

Personas

[UNBOXED]

by

33



Your guide to understanding people, *not stereotypes*

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We're ThirtyThree – one of the UK's leading employer branding agencies.

As *visual creators and storytellers* for the world's biggest employer brands, our creative choices matter – they shape perceptions, enable conversations, and inspire change. And for years, we've helped our clients create communications that drive their diversity and inclusion efforts forward.

Find out
more



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Welcome to
UNBOXED



This guide forms part of UNBOXED, ThirtyThree’s inclusive employer branding series.

By bringing together forward-thinking companies, we’re exploring how DE&I is essential for an authentic and powerful employer brand.

In our third event on 11th July, we explored how personas are often used in employer branding, the problems that they can cause, and how we might be able to do it better.

The content in this guide has been adapted from a [keynote presentation](#) by Marcus Body, Solutions & Strategy at ThirtyThree and a lively Q&A discussion with Amanda Faull, DEI Communications Specialist, including questions from the audience. Our thanks go to all attendees.



Watch
[UNBOXED]
here

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What's wrong with *personas*?

Example: A typical persona

Nigel.

Aged 43.

Lives in Kidderminster.

Married, two children.

Reads the Guardian online.

Enjoys skiing and is a member of the National Trust.

Has a Facebook account. Looks for jobs using LinkedIn.

Has a degree in Computer Science.



Many employers set out to understand and empathise with the audiences they want to communicate with by *defining personas.*



Personas UNBOXED

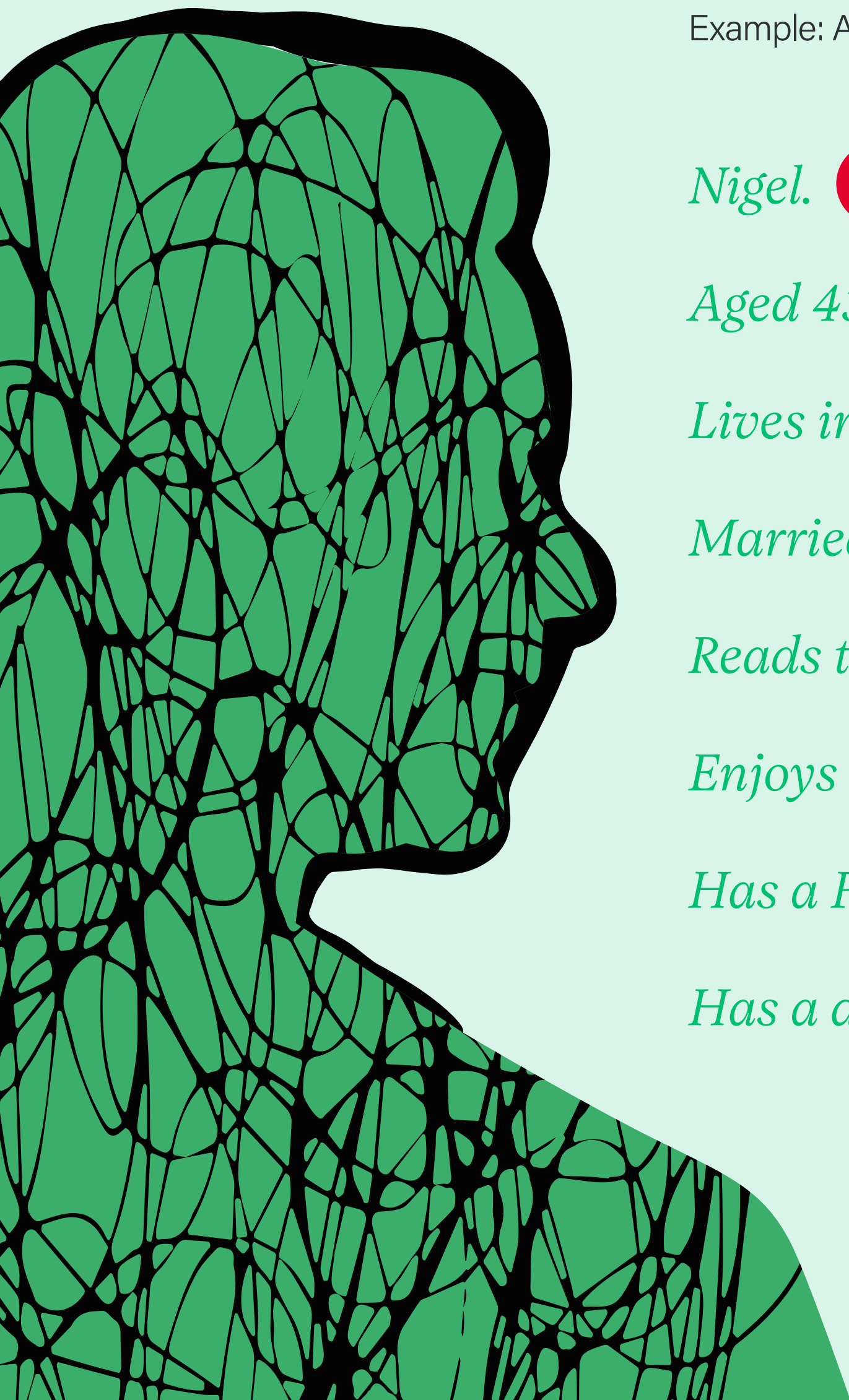
What's wrong with personas?

Personas are then used to develop messaging strategies, channel plans, user journeys and countless other tasks on the employer brand project plan.

But if there's a flaw in how this step is undertaken early on, the impact can be enormous.

Even if the persona is 'valid' – in other words you have data to back the demographics you have chosen – it's only valid for a proportion of people who you could be communicating with, not the whole audience.

Once you have created a set of personas, you are now going to start consciously or unconsciously optimising your whole plan to people who fit those stereotypes, and *inadvertently against those who don't.*



Example: A typical persona

- Nigel.* 1
- Aged 43.* 2
- Lives in Kidderminster.*
- Married, two children.*
- Reads the Guardian online.* 3
- Enjoys skiing and is a member of the National Trust.*
- Has a Facebook account. Looks for jobs using LinkedIn.*
- Has a degree in Computer Science.* 4



- 1 **A name**
Implies gender, ethnicity, or social class
- 2 **An age**
Clearly discriminatory
- 3 **Hobbies and lifestyle**
May have bias by gender, age, parental or marital status, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, or social class
- 4 **Career, skills experience and qualifications**
Anything not essential to the role could introduce biases particularly by age, gender and social class
- 5 **A photo**
Implies gender, ethnicity, disability, or age

The point here is that decisions that might seem insignificant at the point of creating personas can have profound impacts on who you end up targeting.

January:→ December:

“Our data says people in this role are disproportionately likely to play golf...”

“Why is our applicant pool so white, male and middle-class?”

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Why does it *matter*?

There are *three significant reasons* why you need to think about this seriously and ensure that you are using personas responsibly.

The *moral* case against

It's impossible to create a persona of this type that is inclusive. As soon as you specify or imply one type of person, you're excluding from your thinking all those who don't. If you don't have a valid reason for that, it's not the right or fair thing to do.

Even if one tried to set out to create a comprehensive persona set to cover all possibilities, the complexities of intersectionality and compound identity make this an impossible task.

You should also consider how the personas themselves could deeply offend people who saw them. Anyone working in this role who doesn't fit that persona may – justifiably – feel you have defined them as a deficient employee. But even those who do fit the persona could feel you've oversimplified who they are in a patronising or derogatory manner.

The *legal* case against

Depending on employment law in your jurisdiction, you could be at risk of indirectly discriminating by a characteristic that is protected by employment laws.

In the UK, for example, you must be able to prove your persona approach is “a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim” if it indirectly discriminates by age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation.

The *practical* case against

You're about to accidentally exclude people who could be great hires, because they didn't conform to a stereotype. You're going to miss great talent, and make hiring harder.

4 What could
we do *instead*?

Define audiences *differently*

There is an alternative, which immediately removes many of the pitfalls – which is to *create personas that are defined by mindsets* – what they know or feel motivated by, rather than by any details about who they might be outside of that.

At ThirtyThree, we've worked with several clients to start re-examining audiences this way – not only externally for recruitment, but internally when we think about existing employees too.

Defining audiences this way enables us to start creating communications that can work for people who don't fit 'their' stereotype, but still allows us to create a suite of communications that work for different types of people.

Mindset personas can include people who might be very different at first sight – there's no reason why people from very different backgrounds or life stages might not be interested in the same kinds of things.

Example 1:

Someone looking to acquire skills, qualifications, experience

- It could be an apprentice or graduate
- It could be someone starting again mid-career
- It could be someone returning to work
- It could be an immigrant without recognized qualifications

Whoever they are...

...we can focus our communications on what they can learn here

Example 2:

Someone looking for flexible working and respect for work-life

- It could be a parent
- It could be a carer
- It could be someone with a 'side hustle'
- It could be someone who just likes those things

Whoever they are...

...we can focus on telling them how they can succeed here without giving up on that life outside of work

How this *helps*

Once you've created personas based around interests and needs, it makes some things a lot easier – particularly content creation and community engagement. Because we've defined these audiences by what matters to them, it's clear what we might need to talk to them about – and what people in that grouping might be interested in talking to each other about on social channels or at events.

What they need

- Someone looking to inject more variety or challenge into their work at a bigger or broader employer.
- Someone looking for a more purposeful and rewarding use for their skillset.
- Someone looking for a more collaborative and team-based working environment.
- Someone looking for more personal impact and recognition.

What you show them

- Varied project case studies, existing staff talking through their portfolio of experience.
- Existing staff talking about projects they've found fulfilling, or views/thanks of those impacted.
- Group case studies, details on ERGs or other networks, team videos, softer social content.
- Spotlight on staff who've made a personal impact, presence at conferences.

Good places to *start*

If you want to try creating personas this way, you can start defining them by exploring some simple questions:

- What promises are contained within our EVP? What mindset might those appeal to?
- Which companies are we good at taking talent from? Why do those people tend to move?
- When people join us early in their career, why do they pick us?
- When people join from competitors, what do they say is different?
- When people join from outside our industry, what's brought them our way?
- When talent acquisition speak directly to people, what do they want to know?



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What can you start doing *today*?

There are *three top tips* for personas

Give a *critical look* to what you've done

If you've already built things from personas, ask yourself some tough questions about what you're doing to attract, engage and hire people who don't fit them. If you can't come up with good answers, be brave enough to do something about it.

Think of audiences by *wants and needs*

Right now, you could probably write down several reasons people come to work for your organization. Focus your thinking on what those people want and want to know from you rather than trying to make a mental image of what they might look like or do outside of work. You can use this to think about what you already do well, but you can also use it to improve and adapt for the future.

Be an *employer of choice* by being an employer of choices

Humans are complex beings, and what they want, and need may change frequently throughout their life and time working with you. Understanding the mindsets you can and should cater to helps you to create more than one positive employee experience – experiences that will suit different types of people or even the same person at different life stages.

Take your *next step* with us

At ThirtyThree, we believe that every project and campaign should start with inclusion – and we hope this guide helps you live out your commitment to DE&I.

Get in touch with us diversity@thirtythree.co.uk to find out how we can help you create communications that resonate and connect with the people who fit your values and purpose. From copy and art direction to social, digital and film, our experts are here to help you attract and retain the right talent – in the right way.

To hear more about our award-winning DE&I work and to catch our next UNBOXED event, make sure you follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#).



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The inclusive employer branding series

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