Persona Non Grata

Steve Portigal
Portigal Consulting
steve@portigal.com

One recent morning, I came into my office and found a small woman astride my desk.

Well, to be precise, it wasn't an actual woman. It was a cutout of a photograph of a doll representing an archetypal customer—a persona. My officemate had brought this odd item back for me from the CHI conference, and, knowing my extreme discomfort with this sort of tool, had left it for me as some sort of a gift.

I took a closer look at the effigy and recognized a familiar level of suspended realism: think Barbie, G.I. Joe, Robot Chicken. Indeed, the dollmaker had outfitted her with meticulously crafted accessories such as a digital watch, ID badge, CD-ROM, and Day-Timer. And, frankly, it creeped the hell out of me.

The company that produced the persona is announcing to the world that it regards its users as mere dolls, as dehumanized,

This impulse to distance oneself from the customer while simultaneously claiming to embrace the human element isn't limited to designers and to their use of personas.

Market segmentation is often presented in a similarly limiting format.

lifeless, plastic lumps that are without will, motion, action, or emotion until their master (creator?) physically animates them. There is powerful subtext here—does this company manipulate its customers the way a benevolent yet stern tween stages her tea party?

The back of the cardboard cutout has some smart text about the type of user represented: her skill level, experience, attitude, objectives, job priorities, and relationship to the products this company makes. It also shows some thumbnail photos depicting the figure through the course of her workday. Unfortunately, these images evoke Team America World Police more than they evoke any actual empathy or (heaven forbid) convey useful information.

This isn't a critique of this particular (frightening) persona manifestation; this is a critique of personas and the inevitable

impulse to misuse them. Personas are misused to maintain a "safe" distance from the people we design for, manifesting contempt over understanding, and creating the facade of user-centeredness while merely reinforcing who we want to be designing for and selling to.

This impulse to distance oneself from the customer while simultaneously claiming to embrace the human element isn't limited to designers and to their use of personas. Market segmentation is often presented in a similarly limiting format. For instance, a client recently approached us and outlined the different types of people they wanted to know more about. Each one came with its own infantilizing alliterative name, such as Critical Incident Carl, Integrator Ian, and so on. The ease with which she spoke to us about real people as if they were characters from the Strawberry Shortcake universe was distressing.

The common representation for personas—alliterative names and generic imagery—reveals their role in the Big Lie.

Just for fun, do a Google image search for "personas" and you'll find many examples of the same reduction of the human element. Pay particular attention to the visual representation of the persona: it's either cartoonish clip art or a beautiful yet bland, unchallenging and ultimately unrealistic stock photo.

The common representation for personas—alliterative names and generic imagery—reveals their role in the Big Lie. What they illustrate is not real, yet they are often buttressed with the inclusion of "color" details—interesting but manufactured factoids (i.e., media diet, favorite possessions, marital status, etc.) that suggest a real person lurks behind the smiling stock photo. Like reality television, the appeal comes from the seduction of a sanitized form of reality. And like reality television, personas are easier to deal with than the inevitable messiness of real people and real life. Using personas takes away both the

responsibility and the necessity of having to actually engage with a customer and acknowledge who they are.

Once defined, personas must be updated, because culture is a moving target. The Associated Press reported ["Shampoo Ads Highlight Changing Image of Women in Japan," August 27, 2007] on groundbreaking shampoo advertising in Japan that began to break free of the traditional marketing stereotypes, where female consumers were seen only as one of three types: a housewife, an office worker, or a schoolgirl. Shiseido acknowledged the cultural changes that have swept through Japan, and its new advertising has had a tremendous impact on sales. Its rejection of closely held models of who its consumers were, while successful, was seen as radical within the industry.

By imbuing a persona with memetic power via alliterative

3

Simply handing someone a persona is not sufficient to actually engage them in thinking about a real person.

names like Jessie Jeans Buyer, these iconic oversimplifications become shibboleths inside the corporation, creating significant cultural resistance to the idea of refreshing them. As a tangible output of some process, they become a new truth that can blind us from seeing the real world.

Recently, at a design competition hosted by a major software company, teams were given fancy new Web-design software and were asked to create a "safe" social-networking site for kids, based on several personas (the kid, her mother, and her mischievous friend). The design presentations were mostly an excuse to show off some cool visual or interactive design feature that the team came up with. There was no examination of what constituted "safe," and the personas were regurgitated in the context of the design solutions with all the subtlety of a sitcom character. Acknowledging the time and energy constraints of

a competition, the experience suggests that simply handing someone a persona is not sufficient to actually engage them in thinking about a real person. The solutions were not believable, and since they were based on fake people, it was not unexpected.

You might react to this argument by disclaiming that "personas are just a tool." So they are, but tools have affordances, and they lead to certain types of usage. When we met with a client to kick off an in-depth user-research study, we walked into a conference room where the whiteboard was filled with aspirational—not factual— personas. It required significant organizational effort to approve the work of studying real users, but in the meantime, it was trivial for the team to generate (out of thin air) richly detailed examples of who those customers were. Compared side by side with actual research, persona confabulation requires very little effort. To make

4

Rather than create distancing caricatures, tell stories.

Look for ways to represent what you've learned in a way that maintains the messiness of actual human beings.

a crude comparison, guns don't kill people, but they make it a lot easier. And personas aren't solely responsible for bad design or solely to blame for the disconnect between designers and their customers, but they make bad design a hell of a lot easier. To compound the problem, personas enable all of this under a cloak of smug customer-centricity, while instilling bemused contempt. As with guns, we need to be trained to use these tools safely, but given the prevalence of untrained users and the ensuing casualties, let's step back and consider whether the benefits of these tools outweigh the risks.

Any process based in falsehood takes you away from being genuine. If this is the best way we have to keep the organization focused on a "real" customer, then we have larger organizational problems that need to be addressed. With personas, we're going down the wrong path. Rather than create distancing caricatures, tell stories. Don't deny the need to do in-person research with real people. Look for ways to represent what you've learned in a way that maintains the messiness of actual human beings. And understand that no tool, no method, and no shortcut, can substitute for real, in-person interactions. People are too wonderfully complicated, to be reduced to plastic toys.

Steve Portigal is the founder of Portigal Consulting, a boutique agency that helps companies discover and act on new insights about their customers and themselves.

Steve has been studying customer behavior and corporate culture for more than a decade and has advised dozens of clients on the creation of new products, services, and innovation processes.

Steve speaks and writes about consumer research, innovation, design, and contemporary culture. For a complete list of speaking engagements and publications, visit www.portigal.com/about-us/

If you'd like more information on Portigal Consulting, contact Steve at (415) 894-2001 or steve@portigal.com

Other Articles (available upon request)

- *Everybody's Talkin' At Me*
- *The Journey Is The Reward*
- *Hold Your Horses*
- *Living In The Overlap*
- *Some Different Approaches to Making Stuff*
- *Poets, Priests, and Politicians*
- *Interacting With Advertising*
- *Ships in the Night part I: Design Without Research?*
- *Ships in the Night part II: Research Without Design?*
- *We Are Living in a Sci-Fi World*
- *On Authenticity*
- *Ever Notice?*
- *Let's Embrace Open-Mindedness*
- *Take it From Consumers: Simpler is Better*