

The Design Untangled Podcast
Episode: DU003 – Persona or Perso-nah?
Hosts: Chris Mears and Carla Lindarte
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[Intro Music]

[00:17] **Chris:** Hello and welcome to the third episode of Design Untangled with me Chris Mears and my co-host, Carla Lindarte.

[00:24] **Carla:** Hello. Hello, Chris. Hello everyone. Good to be here for the third time now.

[00:30] **Chris:** Oh, that's a trilogy now, isn't it?

[00:32] **Carla:** I know. It's exciting, isn't it? We haven't really had any comments from the second one, so hopefully someone is going to give us some feedback at some point. Maybe they just stopped listening, right but we do have people who have listened, haven't we?

[00:49] **Chris:** Yeah, I think we can just take it that they all thought the content was awesome and required no further discussion. That's how I'm interpreting it.

[00:58] **Carla:** Yeah, everyone loved it, so that's great. So what do you think about personas, Chris? What's your opinion about personas?

[01:08] **Chris:** I think that will come out through the course of the episode. We should probably start by maybe describing what they are first. That's always a good place to start. So they are a deliverable essentially, which aims to kind of wrap up what you think your users are in terms of their goals and motivations, who they are, their likes, their dislikes, what kind of pain points they experience. Ideally this should all be based on actual research that you're doing. As we will probably discuss, that's not always the case, but they kind of look like, I guess, dating profiles a little bit. So you've normally got - we spoke about them in the first episode a little bit - that kind of a cheesy stock image or a little quote, that kind of sums up what they're about, what their thoughts and

feelings are, maybe a couple of different scales showing different attributes they might have, and that can vary depending what you're designing, and then usually some other bullshit people put on there, like they've got two cats or they like polos or something.

[02:23] **Carla:** Exactly. Well that's a very good description of what personas are. It is a deliverable, but how useful do you think they are? I mean, let's start by saying, how many times in your life...Heck, I can actually tell you how many times someone have asked me to create personas. Oh, could you just do some personas for tomorrow? Aside more than 30 times I've been asked to create personas, like out of the blue and once you finish doing them even if you do research or not, sometimes I wonder how useful do you think they are? How many times do you actually use them or how many times do you refer back to them? So I don't know, they ended up being more like a deliverable as you said, that kind of sits in someone's laptop, or I had this client once that they asked for some kind of life size personas. They were actually taller than me because they were on the job...

[03:23] **Chris:** The personas were taller than you?

[03:23] **Carla:** Yes, they were taller than me. They were really creepy and they are always looking at us, but no one really referred back to them. They just looked cool.

[03:34] **Chris:** Like Mona Lisa or something.

[03:37] **Carla:** Yeah, exactly. So, yeah, I always wonder how useful do you think they are? You know,

[03:44] **Chris:** well I think to be useful, they've got to be used in the design process, right? So they've got to help you actually move your designs on or understand something new. And I think what tends to happen, which is one of the problems with them is they kind of get done. Sometimes, it's without any input from the team or whatever researcher or whoever it is, types them up, sticks them on the wall and that's the end of their life really. They just sit there staring at you while you do your wire frames or whatever. I worked at a place that had say, probably about 40 personas or

something, which is just ridiculous. They had a Chinese hacker was one of the personas. How many Chinese hackers have you interviewed to come up with that persona? Yeah, it was just crazy.

[04:37] **Carla:** Yeah, that is always... My God, a Chinese hacker. I've never heard that before. Yeah, so lots of personas like IED, a couple of intranet projects as well, and companies always think that every single role in their organization is a different persona because they have so many different needs. Well they don't really. Like if you think about an employee, you always gonna have very similar needs, regardless of the level that you are at, so that's the problem of becoming just a deliverable or a communication tool. I think is a good idea to have them sometimes because it just helps people relate to particular scenarios or particular context or a particular behavior, because... right? Because they're more like a calm stew and a kind of design thinking too. But at the end of the day, sometimes if you, as you said, if you don't keep referring back to them, they just end up being completely useless. They don't really have any purpose and you don't always need them either. It's also very traditional kind of UX process. People think, okay, we need some personas, then we need some user journeys. Then we need wire frames. It doesn't really work like that anymore. It was a process that everyone followed, but I don't really think that's the case anymore.

[06:06] **Chris:** Yeah. I mean that will probably be a common theme in this podcast. There is no ideal UX processes. Probably one that kind of people thought was the ideal process, but as it's got tried and tested more and actually delivering products and services, it's had to change and sometimes some things are appropriate, sometimes they're not. And I think the thing with personas is if they're not helping your team deliver a product, then what's the point of them really?

[06:37] **Carla:** Yeah, right. That's so true, and also if I think about a moment or product where I did personas, it was one of my retail clients. Obviously we wanted to come up with a series of design principles and we wanted to understand the customer base. So when you have a brief like that, and they said, oh, we want some personas, so where do you start? So we started by just looking at the existing kind of segmentation of

customer, target audience, that majority of companies, if you're working for a big company and a small company, you kind of need to have an idea what your target customers are, and you start by looking at that. In that case for example, they obviously have stores. So we went to the store, we looked at different people, we did a lot of observation as well as very short interviews with people to understand like common behavior, common patterns, and then we came up with a series of initial what we call archetypes, so types of customers, and then we did a lot of more in depth research with those people and we'd travel around the country and we partied a lot as well, and we interviewed lots of people, and at the end of the day, we kind of verified whether or not our initial assumptions on these type of customers or at least...cause for me personas don't really represent a type of customer. For me, they represent an extreme behavior. So they need to represent something that's very different to the other. If they end up being very similar, you have to really reconsider whether or not you need two personas or three or four, because it's not about the number of personas as you said. It's about the behavior they represent. So that was the case where we actually had some time to do personas in a professional way, cause I've done personas like seriously in an hour.

[08:44] **Chris:** Some of the stuff we use them for where I think they were useful, as you say, it's to test that kind of extreme ends of the scale. So in government you kind of have to design for every citizen and a good deal of the population will be broadly similar in what they need to kind of do and accomplish, but you've also got those more edge case type people. So I know someone that's just had their kid taken away from them by social services or whatever. It's a good, I think, kind of exercise to put that in front of the team with your screens or whatever it is, and walk through that flow as that person and see how that journey might be different for them. So certain language might not be appropriate for that person in that frame of mind, and they can be a good tool for stretching your thinking and identifying problems that you might not otherwise have seen.

[09:41] **Carla:** Yeah, that's true. It's kind of a way of having more empathy with the type of people you're designing for, but they don't necessarily need to be scientific as well, but they need to be very different to each other, to really, as you said, to really try to

look at the problems or the journeys or whatever you design in from different types of eyes, so it kind of removes the bias of designing for yourself, or designing for just yourself and your colleagues and it's just kind of bringing in some external insight into what are you doing

[10:16] **Chris:** How much of that do you think is kind of for yourself as a UX designer, versus kind of sharing it with your team?

[10:26] **Carla:** That's a very good question. I think it all depends on the context. I think it's a very useful tool for clients as well so they start understanding there'd be more different behaviours. I think for yourself as a UX designer it's very, very useful, but then the more you share it with your team, or at least the more you encourage your team to think about those different behaviours and context, the more useful is going to be because you shouldn't really be designing by yourself anyway in isolation. You need to have a team with you. So the more you communicate that to your team and just try to bring them back into real people, I think the better it is.

[11:07] **Chris:** Yeah. I don't think necessarily personas are the only way to do that. You can build up that kind of team knowledge just by people observing or participating in research generally. So you know, probably it will have a lot more of an impact if they've, you know, let's take the same example and seeing that lady talking about when her kid was taken away by social services. If they've seen that on a research video or whatever, I think that's gonna make them think about that person's needs a lot more than a paper stuck on a wall potentially.

[11:43] **Carla:** Or the life-size persona looking at you. Yeah. Yeah. I totally think that, I mean research, but I also, I think personas are useful as well to start at screening your participants, because different contexts and different experiences as you described of that lady talking about that situation. It is a result of coming up with a series of screeners or what would you call screeners in a non-jargon way. So participant profiles then you need to come up with to start recruiting for your research. So personas are always a good starting point. I mean if you at least have an idea of the type of people who would

be using your product or service that helps you create a particular brief to start recruiting for those participants.

[12:30] **Chris:** I guess, how are you coming up with that profile before you've spoken to the people that you need speak to, to create that profile with you? See what I mean?

[12:40] **Carla:** Yeah, but you need to have a starting point, and then as I said, you go back to what is your target audience? What are the most typical type of customers who interact with your product? I also used to use a lot of social media listening tools as well, or even going into social media itself. If you don't have time to do research to come up with customer profiles or different types of persona types, you could go on social media and you really look at when people interact with a particular brand, you see common patterns and common behaviours and comments and more like that qualitative data that you need to [unclear;13:23] those people and social media listening skills as well are very useful, like in a retail environment for example, you can go and look at what people are saying in your brand, what kind of demographics they are, where they are located, what do they actually say and go into the detail of the comments. So that's another way of framing those initial profiles, and as you said, with research, you could validate whether or not they're right and keep reaching those type of people, if that makes sense.

[13:53] **Chris:** Yeah, I guess the risk with that, and it's something you need to kind of make sure you recruit for as well, is that you're only gonna learn about people that can be bothered to talk about your brands on social media in the first place. So there's probably a good deal with customers, you know, they shop with you or whatever but they don't potentially love you enough to shout about it on Twitter or whatever. Say you need to way of kind of reaching those customers as well to learn more about them.

[14:21] **Carla:** Yeah, exactly. I mean, as I said, it's just the starting point, but you still need to go and talk to people and look at data, look at what people actually do. If you have an existing website or app, to start coming up with that more realistic profile, and that's what I think is not about a type of person. I'm going to refer back to these jobs to

be done book that I highly recommend. The good thing about jobs to be done rather than personas is actually that unlike personas, they talk about core or macro behaviours or needs that kind of apply to everyone as a person, if that makes sense. One of the things that people always talk about, oh, millennials do this and millennials do that. I've met a lot of people who sit within the millennial kind of profile, but they don't really have millennial behaviours, and sometimes people like me who is obviously old and don't fit into the millennial category, I could have more millennial behaviours than a millennial, because obviously of the industry I'm in, because of the context where I live. So that's what I think when you think about core goals, main jobs to be done, you kind of go beyond the type of person or the demographic or who they are or whether they have children or not, you know? And then you go into the core of what are those things and problems or things that people want to do in their interaction with your brand. And that's what I think more and more personas are being more irrelevant in the design.

[16:01] **Chris:** Yeah. So it sounds like that's a lot more geared to understanding what their desired user journey is, right. If it's about tasks that they want to complete, and how they might want to complete those tasks. That's very much a user journey style exercise.

[16:19] **Carla:** Yeah. Cause if you think about the value of a persona, it's more about the context that they bring, their behavior that they bring, rather than whether or not they're female or male, or they live here or there, or they have children or not. You know what I mean? Cause this is a bit irrelevant. That's just my opinion, and I know there's a lot of UX designers out there who would completely disagree with what I'm saying, because they think personas is always the starting point but I don't think that's the case anymore. It's a bit like an old fashion. It's kind of a myth.

[17:00] **Chris:** They don't really exist, these things we've just spent the last 45 minutes talking about. The problem is a lot of the time they're not based on actual research. They're just kind of a company's internal view of what they think they users are like. They're full of random information that doesn't help you validate your designs. They're just done by one person or they're based on kind of a marketing persona, which isn't

really gonna help you validate your designs again. Oh, they're 18-25 year old Male, whatever the economic characteristics are, stuff like that and I think that's probably given them a bit of a bad rap, whereas if they were properly researched, the whole team is involved in creating them, maybe they might be kind of better repute.

[17:51] **Carla:** Yeah, and also I don't think that anything in design, you stop designing them, if that makes sense? Okay, I've done the personas, I'm ticking the box. That's it. There is my reference point because there isn't enough research you could do to really understand like... I mean you could even use spend let's say three months coming out with personas. You still going to learn more about your customer base as you go through user testing, as you go through more generative research, interviews and stuff like that. What I'm trying to say is that if you're going to use them, use them properly and keep enriching them as you go, not like, okay, deliverable done. This is it and this is what my personas are, because that could really change very, very quickly in the design process.

[18:39] **Chris:** What do you think about proto-personas?

[18:43] **Carla:** Proto-personas?

[18:45] **Chris:** Yeah, so they're basically kind of a lean approach to personas. So again, they should be based on actual research, but it's more rather than creating a whole kind of A4 sheet with a picture and all the other rubbish that goes along with it, it's more like a couple of bullet points that gets to the core of what that user's about. So it might be like suffers from high anxiety and spends all their disposable income on crap they don't need or whatever. And I think the idea behind it is the Fillon kind of persona thing is hard for people to keep in their heads as one whole cohesive thing to think about when you're challenging your designs, whereas if you've got a couple of bullet points, which really are those kind of behaviours or whatever that you're most interested in, that can be a much better tool to help people focus their thinking.

[19:42] **Carla:** Yeah, I mean I have to say that I call them light personas, but I think it's the same thing, but I have to say that it goes back to my point before, it is not so much

about the persona, it's about the behavior. So wonder how much of that persona kind of person with a picture like cheesy picture on it do you actually need? What'd you just need to identify is the core behavior. The thing is that it is easy to relate to a person and once you look at a picture and once you look at the context of that person kind of as a human being, you tend to relate more with that than if you just see a behavior, but at the end of the day is all about those extreme behaviours as you said.

[20:27] **Chris:** I think that's the problem there, right. It's hard to develop empathy with a stock image or even if it's not a stock image of the user that you've never seen or spoken to in your life, it's just a random picture on a page, and I'm not entirely convinced that that breeds too much empathy.

[20:48] **Carla:** No, and to be honest, I've designed my personas around people I know - Pete, Catherine, Lizzy. Chris, you've been one of my personas, because when you don't have time for research, you have to relate back to what you know. How much of that is actually relevant. Well, I don't want my clients to know that I've done all of that for them, but it's not very relevant, because they don't really represent that reality. They just represent one buyer's view of what that behavior is.

[21:23] **Chris:** I'm curious to know what was on my persona now

[21:27] **Carla:** You were really unhappy. It was a very unhappy persona. Very unhappy. And what else? I don't remember what I said. I think you were like a treasure hunter or something.

[21:39] **Chris:** Treasure hunter?

[21:41] **Carla:** Yeah. Likes discounts?

[21:43] **Chris:** I don't know about cheap stuff. I've got very expensive taste.

[21:46] **Carla:** Have you ever done a persona based on someone you know?

[21:48] **Chris:** Other than the Chinese hacker, no.

[21:53] **Carla:** Okay. And it's harder when you can't relate to the topic. So if you're doing personas that I don't know, medical professionals or things like that and you don't know about, you really need to kind of go deeper into who they are and what they do, but if it is about ecommerce, if it is about things that you relate with easily, I think they are slightly easier today because you kind of have a context of what that means.

[22:20] **Chris:** Yeah, and ecommerce behaviours are reasonably well understood. I'd say just as one sort of industry wide thing. So there's probably a lot of material you can get just by reading around to get a sense of who your customers might be and what type of behaviours they're likely to do in, on an online at least ecommerce experience.

[22:42] **Carla:** Yeah, exactly. I mean the online ecommerce is very similar. People just want to achieve the same things. It's just more about the branding and more about the actual kind of differences in the brand than, to be honest, the customer behavior, because at the end of the day, people want to do the same, that is buy quickly and have a very good checkout process and be able to look at the product detail page and look at the details. It's very similar. It's more about how that relates back to your brand. So whether you're a discount retailer or luxury retailer and that's where personas can play a role to represent those behaviours that are more relevant to the brand. But at the end of the day, it's just the same thing.

[23:26] **Chris:** Slightly different slant in the public sector world where the problems are very unique. The users are actually very unique, depending on their circumstances. It's not something where you can necessarily always learn by what other places have done. You know, it's stuff like applying for divorce. There's probably a whole host of academic stuff out there, but there's not many apply for a divorce website. There's one, which is the government one, and you can't really rely on other "industry" sources to develop your understanding that way. Well, though personas might not be the answer, I think there's more case for doing sort of the first hand research to get that initial understanding, rather than having necessarily too many channels to piece it together otherwise.

[24:20] **Carla:** Yeah, I think that's different. Yeah, definitely. Different scenarios, different types of life services that you provide. But ecommerce and things like that, they're very similar.

[24:31] **Chris:** So you've got anything else on personas?

[24:33] **Carla:** Oh, not really. I haven't done personas in a very long time so I have to say that, and I think more and more I would do them less and less.

[24:43] **Chris:** I think as a beginner of what they can do in order to help sort of with learning UX is being able to distil your research into, I guess findings might be a strong word, but try and get to the core of what you've understood about those users. So just as a sort of exercise to do to help you get better at UX turning kind of if you'd done a bunch of interviews and stuff into let's say, four or five core personas might help you understand what you think the differences are between those different users. You might not necessarily use them much after that, but just as a way of sorting out in your head what you've learnt, they can be potentially quite good.

[25:30] **Carla:** Yeah, that's true. And then you realize that you perhaps don't need 4. You perhaps only need 2, because they are like radically different and they represent two main type of behavior, and it's a good starting point to start mapping out all the different themes and these themes, how they relate to particular scenarios and behaviours and how they relate to persona. And so, it's a good exercise, but they don't have to be always personas. They could be just key insights, the key things that you learned. So again, going back to the purpose of this podcast. It's not about a deliverable. It's not about what people say. It's all about what is useful for you in that same process. Sometimes personas are, sometimes personas are not useful. So there's not a right or wrong answer, isn't it?

[26:23] **Chris:** Yup. Okay. I think we can probably wind it up there. Anything else?

[26:27] **Carla:** No, no, no, no, no. So I would like to ask people who are listening to this, if you haven't stopped listening because you thought we were really boring, to give us

any feedback, any topics you want us to talk about or anything that you want us to do that we haven't done yet, which probably is a lot, please let us know. You can follow us on at ... is it design untangled?

[26:55] **Chris:** Yeah, that's the name of the podcast, so I thought that would probably be a good Twitter handle

[27:00] I was gonna say untangled design. @designuntangled on Twitter, if you want just to give us some feedback cause it's really cool to have people telling us even how shit we are.

[27:12] **Chris:** If you can leave us a review, good or bad on Apple podcasts, iTunes really helps us kind of get discovered by other people as well, especially as we're new. Yeah, I think that's it. So we will see you next time.

[27:27] **Carla:** Bye-bye everyone. Thank you. Bye.