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SOCIAL NETWORKING PERSONAS:

A CASE STUDY OF THREE ONLINE APPROACHES

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Not long ago, our company was commissioned by a major player in the interactive-marketing space to study heavy users of Facebook, Twitter and email. To better serve its own customers, the company needed to understand the variety of motivations driving the use of social media, as well as users' receptivity to being marketed to through these channels. Specifically, our client requested that we develop "personas" that would capture meaningful clusters of social-media users.

Persona

The word "persona" is derived from the Greek word for mask. The influential Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung posited a variety of "archetypes" that operate in both the personal and collective unconscious. He called one of these archetypes "The Persona," and in this context, it refers to the face we present to the world, the idealized personality we attempt to project to others as well as to ourselves. In a sense, it's our "story," or a shorthand depiction of our personality.

In the world of marketing, the term gained wide acceptance in the 1990s when the Ogilvy group produced "day-in-the-life archetype descriptions" for their customers. According to one Ogilvy communication, "Each strong brand has a tribe of people who share affinity with the brand's values. This



universe typically divides into a number of different communities within which there are the same or very similar buying behaviors, and whose personality and characteristics towards the brand (product or service) can be understood in terms of common values, attitudes and assumptions.”

According to a Wikipedia entry on the topic, “Personas are said to be cognitively compelling because they put a personal human face on otherwise abstract data about customers. By thinking about the needs of a fictional persona, designers may be better able to infer what a real person might need.”

Thus, personas are a way to vivify our understanding of key customer segments, which might otherwise be lost in dull, impersonal abstractions. We are creatures hardwired for *narrative*. Personas tell a story about the tribes within a given customer base.

According to an online post by the W5 group, “Personas are consumer archetypes, developed through in-depth, in-context ethnographic research, that accurately ‘stand in’ for real consumers. Each persona represents a broad range of individuals who exhibit similar needs, frustrations, desires, motivations and behaviors.”

While both “persona” and “archetype” have roots in Jungian analytic theory and are closely related, they are not synonymous. Properly speaking,

“archetype” should refer to largely unconscious motivational forces underlying brand preference, while “persona” speaks more to grouping or segmentation by attitudes/values/behaviors. In part, what they have in common is that both are carried forward by a good story.

We note that personas may be developed through qualitative or quantitative means, or both. The term may have different shades of meaning in different domains. For example, within the world of usability research, personas may be derived from common patterns of moving through a website.

In our case, we developed a set of personas, based on online qualitative research, that were then subjected to quantitative verification by the client in a subsequent study. The personas we came up with resulted from recurring motifs that leapt out as we poured through the transcripts.

Our Project

Our client was interested in being exposed to several online qualitative modalities. We decided on three approaches: (1) a three-day, bulletin-board-type discussion, (2) a real-time, 90-minute, text-based chat and (3) a real-time webcam chat.

Ten “personas” emerged out of our analysis. We have included some of the verbatim quotes from the transcripts

to illustrate the types of respondent comments that led to various characterizations. We have used rather whimsical designations for each of these personas; none of the labels are meant to be pejorative. Also, there is some overlap between the types described. You may even recognize yourself in one or more of the descriptions that follow!

Our Social-Media Personas

1. The Audrey II

Remember the play and movie *The Little Shop of Horrors*, in which the ever-more-hungry plant named Audrey II kept demanding, “Feed me, Seymour!”?

We use the Audrey II persona to describe those social-media mavens who are primarily driven by a voracious appetite for freebies, coupons, discounts and other sorts of special offers. These consumers may be Facebook “Fans” of 25 or more brands. Similarly, they tend to follow a great many brands on Twitter, and they welcome email offers from a variety of commercial entities. Their primary drive is the opportunity to save money and/or get free stuff.

“I register for companies or brands to get instant updates on discounts before other people can jump on them.”





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The Audrey II type of social-media user is a marketer's dream. She is very receptive to online marketing communications, as long as it's clear that there is something in it for her.

"Saving money or giving me free stuff is the only reason I'll let a company get a hold of me."

"I always open emails from my favorite companies. It is how I end up getting such great deals on things for my family! I will get a special email invitation, for like 50% off a product or free shipping, that I wouldn't have normally gotten a chance to have. If it's an email from any of my favorite companies, I definitely open it to see what they have to offer. Some of it is just a newsletter or a deal on something I don't need, but you never know when you may open one up and find that great sale on something!"

This type of social-media user is a marketer's dream. She is very receptive to online marketing communications, as long as it's clear that there is something in it for her.

2. The Worker Bee

This term describes the very business-oriented type of person who is primarily concerned with such activities as keeping up with business trends, communicating with business contacts and promoting his own business or that of his employer. Facebook, Twitter and email are viewed chiefly as tools to help him in his pursuit of business success.

This type of individual is focused strictly on business and typically is not interested in the other distractions that social media offer.

"In my industry, it is very important to develop an online presence and identity, so a lot of my Twitter posting is news, industry-relevant tidbits and that sort of thing."

"I have about 350 friends on Facebook that I'm getting to become fans on my business page, and that's starting to work because they're spreading it out to their friends. So I'm starting to get business from that."

Speed and efficiency are key values for the Worker Bee:

"For me, I think the best thing about email as a communication tool would have to be the efficiency of it. ...I like that it is quick, simple, and can be done on your terms. ...You can end it when you want, unlike a phone call where at times you get stuck... You want to hang up but cannot out of respect... Email is so much simpler and easier to deal with. Email makes life so much easier."

"For me, email is sometimes more convenient than a phone call. It can be quick, to the point. ...Email also lets me multi-task so I'm not wrapped up in a phone call."

It is also essential for the Worker Bee to be on top of all the latest news and information that potentially relate to his or her projects/goals:

"I'm the type of guy who needs to keep up with the trends in order to do my job and also to be in-the-know with the community around me. I found that these new social-networking sites are a central hub for networking and expanding my business contacts, as well as turning international acquaintances into friends."

3. Family and Friends

This social-media user is primarily interested in such activities as tracking the kids away at college, connecting with friends from childhood, staying in touch with high school and/or college chums, communicating with a close circle of friends and so on.

"Love getting emails from family and friends. Sometimes the business ones are just a pain. Unless I am looking for something, I usually just delete the business ones."

"I tend to give top priority to family emails. After all, you are born into a family and not a brand. Brands change, and tastes in brands change too."

"With friends and family, you can loosen up a lot in what you write since they know you personally as a living breathing person. With a company, formality — for me — is the rule."

"I can't remember what life was like before Facebook. Love the fact that I can stay in touch with friends and family all over the world. Currently, Berlin, Brazil, Colombia and Peru."

"I reconnected with A LOT of my old family & friends, thanks to Facebook. It was simply amazing the people that found me on there. I reconnected with family that I haven't seen nor talked to in over 15 years or more... It has been great. I actually met up with a few old friends for dinners, a few drinks, an occasional lunch... It has been great catching up and seeing my old friends and reconnecting and starting our friendship all over again! And I thank Facebook for it all!"

4. The Exhibitionist

This type of social-media user wants more Facebook friends and Twitter followers than any one else. He or she tends to be uninhibited online and very expressive — wants to share with the whole world.

The Social Butterfly tends to be very social and seeks info on food, restaurants, fashion, travel, movies, music, etc.

"I admit it, I am Facebook's exact target consumer. I am always checking out what other people are up to, and I friend almost every person I make a decent in-person connection with..."

5. The Voyeur

This category of social-media user is more of a lurker, more interested in getting info than sharing it.

"I'm pretty new to getting myself out there on social sites. In fact, the only one I really use is Facebook. And on that, I don't post too frequently. However, I do check it many times each day to see what's going on in everyone else's lives. Guess I'm more of a voyeur than a sharer."

"I do enjoy finding out what people are up to, and sending a quick message, without having to really say too much."

6. The Social Butterfly

This type of user tends to be very social and seeks info on food, restaurants, fashion, travel, movies, music, etc.

"I love the discount fashion websites. I would say I open at least 75% of the emails I get from them to see what brands are featured and if it's worth my time to go to the site and shop around. I love discount designer stuff. Love."

"I share just about everything online. I think if it is going to help the person or friend, I share it."

7. The Stimulation Seeker

This person is hyper-social, friends everybody, engages in lots of Fan activity and "liking" behavior, and wants lots of followers.

"I have over 1,000 friends now, from old school mates to old co-workers..."

"I want as many people as possible. If I could get 20,000 people following me and my business on Twitter, I would be absolutely thrilled."

"I am a fan of so many companies on Facebook and Twitter, I wouldn't be able to list them all... I would think it would be somewhere around 70 companies."

8. The Controller

This type of individual wants to limit and filter communication, doesn't want to be overwhelmed and is very selective.

"I'm not much for posting on Facebook, but I do send private messages to friends and acquaintances once in a while. A lot of the things I see posted are not things I'd share with all of my FB 'friends.' As we know, a lot of our 'friends' aren't really our friends at all. They are merely acquaintances."

"I think anything that is of a personal/sensitive/confidential nature should not be on Facebook. Even though there are security flaws in email, at least the info is not very public."

"For me to give my email, I really have to want what they are selling. I used to give it out randomly before, but with so much spam, I have to rethink who I give it to."

9. The Switchboard

This refers to the sort of person who loves turning others on to things and is big on re-tweeting and connecting people.

"I do share info, especially if I am pleased with the product. I will post about it on forums, talk about it on blogs. Word-of-mouth is also good. I will also go straight to the site I ordered it from, like Amazon, and post a review on what I thought about the product. Facebook is very good for sharing info about products as well. I am equally comfortable sharing this information in any of the ways I posted. I think that sharing information is a great way to learn more about a product before you purchase it."

"I share all of the information I get from companies and brands on forums and blogs. I also share most new information by word of mouth. Bzzagent is another good resource to share information in reports about products and services. I just wish they would have more campaigns. I am also a member of some companies' private forums and share information on those as well."

"I am known for this... I love to be the first to give a company 'props' for their services, products or the company itself if they are a great company!!! I also make sure to tell about new products, products that are great to use, things I may like about the company and so on. I make sure I share with everyone on my social networking sites, ex. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and all my friends & family via email, telephone or texting."

10. The Devotee

Here, we are referring to the fanatical gamer, constantly seeking updates and the latest games. This category includes other sorts of hobbyists who use social media to stay up on the latest info and to network with their co-hobbyists.

"I have no shame, I am totally addicted to Facebook! I log in, and check it every hour on the hour! I cannot seem to stop playing Frontierville. By the way, if you play, come add me!"

“I have an account with Facebook, which I am on 24 hours a day.”

“It wasn’t hard to get into Facebook and all the gaming, but it was sure as heck hard to get out of it. It really came down to my wifey saying ‘Enough is Enough,’ and that I have a ‘Real’ life and family that I was neglecting for this fictional lifestyle I was playing online.”

A Couple of Surprises

We were surprised to discover the extent to which privacy is NOT a major concern for those who chose to become “fans” of companies or who permit emails from corporate entities. Some seem fatalistically reconciled to the notion that privacy no longer exists, with some even embracing the ideal of a world with greater transparency. They actually tend to be more concerned that companies not spam them

with too many offers or with the same offers over and over again (i.e., each communication or offer should be fresh).

Our subsequent research suggests that many feel that they DO understand the basics of how to protect their privacy online. They know the fundamental sorts of safeguards that we have all heard about. However, there is that niggling concern about *what could happen*. They are not 100% certain as to what information someone, somewhere, *might* be able to access.

Another surprise was an apparent move away from email. At the time we carried out this study, this did seem to be a fairly novel finding. Since then, though, we have heard other reports confirming this unfolding phenomenon.

“Email is so last century... if I have something to say to someone specific or vent to the world, Facebook

and Twitter is the place to be... next best thing to sitting on Oprah’s couch.”

“I think there are fewer messages from friends in my email because of Facebook. But at the same time, I’m engaging with so many more entities through Facebook and Twitter than I had through email.”

“If I need to communicate something, I would Facebook or Twitter first... because most folks live on those things... and I will always get a reply via Facebook or Twitter first.”

Later research by our client suggests a more nuanced conclusion: Email is not going away; it’s more that email is less often the main hub of communication with friends. The use of email is

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Email is not going away; it's more that email is less often the main hub of communication with friends.

not shrinking overall. All forms of communication are exploding. However, especially among those 35 years and under, *casual communication* is shifting to direct messaging and instant messaging within Facebook. They tend to be on Facebook all the time. Facebook is already open, so it is the easy choice

for quick and casual communication with friends, family and online acquaintances. By contrast, email is for more serious, longer, formal communication, especially among those who are 45 years and older.


Comparing The Three Online Approaches

As mentioned earlier, our client was interested in experiencing three online qualitative approaches. Each approach utilized different respondents, but all were recruited to the same specifications. We began with a three-day bulletin board, followed that with a real-time, text-based chat, and then finished with a webcam group. All three approaches yielded important information, and none contradicted the findings of the others.

Experienced online qualitative researchers will not be surprised, how-

ever, to learn that the client was most impressed by the three-day bulletin board. As the experience of others has shown, our three-day discussion generated so much material that we pretty much learned all there was to learn, and by the time we did the real-time chat and webcam group, those subsequent experiences seemed anticlimactic.

Conclusion

The personas we have described highlight that there are different constellations of motivations for involvement in online social networking and that these motivational sets have important implications for online marketing. Our client was sufficiently impressed by these findings that the company went on to expand the insights we derived into a book which it made available as a bonus to its own corporate customers. 

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