



Content Marketing Success Through Deep, Ongoing Audience Understanding

Best Practices for Building and Maintaining
Insightful Buyer Personas



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Introduction: Buyer Personas are an Essential, Ongoing Process



One of the best feelings a marketer can have is knowing that content they created had an impact, whether it helped close a deal, maximized the success of a campaign, lit up social media in a flurry of sharing, or inspired people to think differently. This is the power of high quality content.

But, particularly in enterprise environments where multiple people are involved in each purchase decision, creating relevant, high quality content is complex. It requires a deep understanding of your audience and their business challenges. This is why in-depth buyer personas are critical to successful content marketing.

Robust buyer personas give you comprehensive insights into your buyers. These insights are the first and most essential element to creating content that motivates buyers into action, builds affinity and trust, advances your brand authority, and promotes relationships. Insightful personas can influence everything from corporate messaging, to social media, to email marketing, to sales alignment, to lead nurturing, to segmentation and more.

However, building buyer personas that improve Marketing and Sales effectiveness is NOT a one-time project. And personas are NOT a one-page demographical description that hangs on a cluttered cubicle wall where they'll surely be forgotten about. Rather, persona building and maintaining is an ongoing process of data integration, market research, sales engagement, customer interviews, and collaboration. Building them the right way ensures marketers accurately understand their buyers so they can create content they know buyers (and Sales) will love. This paper details, step by step, the best way to undergo building insightful buyer personas that serve as the foundation to all of your marketing initiatives.



What are Buyer Personas and Are They Really Necessary?



Buyer personas are aggregate representations of the actual buyers influencing or making decisions about your solutions and are based on real people, insights, and experiences. And yes, they're necessary. Content is now the primary way buyers learn about and purchase solutions. But according to a [survey](#) released by Marisa Kopec of SiriusDecisions, 60 to 70% of content created by B2B companies is never used. The primary reason for this: the content topic is not relevant to the buyer audience (29%). In fact, 60% of marketers say that their biggest challenge to creating buyer-centric content is a lack of buyer insight.

Marketers are beginning to tackle this, however. In a [CMI survey](#), when asked which content marketing initiatives marketers are working on now, creating more engaging content (69%) and better understanding of audience (63%) were the top choices among 28 options. Clearly, marketers know these two things go hand-in-hand.

As an example of the power of buyer personas, Julian Archer of SiriusDecisions notes that one company's [commitment to develop buyer personas](#) fueled a 100% increase in sales qualified leads and a consequent 20% increase in reported pipeline opportunities and pipeline value. Meanwhile, another company reported that leveraging persona insights, along with other actions that enabled them to deliver targeted efforts, resulted in a 70% year-over-year increase in revenue.

Many marketers have created buyer personas using basic, standard templates, but these do not give marketers the more in-depth knowledge they need to create compelling content. As B2B buyer cycles become more complex, B2B marketers need more insightful buyer personas that offer more than just simple demographical information – they also need to reveal priorities, goals, challenges, purchasing preferences, hesitations, concerns, needs, expectations, and more. Personas are the cornerstone to not just your content marketing strategy, but to all of your B2B marketing efforts.

8 Steps for Building Actionable Buyer Personas



1. Don't Get Lost. Use a Guide.

Use a framework as a guide for building buyer personas based on valuable buyer insights.

To ensure that you approach creating your buyer personas in an effective, defined way, you first need a framework that guides how you gather and organize your buyer information, and how you then build your buyer personas. Consider the framework *6 Essential Layers Comprising an Insightful Buyer Persona*. Each layer within the framework is organized around persona attributes that yield critical buyer insights (see a graphic of the framework on page 7). A persona attribute is a characteristic that helps define a buyer persona, such as “primary need for a solution” and “buying criteria.” Leveraging all of these layers is vital to building comprehensive buyer personas that bring significant value to not just the marketing team, but to your organization as a whole. The *6 Layers* include:

- **Demographics:** This layer provides basic demographical information about the persona.
- **Goals & Initiatives:** This layer provides a snapshot of the “day in the life” of the persona, including their day to day duties, to whom they report, and whether they manage a team. But it also highlights their challenges, their goals, what fears keep them up at night, and the risks associated with their jobs. You will learn what the buyer faces daily, which will have a direct impact on their buying process, how they evaluate a solution, and why they choose to take the leap and invest in a solution like yours.
- **Solution Fit, Expectations & Concerns:** This layer tells you why the buyer needs your solution and what additional benefits they desire. Even more, it digs into the specific results or outcomes they want to achieve – insights that are instrumental in guiding content that is focused, relevant, and able to persuade. This layer will also inform you of buyer objections and concerns that cause your buyer to walk away. These concerns may come from the buyer himself, or from other influencers, recommenders, or deciders within the organization. And

why do these concerns exist – prior experiences, or something they read or heard somewhere? Whether these concerns are true or false, you will learn who is blocking the purchase of your solution and why – arming you with the information you need to develop powerful content that addresses these objections head on. And while you may have been aware of some of these concerns, most you will likely hear for the first time.

- **Buying Criteria:** This layer highlights what capabilities or features are most important to your buyers, why they're the most critical, and why buyers chose one solution over another. You will no longer have to guess at which buyers care about which features/capabilities the most, so you can develop the right content and messaging for the right buyer.
- **Buying Process:** This layer reveals the roles that specific titles within the organization have during the buying process. For example, which titles are influencers or deciders in the purchase of a solution like yours. You will learn just how many people are involved in the buying process and what they're considering as they evaluate the solution. This information will reveal to you which audiences you need to consider in your content creation and sales enablement initiatives.
- **Buying Preferences:** Your solution could be the perfect fit for your buyer, but engaging them the wrong way can kill the deal – fast. This class highlights what type of buying experience a buyer prefers, including communication, content format, and tone.

This framework will guide the questions you ask Sales and your customers, discussed more below, and ultimately how you leverage your research to build insightful buyer personas.

Note: *Organizations can use a different framework that gets to this level of buyer insights. Or, they can customize this framework based on their particular business needs or stage of persona development. They may have certain attributes they would like to add or remove, but generally most attributes will fit into one of these classes.*

Layers

Buyer persona attributes

Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">TitlesOrganization LevelDepartmentEducation LevelGender
Goals & Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Day to day business duties fulfilled and/or overseenEvaluated based on<ul style="list-style-type: none">Current business challengesUpcoming initiativesFears and risks
Solution Fit, Expectations & Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Primary need for a solutionAdditional desired benefitsDesired outcomes or resultsBusiness triggers to look for a solution to purchaseObjections and concerns about the solution
Buying Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Primary buying criteria, including capabilities/features that are the most critical and whySolutions evaluated and differentiators that led to the purchase decisionPerceived limitations of solutions evaluated
Buying Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Role in the buying processThe deciders and influencers and how do they evaluate the solution
Buying Preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Preferred buying experiencePreferred content formatsSources of information (blogs, pubs, shows, etc.)Preferred means of communication during the sales processContent tone that resonates

2. Gather Ye Facts Where You May

Without even leaving your office, you have a plethora of data to tap into to get you started on understanding your buyers.

The majority of the building personas process is comprised of conducting research, or gathering information on your personas. This starts with developing an initial list of your personas. First, talk to Sales. Ask them which buyers, by title, they engage with throughout the purchasing process. Next, data in applications such as your CRM or marketing automation platform are a great fact-based starting point. Take a look at your CRM data to understand who (title and job role) from your customers actually purchased your solution. Also review the sales pipeline activities to see whom Sales is actively engaged with, as well as marketing automation data to understand which prospects are converting to campaign leads.

3. Self-Educate

Now that you have some basic facts to get started with, grab your laptop or tablet for some self-guided research to ramp up your industry knowledge.

Conduct some external research on your buyers based on your initial buyer list. You don't need to spend an extraordinary amount of time doing this. Within just a few hours you will gain knowledge into key trends and themes, such as the business challenges your buyers are facing, the main initiatives they're addressing now, and what upcoming initiatives they're planning to tackle. This background knowledge not only provides additional material for your buyer personas, but it also sets you up to confidently tackle steps 4 & 5 – interviewing Sales, Client Services, and customers. After all, Sales will be dismissive of the seemingly uninformed.

For the best insights, read industry reports and articles by key influencers, such as industry analysts, trade media, and bloggers. If you cannot access reports by industry analysts, review the summaries of these reports, as well as the analysts' blogs. Also Google the analysts' names, as they're typically interviewed by press and offer reliable, valuable industry insights. Overall, look for things like surveys/ studies conducted by influencers, industry commentary, case studies, and insights reported from trade shows and conferences.

To ensure you can easily and effectively reference this research, be sure to keep record of all materials in a single repository. It's also helpful to organize the research by the persona and/or target market segment it's most relevant to.



4. Make New Friends at the Office and Reconnect with Old Ones

With some market research under your belt, you're ready to talk the talk with all those around you and dig into really understanding your buyers and how they buy.

Your sales team engages with prospects and customers every day, which means they've acquired a mountain of great information. Talk to your sales team – including them not only helps build a better persona, but it also will ensure they're eager to leverage the personas and the content you create.

Work with Sales to identify your organization's business objectives and target market segments. Business objectives are the top level sales and marketing initiatives, and they typically match the company's organization around Products, Product Lines, Business Units, or Divisions. Target market segments define the characteristics of the companies in the "sweet spot" for your products and services. Characteristics include things such as company size, regions, and industries. Different segments may have different buying processes, personas, lexicons, solution needs, etc.

Next, ask Sales what they're seeing and hearing as they engage with prospects. Because they speak with so many people, they have an excellent aggregated point of view on key persona attributes. For instance, although customers themselves provides the best insights on their own buying concerns, Sales will have an aggregated view of buyer concerns for not just buyers that became customers, but also prospects who didn't choose your solution. Armed with this knowledge, you will know what objections you need to tackle head on in your content. Sales will also have aggregated knowledge on what buyers are looking to learn when they engage with them, or what questions they typically ask. For example, they may be finding that a high number of buyers are asking for a particular case study, that a certain buyer persona has been increasingly asking for an ROI calculator over the last five months, or that particular buyers have requested content that details a specific capability and/or use case.

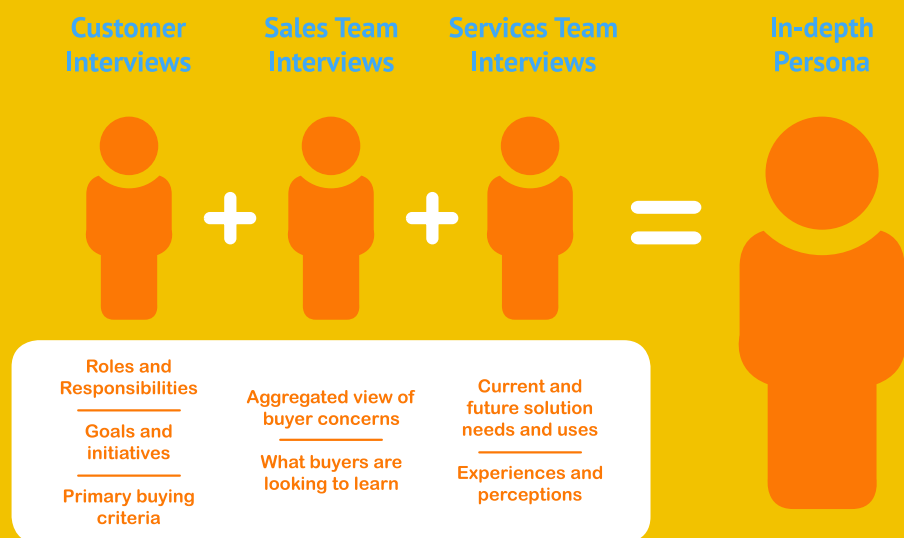
Ask questions such as:

- Of the titles you target, who are the influencers, the deciders, and final purchase decision-makers?
- What pain points do buyers have that they're looking to address with a solution like ours?



- What benefits do buyers want to achieve with a solution like ours?
- What are the buyer's primary buying criteria?
- What concerns do buyers have about purchasing a solution like ours?
- What other solutions do the buyers consider and what differentiators caused them to choose one solution over another?
- What information are buyers looking to learn when they engage with you, or what questions do they typically ask?
- Do buyers typically have certain perceptions about our solutions and solutions like ours in general?

Interviews: Adding Up to an Insightful Buyer Persona



In addition to Sales, speak with other teams internally who work closely with your customers daily, such as Client Services. In particular, Client Services will have an awesome perspective on buyers' current and future solution needs and uses. They'll also become familiar with buyers' experiences and perceptions, such as prior experience with solutions like yours and certain perceptions about your solution and/or solutions like yours in general. Ask Client Services questions such as the following for each title on your initial buyer list:

- What common requirements or problems does the buyer have that they need our solution and your team to address?
- What primary use cases (current and future) does the buyer want to address with our solution?
- What common questions does the buyer ask about our solution's capabilities?
- Which capabilities does the buyer value most and why?
- What insights, tips, or best practices is the buyer most interested in?
- Are there any trends in upcoming initiatives that the buyer is addressing?
- Does the buyer have prior experiences or perceptions with solutions like ours?

Remember, building buyer personas is a process. You don't have to talk to everyone at once. Have a few meaningful conversations to get started, and then re-engage as you go.

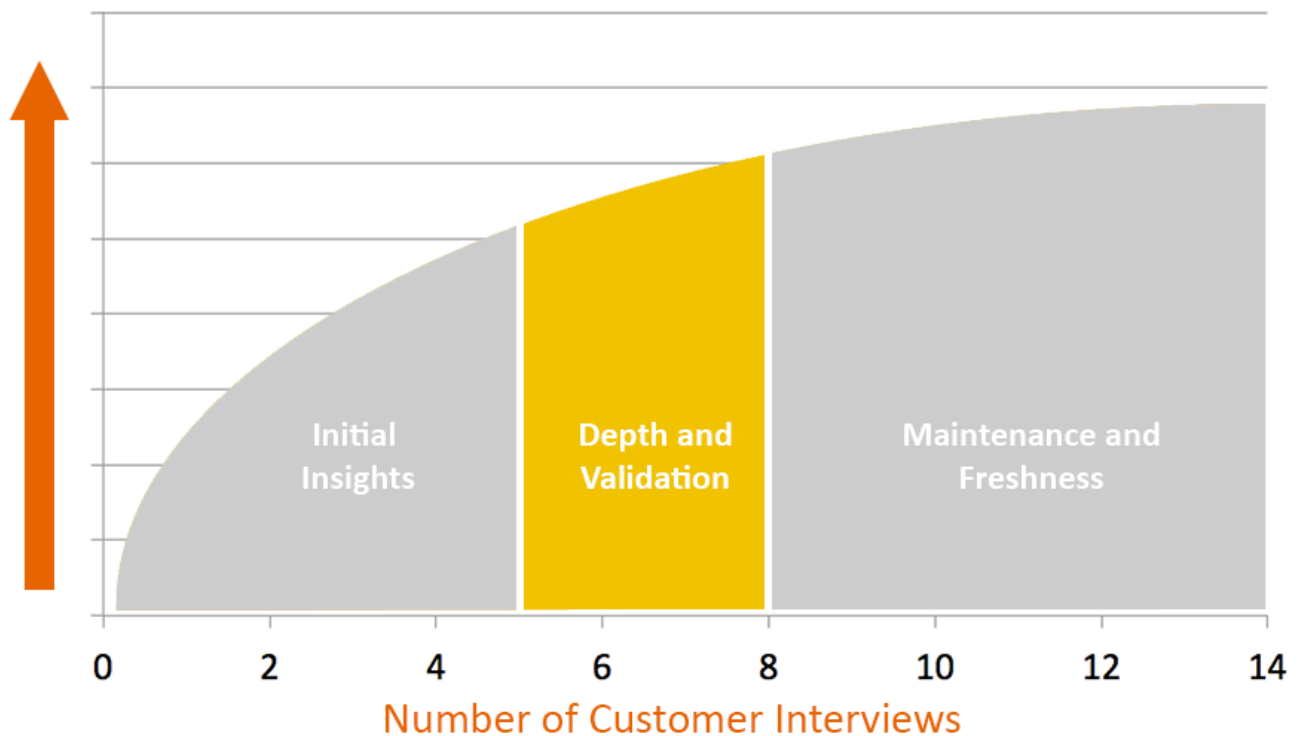
5. The Magic Moment: Talking To Your Customers

You're now ready for the big leagues. The best source of insights about your buyers are your buyers – and that's why interviewing customers is vital to developing the most robust, accurate buyer personas.

You'll gain knowledge from actually speaking with your customers that you'll simply not get anywhere else. Not only will they shed light into issues you and your team are unaware of, but they will also provide more in-depth insights. Ultimately, this means you as a marketer will be armed with more information for creating better content.

The key is to ask the right questions and to let your customers do the majority of the talking. It's only through directly speaking with customers will you learn why buyers engage with you, and what goes through their minds as they purchase solutions like yours. The only sure way to remove the guesswork on what makes your buyers tick is to actually speak with them. And don't be afraid to ask – customers actually like being interviewed – they appreciate your wanting to understand your buyers more and enjoy providing feedback they think will be helpful.

Depth of Buyer Persona Understanding



So just how many customers should you interview for each persona? This graphic highlights how your depth of buyer understanding increases with the more customer interviews you perform. It shows how you will gain a sharper incline of understanding initially, with 5-8 interviews for each persona really being the sweet spot. Once you build your personas with the insights you gain from 5-8 interviews, you should continue interviews on an ongoing basis to ensure they're up-to-date.



WHICH QUESTIONS TO ASK

So which questions do you ask? The right way to leverage scripted questions is to develop and organize them based on a framework aimed at gathering valuable insights, such as the *6 Essential Layers Comprising an Insightful Buyer Persona*. This ensures that questions serve a purpose, and that responses will be useful. A snapshot of questions to ask customers includes:

- What are the day to day business duties you fulfill and/or oversee?
- How are you evaluated/measured at your job by your supervisor/ department head?
- What are your current business challenges?
- What are the key risks you must address in your job role?
- What is the primary need you want a solution like ours to fulfill for you, or the primary pain you want it to alleviate?
- What are your concerns or major questions about selecting a solution like ours?
- What are your primary buying criteria (including critical capabilities) for evaluating and purchasing a solution like ours?
- What is your role in the buying process for a solution like ours (Influencer, Decider?)
- Where do you like to learn about your industry and about other companies and products? Be specific about news sources, events, trade publications, organizations and associations, blogs, social networks, peer recommendations, other industry influencers, etc.

Note: *When interviewing Sales and customers, use the phrase “a solution like ours” or “a solution like this” rather than “our solution.” It’s best NOT to think about buyer needs, concerns, desired benefits, etc. purely in the context of your own solution, as this will not provide an accurate representation of your buyer. “A solution like ours” includes the category of solutions yours falls within, or the types of solutions you compete against. It’s best to mention this before interviewing customers and Sales.*

Interview Tips

When a customer agrees to take time to speak with you, you must be prepared to get the most out of this interview session as possible. Here are a few tips to consider when interviewing your customers for your buyer persona development:

→ Interview Recent Customers Who Align Well to Your Current Buyer Personas

The best buyers to interview are those who are recent customers. The thoughts and experiences they had throughout each step in their buying process are fresh in their minds, allowing them to provide more accurate, detailed responses. Also select buyers who align with as many aspects of your current buyer personas as possible. Never interview buyers who are currently in the purchase process.

→ Provide Your Questions to Customers Beforehand

Once customers agree to be interviewed, provide them with your interview questions beforehand. This makes them feel more comfortable and will also help them be better prepared, leading to more thorough responses.

→ Have Just 1 or 2 People from the Marketing Team Join the Call

Having too many people on the call can be overwhelming for the customer, so just limit attendance to 1-2 people. Also, do not have the customer's sales rep join the call, as this may deter the customer from being completely open with their thoughts.

→ Ask the Customer if You May Record the Call

As the interviewer, you will be focusing your energy on listening carefully to the customer responses and seeing where you can ask follow-up questions, making it difficult to write down the responses simultaneously. For this reason, it's very helpful to record the call, but always ask for permission first. If you cannot record the call, have a colleague with you to write the responses.



→ **Don't be Afraid to Ad Lib**

Ask follow-up questions based on the customer's response – sometimes these details reveal the best insights. For example, if the customer simply says that the ability to improve efficiency was a buying criteria, ask them what capabilities they need to improve efficiency, exactly where they need to improve efficiency, and how they evaluated a solution's ability to improve efficiency across different offerings. You could learn, for instance, that the buyer wants a solution whose configurable workflow tools allow them to more quickly adapt to process changes they're experiencing as a result of new online shopping behaviors.

→ **Clarify Questions with Sample Responses**

Have sample responses to each question handy. Customers will sometimes ask for clarification on what a question means, or what type of information you're looking for. Providing about two example points of a response to a question helps clarify things for them.

→ **Record Direct Quotes**

Try to write customer responses in direct quotes – if not all the time, at least in those cases where the customer was very passionate and in-depth about a response. This helps you learn their language and avoid misinterpretations later on.

6. Baking the Cake

It's time to bring it all together and build your buyer personas around key shared attributes. Each conversation, each data point, each anecdote is an important part of the process – so be organized, thorough, and holistic in putting the pieces together.

Each question you've asked customers and internal stakeholders, along with that question's response, should be mapped back to a key persona attribute within your framework, such as the *6 Essential Layers*. For example, the question, "what is the primary need you want a solution like ours to fulfill for you, or the primary pain you want it to alleviate?" and its responses should be mapped to the attribute primary need for a solution within Solution Fit, Expectations & Concerns.

After you've completed your interviews and mapped their responses to key attributes within the *6 Essential Layers*, look for similarities and differences in how and why buyers buy and what role (Influencer or Decider) they play in the purchasing process. If buyers share significant similarities in these ways and the same messaging and content strategies will influence them the same way, then they should be one persona, even if they have different titles. Segmenting your personas this way will actually streamline your marketing efforts, simplify your content marketing strategy, and ensure that you're messaging to your different audiences in a way that will actually have an impact on their purchasing decision. Also, you're likely to actually have less personas when building them on key shared attributes than if you focus purely on demographics.

7. Rinse and Repeat

Validating that your buyer personas are still accurate and current is an ongoing task. Never let them get stale, and never overlook the fact that you can drift off target over time. Persona maintenance is a critical function to operationalize – not project-ize.

Buyer personas are not static – they are constantly evolving, whether due to new market trends, new technologies, or organizational shifts. That's why to ensure their currency and accuracy, you should repeat steps 2-7 on an ongoing basis. For instance, always interview new customers, and hold

monthly meetings with Sales and other key internal stakeholders to determine if buyers are asking new questions, showing new concerns, or asking about new capabilities. These don't even need to be new – any change, whether an increase or decrease in a particular thing, is noteworthy. Continued feedback and internal collaboration help ensure personas are continually updated with the latest, most accurate information.

Integrating your CRM and MA data with your buyer personas also helps to validate the accuracy of your personas, as well as adapt to changing personas. It's not uncommon that as industries shift, new departments and roles emerge or existing personas take on new responsibilities. These changes will be reflected in both your CRM and MA data. For your buyer personas to give you the insights you need, building them must be a collaborative, multi-dimensional, and ongoing process.

8. Personas, Personas Everywhere

Almost everyone in an organization benefits from a better, deeper understanding of their buyers. Product will build better products, Marketers will write better content, and Sales will close more deals. Don't let your personas be neglected and lost on the file server. Don't pin them to the wall until "next time."

Buyer personas are not relevant to just one department or team. Nor should they be old, locked away documents that only a few people access from time to time. Your buyer personas, when done the right way, reveal critical insights that are significant to everyone from Sales to Product to Content Marketing, MarComm, Demandgen, and more. Your buyer personas should be live documents that everyone across Sales and Marketing can access, share, and provide feedback on in real-time. They should be connected to ongoing business data and integrated with the tools Sales and Marketing are currently using. This will activate buyer persona knowledge and usage organizationally.



Conclusion: Building and Maintaining Personas the Smarter Way



Creating content that builds trust and affinity is complex. It requires knowing your audience. Really knowing your audience – knowing them inside out and upside down. That's why buyer personas are the most foundational element to your content marketing strategy – and why they must be more in-depth than ever before. Understanding your buyers at a deeper level is absolutely vital to creating quality content that engages your buyers and raises your voice in the market.

Building rich buyer personas that reveal the insights necessary for buyer-centric marketing and selling is an ongoing process – not a one-time project. This is why having a technology-enabled approach to creating and maintaining personas is so essential. Just as marketers have employed software to optimize other areas of marketing, a product approach to personas ensures marketers more efficiently build buyer personas that have impact across the organization.

A buyer persona product built on best practices consolidates all information into one, easy-to-use source and helps marketers drive the right business processes internally in a more streamlined way. It acts as a single repository to share and protect critical buyer knowledge. It can also ensure personas are integrated into other systems Marketing and Sales use, enhancing the use and effectiveness organizationally of these rich buyer insights. You no longer have to worry about wasting time and effort on creating personas that go unused, stale, or are lost altogether. A technology-driven approach transforms personas into live documents that are continually leveraged, updated, and collaborated on.

Although it may seem daunting, building insightful buyer personas is not an excruciating or incredibly long process – at least it doesn't have to be. By using a buyer personas product that optimizes collaboration and provides a framework for gathering in-depth insights, marketers can efficiently create truly rich buyer personas. And the best part – the profound insights you gain will empower you to more rapidly create high quality content that motivates your buyers into action, is valued organizationally, advances your brand authority, and drives conversions.

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About Akoonu

Akoonu, Inc.™ is the first content marketing platform empowering B2B marketers to develop an integrated, data-driven content marketing strategy that unites Marketing, powers buyer-centricity, and inspires your brand authority. Akoonu's built-in best practices, customizable frameworks, data integrations, and collaboration features give marketers a smarter, more efficient way to develop robust buyer personas and buyer's journey maps and to put them into the hands of everyone across Marketing and Sales. Armed with a truly in-depth understanding of their buyers and their buying process, marketers gain clear direction for creating high quality content that motivates their buyers, and that is loved, valued, and used organizationally to advance their brand, drive conversions, and fuel long-term business success. For more information, visit www.akoonu.com.