

Personifying success:

How to craft effective B2B personas in 2024



A deep dive into B2B buying persona creation and deployment in a post-Covid world

B2B marketing has evolved significantly in recent years, with the Covid-19 pandemic acting as a catalyst for change. That's why it's more important than ever to understand how your B2B buying personas may have changed. Accurate audience personas provide crucial insights into the evolving needs, preferences, and decision-making processes of B2B buyers, empowering businesses to tailor their strategies, enhance customer engagement, and stay competitive in an increasingly dynamic environment.

In this comprehensive guide, we look at:

- What B2B buying personas are and why they're important
- How they have evolved in recent years
- How to create accurate and up-to-date buying personas
- Effective strategies for B2B buyer research
- How personas vary by market and the importance of localisation
- How to use personas effectively once you have created them

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What are B2B buying personas?

B2B buying personas, often referred to as audience personas, represent semi-fictional characters embodying the target customers for a business. These personas are based on market research, data analysis, and behavioural patterns. They encapsulate demographic information, pain points, goals, and motivations, helping businesses to craft targeted marketing strategies.

Why are buying personas important in B2B marketing?

A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to B2B selling tends to result in lost sales and wasted marketing budget. Buyer personas are a helpful way to understand the wants and needs of different groups among your target audience. Once your sales and marketing teams understand what separate groups tend to look for – and crucially, how and why – you can target them much more effectively.

More specifically, B2B buyer personas can:

- Inform how to refine marketing messages
- Help sales teams to engage buyers
- Ensure consistency between sales and marketing efforts
- Inform new product development
- Optimise your channel usage
- Improve understanding of different customer journeys
- Help UX teams to make changes to usability
- Target prospects and guide media buying
- Prioritise a higher-value or ideal customer type
- Identify customer pain points

The pandemic has affected B2B buying personas

Post-Covid, we've seen B2B buying personas evolve in response to key shifts, including:

Remote work and digitalisation: The widespread shift to remote and hybrid working during and after the pandemic has heightened the importance of digital interactions. B2B buying personas now need to reflect individuals and organisations with a strong inclination towards digital solutions, emphasising seamless remote collaboration, cloud-based services, and cybersecurity.

Adaptability and agility: The uncertainty caused by the pandemic and its aftermath emphasised the need for adaptability. B2B personas need to reflect decision-makers who prioritise agility and flexible solutions that can respond swiftly to changing market conditions.

Supply chain disruption and resilience: The pandemic as well as recent geopolitical events have exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains. Companies are prioritising supply chain resilience, seeking more localised or diversified suppliers to mitigate future disruptions. Risk assessment and contingency planning has become more important in decision-making.

B2B decision-makers are getting younger

Traditionally, B2B decision-makers have been associated with older, experienced professionals. However, recent years have witnessed a generational shift, with a growing number of millennials and members of Gen Z taking on key roles in decision-making processes. (Statistics vary but it's estimated that about two thirds of B2B buyers are millennials or Gen Z.) This demographic shift has influenced the preferences and behaviours of B2B buying personas in several ways:

Preference for digital interactions:

Younger decision-makers prefer digital interactions over traditional communication methods. They seek seamless online experiences, mobile responsiveness, and intuitive interfaces when engaging with B2B vendors.

Customisation and personalisation:

Younger B2B buyers expect tailored solutions that address their specific pain points and objectives, emphasising a one-to-one approach in marketing and service delivery. Their B2B expectations have been shaped by B2C experiences – such as hailing an Uber, buying on Amazon, or streaming content on Netflix.

Focus on sustainability and ethical practices:

Up-and-coming B2B buyers tend to be more environmentally and socially conscious, valuing sustainability and ethical business practices. They are more likely to engage with businesses that demonstrate a strong commitment to reducing their environmental footprint and supporting social causes.

Inclusivity and diversity:

Millennial and Gen Z B2B buyers value organisations that embrace a diverse workforce, promote inclusivity, and exhibit a strong stance against discrimination and bias.

Emphasis on employee well-being:

Younger B2B stakeholders appreciate companies that prioritise employee health, mental well-being, and work-life balance, understanding the impact on productivity and overall success.

Emphasis on innovation and agility:

Younger B2B decision-makers are more inclined to adopt emerging technologies and disruptive business models in line with their forward-thinking approach.

Desire for authenticity and transparency:

Transparency and authenticity in marketing and business operations resonate with younger decision-makers. They value honesty, ethical business practices, and a genuine commitment to corporate social responsibility.



The number of decision-makers in B2B buying is increasing

In recent years, we have seen the number of decision-makers involved in B2B procurement increase. This has been driven by the rising complexity of business solutions plus a broader shift towards collaborative business decision-making. The extent to which this is the case may vary by market, depending on how markets view power distance as outlined in Hofstede's Theory of Cultural Dimensions.

As B2B transactions become more intricate, it's increasingly common for decision-makers to include individuals who you may not meet face to face, especially those involved in desk research at the early stage of the process. Recognising this, marketers should place importance on developing comprehensive FAQs and implementing chatbots on their websites. These tools serve as virtual resources for individuals engaged in desk research, providing instant and relevant information to support their decision-making.



The growing involvement of HR in B2B purchasing decisions

Another notable shift in B2B buying personas is the increased involvement of Human Resources professionals in the decision-making process. HR departments are playing a crucial role in evaluating and selecting B2B solutions, particularly (but not exclusively) those related to:

Talent acquisition and management: HR professionals are actively involved in the selection of software and technology solutions for talent acquisition, employee engagement, performance management, and learning and development. They seek solutions that streamline HR processes and enhance the employee experience.

Wellness and employee benefits: The focus on employee well-being and benefits has surged in recent years. HR professionals are seeking B2B solutions that support employee mental health, wellness programmes, flexible work arrangements, and comprehensive benefits packages.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives: HR stakeholders prioritise B2B solutions that match their organisation's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. They seek partnerships with vendors who offer tools to promote diversity, measure inclusivity, and drive equitable practices within the workplace.

How to create buyer personas using B2B research

Ultimately, your buyer personas should be unique to your business. They should contain the relevant information your sales and marketing teams need to understand who your audience is and how to target them as effectively as possible. Here are some variables around which personas are typically drawn:

- **Organisation type:** Segmenting businesses by sector, number of staff, revenue, location, etc.
- **Profitability or potential:** Based on criteria such as expected customer lifetime value or likelihood to purchase.
- **Decision-maker type:** For example, buyer versus end user personas, or personas by job title.
- **Needs and wants:** Based on subjective factors such as how segments value price, relationships, ease of use, productivity.
- **Behaviour:** What they have bought before and purchase habits.

How to gather insights to shape your B2B buying personas

To develop buyer profiles from scratch, start your research with a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods, ideally starting with quantitative analysis. Sound personas rely on robust data, so don't hesitate to overlook weak or inconclusive data.

Leverage your CRM data:

If you have one, then your Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system is a good place to start looking for insights. However, the value of the information you extract will depend upon the effectiveness of your CRM management. If your sales team are diligent about updating the CRM during their interactions, you'll have a solid foundation to start from. Scrutinise the data relating to prospective clients in your pipeline, as well as your existing clientele. This comparison allows you to determine if the prospects you are targeting align with the clients you have secured.

Harness prospecting data:

If you are using email prospecting as one of your lead generation channels, you're at an immediate advantage. Prospecting data is enriched with insights into job titles, job seniority, company size, industry, and more. Additionally, since you've directly contacted these individuals, their responses can shed light on the effectiveness of your campaigns. Analyse leads and sales based on company size, industry, and job titles to initiate the identification of cohorts.



**Tap into web data:**

Google Analytics is a valuable source of information. Examine performance indicators such as sessions, bounce rates, and conversions, viewed through the lens of different demographics, to understand varied behavioural patterns on your site. In-market segments can highlight the subjects that pique your audience's interest. Categorising these segments by age can help to understand the preferences of distinct age groups that correspond to your personas.

Use social data:

Exploring your social media followers' profiles can provide a comprehensive view of your audience's demographics. Social media platforms allow for deeper exploration, revealing broader areas of interest. Participate in groups and use social listening platforms to identify prevalent questions and pain points across different segments.

Incorporate qualitative data:

Once your buyer personas are taking shape, engage in one-on-one interviews with your existing customers to validate and refine each group. Qualitative research stands as the most effective way to understand the challenges and factors influencing decisions. You can arrange these interviews either through your own internal sales or customer service teams, or through a third party agency.

Essential components of B2B buying personas

Buying personas should include the following information:

Profile

Relevant profiling information, to help you visualise who you're selling to. Factors might include:

- Job title
- Years in role
- Department
- Seniority
- Age
- Company size
- Industry



Information sources

How do your buyers find out about relevant products or services at different stages of the purchase journey? This will determine what channel mix you use to target them. Understand their preferences in terms of:

- Offline research
- Online research – search, email, affiliates, videos, and so on
- Third party sources – such as expert reviews or user reviews
- Social media – bearing in mind that platforms can vary by market
- Brand websites

Communication preferences

Understanding how your buyers research your product tells you where to target your buyers – but next you have to understand how to engage with them. For example:

- Short form content or long form content?
- Optimal blend of written, audio, or video content?
- Optimal frequency of contact?
- What tone of voice?

Purchase criteria

What are this persona's key buying criteria? Rank the importance of factors they consider when making a purchase, and know which ones are most likely to help them decide. For example:

- Price or value for money
- Premium quality
- Brand reputation
- Specific features
- Customer service and support

Influence

Clearly outline the role this customer persona tends to have in the purchase decision-making process. Are they the sole decider, the main decider, or a key influencer? It's also helpful to clarify which other roles in the company tend to influence this persona and how you need to take this into account. For instance, what information do influencers need, and in what format?



Pain points

List their common frustrations so your marketing and sales efforts can target these pain points. These could be things they don't have, or things they have but are inadequate or could be improved on. When researching pain points for products and solutions, bear in mind that emotions can affect B2B buyer behaviour. As well as certain cognitive biases, several emotional factors can sway their final decision.

Jobs-to-be-done

Instead of focusing on specific product features, consider the tasks or objectives users want to achieve. Define these objectives by their desired outcomes to identify potential opportunities. This is especially important from an SEO perspective: usually, B2B buyers are not searching for your product but for solutions to their specific needs. That's why understanding how they conceptualise their business problem is so critical.

For example, imagine a buyer persona for Microsoft Azure in 2010, targeting tech-savvy entrepreneurs starting small B2B SaaS ventures. Had Microsoft only improved features, like making cloud computing more cost-effective and user-friendly, it wouldn't have addressed the fundamental need. Instead, they understood the crucial task was minimising or eliminating on-premise IT infrastructure. They innovated a cloud-based service, lowering entry barriers and enabling easy scalability for growing businesses.

Identifying 'jobs to be done' is key for creating buyer personas, considering their pain points, unique requirements, and varying levels of sophistication in their approaches.

How many personas should my business have?

Although it will depend on your product and service, generally it's a good idea to limit the number of personas to a manageable quantity. Aiming for a maximum of six per market is wise. Any more than this and there might be too many to be useful. That said, it's important to ensure that your personas are tailored to each region of the world you're operating in.

Effective strategies for conducting B2B buyer persona research



Actively engage with stakeholders throughout the process:

Active stakeholder involvement is crucial in successful buyer persona research, to ensure accuracy and consistent use. Sometimes, personas may challenge existing perceptions within the business of who your customers actually are. To overcome this challenge, engaging internal stakeholders at significant milestones is essential. Seek their insights from the start through collaborative workshops, during primary research, and in the finalisation phase. Their engagement helps the wider business to understand persona evolution, enabling integration into long-term planning.

Additionally, stakeholders may possess proprietary information or secondary data that should be considered before proceeding with the research. Potential data sources could include:

- Customer behaviour data from CRM tools, analytics, and other intelligence tools
- Customer satisfaction surveys or feedback
- Customer engagement data from social media platforms

Incorporate prospects in persona development:

A comprehensive understanding of the buyer market extends beyond existing customers. Including prospects in your research provides a well-rounded view of various customer groups. Conduct a thorough jobs-to-be-done exercise to unveil opportunities for targeting prospects in adjacent markets or previously underserved customer segments. Competitor research helps to assess how well rivals are meeting or failing to meet buyer needs. Focus not only on the ideal customer but also on other potential segments that offer significant opportunities.

Make personas engaging and memorable:

To ensure longevity and effective use, personas should be engaging and memorable representations of buyers. Dry and uninteresting personas diminish their utility, as teams are less likely to use them regularly. Align sales or marketing persona data with existing processes to avoid creating isolated entities. The final persona materials should be easily scannable and shareable. Employ visualisation techniques, write pen portraits, and use vox pop videos to bring the personas to life.

Regularly update personas in response to changing buyer habits:

Buyer behaviour evolves in response to external factors such as new technologies, communication channels, or seismic events such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Periodic updates of personas are necessary to reflect these changes. Revisit your personas at regular intervals or when significant disruptions occur within your industry. Ensure that the persona examples remain relevant and aligned with the shifting landscape, to ensure their effectiveness and longevity.

Remember that buying personas can vary across international markets

B2B personas can vary significantly across international markets due to cultural, economic, and social differences. For instance:

Diverse cultural influences:

Cultural nuances affect decision-making styles, communication preferences, and relationship-building approaches. Sensitivity to cultural differences is paramount, whether it's understanding hierarchies, negotiation styles, or business etiquette, to tailor marketing and engagement strategies appropriately.

Economic landscape and budget considerations:

In markets with fluctuating economies or financial constraints, personas are often budget-conscious and seek cost-effective solutions without compromising quality. On the other hand, in economically stable regions, personas are more inclined towards long-term investments, focusing on ROI and total cost of ownership.

Regulatory compliance and legal framework:

Compliance with local laws and industry-specific regulations is a top consideration for personas in highly regulated markets. Businesses need to align their offerings and operations with these legal requirements to gain trust and maintain credibility.

Technological maturity:

In technologically mature markets, personas expect state-of-the-art solutions, cutting-edge features, and seamless integrations. Conversely, in markets with slower technological adoption, personas may prioritise simpler, easy-to-use solutions that don't overwhelm their current capabilities.



Supply chain dynamics:

In markets with complex and globally dispersed supply chains, personas value reliability, robust logistics, and efficient order fulfilment. Understanding the intricacies of the supply chain ecosystem helps tailor solutions to meet these expectations.

Market maturity and competition levels:

In highly competitive markets, personas are more discerning, seeking unique value propositions and differentiation. On the other hand, in emerging markets, personas may be more open to exploring new entrants and innovative solutions.

Local partnership and relationship building:

B2B personas in different international markets often place varying emphasis on local partnerships and relationship-building. In some markets, building strong personal relationships and establishing trust is essential before engaging in business transactions. In others, professionalism and efficiency in operations may take precedence.

Political stability and geopolitical factors:

In regions prone to political unrest, B2B buyers personas are more likely to prioritise stability and risk mitigation in their business partnerships. Understanding these geopolitical factors is crucial in aligning with personas' needs for stability and reliability.

Socio-economic trends and consumer behaviour:

These trends can influence business decisions, strategies, and product positioning. For instance, a rising trend in sustainability awareness may drive B2B personas to seek eco-friendly solutions.



Examples of cultural differences in B2B marketing around the world

There are various theories to explain cultural differences around the world, including Hofstede's Theory of Cultural Dimensions, the concept of high context and low context cultures, and many others. At Oban, we use our Local In-Market Experts to navigate cultural nuances. Here are some of the cultural contrasts a B2B marketer might experience around the world:



Communication styles:

US: Direct, value-driven communication (low context)

Japan: Indirect, relationship-centric, formal (high context)



Relationship-building:

China: Guanxi-based (i.e. building relationships based on trust and mutual obligations), face-to-face interactions

Germany: Trust, reliability, concise communications



Decision-making:

India: Hierarchical, seniority-driven decisions

Sweden: Egalitarian, consensus-based choices



Risk and innovation:

UK: Open to risk, data-driven

South Korea: Emphasis on stability



Regulatory compliance:

EU: GDPR adherence, country-specific compliance

China: Adherence to local laws and regulations



Perception of time:

Germany: Punctuality and efficiency

Latin America: Greater flexibility with time

Understanding and respecting cultural nuances and adapting marketing strategies accordingly is crucial for B2B marketing success in diverse international markets.

How to use B2B buying personas

Once you have created or updated your B2B buying personas, and tailored them to each target market, there are various ways you can use them effectively:

Targeted marketing and advertising:

- Tailor marketing messages and advertisements to resonate with each persona's pain points, preferences, and behaviours.
- Optimise ad placements and channels based on where each persona is most likely to engage.

Product development and improvement:

- Shape product features and functionalities based on the needs, challenges, and preferences of different personas.

Content creation and customisation:

- Generate content that addresses the unique concerns, interests, and informational needs of each persona.
- Customise content formats, tone of voice, and delivery channels to suit the preferences of different personas.

Sales strategy and training:

- Tailor sales pitches, demonstrations, and presentations to align with the pain points and motivations of each persona.
- Develop targeted sales training programmes to help sales teams effectively engage and communicate with different personas.

Customer journey mapping:

- Create distinct customer journey maps for each persona to identify touchpoints and opportunities for engagement at each stage of the buying process, in each market.
- Optimise interactions and experiences to guide each persona through a personalised and efficient buying journey.

Lead generation and nurturing:

- Design lead generation campaigns that specifically target personas based on their characteristics and preferences.
- Develop lead nurturing strategies that provide relevant information and value to nurture leads through the sales funnel.



**Customer segmentation:**

- Segment your customer base by persona to refine analysis of purchasing trends, behaviours, and lifecycle stages.
- Use segmentation to tailor customer support, upselling, and cross-selling strategies.

Customer success and support:

- Enhance customer support by understanding each persona's pain points and providing tailored solutions and assistance.
- Develop customer success programmes that align with the specific goals and expectations of different personas.

Event and trade show planning:

- Customise event strategies and presence at trade shows to appeal to the personas who are likely to attend or engage with the event.
- Plan relevant sessions, demonstrations, and networking opportunities that cater to the needs and interests of targeted personas.

ROI measurement and analysis:

- Where possible, attribute ROI and measure performance at a persona level to determine the impact of efforts targeted towards specific personas.

Partnerships and collaborations:

- Identify potential partnerships or alliances that align with the interests and needs of targeted personas.

Feedback and improvement loop:

- Gather feedback and insights from each persona group continuously to refine and update the personas, ensuring they stay relevant and accurate.
- Use the feedback to make data-driven improvements in various business processes and strategies.

In conclusion

B2B buying personas are not just hypothetical characters – they represent the essence of your customers, enabling you to tailor your strategies effectively. Understanding the intricacies of these personas, and how they vary internationally, can significantly elevate your marketing efforts and drive success in the competitive world of B2B commerce.

Oban helps businesses grow internationally

Since 2002, we've helped numerous businesses including many B2Bs grow internationally using our unique network of Local In-Market Experts. To find out more, please get in touch:

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