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Joseph Jeyaraj, *New York City College of Technology (CUNY)*

Audience Personas: Audience Analysis Documentation for Rhetorical Technical Communications

Scott Mogull

Texas State University

Abstract: An important trend in the expansion of audience analysis from technical and professional communication is the development of audience personas, or documentation of the typified audience characteristics, as technical buyer personas in the field of technical content marketing or user personas in the field of user experience (UX). This article provides technical communicators with an audience persona template that is a composite of the documentation used in industry. Audience persona documentation transforms audience analysis theory into communication practice and prepares technical communicators for positions in technical content marketing and user experience. The coupled audience analysis and recoding of findings in the audience persona documentation helps design technical and professional communications as well as user interfaces. The audience persona also can be used for sharing the concept of a target audience among writers, editors, and media publishers.

Keywords: audience analysis, technical buyer personas, Funnel-Bucket Model, technical content marketing

In order to maximize the effectiveness of communications, technical communicators identify and evaluate relevant characteristics and motivations of target audiences and create rhetorically effective communications that provide useful content presented in an appropriately engaging style for specific audiences. In technical content marketing, technical buyer personas are one- to two-page summaries that highlight a typified customer role, needs, wants, and relevant demographics for communication in context to company developing the communication (Mohr, Sengupta, & Slater, 2010; Puska et al., 2018). A technical buyer persona, or audience personal, is formal documentation following an

audience analysis in order to summarize the analysis and insights into one or more target audience group(s), that, in aggregate, comprise the complete audience for an organization. Similarly, technical user personas are UX documentation that characterize a target user audience for a particular technology.

The objective of this article is to provide the background and template to create an audience persona for technical and professional communication. In this example from technical content marketing, technical buyer personas are then used to develop audience-specific marketing communications for specifically targeted audiences that are potential customer groups. As a familiar form of professional communication, marketing is a field that students find intuitive as to the goal and objectives of the communications. Thus, the audience persona is also more closely grounded in the type of communication and documentation that technical and professional communicators use in industry. For programs, this piece exposes students to the inner workings of professional content marketers at organizations like Content Marketing Institute (contentmarketinginstitute.com) or a global organization like the World Economic Forum (weforum.org). This FOCUS article creates a bridge to connect academics with like-minded industry practitioners sharing similar activities and approaches in profiling and reaching their intended audiences.

Technical Content Marketing

Technical content marketing positions technical products and services to target consumers based on the needs and wants from those individuals (Harner & Zimmerman, 2002; Rogers, 2003; Moore, 2014; Mogull, 2021; Mogull, 2023). As illustrated in Figure 1, the Funnel-Bucket Model provides a framework for planning the advertising and marketing strategy of an organization and, more specifically, publishing different technical content marketing genres at various stages of a customer decision journey (Ames, 2017; Mogull, 2023). As illustrated by the Funnel-Bucket Model, each stage (defined as *attention*, *interest*, and *desire*) narrows the size of the audience for an organization and technology, which will eventually progress to the action stage of product purchase. Notably, following product purchase at the *action* stage, actual customers enter the organization's communication ecosystem and become audiences for *support* documentation, *loyalty* communications, and brand *advocacy* cues to become brand ambassadors.

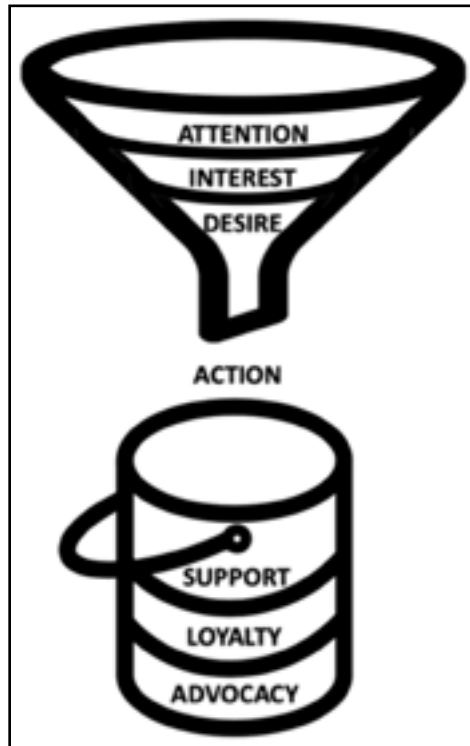


Figure 1. The Funnel-Bucket Model showing the stages for potential target audiences and technology customers in the planning of technical content marketing (which include both genres and media selection). Source: Mogull (2023).

A technical content marketing strategy emphasizes the coordination of all communications about a product, with messaging that provides relevant, useful, and consistent information relevant to a product through multiple media and interpersonal sources (Pulizzi, 2014; Ames, 2017). Importantly, technical content marketing becomes multimedia publications in which various genres reach target audiences and ultimately promote sales (Pulizzi, 2014; Calhoun, 2006). This coordinated communication and content management strategy is complex in the genres, communication channels, and media used to reach potential audiences (Pulizzi, 2014; Lane Keller, 2001). Technical content marketing provides the foundation for an overall publication or content strategy. More nuanced technical content marketing, or the content marketing of technical products, is necessary to adapt general technical communications to the unique contexts and characteristics of specific consumers. This is an important stage in providing individualized communication from an organization to the external individuals who make the organization possible. For technology, technical content marketing is further refined and then targeted to different audiences with various attitudes towards technologies at different timepoints following the launch of a new technology (Mogull, 2021; 2023).

Audience Analysis to Audience Persona

The technical buyer persona is an audience persona that integrates key concepts from audience analysis and technical content marketing to provide technical communicators with an increased awareness of the audience characteristics that influence rhetorical technical and professional communications (Henson, 1994; Mohr, Sengupta, & Slater, 2010). The rhetorical intent of technical content marketing to sell brand-name technology to address a human need. In some situations, marketing and advertising are positioned to transform a human want into a perceived human need (Mogull, 2010). As Foucault (2004) illuminated, organizations transform normal human conditions and needs into consumer demand for technology. Although ethical technical content marketing is originally grounded in the product concept and decisions for commercialization by an organization, the resulting rhetorical shift of technical and professional communications from a company transforms informative technical communication into persuasive technical content marketing that may lack ethical and legal foundations (Bryan, 1992; Foucault, 2004; Goulding, 1983; Einstein, 2017; Mogull, 2022; Mogull, in press; Schnaars, 1989). An audience persona is an important tool and document that technical communicators may use to assist in evaluating excessive rhetorical power from organizational communications.

In 2013, Ross introduced the field to the Deep Audience Analysis (DAA) method as an approach to investigate audience motivations and expectations. Ross' (2013) original instrument, the DAA, was innovative in documenting the evolving methods of audience analysis from interviews and practitioner coding. More recently, audience profiling has moved into automated computer systems that analyze social media and online profiles to develop a detailed audience profile from a digital footprint (IBM, 2021). Although such computer systems and massive data repositories are beyond the scope of most technical communicators, a similar approach can be achieved by a conventional content analysis of purposely selected online artifacts. Such an approach is used in the technical buyer persona for technical content marketing (see Appendix 1) in which audience information comes from content analysis, surveys, or interviews of individuals, social media accounts of actual or potential consumers, and social media influences in the marketplace. In order to check the shared vision of the audience, technical communicators should also perform a content analysis of competitor communications and news media designed for this target audience.

Program Connections

The audience profile activity can be used to connect audience analysis for target audiences of technical content marketing and specific users for user experience of a specific technology. As a form of internal team documentation, the audience profile is useful for developing future communications that directly connect insights from audience analysis research into communication practice. Although the audience profile is not the only means for documenting an audience analysis, this composite of buyer personas from industry—particularly used by tech companies—prepares technical communication students for positions in technical

content marketing and UX. Specifically, the technical buyer persona presented in Appendix 1 is a prototypical composite of the predominant categories and features that inform a typified audience member for designing targeted communications. Although this is a qualitative approach that differs from the more quantitative methods patented by IBM (2021), an informed technical communicator will develop greater insight into the target audience by completing the research independently and adapting this profile to the context and rhetoric objectives of the intended corporate communication. The audience profile helps position messages and media for a specific target audience and multiple audience profiles should be completed for each targeted audience prior to creating and publishing communications. The documentation of this audience persona transforms audience analysis approaches into documented communication practice and helps prepare technical communicators for future positions in technical content marketing, user experience, and general organizational communication positions. Finally, this audience persona also can be used for sharing the concept of a target audience among industry writers, editors, and media publishers so that different team members share a vision of the audience prior to their role in the communication process (Spartz & Weber, 2015).

Conclusions

Strategic technical communication depends on planning, analysis, and development through multiple cycles and individuals. Without a documented audience persona, technical communicators are continuously having to recreate an imagined audience—often distant from the origin of the original audience analysis. Furthermore, communication teams—or groups of writers, editors, designers, and publishers—typically lack a shared vision of the agreed-upon audience. This gap of shared vision and lack of detailed documentation in technical and professional communication results in disparate communication visions and objectives that do not have a shared upon image that can be used later for evaluation of technical content marketing immediately prior to publishing (Pulizzi, 2013).

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Appendix 1

Technical Persona Profile

Company Overview

Instructions: Identify the organization and technology or service that is being positioned for this audience.

Company/Organization: XYZ Solar Company

Technology (Product/Service): Home Solar Panel

Target Audience

Instructions: Select an easy-to-remember name and identify relevant demographics for communication to the composite profile of a target audience.

Name: Erik Environmentalist

Relevant Characteristics (for Technology/Product Use): Homeowner, environmentalist

Relevant Demographic Information that Influences Communications: 42, married with 2 children, middle class, professional occupation, general fitness includes bike and socializes with like-minded fitness couples and singles.

Audience Characteristics

Instructions: For each question below, list and order (in descending order of importance) 3 to 5 unique items. Usually, this information comes from content analysis, surveys, or interviews of individuals, social media accounts of actual or potential consumers, and social media influences in the marketplace. Technical communicators should also perform a content analysis of competitor communications and news media designed for this target audience.

1. Identify adjectives to describe this person.
2. Identify the relevant values of this person.
3. Identify the personal need(s) and/or goal(s) of this individual (which would be addressed by the technology).
4. Identify this person's challenges or frustrations that influence the selection and purchase decision for the technology.
5. Identify why this person would "love" the technology or product.

MBTI Personality Synthesis

Instructions: Using the information above and from additional online research, evaluate each MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) personality characteristic dimension. Circle one number along each dimension. Attempt to position each

dimension to one side of equal balance (number 3) from being moderate (numbers 2 or 4) to intense (numbers 1 or 5). This information is a synthesis of your research and profile from the audience characteristics (above). While not a scientifically accurate personality profile, this reversed profile of a prototypical audience persona will help communicators select content, style, and media for reaching these individuals.

Extrovert	1	2	3	4	5	Introvert
Sensing	1	2	3	4	5	Intuition
Thinking	1	2	3	4	5	Feeling
Judging	1	2	3	4	5	Perceiving

Communication Strategy

Instructions: For each question below, list and order (in descending order of importance) 3 to 5 unique items.

1. Identify a few popular consumer brands that this person likely consumes (brands that connect or resonate with this person).
2. Identify news media and/or social media platforms that this person likely watches or reads regularly.
3. What messages (content or style) will evoke a positive reaction in this person? (What messages should be included in technical content marketing?)
4. What messages (content or style) would evoke a negative reaction in this person? (What messages should be excluded or avoided in technical content marketing?)

Author Information

Dr. Scott Mogull is a Professor of Technical Communication in the Department of English at Texas State University. He is also the Book Review Editor for *Technical Communication Quarterly* and has been an editor at the journal since 2008. His research examines technical content marketing and the commercialization of technology. Prior to entering academia, Dr. Mogull spent nearly a decade in the biotechnology and biodefense industry.