The State of Buyer Personas 2012

by Tony Zambito (June 2012)

This June marks ten years since the first buyer persona development methodology was first introduced. Over the past ten years it has been quite a journey. Much has happened and much has changed. The adoption of research-based modeling of buyers that leads to buyer personas has been mixed. The rise in popularity of the term has also been a mixed blessing. It has resulted in many misguided definitions and practices that have not produced the potential results other organizations have seen when the goal-based modeling methodology is utilized. The organizations who have embraced the goal-based modeling methodology for research-based buyer personas have seen tremendous success in uncovering new opportunities for revenue growth.

The State of Buyer Personas 2012

Buyer personas today are becoming more widely used by marketing and sales organizations than ten years ago. Understanding about buyer personas and their place in the grander effort of modeling buyers to inform marketing and sales strategies ranges from harmful misperceptions to evolving maturity levels profoundly transforming organizations. Today's business leaders can reach a maturity level that allows for a robust practice of modeling buyers whereby buyer personas are one of the tools used for both descriptive and predictive buyer modeling. The following 7 areas are reflective thoughts on the current state of buyer personas:

1. Buyer Persona Sophistication On The Rise

Personas first emerged as a tool for design in 1999 when Alan Cooper published *The Inmates Are Running The Asylum*. It was in this book that the term buyer persona was first used although to point out that the focus of design should be

on user personas as opposed to buyer personas. I was privileged to be a witness and participant to the development of the goal-based modeling methodology created by a cast of innovative thinkers for design personas focused on users. This same methodology serves as a foundation for what later became a specific goal-based modeling methodology for marketing and sales personas focused on the buyer. Today, in 2012, the understanding of this methodology is unevenly understood yet buyer personas are evolving into a more sophisticated modeling tool being used by marketing and sales organizations.

2. Success Dependent Upon Modeling

We are seeing organizations attempt researching buyer personas for the first time while others attempt to take limited success with buyer personas to new maturity levels. There is a direct correlation to success and the foundational understanding of the goal-based modeling methodology when it comes to buyer personas in general. Robust understanding of buyer personas as a modeling tool versus a profiling tool helps to ensure that they are effective and do what they are designed to do – inform marketing and sales strategies. In cases where I have seen poor results, lack of adoption, and inappropriate use, these can usually be traced back to the misunderstanding of buyer personas as a detailed profiling exercise. Much of the offered templates and practices are buyer profiles masquerading as buyer personas. Business leaders today will need to be more discerning as the proliferation of the term buyer persona becomes more widely used by consultants and agencies to describe what amounts to as profiling. Determining whether consultants or agencies are trained and skilled in the goal-based modeling methodology foundational to personas becomes an imperative.

3. Modeling Takes Center Stage

A development on the rise is organizations today are beginning to make the connection between understanding new and fast-evolving buyer behaviors and the need to understand these behaviors through modeling. Buyer personas are

best defined as the modeling of buyer behaviors, the key attributes of buyers, and most importantly the goals of buyers. In the past few years, through co-creation efforts with Fortune 100 companies, we began to see robust modeling expanding beyond just the concept of a single buyer persona to that of modeling key dynamics of the overall buyer experience such as buying scenarios, mental models, values, and experience. Additionally, we are seeing more robust efforts in descriptive, narrative, and predictive buyer modeling that represent a comprehensive view of behaviors associated with individuals as well as with companies.

4. Research-Based Understanding Gaining Momentum

Personas are developed from primary qualitative research with real customers. Specifically it calls for the type of qualitative research that is grounded in a robust understanding of goal theory. Personas are not created, crafted or constructed as in the world of profiling. Personas represent a distinct set of patterns uncovered in research and represent the illumination of buyer's behaviors, goals, and experiences that inform. At this state of buyer personas in 2012, companies are beginning to realize that poorly researched and template-based persona profiling may be proving to do more harm than good. This important aspect of buyer personas and buyer modeling is beginning to grow solid roots in the minds of many business leaders – particular those who have wasted budgets on poor profiling based efforts imitating as personas.

5. Addressing Complexity

The significant shifts in buyer behaviors in the past few years have left companies struggling to deal with increasingly new dynamics of complexity. Particularly those who have large bases of existing customers and have seen the mix of channels used by customers become more diverse as well as integrated. Organizations are beginning to address newer forms of complexity by improving understanding of buyers by behavioral groups and focusing on the goals of

buyers. At this state, the adoption of this approach has been mixed. Some organizations have come to misunderstand buyer personas as a tool only for messaging and content marketing. Thus, the focus can shift to a narrow profiling view intended to help with writing content as opposed to the intended focus on helping business leaders and stakeholders to make informed decisions based on an outside-in view of customers. Efforts in buyer modeling and buyer personas help companies to cut through the complexity and to prioritize tactical and strategic measures that best connect with customers. The highest return on the modeling of buyers with the use of buyer personas and other modeling tools is when they help to optimize all facets of the buyer experience as opposed to a limited scope of just messaging.

6. Buyer Persona Lifespan

The rapid pace of changes occurring in technologies and the impact they have on buyer behaviors means that the lifespan of research-based buyer personas has considerably shortened. This is causing a shift in thinking about researching buyer personas from a periodic one-time event to a view of ongoing buyer research whereby buyer models are continuously updated. This is one of the most profound changes occurring in the field of buyer modeling and use of the modeling tool we know as buyer personas. Companies striving to remain relevant to their customers will need to constantly update their knowledge of evolving channels and buyer preferences and how they relate to buyer goals.

7. The Next Frontier: The Rise Of Sales Personas

After ten years, I've witnessed the rise of buyer personas as a concept embraced by primarily marketing albeit with mixed results. What I am witnessing over the past couple of years is what may be counter intuitive to the current notion about buyers being elusive, hidden, invisible, becoming buyer 2.0 or 3.0, and many other similar descriptors. I do not buy into these views based on insights from conducting qualitative research directly with buyers. Here's what I am seeing as

the next frontier: buyers are seeking more interaction and connection and not necessarily more content to read. Our definitions and concepts of interaction and connection will undergo transformation due to rapidly changing technologies. Buyers today see new technologies as a means to enable stronger interaction and connection – not as a means to be elusive or to hide. However, it ups the game for companies to be even more relevant than they ever had to be in their existence. Based on ROI and revenue growth impact alone, in the totality of the buyer persona development efforts I have conducted, the most impact from an ROI standpoint have been those originating from sales.

This leads me to another belief that may be counter intuitive: poised to enable this stronger form of interaction and connection is sales. Sales as we know it today will undergo further transformation yet I see its role becoming more prominent in developing the closer connections buyers seek. Buyer modeling and the modeling tool of buyer personas will be an enabling process for companies to transform their sales organizations into a gateway for buyers to make the interactions and connections they seek. While marketing personas have gravitated towards a specialized focus on content marketing, I see the rise of sales personas emerging to inform understanding and strategies that result in stronger connections with buyers. I am excited to be working on specific goal-based modeling methodology to address the role of sales personas utilized towards lead development, lead nurturing, social selling, inside selling growth, account-based marketing and sales, and buyer conversation effectiveness.

We've come a long way with the concept of modeling buyers and the tool of buyer personas. Yet, we have a long way to go. One constant we can count on is that buyer behavior will continue to change just as rapidly as new technologies are evolving. The use of descriptive and predictive buyer modeling tools such as buyer personas and buyer scenario models will become an important part of helping companies to make informed decisions on their future strategies.