

**“Putting Myself in my Employer’s Shoes:” Implementing Target User Personas for Personal Portfolio Website Creation in the Agricultural Communications Classroom**

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**Introduction & Need for Innovation**

Emerging agricultural communications professionals need to be prepared with the skills required for effective web design when going into the workforce (Irlbeck & Akers, 2009; Leal, 2016). To create an impactful website, a target audience should be identified to address the user’s needs (Fenton & Lee, 2014). However, students often struggle with defining who an audience is for their websites, specifically a personal professional portfolio site. When the target audience is not specified, web designers can put out limitless content with no boundaries that ultimately drive the user away (Miaskiewicz & Kozar, 2011; Rhoades et al., 2007). One way agricultural communicators can tailor their website content is through understanding their audience and creating a user persona. A user persona has been defined as an idealized representation of a person that represents the needs of a larger audience (Faller, 2019). User personas give the creator an opportunity to give life to the website’s potential user and develop a product that successfully meets their needs (Maze, n.d.).

Within the industry, practitioners have shown the need for creating user persona profiles that outline key motivations, demographics, concerns, and expectations that are shown on a persona (Faller, 2019). To fulfill this need, an assignment was created for students to create user personas to highlight their motivations and behaviors to inform the content that they should develop. By conducting research and creating a persona, website creation can be more strategic by having specific needs addressed to produce an effective product for the user’s desires (Canziba, 2018).

**How it Works**

Throughout the semester, students in an agricultural communications web design course are tasked with developing a personal professional portfolio site. In one activity, students were asked to think critically about potential users for their portfolio site (i.e., potential employers) and develop a user persona that exemplifies a potential employer. To do so, students were first tasked with finding and submitting a job description for their ‘dream’ job or internship. Then, students were tasked with conducting research to further understand the type of people who may hire them into this role including general demographic information, behaviors, motivations, frustrations, and needs for a potential hire (i.e., professional interests, skills needed to fulfill this role, problems that need solving, etc). After considering these ideas, students were asked to develop a visual user persona demonstrating a hypothetical person that might hire them after graduation or for an internship. Students were expected to create a one-page visual outlining a user whose goals and characteristics represented the needs of their future employers through pictures, icons, and graphics. After, students were asked to reflect about how this activity helped them to learn about potential users for their site through the following questions: 1) how did this exercise help you to think about what a potential employer would need to view on your website, 2) what are essential pieces of content that you could place on your site?, 3) what is one word that you would like your persona to walk away from your website with, and 4) how does it relate to your overall goal?

### Results to Date/Implication

The reflection required at the end of this assignment provided the results for this abstract. It was found that the formation of a user persona was a constructive step in the website creation process, allowing students to critically think about who their target audience is. This activity also empowered students to choose a theme to convey through the content placed on their site.

Students suggested this assignment allowed them to *put themselves in their employer's shoes* as a recurring theme. One student mentioned, "This exercise required me to put myself in my employer's shoes, which proved beneficial." Another student indicated, "I was able to conduct research that showed what an employer is really looking for rather than what I think they're looking for." Students also expressed how important it is to *understand their user's needs to create their content accordingly*. One student stated, "Knowing these things about a future employer would allow you a leg up by catering to the specific user through their specific interests and age." Furthermore, students indicated how creating a persona for their potential employer made them *more aware of what the overall goal of their website should be*. They said, "This exercise caused me to think more intentionally about the ultimate purpose of my portfolio website and shifted my experience from what I want to include on my website to what my employer needs to see on my website." Finally, students chose one word that they would like their persona to walk away from their website with. Emergent words included confident and genuine. One student said, "I want them to have confidence in me as an individual as well as confidence in their decision to hire me for the position." Another student stated, "I hope that through my site people are able to see my relationship-oriented values and my passion for working and serving others."

### Future Plans/Advice to Others

Identifying and understanding the target audience is an important step when teaching students how to build an effective online personal portfolio or other websites. Instructors should highlight this portion of the web design process by providing lecture material focused on audience analysis and developing user personas. We recommend instructors give students examples of potential job/internship descriptions and persona templates with vivid details that can be developed in Canva or Adobe software. Templates should include details such as the students' potential job title along with pain points and motivations of the user that portray a clear picture of their needs. Additionally, instructors should plan ample time for students to complete two personas so that they can gain an appreciation for the multiple types of users who may be visiting their site.

### Cost/Resources

Implementing this assignment for students is free and does not require any additional external resources. Students should already be equipped with the essential materials needed to conduct research for job descriptions to meet professional goals and design a persona for a potential employer, such as laptops and internet access. However, plenty of time should be allotted for instructors and students to work through any questions and for students to think critically about their projects.

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