



UNDERSTANDING
YOUR TARGET
AUDIENCE FOR
EFFECTIVE ONLINE
COMMUNICATION

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GOOD COMMUNICATION IS WHEN YOU COMMUNICATE IN A WAY YOUR AUDIENCE UNDERSTANDS.

You may feel like you know how to use social media platforms for personal sharing, but writing to achieve a marketing/evangelism goal requires much more thought and strategic planning. This worksheet is designed to give you a framework for successfully defining your target audience and determining how to speak to them in a way that is relevant, encouraging meaningful engagements. It is essential that we not only communicate clearly, but that we also take the time to deeply understand our audience. It doesn't matter if you know what you mean. Put yourself in your audience's shoes and speak to them accordingly. Speak to your audience in a way and with the words that enable *them* to understand and connect with your message.

REMEMBER, EMPATHY FIRST.

This means that when we communicate in the digital space, we must speak the language of the platform and recognize the "cultural expectations" and "norms" prevalent in the space, as well as within the culture(s) of the people we are communicating to. Without careful research, our words and intentions can easily be taken the wrong way, inadvertently offending and pushing away the very people we are trying to reach.

As Christians, we want to reach and include everyone. This is our ultimate goal as disciples. However, from a specific ministry standpoint, this approach ends up reducing the relevancy of the message and spreads efforts too thin for significant impact. After all, a standard marketing rule of thumb states:

If you try to reach everyone all the time, you'll end up
REACHING NO ONE.

Each person, ministry, and local church is uniquely equipped and positioned to reach different types of people. Therefore, it is vital to understand who your audience is before you create content, write a single social media post, or spend any money on social advertisements. This resource will help you learn how to effectively shape your messages and content to match your audience's needs and reach them effectively, no matter their age, gender, ethnicity, location, or situation.

Determine Your Target Audience

The first step in reaching your audience is to develop a clear picture of who you are talking to. Begin with surface-level demographic information. Use the space below to fill in the information for your ministry's target audience.

Surface-Level Demographic Information:

- Location

- Age

- Gender

- Ethnicity/Language

- Interests

Once you've determined the surface-level characteristics of your target audience, work down to a deeper level which will help shape your messaging and the kind of content you'll create.

Create deep connections by identifying with
CORE VALUES, NEEDS, & COMMON EXPERIENCES.

People no longer fit into neat categories, so we must connect with them on a more profound level, transcending the standard marketing demographics of age, ethnicity, gender, language, location, and interests. If you can dig deeper, your audience will be loyal to your brand because you resonate with them at their *core*.

The best way to do that is to investigate their needs, experiences, values, and perceptions. Conducting surveys and interviews is one key way to collect more information. Then start asking yourself questions that will help you to get inside the minds of your audience members. What motivates their actions? What makes them who they are? What do they have in common? How can I speak and write in a way that my audience will find relatable? What do they value? What do they actually need?

Examples of needs may include: a spiritually supportive community, affordable education, employment, affordable medical care, safe spaces for their children, mentorship opportunities, a better future, healthier relationships, self-improvement, Christian guidance on real-life issues, food security, or practical life-skills training.

Use the space below to write down possible answers for your target audience.

Deep Level Characteristics:

- Needs

- Core Values

- Shared Experiences

- Motivations

- Additional Insights

“Cultural Empathy” in the Digital Mission Field

The concept of “cultural empathy” is well known in the physical mission field and its principles should be applied to the digital mission field. We live in a world of intersecting cultures or communities, and, therefore, our definition of culture must expand. Many now find themselves between cultures and functioning in multiple communities simultaneously. In order to identify the unifying threads between seemingly dissimilar people, we need to first unpack their many cultural influences.

These cultures are potentially endless in variety, but can include:

- Platform
- Age groups or generations
- Gender
- Language(s)
- People groups: race, ethnic, immigrant v. first generation, etc.
- Current location: city/suburbs/country
- In school vs. out of school
- Lived in a specific geolocation their whole life vs. transplant
- Faith groups, life-long Christians vs. converts vs. former believers/Christians
- Professional groups vs. homemakers vs. working mothers
- College educated vs. blue-collar workers
- Offline social clubs vs. online identities and groups
- Poverty vs. middle-class vs. wealthy

Use this section to unpack your own intersecting cultures and consider how they may shape your core values and needs.

Now use the following space to write the potential overlap in cultures found within your church, community, ministry, or target audience. How might they influence behavior and needs? What unifying factors can you identify?

Internal v. External

Are you speaking to Christians or non-Christians? Your language may change based on the answer to this question. We must modify the way we communicate in order to effectively reach different audiences without creating barriers. For example, when we are talking to our friends we use certain vernacular that tends to be more playful and friendlier, but when we are talking to our boss or elders, our persona is more serious and professional. The same is true with evangelism and discipleship. For example, Adventists may commonly use certain words such as “Sabbath” or “haystacks” that could seem foreign or confusing to non-Adventists. The list below offers some guidelines on how to distinguish between internal and external audiences.

Internal:

- Church members
- Church leaders
- Corporate church constituents
- Bible study groups
- Pathfinder/Adventurer/youth group participants
- Those raised in the Church/long-time attendees
- Faith communities: city/neighborhoods/ministries

External:

- Broader community: neighborhoods/city/state/metro areas
- Businesses
- Related causes or non-profit missions
- Local news

Be careful not to use denominational-speak when addressing external audiences. Use the space below to indicate who your ministry communicates to on a regular basis, if they are believers or non-believers, and how you currently interact with them. What changes should you make? What barriers to faith or entry may you be accidentally creating with your words?

Audience Personas 101

When communicating to your audiences, visualize actual people—their interests, culture, wants, needs, and expectations—to refine your voice. You will probably need to create unique personas to represent different target groups within your audience. According to *The Guardian*, personas can be simply defined as:

“A fictional character that communicates the primary characteristics of a group or segment of your audience and takes into consideration needs, demographics, motivations, and environments.”

Determining your audience personas can help you develop and write content that will be relevant and useful to your audience. The best personas are often created by simply talking to your audience, but social media insights, website analytics, and surveys can also prove very useful. Personas give a human face to a collection of information, and they allow you to classify groups for different messaging campaigns and programs. The best personas combine both quantitative and qualitative information.

Below is an example of a persona:



About Bryce: College Persona

Age: 17

Education: High school senior

Interests: Business, sports, camping, meeting other young people, discipleship training

Salary: \$3,000 a year

Location: Berkeley, Calif.

Family: Adopted, married parents, no siblings, Hispanic

Goals: Finding a good paying and meaningful job, mentoring younger peers, finding a girlfriend, finding a Christian friend group

Challenges: Finding friends with similar morals, avoiding drugs/alcohol, food insecure, feels rejected by his biological parents and struggles to connect, struggles with religious doubt

Values: Fair justice system, the environment, good reputation, strong character, fairness, good citizenship, technology and flexibility, diversity, leadership training and experience

Fears: The unknown, poor work-life balance, affording college, student loan debt, getting a good job, rejection, finding purpose/meaning

Preferred platforms for Media: Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube

Messages applicable to Bryce: We are all adopted into God's family. Our church/school/ministry is a place to belong and a place to grow. Connection to others, connection to God. Diversity and purpose. Mentorship opportunities and support for leadership training or education.

* * *

Social media personas are developed based on your target audience as defined earlier in this section. The key is finding out what those people want and need; the rest is simply compiling those qualities into a made-up person. As a Church, we need to constantly find ways to reach our audience for the kingdom in the best, most efficient way possible. Creating social media personas is a valuable exercise that enables us, as communicators, to step into others' shoes and view life from their perspective. Personas help us develop empathy with our audience.

Use the following framework to develop your own personas:

- Name:
- Age/Gender:
- Culture/Race/Community:
- Education:
- Profession:
- Income:
- Location:
- Family Situation:
- Faith:
- Goals:
- Challenges/Needs:
- Values:
- Fears:
- Platforms/Channels for Promotions:
- Messages That Would Resonate with Them:

Special Note about Generation Z

The Church and the wider Christian community has become increasingly concerned with reaching Generation Z, people born approximately 1997-2012 (Pew Research Center). However, the Church has not yet adapted to meet the needs of the generation before them, Millennials. We should be concerned, as these two age groups represent the largest divergence from traditional Christian values and lowest participation in faith institutions we've seen. To reach and retain these generations, we must reframe our approach based on their perspectives.

Generation Z lives in a totally different world and interacts in a totally different way than any generation before them. When asked what the most important historical event in the USA in the last 20 years was, they responded, "The release of the iPhone." Most older people would say the terrorist attacks of 9/11. (Adam Fenner, *Director, Adventist Learning Community*)

From Gen Z and Millennial perspectives, their answer makes sense given that technology and digital communications have completely reshaped society, how we connect with each other, how we shop, and how we live. They have grown up in an almost entirely digital world, and they relate to technology in a more integrated fashion than any other generation before them.

So who is Gen Z? What you should consider when targeting this age group:

- By 2020, people born after 1995 will be **1/3 of the total population in North America** and account for **40% of all US consumers**.
- **It is the most diverse generation** in US history; they don't see diversity unless it's absent.
- **The majority are non-white**, mostly Hispanic.
- 1/10 will marry across racial/ethnic lines.
- 55% prefer to buy clothes online; 53% prefer to buy books and electronics online.
- **They use technology for everything:** grocery shopping, dating, socializing, studying, entertainment, communication, reading the Bible, cooking, etc.
- 70% watch **2+ hours of YouTube a day**.
- **They prefer less public social media** (example: Snapchat).
- Gen Z has an average attention span of 8 seconds; 11% have ADHD.
- **They prefers images, icons, and symbols** (think emojis and gifs) over text.
- **This group is the least religious generation ever:** only 63% are sure God exists; 35% are completely unaffiliated religiously; 28% have never attended a religious service; and 13% are atheist. This may seem discouraging, but it actually shows a huge opportunity if we are willing to meet the challenge.

What are their core values and needs (broadly speaking)?

- 60% **want their work to benefit the world.**
- 76% are **concerned about humanity's impact** on the planet.
- **They are worried about success**, experienced a weak economy early on and have seen the impact of the student loan crisis on Millennials.
- 57% **prefer to save over spending** (cost-benefit analysis, very pragmatic).
- **They interact with media (two-way interactivity) and want it to work from anywhere they are located to fit their lives** (example: online education, telecommuting, Uber/Lyft vs. personal vehicles, airBNB vs. hotels).
- **They prefer one-on-one social media conversations** over lectures.
- They want **leadership opportunities.**
- **They believe in a social gospel: action not words.**

Source: Adam Fenner, *Director, Adventist Learning Community*

What do Gen Z's values mean for the Church? It means we must innovate for meaningful impact. If we don't, we only have ourselves to blame for the continuous departures. Change is hard, and the Church is notoriously slow to adapt. Now is the time to act if we really are concerned for the salvation of the next generations. Institutions are not permanent. After all, in the words of W. Edwards Deming, "It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory." The good news is that God never fails. He will always have a people, and He has called us to participate in His great work.

In Summary:

We must put our assumptions and judgements aside. Too often we create programs and content based on our own interests and passions or based on what *we* think people need, according to our own perspective and bias. Use the audience factors discussed in this worksheet to make data-informed decisions about your audience, then create programs, messaging, and content based on what you discover. If you're still not sure where to start, spend more time with your target audience and ask more questions. Find out directly from them what they need, what they feel will improve their lives, and what will inspire them to develop a closer relationship with God.

To reach people, we must become a student of their culture. No judgement, only acceptance (note that acceptance does not mean approval) and adaptation. No one should know more about your audience than you do. Strive to become an expert on the people you are trying to reach.