



Defining Your Customer Avatar

A customer avatar is a fictional persona that represents your ideal customer. When committed to paper, a customer avatar is a reference point of the attributes that make up your customers. These attributes aid in the decision-making processes surrounding a number of aspects of your business including marketing, sales, product design, and planning for the future.

How Do You Build a Customer Avatar?

In the age of comprehensive and automated digital marketing and online sales, it can be easy to forget that your customers are real living and breathing people. A customer avatar brings you back to the real world by encouraging you to think about your customers not just as the profit margin of the next transaction, but as three-dimensional people with wants, needs, hopes, and dreams.

The best customer avatars aren't just a collection of notecards or scribbles on a notepad—they are a set of focused attributes attached to a fictional person with a name and a face.

It may feel silly to talk about your ideal customer as if they are a person in the room with you while you build your avatar. Don't let it get to you. The brands that are most connected to their customers achieved their enviable (and high-value) relationships by taking the time to nail down *exactly* what it is that makes their customers tick. More specifically, they took the time to nail down what makes their ideal customer different from other people.

A well-constructed customer avatar consists of a few key elements as they relate to your product or service:

- Demographic Info
- Goals and Values
- Behavior and Attributes
- Challenges, Fears, and Pain Points
- Media Diet

If you are a savvy marketer, you may have already realized that several of these elements directly correspond to existing market segmentation methods. Demographic attributes represent some of the simplest ways to organize and group a market. These characteristics are easy to uncover and are inexpensive to target.

The goals and values portion of your customer avatar aligns closely with psychographic segmentation methods, which focus on emotions, values, and lifestyle characteristics. These characteristics are less tangible than demographic aspects such as age or annual income, but they represent the potential to be a bridge to forming deeper connections with customers.

When defining the behavior and attributes portion of your customer avatar, you are tapping into the principles of behavioral segmentation, which is the practice of segmenting your customers by their purchasing behaviors, patterns of product/service usage, or spending habits.

Note

The customer avatar being described is designed for a B2C business (as opposed to a B2B business). A customer avatar for a B2B brand would use firmographic elements such as firm size, annual revenue, and market share as well as other B2B segmentation qualifiers.

Demographic and Background Information

Demographic details are personal attributes. They include aspects such as age, gender, income level, and occupation. As you increase the number of demographic criteria you define, the size of your market segment shrinks. For example, the number of people who are male and over the age of eighteen in a given area is likely pretty big. The number of people who are male, over the age of eighteen, and make more than \$30,000 per year in a given area will be smaller (though likely still a pretty big number). Defining the number of people who are male, over the age of eighteen, make more than \$30,000 per year, and work in the marketing field in a given area narrows the selection further.

Name, Face, and Quote

Because we want our customer avatar to be represented by a single person, there are quite a few demographic factors to be identified. In this case we even go so far as to give our avatar a name and assign a "quote" to him or her. Your avatar's quote should be something that fictitious person would say if they were real. Examples include the following:

"I consider myself frugal but I am willing to pay more for something that will make my life easier."

"When shopping, I am thinking about my family's needs first."

"I never pay more than I have to for necessities. I rarely even splurge on myself."

You get the idea. Even though it may feel like an unnecessary step, assigning a name, a face, and a voice to your customer avatar will help you think of them as a real person. Thinking of them this way helps you build better products and services, craft better marketing campaigns, and generally make smarter (and more informed) sales and marketing decisions.

Goals and Values

The goals and values section of your customer avatar represents psychographic segmentation elements. Demographic attributes loosely sort people into groups; our shared goals and values bind us together in much stronger ways.

Goals

The goals of your customer avatar (and by extension, your ideal customer) represent things he or she wants to accomplish. Use goals on a timescale that are pertinent to your marketing needs. Goals could be as mundane as simply becoming more organized or as aspirational as buying a new home or getting a promotion at work—whatever is relevant to your product/service and your customers.

Values

Just as there is no need to focus on customer avatar goals that are not relevant to your product/service or customer, there is no need to focus on values that are irrelevant. Identify values that shape your customer avatar as a person and as a consumer. Importantly, understand that a value is a position. Identifying what a person believes often means simultaneously identifying what that person *doesn't* believe.

Example values:

*“You get what you pay for” as opposed to
“You should always pay as little as possible.”*

*“Good things are worth waiting for” as opposed to
“Things are only good if they are delivered quickly.”*

*“I can rely on myself to make good decisions” as opposed to
“The best decisions have input from others.”*

Behavior and Attributes

In this context, behavior refers to consumer behavior, and attributes refer to consumer—or otherwise marketing-relevant—attributes. What marketers like about these characteristics is that they often represent patterns, and patterns are predictable.

Behavior

Consumer behavior is expressed in the when, how, and why of spending. The decision to purchase a product or service is motivated by many different factors; identifying (and speaking directly to) the behavioral aspects of that decision can help brands see results. Here are some example behaviors:

John shops in the evenings after work

Wendy won't travel more than fifteen minutes from her home to work out

Sam only cooks meals that require minimal prep and cleanup

Mark checks in with social media before making a purchase

Attributes

Personal attributes are distinct from traditional demographic attributes. Think of it this way: if you could see the attribute as the answer to a question on the census, it is a demographic attribute. If you could see it as the answer to a question on a personality test, then it is a personal attribute. Examples include the following:

John is frugal

Wendy loves pets

Sam likes to travel

Mark likes meeting new people

Challenges, Fears, and Pain Points

This portion of your customer avatar focuses on the problems that your customer avatar—and by extension your ideal customer—faces in their life. As a brand, your goal is to solve the problems that your customers have. No one is interested in a product or service that doesn't solve a problem. If what you are selling doesn't solve a pressing problem that your customers have, they won't be your customers for long.

Challenges and Fears

Our challenges, and things in the future that we are afraid will become challenges, can be powerful motivators. For the purpose of constructing your customer avatar, these aspects represent general problems that your ideal customers have. For example,

John is worried that he is paying too much for health insurance

Wendy is afraid that she will not be able to spend enough time with her family

Sam is concerned that he could fall behind the latest tech trends

Mark is feeling that he needs to lose a little weight

Pain Points

Challenges and fears are general and often not in the here and now. Pain points are specific, actionable problems that your customers are facing right now. Pain points are sources of friction, cost, inconvenience, or other problems that customers will pay money to solve. For example,

John does not have enough time in the morning

Wendy can't communicate with her team quickly

Sam wants meals that take less than an hour to prep, cook, and clean up after

Mark has trouble finding affordable childcare during the workday

Media Diet

Your customer avatar's media diet represents where they go for information, who they listen to when it comes to personal or professional advice, and where they hang out online. When defining the media diet of your customer avatar, focus on the selections that set them apart from other people. Remember, your customer avatar represents your ideal customer. You want to use as narrow a focus as possible. Later, when you are planning and building market segmentation methods, writing sales copy, and planning marketing campaigns, you will extrapolate from your customer avatar.

A good way to think about the elements that comprise your avatar's media diet is by identifying the media they consume and the people they follow but that others won't. Anyone who enjoys gardening would likely read *Home & Garden Magazine*, but so would a lot of people who read it for other topics—*Home & Garden* covers a wide range. On the other hand, the readers of the magazine *Container Gardening* would be interested in just the topic of gardening.

If you were to build a customer avatar for a gardening product, to drill down your ideal customer's media diet you would use statements like "John would read *Container Gardening* but not *Home & Garden*." John may also read *Home & Garden*, but you are attempting to uncover the profile of your ideal customer. Someone who reads *Home & Garden* may not be your ideal customer, but a *Container Gardening* reader would likely be a good fit for your product.

Some Helpful Customer Avatar Tips

- Your customer avatar is not a set-it-and-forget-it document. Treat it as though it lives and breathes—use it! Reference it when needed, update it as new information is uncovered, and think critically about the information it contains.
- Don't be afraid to create multiple personas for your products. Each customer avatar you create should represent a different ideal customer and should revolve around a specific problem or pain point that is unique to that person. If it turns out that your second (or third) avatar is too similar to what you have already defined, scrap it. Not every product or service will necessitate multiple avatars.
- Not sure where to come up with the contents of your customer avatar? When brainstorming from the point of view of your customer isn't enough, test some of your theories and course-correct as needed. Talk to your customers, use digital polls and surveys, and see what your competition is up to. Always be willing to use new information to update your avatar.

The Bottom Line

Take your time and bring your customer avatar to life. Even though he or she is fictitious, treat them like a living, breathing person. Remember, the more focused and realistic your customer avatar is, the stronger a foundation it will be for your marketing and planning efforts. Don't hesitate to create multiple avatars if your product or service warrants it, and, above all, don't let your customer avatar collect dust! Bring it out, use it, and update it as needed.