ALL ABOUT

BUILDING MEMBER PERSONAS

Community managers know their members better than anyone, right? But knowing individual members on a personal level isn't the same as knowing your community population, or what brought them to you in the first place. Let's explore how to build member personas for your community program.

THE COMMUNITY ROUNDTABLE

What is a member persona?

First things first. (You know we love a definition moment!)
A persona, in our case, isn't too far off from the traditional definition, "a person's perceived or evident personality, as that of a well-known official, actor, or celebrity; personal image; public role." The only real modification needed for our purposes is: it's the perceived or evident personality of community members.

community persona
com·mu·ni·ty per·so·na
/kəˈmyo͞onədē/ /ˌpərˈsōnə/

noun
noun: **community persona**; plural noun: **community personae**; plural noun: **community personas**

a group of users that displays a set of similar characteristics.

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Persona mapping isn't a new thing just for online communities.

Marketing professionals have been building audience personas for persona-based marketing campaigns for a long time. Marketing personas are typically focused on individual personal demographic characteristics, i.e. age, location, gender, etc.

This is more nuanced in community persona mapping.

You might want to think about what location this persona is at (in an office? which office? remote?), what team they are on, their job function, how tech-savvy they are, etc. These individual characteristics are less based on their personal attributes, and more based on their "at work" attributes.

Getting Started

In other words, a persona is who we see our members as in the context of the community.

Deep, right?

Eh, not really — you're not going to be able to know everything about every one of your members by creating personas — but by answering a few simple questions you can at least pinpoint what the ideal members look like for your community.

Ask The Right Questions

In this All About Guide, we'll walk through the basics of building community personas using six questions about your member base, and identifying the common threads that run through them.

Think of it as a more in-depth version of the standard Who, What, Where, When, Why?

- Who are your target members?
- Which members are the most familiar?
- Which members are the most anxious about change?
- Who is underserved?
- Who is frustrated?
- What is the cost to the organization?

Let's walk through each of these questions in depth before we dive into active persona building.

Six Essentials Persona Mapping Questions

1. Who are your target members?

Each community type has a different use case, and as a result, each will have different types of members. As with most things in community management, this is an, "it depends on your community use type and goals" situation.

An easy way to drill down your target members is by using categories to define the different members and their roles, for example:

- What's their job or field?
- What's their education level?
- How long have they been in the industry?

Beyond your target members, you need to consider which members matter most.

Yes, we know you love ALL (most) of your members, but there are some who provide more value and engagement than others.

Additionally, some members will generate the most value in your organization's eyes by adapting to new changes and shifting their behaviors. **Remember that's the key goal, especially for young communities: behavior change!**

 Note: These two types of valuable community members aren't necessarily the same persona, nor should they be. Group your members appropriately.

After you've been able to break your members out into groups, AND identify which of those are the most valuable, you're ready to move onto the next step.

Six Essential Persona Mapping Questions

2. Which members are the most familiar?

Again, we're not asking about individuals here. Don't just create a persona by writing down all of your community bestie's personality traits (as tempting as it may be).

Instead, which of the groups of members is the one you've worked with the most to date? Is it the experts? The new hires? The learners?

Whichever group it is, that's where you'll want to start because the details and aspects of how they utilize the community are ones with which you're already familiar. It's your keen understanding of familiar members that'll allow you to use what you know about their motives and actions and apply it to the appropriate member categories.

A word of advice: Save noting and creating the personas for the members you aren't as comfortable with for later in the process when you've got a few easier personas under your belt.

3. Which members are the most anxious about change?

Not anxious-excited, but anxious-uneasy. Yes, the squeaky-wheel members who start fretting anytime they see a notification for something as simple as a platform update. These members can be aggravating (most community managers can probably name at least one person who springs immediately to mind when reading this section), but they still have merit when creating personas for your community.

Six Essential Persona Mapping Questions

How?

It's simple, really. By understanding which members are likely to be change-resistant, you'll be able to plan ahead. After all, these are the folks who will wind up creating challenges or pushback to anything "new" introduced to the community. If you know what drives their anxiety, you'll be able to appropriately communicate any changes in a way that reduces their stress.

A win for you, your community's strategy and editorial calendar, and (most importantly) a win for the members themselves. #Winning!

4: Who is underserved?

We're not asking you to consider these people because we want you to wallow in your "failure." We want you to see these members and consider including them in your personas because of the untapped potential they have.

Untapped potential?

You got it! The members who are currently underserved are the ones who have the most to gain from the community, because the community has the information and resources they need, so it's more valuable for them. A valuable community is one with engaged members. These underserved members have the potential to become some of your community's biggest champions. The trick is to include them in your personas so you don't forget them, perpetuating the cycle of leaving them behind in the dust.

We believe in the principle of "no member left behind," and that includes these folks!

Six Essential Persona Mapping Questions

5. Who is frustrated?

Yes, another squeaky wheel to pinpoint! People are far more likely to be vocal when they're upset than when they're happy (seriously, a quick look at almost any review site will show this isn't a stretch), but that shouldn't deter you from considering these folks when creating personas.

When you're seen as a problem-solver, people are more likely to listen to you.

There's no better feeling than when you've been able to take a frustrated member and make them feel heard with your results to the problem. Even better? When they've had a problem solved, your (formerly) frustrated members will be more likely to sing your praises afterwards.
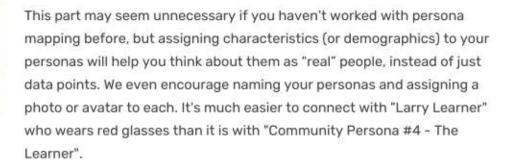
6. What is the cost to the organization?

Time to talk money. Business ROIs are frequently tied to communities, and some members are simply more "expensive" to maintain than others. These members are another persona to consider for your community. After all, if the cost of their engagement is higher because it's less frequent or impactful than others, you'll want to incorporate that factor into any community decisions you make to ensure you aren't wasting valuable funds in a way that won't impact higher-cost members.

Three Critical Persona Characteristics

Let's get personal. Well, personal-ish.

Now that you've considered your overall member ecosystems it's time to start drafting personas that represent typical member segments.

There are three main components to consider when defining community personas: characteristics, influencers, and workflows. By defining these three components for your persona types you can better understand who your members are, what motivates them, and how you can best help them use the community in a successful way.

This part may seem unnecessary if you haven't worked with persona mapping before, but assigning characteristics (or demographics) to your personas will help you think about them as "real" people, instead of just data points. We even encourage naming your personas and assigning a photo or avatar to each. It's much easier to connect with "Larry Learner" who wears red glasses than it is with "Community Persona #4 - The Learner".

For community personas, you'll also want to assign motivators to each "individual." A person who is internally motivated will have completely different goals and expectations around how a community functions vs. someone who is externally motivated.

Techie Tina

Larry Learner

Newbie Nick

Three Critical Persona Characteristics

Additional characteristics you'll want to consider are what drives or prohibits your members from engaging in the community.

These can include:

- **Temperament** - introverts tend to be more comfortable engaging in a digital environment than extroverts, for example
- **Learning styles** - do they prefer modules vs. mentorship programs
- **Availability and schedule** - if a person's busy, they're not going to be spending their precious free time in a community if it doesn't provide value
- **Physical community** - if someone's highly isolated, chances are they'll spend more time in a digital environment vs. someone who is around others all the time
- **Competing sources of information** - what does the community provide that they can't get anywhere else?
- **Technical literacy** - are they a digital native or does engaging with technology come less naturally to them
- **Online comfort levels** - not everyone is as comfortable with sharing transparent experiences with "strangers" online
- **Aspirations** - are they hoping for a promotion, social recognition, or something else?
- **Cultural and social context** - who will be your Guinea pigs when you want to try something new?

Use this exercise to be author of your community narrative — these personas are your characters. The only difference is your personas are more of an aggregate of a bunch of individuals vs. a singular character. Now get out there and go tell your community members' stories!