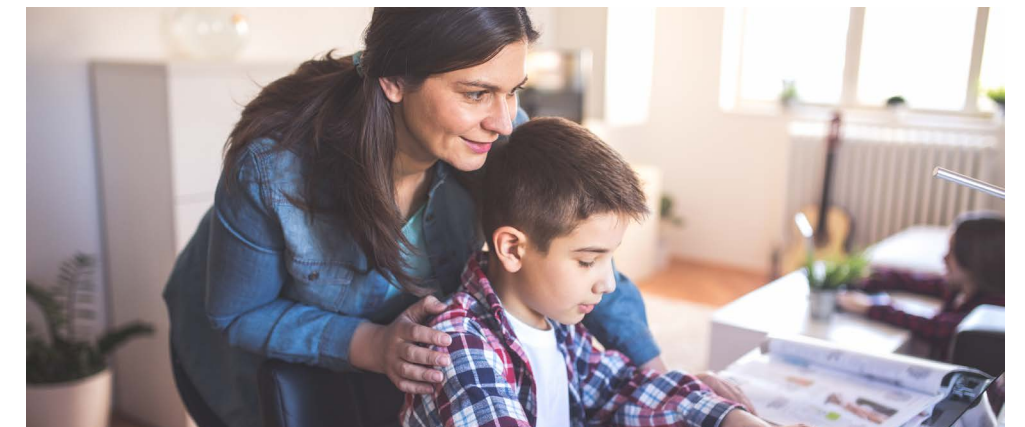
During the next steps, the persona profile starts to take shape. We will then combine the CX mapping results and its key takeaways with a deep dive into the social listening research. All this can then be written up, with a mind to creating the average profile of these personas.

We would then create the final research document to demonstrate where we drew our conclusions from.

Creating the persona itself also involves giving it a name, gender and age range, and sometimes a location. It can also include a list of key insights such as the persona's pain points, how they engage online, what platforms or forums they engage with, and their tone and style of communication.

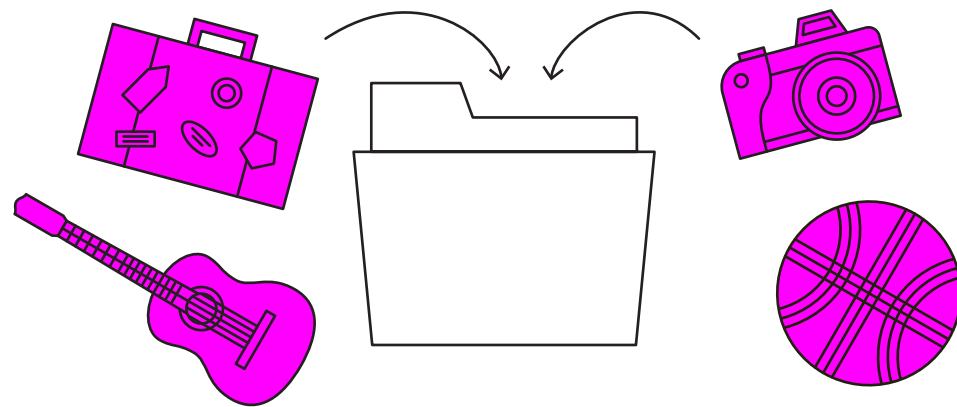
In the primitive days of persona profiling, marketers would come up with rudimentary personas largely through guesswork and stereotyping. They'd invent an oft-colourful, stock picture character, complete with a large family, marital difficulties and two children in private school, who they felt was an accurate summation of a brand's target audience. These personas were less than effective as they were merely stereotypes, rather than nuanced, fact-based profiles.

One of the biggest problems when adding lifestyle details to a persona is that it can transform it from a data-based profile into a stereotype and cause marketers to forget that everyone is an individual. The fact that a number of individuals fall under the same target persona - e.g. mothers living in Leeds - does not mean they will have the same interests and hobbies as everyone else in that target group.



So why do marketers continue  
- even in these much more data-driven times - to include  
names, hobbies and images with their personas?

### Does this help in any way?



Our consensus is that while these details can assist in a contextual way, they're certainly not essential when creating needs-based personas. Our profiles are designed to look at the persona's needs when in a certain situation and their attitude to the different stages in their journey.

Catherine Cooke, head of social engagement at Axonn, explained that the trouble with putting too much weight behind personal details is that they're quite hard to find out accurately, and they may also not be relevant to the brand, and therefore not particularly useful when it comes to content planning.

Joe noted that while opinions differ widely on this, it can be "incredibly misleading" in the case that such persona details are extrapolated or made up rather than based on genuine facts.

He continued: "I imagine some people find it easier to turn insights into tangible actions and activities if a persona is more memorable. Personally, I think it adds a greater risk of error and misinterpretation."

This isn't to say that the personal details found on some personas don't have their uses.

Beth underlined that the purpose of content marketing is to identify and form mutually beneficial brand-customer relationships. It is in this way, she noted, that understanding what interests someone outside of their journey with a brand's product or service can help determine how to communicate with them on their level - and whether it is worth targeting them in the first place.

They are also useful when looking at media consumption habits. It is necessary to understand the preferences of different personas for various media outlets and social media platforms and how they interact with these in order to properly plan outreach and advertising activities.



# 4TH STEP

*If your goal is to design a better website that is more useful for users, then the people implementing the changes to the website must understand how they can use personas created for that purpose.*

JOE LIVINGSTONE, director of strategy services at Axonn





## YOU'VE GOT YOUR PERSONAS, WHAT'S NEXT?

Plans for different personas will vary depending on why you created them, but a vital next step once your personas are polished off is to ensure that those who will utilise them understand the profiles, as well as how they apply to their own work. In many cases this will mean people need to lay out new plans, or change already existing ones - something marketers may face internal resistance to.

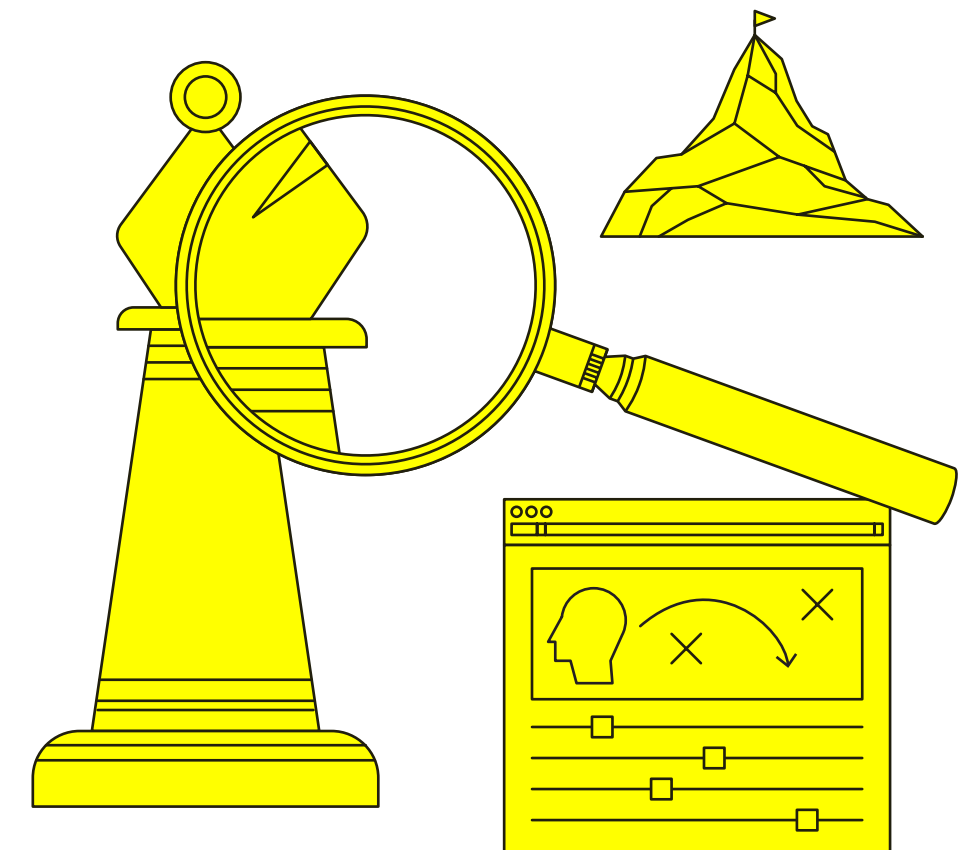
However, it is important to push forward and make sure decisions made as a result of the persona profiling are actioned. Ultimately, the characteristics that have been

researched and summarised within your personas are only useful to the extent in which they lead to some goal-orientated action.

Typical plans that might be created off the back of persona profiling include planning a website design that reflects the ideal user journey, planning ongoing content or campaign activities that meet the user's needs, or planning promotional activities based on what you know about their media consumption habits, for example, PR activities targeting the persona's preferred newspaper.

Generally speaking, once your personas are finished, you want to create a strategy that supports their needs, implement it to the best of your ability and make sure you're tracking everything you're doing. Then it's time to review and learn in order to build on your existing personas, and to adjust and start the process again!

Every time you review and adjust your strategy you are learning more about your audience. It is vital to collect all this information as you go and add it to the persona documents. Working in this way means your understanding of your audience is going to continue growing. Remember - personas should be seen as a constant work in progress.





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To find out how Axonn can help you get to know your audience better,

**Get in touch**

Our MD Alan is a raving pedant and wanted to point out that while marketers refer to 'personas', the formally correct plural of 'persona' is 'personae'. To learn more about things that Alan is irked by, [see his blog](#) on friendly brands