Life-Size Personas

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ABSTRACT

Personas are an effective design tool. They represent user needs and the different target groups. This paper describes an experiment where life-size images of personas were created with the purpose of enhancing the effectiveness of the personas on the project team. The results suggest that projects that require complex target group representation may benefit from using life-size images.

INTRODUCTION

Personas are an effective, simple and powerful design tool. Personas are fictitious persons or "*hypothetical archetypes* of actual users" [1], but they are created with precision and represent the target groups. Their personality and general circumstances are based on user research, but names and personal details are fictitious. A clear distinction must be made between real people and personas, as real people have "behavioral anomalies" that can interfere with the design.

This paper describes the creation of personas for a project at Icon Medialab in Stockholm. The final product was a content rich portal for a number of diverse target groups within and outside the African Continent.

THE CREATION OF THE PERSONAS

The purpose of the user research was to investigate what kind of content the target groups wanted on the portal. In order to get acquainted with the target groups, several focus groups were performed. During the focus group sessions the general discussion centered on the Internet and the way in which the focus group participants made use of it. It emerged from these discussions that the target groups for this project were very diverse and therefore a large number of personas, nine in total, were created. A goal was also created for each persona, as well as a scenario whereby the persona fulfils the goal by using the portal.

THE PROBLEM

The personas were visualized with a portrait and a scenario picture. When the personas were first introduced to the project team and the client, the portrait and scenario pictures were used. When personas are created, have been given a life, a goal and a way of fulfilling their goals, they should from that point on live their own life within the project and in the minds of the project team members.

Given the large number of personas, and the large differences in cultural settings that existed between the project team and the target groups, the task of getting the project team acquainted with the personas was unusually difficult. The personas only existed in documents and the whole project team was now required to read the documentation, memorize it and try to develop a unified *feel* for them. It became apparent that some kind of mnemonic device, which was not bound to the documentation, would facilitate this process.

THE SOLUTION

The solution was the creation of life-size images of the personas. The life-size images were made out of white cardboard. Pasted on their backs were their personal description, goal and scenario. The life-size images were then introduced to the project team, and the team members got to choose a persona to "adopt" and were to arrange them in the work place.

*Figure 1. **Life-size images in the project place.***

The life-size images turned out to be an effective tool to assist the project group in becoming more familiar with the personas. They became the center of attention in the project workplace and created an atmosphere that smoothed the process of the project team getting to know the personas. The life-size images were also a useful interface between the different groups within the project team – the programmers and the graphical designers. The project team started to interact with the life-size personas, putting jewelry and scarves on them. Mbabu, a cool Rasta, was even asked out on a date.

Formal interviews with the project team as well as participant observations during the project work revealed that the life-size images helped the project team members to get acquainted with the personas and become aware of their purpose and importance in the design of the portal. It was as though the personas were working with the project team, literally looking over their shoulders while they were working on the design of the portal. The life-size images not only increased the target group awareness for this particular project, but they also increased the general user awareness, i.e. that there were real people with real lives that would use the product the project team was designing.

CAVEATS

Since the project team had a large number of personas from a vastly different culture to get acquainted with, the life-size images turned out to be very useful in the present project. However, it is doubtful that creating life-size images would have as significant an impact in projects where the number of target groups is smaller and where the project team members can more easily identify themselves with the target groups.

Also, one should be aware that using life-size images does not work in every location. When the project team changed location to a less spacious office, the life-size images started to get in the way and irritate people. Therefore, when life-size images are used, the project workplace must be spacious enough to allow it.

SUMMARY

To create life-size images of personas can be very useful in projects where the target groups are complex and diverse and when there are large differences in cultural settings between the project team and the target groups. The results suggest that, under certain circumstances, life-size images of personas can significantly enhance the effect of ordinary personas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Abraham, Carol, Claire, Elias, Joseph, Mbabu, Peter, Rebecca and Zanela for allowing me to create them and for participating in this project. I would also like to thank my colleagues, Olle Torgny and Anna Söderblom, for their collaboration.

REFERENCES

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The author has an MSSc in Applied Social Anthropology and works at IconMedialab in Stockholm. She has 5 years' experience in planning and implementing user research and interface design for both speech- and web-based technology.