ELEARNINGNEWS ARTICLE

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How to use Learner Personas to design courses

Marketers routinely use Buyer Personas to meet the needs of their market. Let's find out how to apply this technique to the production of content for eLearning courses.

Marketing techniques routinely use Buyer Personas to meet the needs of their market. The effort of creating fictitious personas in detail pays off with better accuracy in the offer of products and services. This technique can also benefit the production of content for eLearning courses.

The difficult task of marketing

When designing courses it is important that the training material is best received by the users. In the case of corporate training these users, who are the final users of the services, are not the ones who decide on the purchase or implementation. Providing an eLearning service at its best means convincing all the actors involved in the process of purchasing and using the service.

According to marketing practices, different actors can be distinguished for each purchase decision:

- User
- Payer
- Decision maker
- Influencer
- Saboteur

In the case of an eLearning course, the employees following the course are the **users**: they are the ones who will have the experience and who need to be convinced of the goodness of the service. In this case, satisfaction will be as much in the information they retain as in the ease with which they learn.
The managers who have the power to spend the budget, and the company in general, are the **payers**: to convince these actors it is essential that the return is worth the expense. The service must be competitive, as much for its cost as for the results it promises to convince the buyers in the purchasing department or the CFO.
The **decision makers** may not be the payers themselves, in fact the manager responsible for employees may be the one to choose when to use an eLearning course - and choose which one. If the company is more structured, the decision might be in the hands of the **CLO**, the Chief Learning Officer, who is responsible for implementing a **programme of continuous integration of learning and strategy (CILS)**.
Influencers can be anyone who can assist in the decision to adopt an eLearning course: it may be the user who is so satisfied that he or she becomes a Brand Ambassador for the course. Or the SME, the Subject-Matter Expert, the person with in-depth knowledge of all aspects of the subject matter whose authority persuades and reassures the decision.
Saboteurs can be many: from those who propose alternative suppliers for the same service, to those who distrust the solution itself. The advantages of eLearning for school and corporate training are confirmed by the **forecasts of deployment and transformation**. However, a corporate decision is rarely a straightforward process: especially for companies that are more bureaucratic or less familiar with technological solutions, there is always the difficulty of convincing the more sceptical of change.

Buyer Personas: the tool for understanding customers

Imagine now how much concern a supplier may have about all this decision-making complexity: if even one of these figures is not conquered, all the salespeople's efforts will be in vain.
To make the buying process more manageable, marketing experts have developed **buyer personas**. These are nothing more than fictitious representations of end customers. The idea is to create real personas, to whom all the characteristics of possible customers can be attributed. The challenge is to make them detailed enough to be realistic.
It is not enough to imagine their age, gender and school level. It is necessary to push the detail to the point of understanding all

the details of their possible **buying behaviour**: the doubts to be dispelled, the buying patterns, the insecurities to be supported after the experience. If done well, it is a process that benefits marketing, sales and customer service alike.

Each company addresses specific target groups, for which it is appropriate to outline these buyer personas. The optimal procedure is to

- Collect data on your real customers
- Once the survey is complete, group the data together
- Track buyer personas with this data

If customers can be divided into urban and rural, and urban customers have a lower age, higher spending power and less leisure time, then two different buyer personas can be devised to target marketing efforts. If the survey returns more clusters, the number of characters will be expanded. The point is to get to the maximum useful detail, considering social, demographic and lifestyle aspects.

In the case of marketing to end consumers, where personality is the main determinant of purchase, one can also use macro-categories, into which specific buyer personas can be placed. One example is the **four temperament** classification devised by David Kersey:

- The **idealist**, for whom sociability is essential
- The **logical**, meticulous and methodical
- The **guardian**, responsible and authoritarian
- The **craftsman**, spontaneous and impulsive

In the case of business clients, this simplification, which is useful for an initial approach, must be supplemented with considerations about the company itself.

Learner Personas: eLearning studies marketing

The benefits of defining personas that represent the characteristics of ideal customers are clear: a model for exercising sales procedures and reaching the target audience with a product specific to their needs.

This principle can also be applied to an eLearning service by creating **Learner Personas**. The intention is only partly different: of course, the ultimate goal is to sell a valid service; but, at least in this case, to do so it is necessary that the customer's specifications are also taken into account in the design of the service. Basically, if in order to sell you have to have the client in mind, in order to train you have to do it twice: when teaching and when convincing to buy. One thing does not depend on the other. A course that is not effective will be short-lived; conversely, even the best quality course is of no use if it struggles to establish itself.

The focus on the psychology of the users is an important point for all figures involved in the realisation of a course: the Course Writer, the course author, the Subject-Matter Expert and the Instructional Designer, the course architect, have to take into account the different **learning styles**. With Learner Personas more detail is achieved.

Again, the best procedure is one that starts with data: if a course has already had learners, the more information you can gather about them, the more realistic the **creation of the personas**. If it is a new course, it is useful to think about the target market, and maybe take information from other courses. The point is to be as close as possible to real people, to make a faithful reproduction of them. Once you have analysed the data, you can consider how to aggregate them into homogeneous subgroups and create your own person for each of them.

Once the information has been collected and analysed, the different Learner Personas can be outlined. The point is to capture their essence, as a novelist would do. Among the characteristics they should possess are:

- The pattern of behaviour
- Their objectives, both long and short term
- Their needs
- Their attitudes, beliefs and opinions

- Skills
- Information about their personal life

It may be useful to start with stereotypes and then add **layers of realism**. Is Mario, a 50 year old man from Turin, father of two daughters, and long term employee, not very dynamic? Maybe it is because he would feel better in another position; maybe he would give his best as a mentor for new recruits. Maybe he is reluctant to take in-depth eLearning courses because he is used to focusing on the flow of tasks and making a clear distinction between work and study. Perhaps offering him micro-courses could help him overcome his initial mistrust.

On the other hand, Roberta, a young, single, out-of-town engineering graduate, is not necessarily unmotivated: she might wonder whether this is the right career. Perhaps providing open courses, where she could explore what it would be like to follow different possible paths, might be helpful: an **LXP might come in handy**.

There are countless examples, that's the point: ask yourself all the questions you need to understand who you are addressing. If done well, stereotypes eventually give way to well-rounded characters, for whom concrete solutions to real needs can be defined.

In summary, by adopting Learner Personas, the following benefits can be achieved:

- Giving a face to the learners
- Involve course creators in the best possible way
- Customise content and delivery methods
- Improving the assessment of possible learning bottlenecks

Personalisation is of particular importance. Thanks to LMS technology and user metrics that can be recorded, it is possible to atomise courses into microlearning; make the sequence of lessons flexible; integrate video, audio and text formats; and introduce gamification elements. Technology allows all this - and in the future even more -, it is up to the user to ensure that its benefits follow people's needs.

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