Discovery: Who is the user?
Analyze information

Persona

Create an imaginary person, with characteristics drawn from real users, who interacts with the new system in a design scenario

Introduction

User-centered design, not surprisingly, involves centering the design around a user. However, it is much easier for interaction designers to design for specific people than to design for general categories of users. If you consider how a specific person, in a realistic situation, would interact with your design, you will consider new design opportunities and more easily consider (and fix) potential breakdowns.

Personas are imaginary people who share key characteristics with your target audience and experience situations in which your design would benefit them. Personas should be as specific as possible – do not try to design a system that “works for everyone”. Perhaps counter-intuitively, keeping personas specific will help you generate significantly more ideas. Even better, if your design truly meets the needs of a small, targeted group of users, you will usually find that the design can easily be expanded to a much wider audience. For example, many designers create tools for the kitchen, for ‘normal’ cooks. The Oxo Good Grips brand was designed instead for elderly people with reduced mobility and weak hands. This constraint led them to design a series of very clever kitchen tools and utensils, such as a one-handed salad spinner and an easy-to-turn pepper grinder, that were so elegant and easy to use that they are now available in exclusive kitchen stores such as Williams Sonoma, as well as large department stores.

What to do

The primary role of a persona or extreme character is to animate a scenario, either to represent what users currently do (use scenario) or how they would react to your new design (design scenario). It is helpful to have an idea of what kind of scenario you would like to create before you define specific personas, although the details of the scenario will be directly affected by the particular personas you choose.

Preparation (before)

Gather your notes and quotations from your interviews and observations of real users.

Procedure (during)

Decide how many personas you will need. (This varies, but usually a scenario will use one to three personas.)

Use a highlighter to indicate key user characteristics from the interviews and observations. Make a list of the personal characteristics of the people you interviewed or observed, including age, gender, current occupa-
You can create personas that represent typical members of your target audience; you can also create ‘extreme characters’ (Djajadiningrat & Gaver, 2000), who push the limits of the situation. For example, the Oxo company designs kitchen items for the handicapped. Relative to the rest of the industry, their designers worked with ‘extreme users’; but the limits these users imposed on them forced them to create better designs which were then appreciated by a much wider audience.

Be careful when choosing extreme characters – it is tempting to choose people who are shockingly extreme, but not necessarily extreme with respect to the design problem at hand. Say, for example, that you are designing a mobile device to help users keep track of their medications. Normal persons might include a working mother with allergies, a teenage boy with the flu, and a retired truck driver who takes heart medication and vitamin pills. Relevant extreme characters might include a body builder or a cancer patient, who are extreme because they want or need to take an exceptionally large number of pills. In this case, a heroin addict could also be considered an extreme user. However, avoid choosing a heroin addict just because it sounds extreme: the character's extreme characteristic must be directly relevant to the problem at hand. If the design problem was to create an app that helped people to exercise regularly, the heroin addict would not be a good extreme character.
The advantage of designing for extreme users is that they add constraints and often force you to be more creative. Even if you end up rejecting the situations that involve extreme characters, considering how they behave and what they need may lead to more innovative solutions for the rest of your target audience.

Selected references / Bibliography

Pruit and Adlin (2006) The Persona Lifecycle, Morgan Kaufmann is an entire book about personas, from a business as well as a design perspective.