



The Buyer Persona Manifesto | Second Edition

IT'S TIME To Channel The Power of Your Buyer'S auThEnTIC VoICE

by Adele Revella



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“It’s almost like cheating, like getting the exam paper weeks before the final. Instead of guessing what matters, now I know... not only what the customer wants; I know how she goes about it.”

To my great delight, I hear feedback like this all the time from the people I work with. The insights that flow from a skillfully crafted buyer persona usually have that effect, dramatically boosting the confidence of marketers – and their business results.

Apply those insights to messaging and it’s almost like watching a guy who’s been a bad date for decades – droning on about himself without pausing for breath – suddenly discover the wisdom of asking his dinner companion what interests her.

Marketing content, all too often, really is that bad: an endless stream of “me-me-me” spammed out in hopes something will stick. It’s driven by internal objectives with absolutely no thought for the buyer’s concerns.

No wonder they don’t pay the slightest attention to what we say.



And *this* is what changes with a skillfully applied buyer persona. All of a sudden Marketing gains the ability to channel the voice of that long-suffering dinner companion, to tell Mr. Bad Date: “Enough about you already. Listen closely to what *I* want... then tell me what *you’re* going to do about it.”

Done right, that voice comes through with such authority, clarity and precision that nobody can dispute its validity. It’s a continual stream of insight that offers immense strategic value to any organization – value that gives Marketing in-house stature it’s never had before.

Once that insight begins to drive skillful messaging, SOMETHING MAGICAL HAPPENS.

It’s almost as if that dinner companion looks up in astonishment (from the smartphone she’s covertly browsing under the table), thinking, “He’s actually talking to me.” She leans in and begins to pay attention. Respect and trust begin to grow as a meaningful relationship takes shape.

The responses that come back are sometimes near ecstatic; comments like: “Yes! At last someone gets it; let’s talk!” Or, “You guys must have ESP. You must’ve read my mind.”

No paranormal powers are needed to do this, though. No cheating; no stratospheric budget either. Just smart, sustained application of the proven approach to buyer personas that this book will introduce to you.

But it works like magic all the same. And its transformative power is what makes now the best time ever to be a marketer.

we got the picture, but it won’t tell us anything...

“We did the whole persona thing. We know she likes hot yoga and hiking on the weekends. We pegged her as blonde. Her picture is on the marketing room wall and we stare at it. But she won’t tell us anything useful.”

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, as they say.

Fifteen years ago when I began to devote my energies to the buyer persona craft, no one had even heard of it. Over the years I’ve helped many people “**get it**” – and powerfully. But I’ve also seen – mostly from a distance – many people who got the gist but missed the heart of it.

Sure, it’s great to have a picture of your buyer. But pictures don’t talk, and it’s her voice that you need.

Seriously, I’ve heard of marketing teams spending all afternoon arguing over the buyer’s gender – and I know why. Nobody told them what they were supposed to do with the picture once they had it.

That’s the difference in my approach, refined over 15 years. The buyer persona is an archetype, a composite picture. I take marketers a big step further to add the composite voice.

The trick – which took me years to perfect – is to usefully synthesize that composite voice, filtering out tons of noise, to focus precisely on the narratives crucial to the marketing mission.

It’s not that difficult, but you have to be methodical in order to achieve a consistently high level of accuracy and clarity. And I’ve only found one method that can do that; the one I’m going to teach you.

Before I do that, one more question about the applicability of buyer personas. We need to think about **consideration**.





When a consumer picks up a new magazine at a supermarket checkout, very little active consideration may be involved. She doesn't line up five different magazines and make a spreadsheet comparing value and content. She doesn't have to ask permission or solicit input from anyone else. And she can't tell you why she was subliminally attracted by the font on the cover – because she didn't actively consider any of that. So all she might be able to tell you is, "I dunno, it had a nice photo of Caroline Kennedy on the cover...and I've always liked her."

And when planning a vacation you may spend hours researching and considering your choice. Quite likely, you can tell a story about the consideration you put into a decision like that.

Here's the irony...

The buyer persona first captured the attention of B2C marketers as a tool to give them a picture of their consumer: what she looked like; where she lived and worked; what her preferences were across a wide spectrum of product categories. It didn't emphasize capturing the narrative of her buying consideration because with most consumer purchases there isn't much depth to it.

Once B2B marketers caught on to the potential of buyer personas, savvy practitioners began to see the need for an audio track alongside the video. We discovered a whole new dimension of value in buyer personas.

So it's all about consideration. Whether it's B2C or B2B, if a high degree of consideration is involved, the buyer persona can help you understand the dynamics behind the buying decision.

And here's how you get it...

On the other end of the consideration scale is the vendor selection process for a new corporate IT solution. It may take years and involve dozens of people.

Every facet of value and performance is considered to death. The people involved can tell stories till the cows come home about how the decision was reached...if you can get them to spill the beans.

Between the two extremes you find consumer buying decisions that involve a level of consideration almost as intense. When buying a new digital camera or a car many consumers spend hours comparing features and prices and looking up reviews online.

A Question of **CONSIDERATION**

There are two very distinct tribes in marketing, with almost no intermarriage: business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C). Few people jump from one to the other in mid-career. But to me this is a false dichotomy. What separates the two is not actually focus on business versus consumers. It's a question of consideration.

Chapter 1: HOW TO MAKE A PERSONA SING



Let's cut to the chase. Instead of starting with "What's a buyer persona and how do you build one?", let's begin where teams are most apt to fail.

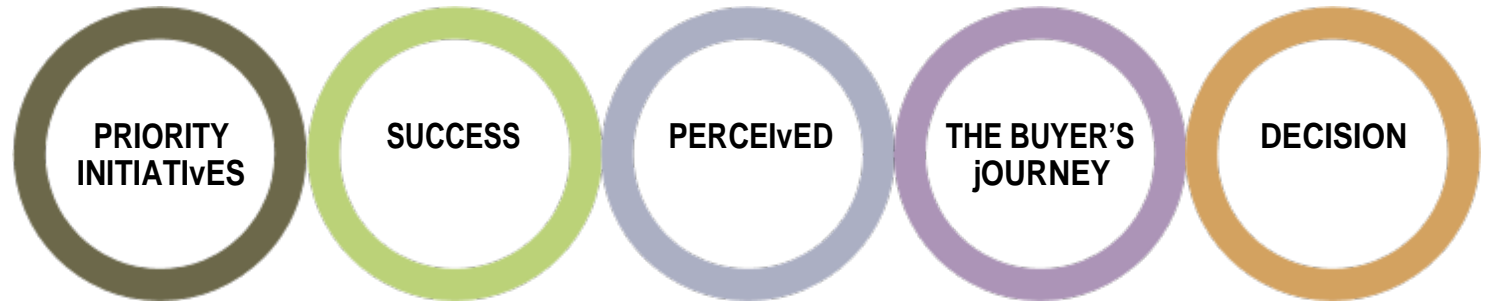
After huge effort, marketers are often disappointed to find their carefully crafted persona has nothing useful to say – just random comments and noise. So everyone's hard work ends up as intranet dust – the e-marketing equivalent to shelfware.

By starting here, though, let's be clear about one thing: I'm not giving you a short-cut, because cutting corners is the quickest route to failure. As we will discuss, getting useful results requires meticulous groundwork. But even the most diligent teams can end up with half-baked results for the most frustrating reason imaginable: they follow a recipe that omits the critical ingredient.

Most buyer persona "cookbooks" focus on creating a picture, a biographical sketch that lets you see the buyer. But they stop short of enabling you to hear what she has to say...much less how to sift from that narrative the fine-grained insights that reveal how you fit into her world.

To get a coherent, useful narrative from dozens or even hundreds of voices that comprise your persona you need a method, a means of filtering and harmonizing what they say. But as no such method existed, I had to create my own proprietary approach. It focuses on attaining – again, methodically – a defined set of insights that combine to create a multi-dimensional, high-definition window on the buyer's world.

It's the result of 15 years of intensive observation and experimentation with hundreds of marketing teams. It's practical, straightforward to implement – and it works.



Chapter 2: 5 RINGS OF BUYING INSIGHT™

Where the Buyer Persona Profile creates a composite picture of the **person** you need to reach, the 5 Rings of Buying Insight™ reveal the **buying decision** you need to influence – telling how, when and why the buyer engages to choose you or a competitor, or to stick with the status quo.

Think of it like a study tool for an exam. The five insights encompass everything you need to know in order to ace the final, saving you from having to pull a needle from a haystack of extraneous material. When you sit for this exam, you know.

- 3 Which buyers are receptive, and which will ignore you no matter what you say
- 3 Which aspects of your solution are relevant to them, and which are irrelevant
- 3 Which attitudes prevent your buyers from considering this approach
- 3 Which resources your buyer will trust as they evaluate their options
- 3 Which buyers are involved in this decision and how much sway they have





PRIORITY INITIATIVES

What causes certain buyers to invest in a solution like yours, and how are they different from buyers who remain attached to the status quo?

In other words, what's really on the buyer's radar? To use an IT example, knowing how old his system is, you may think your buyer is obsessed with replacing it. Meanwhile, what actually keeps him up at night is fear the entire department will move to India. Too often, we arrogantly presume that since what we do is important to us it must be just as important to the buyer. The truth is out there, find it.

But don't confuse this with pain points, and assume you can simply reverse-engineer based on the capabilities of your solution. You want to understand the personal or organizational circumstances that cause your buyers to allocate their time, budget or political capital to resolve the pain. What happens to make this investment a priority for this type of buyer?



SUCCESS FACTORS

What operational or personal results does your buyer persona expect from purchasing this solution?

Success Factors resemble benefits, but this insight is far more specific and it's written from the buyer's perspective. For example, where you might be pushing your solution's power to cut costs, this insight might focus on where the buyer sees opportunity to reduce business risks.

Done right, this insight yields a far more specific and compelling set of factors than anything you can reverse engineer from the capabilities of your solution. Instead of ending up with a ten-word tagline or summary that sounds just like your competitors, you will be armed with a concise statement of your buyers' key expectations.



PERCEIVED BARRIERS

What concerns cause your buyer to believe that your solution or company is not their best option?

I call this the "bad news insight" because it tells you exactly why this buyer will not buy from you. It could be internal resistance from another function or scars from prior experience. It could be a negative perception of your product or company, accurate or not.

You need to know where the barriers are and what's behind them. Who's blocking you up the ladder? Where's that negative impression coming from, social media?

As a result, you may be surprised to find that your most valuable content focuses on overcoming these barriers and addressing objections that your competitors didn't know were there.

THE BUYER'S JOURNEY

...reveals the behind-the-scenes story at each phase of the evaluation

Who's involved? How are solutions evaluated? How does the process unfold as the decision gets made? This insight tracks the stages your buyers go through as they evaluate options, eliminate contenders and settle on a final choice.

Behind the scenes, this can be a very messy process. Your key buyer persona may live in a complex ecosystem that includes all sorts of characters who have a hand in decision-making at various stages of the journey. Who helps your key persona and who gets in her way? We're often surprised to find that the people at the top of the totem pole have less clout than vendors assume.

With an accurate understanding of the journey you can support your buyer with exactly what's needed at each stage. And you can confidently commit your resources where they will have maximum impact, be it social media, content marketing, sales engagement or something entirely creative.

DECISION CRITERIA

Which aspects of the competing offerings do your buyers perceive as most critical, and what do they expect from each one?

This final insight directly informs marketing messaging and content, clarifying the buyer's key questions and the answers they want to hear. But it's equally critical for sales enablement, as it identifies which buyers care about specific features and why.

For example, if the buyer wants an "easy-to-use" solution we dig to find what they mean by that. Where do they want that ease? And how do they go about evaluating which solution is easiest?

We usually focus on revealing the criteria behind three to five capabilities that matter most to the buyer in question. For example, specific product features, implementation issues or price vs. value calculations.



THE RINGS' POWER IS IN THE EXECUTION

Applied diligently, the 5 Rings of Buying Insight™ work wonders. And if you'll excuse my boasting – hey, I'm a marketer! – I'll tell you that my proprietary method is now a key tool at three of the world's five largest software vendors, and increasingly regarded as the B2B industry standard in buyer personas.

Could you find another way to do the same thing? Sure... and you can re-invent the wheel while you're at it. But there's a decisive advantage to following a precise and proven method with this work. Without a very defined, paint-by-numbers path to the goal, I've seen one marketing team after another wander off into the woods, never to be seen again.

It usually happens about two hours into an all-afternoon meeting. Someone pipes up with a bright idea like: "We can cut the cost by skipping all these interviews... we can just have our sales guys fill in the blanks in these rings!"

It's like the short-sighted VC who figures out how much capital a new venture will

need to succeed, then hedges his bets by halving the amount.

For years I tried to follow the old proverb: "Give a man a fish and you'll feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you'll feed him for a lifetime." I thought, if I teach people the principles they can do it all by themselves. But experience has taught me that the rings work much more powerfully when my team remains involved right through execution.

That's why half our work is now devoted to crafting buyer personas for clients. But we're equally happy to teach the craft of buyer persona development from the first step. And that's where we'll go now.

What is a buyer persona?

Buyer personas are examples of real buyers who influence decisions about the products, services or solutions you market. They are a tool that builds confidence to persuade buyers to choose you rather than a competitor.

The 5 Rings of Buying Insight™ are their most essential aspect, revealing surprising findings about how, when and why your buyer makes the decisions you want to influence.

On average, marketers who segment buyer personas around key insights need half as many personas as those who focus on demographics. More critically, insightful buyer personas readily inform strategies for persuasive messaging, content marketing, product launches, campaigns and sales alignment.

Chapter 3:

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE INTERVIEW



“How do you make these personas, anyway? Do you rub a magic lamp to summon up the genie? Do you ask the Starship Enterprise to beam your buyer down to the planet?”

None of the above, and here's where the real skill comes in. To get the insights required for a useful buyer persona you have to talk – well, mostly *listen* – directly to buyers. You have to get them on the phone and *interview* them.

How many interviews should you do?

It's usually possible to craft a highly accurate persona from just six to ten interviews. It's quality, not quantity, that counts. Five really good interviews are more useful than 50 clumsy ones.

Who should do the interviews?

The best interviewers you can find. If you have people on your team willing to learn new skills, you can do it in-house. But as this is the critical factor in the whole process you may want to work with a seasoned professional interviewer.

Where do you start?

With a team that's in the planning stages of an important launch or campaign. Include people from each of the functional areas involved in the project. Make their buyer persona work a priority and dedicate time and resources to it. If you say, “Do this when you have time,” they won't find the time and the project will fail.

Next, select a few people from that team who stand out for their energy, enthusiasm, empathy and curiosity. Task them with doing the interviews or working with your professional interviewer to define the project. Best practice is to record the interview, leaving the interviewer free to focus on building rapport.

When doing live interviews, rapport is all about making eye contact – and even many seasoned journalists get this wrong. Instead of looking and listening they keep their heads down taking notes. That means they miss the facial expressions and body language that tell so much more than words alone. When you have eye contact, your reaction can encourage a person to answer more candidly, to elaborate.

In a phone interview, without that eye contact, it is tougher to build rapport. That's why the interviewer needs to learn how to keep the buyer talking:

“That's really interesting...”

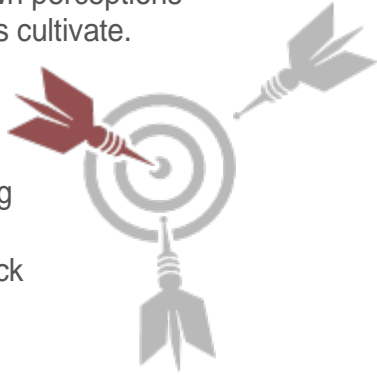
“How did you evaluate that...”

“Wow, that must've been a challenge for you...”

Learn to stifle the urge to correct the interviewee no matter how stupid, wrong or unfair his perceptions are. This will be tough at times, but the interviewer's job is to uncover perceptions, not to change them.

Bringing out those deep-down perceptions is a skill that great journalists cultivate.

In a friendly way, ask a provocative question that gets the subject engaged. When one line of questioning hits a wall, you move on to another topic, then circle back to probe for further detail.



Interviewing is an art that requires practice and skills that you may need to develop.

That's why you may want to start by working with the best outside interviewer you can find. But there is no reason you can't develop this capability in-house, either through training or hiring people with the right background – ex-journalists, for example.



So who to interview?

When your buyer persona team is geared up and *ready to go*, start by looking for buyers who have made a decision in the past several months.

This is where you may hit your first obstacle: sales reps may not want Marketing to *talk to their contacts*. So you may need the Marketing head to ask the Sales head to help *secure cooperation*.

But don't limit the search to your own sales force. *Mine the stack* of business cards you have from conferences. Trawl through online industry forums. Search LinkedIn. *Work like a detective* to sleuth out buyers. If you still come up empty-handed, a focus group recruiter may be able to help find people who match your buyer's profile.



And what to ask?

Once you begin contacting buyers, ask for about 30 minutes of their time. Your task is to gain all the insights needed to populate the 5 Rings of Buying Insight™ – but don't turn the questions into a script or you'll sound like a telemarketer. Big turnoff.

Make the questions open-ended to get your subjects talking.

“What happened on the day you decided to look for a solution like this?”

“What did you do to find potential solutions?”

“How did you narrow the options down?”

“How did you decide to continue to include those companies?”

“Who else was involved at that stage of the decision?”

With follow-up questions, aim for as much clarity as possible. Since generalizations like “we wanted to grow our business” aren't really insightful, ask “How will this help you to grow faster?”

When you write up the results, quote the buyer directly. You want to capture the way they talk and the words they choose. You want to highlight the points where the buyer got worked up and started driving the conversation.

After doing six or so interviews, you will begin to have a sense of the roles various buyer personas play. Who triggers the initial search for a solution? Who evaluates the options? Who else is involved? Will the CIO respond to a marketing campaign? Or should you start lower down the food chain?

Armed with that knowledge, shift the focus in subsequent interviews to questions that emerged in the initial round. Expect to hear similar answers emerge as you fill in each of the 5 Rings. But don't ever stop doing buyer interviews! Your knowledge of the buyer is never complete. Circumstances never stop changing.

Never assume you know the answer!

Chapter 4: PUTTING YOUR INSIGHTS TO WORK

Insights gleaned from the interview process will equip your team with all they need to develop detailed and accurate buyer persona profiles and – most important – to flesh out the 5 Rings. Guided by these insights, your team will know exactly where to focus their efforts.

Who?

Now that they clearly understand the buying process, the team may realize (for example) that the CIO is never going to attend their webinar. CIO sign-off may be essential in the end, though, so top-level support must be built as the process moves along. But Marketing now knows who down the ladder can initiate the discussion. This insight triggers marketing and sales enablement activities that guide programs and reps to focus on the right people at each stage.

When?

Now that they understand what events trigger the search for solutions – budget cycles, equipment-update cycles, business-process changes, expansion plans and more – the team calculates when to make contact.

Where?

Having identified where buyers begin looking for solutions, the team targets the events, online forums, magazines, bloggers and influential columnists they look to. Knowing what buyers hope to hear, the team plans content to impress them wherever they land.



For more on how to apply buyer persona insights, see the ebook I co-authored with Maribeth Ross, ***For Compelling Content, Let Your Buyers Be Your Guide.***

What?

Spray buyer persona insights on marcom-babble and wipe with a cloth. What remains are clear answers to questions that really matter to buyers. When freed from wading through gobbledygook to find the information they need, buyers are not only grateful but more likely to trust you.

How?

Buyer persona insights tell you not only what the buyer wants to know, but how best to tell the story. Let your creative team hear the buyer's authentic voice: the words and metaphors they choose; how formal or informal they are. Don't stoop to, "Dude, it's *awesome*," but if your buyer is a 24-year-old techie then you shouldn't talk like a Pentagon spokesman either.

Why?

To implement your buyer persona insights the team will inevitably have to overcome internal opposition. For example, engineers may feel slighted if you omit their dense description of features buyers don't want to hear about. Use the insights to explain why you've got to do it.

Here's one pitfall. Teams often get so excited by their buyer persona that they want to introduce him – like a trophy boyfriend – to everyone in the company. Resist that urge. Unless the introduction comes with convincing answers to a critical question, it is too easy to mistake this for some trivial game in the marketing department.

Sell the results you achieve with this tool, not the tool itself.

If your buyer persona initiative succeeds, consistent wins will attract attention throughout the company. People will notice how your communications differ from competitors. Even the CEO may start to ask, "What's going on down there in Marketing?"

At this point, your ultimate Success Factor appears on the horizon.



Chapter 5:

THE BIG PAYOFF FOR MARKETING: RESPECT

“So what does Marketing do, exactly?” Why is it that marketers are the only ones who get stupid questions like this? After all, everyone knows what goes on over in Finance or Engineering. And most people have a pretty good idea how they while away the hours down in HR – even if they do suspect evil at work.

If the lack of understanding of our role is frustrating, the respect deficit that comes with it can be absolutely fatal – especially at the C-suite level.

I once led a workshop in which a senior executive stood up and sucked the oxygen out of the room by asking: “How do I know that anything would change if I eliminated the marketing organization?”

Still in shock from the question, the marketing team’s responses were scarily unconvincing.

Contrast that with the performance of one of my star protégés when confronted with “The Plan,” carved in stone by Product Development. The intention was to bet the year’s revenue goal on a technically brilliant innovation that was the pride of Engineering. Trouble was, that wasn’t what mattered to the buyer just then.

My buyer persona ninjas were able to demonstrate that point so authoritatively and decisively that the company was able to avoid a major disaster that might have drastically reduced profits for the year. The shockwaves then reverberated throughout the company: “You mean, Marketing actually saved the day?”

No one had ever seen Marketing wield such strategic influence. This is the measure of the power that the buyer persona can confer on a marketing organization.

My dream is that, not long from now, when asked what it is they do, marketers will be able to respond with confidence: “We tell everyone in the company what buyers will and will not buy, and we build lasting relationships with buyers who appreciate our ability to meet their real needs.”

That’s my dream, and I’m happy to share it.



About Adele Revella

If there are others out there who know as much about buyer personas as Adele Revella, they are few and far between.

A career marketer with decades of experience, Adele has approached the discipline from all sides: marketing executive, consultant, trainer and entrepreneur.

Traveling the globe for more than 10 years, Adele introduced the buyer persona to thousands of marketers through a two-day seminar she developed and led for Pragmatic Marketing.

Through keeping in touch with hundreds of seminar participants working with buyer personas, Adele saw that marketers needed more intensive support to achieve their full potential with the methodology. So in January, 2010 she took up the challenge by establishing Buyer Persona Institute.

Today, Adele leads a team of expert practitioners on three continents who support marketing organizations large and small with her proprietary buyer persona methodology.

When not on the road (which she is a lot of the time), Adele and husband Steve live on San Juan Island, Washington, halfway between Seattle and Vancouver. Her office window looks across the Salish Sea with beautiful views of the Pacific Northwest.

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