
Watching the Movie

Using Personas as a Library Marketing Tool

Spenser Thompson

Over the last twenty years, **Spenser Thompson** has worked on the marketing teams at Research Libraries Group (now part of OCLC), Innovative Interfaces, and Golden Gate University. He holds master's degrees in library science and psychology. He is on the review board of the *Marketing Libraries* journal and has presented at the National Library Marketing and Communications Conference. He maintains a blog at www.marketinglibraries.com and can his twitter handle is @mktglibraries.

Correspondence concerning this column should be directed to Nicole Eva and Erin Shea, email: nicole.eva@uleth.ca and eshea@fergusonlibrary.org.

When Spenser Thompson said he'd like to devote this issue's marketing column to "personas," I have to be honest—I had no idea what he meant. But his description of "watching the movie" to see how different people use and perceive the library is really intriguing. Much like sportscasters "roll the tape," to get a better look at a play, librarians can also watch the movie to design better marketing experiences.—*Editors*

If you want to improve marketing at your library, "watch the movie." Watching the movie is an approach to marketing planning that has three parts: (1) building personas through observation and intuition, (2) finding a place for the library in the narrative of the persona, and (3) linking these personas to various stages in the "sales cycle": unaware of the library, aware of it, considering using it, or already using it. By watching the movie, you can design marketing experiences that are more creative, effective, and appropriate to the audience. This contrasts with approaches that start with "product-first" thinking or an exclusive reliance on demographic groups.

ABOUT PERSONAS

HubSpot—a technology company that provides a Customer Relationship Management system (sort of an ILS where the items are people)—define personas as

Fictional, generalized characters that encompass the various needs, goals, and observed behavior patterns among your real and potential customers. . . . By grouping people into persona categories, it is much easier for marketers, product designers, salespeople, and services people to tailor their content, messaging, product development, and services to different groups of people.¹

In HubSpot software, you can create personas and use them to manage email recipient lists and to track interactions online, or at events. It's not just about emailing demographics to get leads anymore.

A persona is not "men 40 years old who make X amount of money" or "students who work two jobs." These are demographic profiles that can be very useful in deciding who to target and what to tell them, but they are not fully realized personas. The personas can help get library staff beyond asking "What do we have and how do we promote it?" to the

AMPLIFY YOUR IMPACT

more useful “What characters are out there and where are they in time and space?”

By grouping people into carefully constructed personas, a small set of persona-targeted marketing strategies can effectively reach a much larger audience, delivering a personalized experience on a commodity scale.

Companies want their products to be deeply embedded in the lives of users, not just bought. Persona building can help them get there. Many companies use the word “life” in their tag line. GE’s “Bring good things to life” or Safeway’s “Ingredients for life.” If I hear the phrase Mac User or Harley Rider, I get sense of that person’s identity.

CREATING A PERSONA

Observe what types of people are wearing, where they walk when they come in the library, if they bring children, or what news events they happen to be talking about. What car do they drive or what kind do you imagine they drive? Cars are an excellent persona-building tool because the marketplace has so many models and is so thoroughly segmented by type of customer. You can pool the experiences of various members of the reference or circulation teams in a brainstorming session. Although this is a highly qualitative process, it can be as fruitful—in terms of your creativity—as focusing on metrics or the features and benefits of library services.

Decide as a group the answer to this question: How do we reach Busy Single Guy when he is a stranger? Or how do we get him to be more engaged with our library than he is (meaning, what additional services can we get him to use)? If you decide which stage of the story and which persona fits your marketing challenge best, you can focus your attention or dollars there. For example, how do you reach Busy Single Guy, who spends a few hours a week in the laundromat, who is at the awareness stage? He knows about the local library but has not considered using it.

ABOUT THE BUYER’S JOURNEY

The timeline your library focuses on is called the Buyer’s Journey by today’s professional marketers.² A marketing-focused library tries to imagine which “act” the person(a) is in, and what plot points (marketing tactics) will move him/her to the next step. The job of a library’s marketing staff is to inject experiences into the path of a given persona and march its members, literally (perhaps with signs) and figuratively, to the library.

Future library users are people living out their own movie scripts. Are their stories about being successful, getting by, or personal development? The best marketing aligns with the trajectory of people’s lives through the persona that captures them in their full character shading.

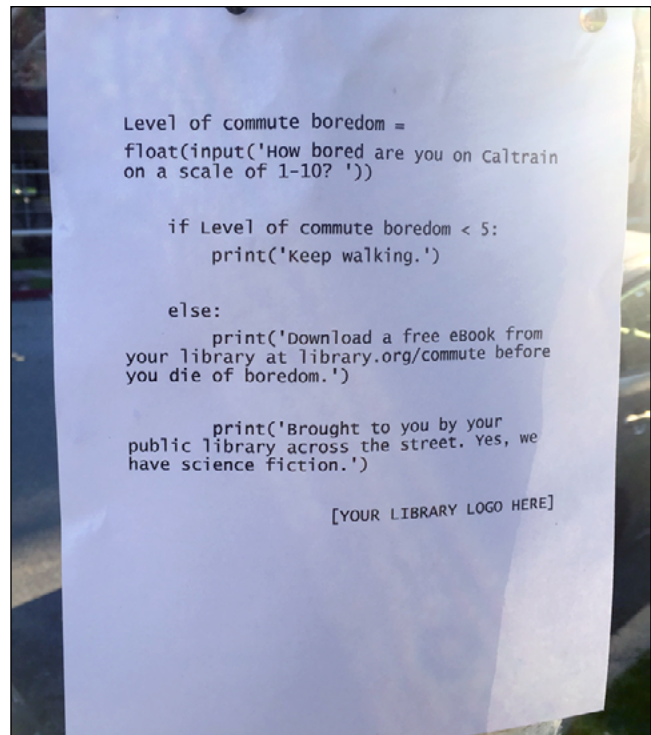


Figure 1. This computer code flyer is aimed at Techie Tom and asks him to sign up for the library’s E-book Service. Image: Spenser Thompson

Example Personas

Techie Tom’s Terminal Boredom

I used to live on the second floor of a Silicon Valley apartment. I would see twenty-somethings walking to and from the Caltrain commuter station with service to Mountain View (where Google and other tech companies are). They would pass my window and then pass the library down the tree-lined street without glancing at it. Did they even know it was there? After making this observation, I created a persona called Techie Tom and invented a library challenge of raising e-book usage.

Who is Techie Tom? Techie Tom wears a T-shirt with a computer programming pun on it. I imagine that he thinks of libraries as antiquated and irrelevant. He finds the commute boring. In fact, his state of mind in general is bored with life. His “movie” is about the search for excitement.

As with film, something unexpected happens to the main character. Techie Tom sees a piece of paper on a tree. He stops because it does not look like an advertisement. Moving closer he sees that it is computer code, an IF/THEN statement that says if he is bored with his commute, he should download some science fiction books from a digital book service of the library. Moments later, Techie Tom buys a sugar donut at the coffee place at the station. He sees the same code on his coffee sleeve. This time he has a minute,



Figure 2. Social Sarah wants to make social connections in college. Image credit: iStock

so he pulls out his phone to scan the QR code and goes to a landing page for the promotion created by the library. There he signs up for an e-book subscription service at a special landing page created by the library staff. A generic example would be www.yourlibrary.org/commute. When he fills out the e-book registration form on the landing page, he starts climbing out of his dull life.

Social Sarah's College Adventure

Consider breathing life into a persona called Social Sarah, who is attending the prefreshman program at your university. Like Techie Tom, she thinks libraries are irrelevant and antiquated. She is very extroverted and very anxious about college. Perhaps she is afraid that falling behind academically during her first term will affect her social life. Given her social bent and the large amount of new experiences competing for her attention, she may never find the library; so the library staff has to find her. Libraries might want to partner with a sorority to find Social Sarahs that can wear T-shirts about the library around campus or serve as greeters. Social Sarah might show up to prefreshman week hoping to get a fast start on her social connections. This is a great time for a librarian to address the students. Getting ahead of your competitors for Social Sarah's attention, for example the student union, is a good strategy.

The Last Scene of the Movies

The last scene of these persona movies does not show librarians jumping up and down because e-book usage rose. These movies are about the users, not the library staff. In the last scene of Techie Tom's movie, he gets inspired by the sci-fi e-book and builds a huge rocket in his garage and blasts off in it. Social Sarah gets in a band with some cool kids and a bass-playing librarian. They organize a concert in front of the library. The college dean wanders by and tells the library director she will fund a concert space in the library. Now that's a Hollywood ending.

References

1. Sam Kusnitz, "The Definition of a Buyer Persona [in Under 100 Words]," *Hubspot* (blog), March 8, 2014, <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/buyer-persona-definition-under-100-sr>.
2. Lauren Hintz, "What is the Buyer's Journey?" *Hubspot* (blog), June 15, 2016, <https://blog.hubspot.com/sales/what-is-the-buyers-journey>.