LIFE SCIENCE MARKETING RADIO – CHRIS CONNER

Focusing on the Nitty Gritty of Buyer Personas for Better Lead Generation and Conversion

This transcript was lightly edited for clarity.

Chris: Paul Avery is the co-founder and managing director of BioStrata, a specialist life science marketing agency, offering traditional outbound marketing, content marketing, lead nurturing, inbound and context marketing.

Paul, welcome to Life Science Marketing Radio.

Paul: Thank you for having me, Chris. I'm very proud to be here.

Chris: This is going to be fun. Today we're going to talk about buyer persona. For all the listeners out there doing content marketing, it's really important to get this right. While it's fairly straight forward, I think we're going to learn a few things that's going to make it easier today.

First of all, Paul, tell us what is a persona, and why is it important to define them?

Paul: Yeah. I think it's a really good question because I suspect in some respects, we've always used buyers persona and audience personas in our marketing, but with advent of content marketing, putting the buyer at the center of everything we do has become even more important. Within the context at least of how we work with them at BioStrata, a buyer persona is an idealized representation of a customer segment that you're targeting as part of your marketing and sales efforts. As we're using content and inbound marketing to try and attract customers through content that acts as a magnet, we're trying to put the customer or the audience at the center of everything that we create, so we're talking about the things that they care about, perhaps even more than the things that we care about. Trying to find that overlap between their passions and what they're interested in and then our expertise, products, and services. Then if we have this buyer persona defined, in terms of what those things are that those buyers are really interested in, it just makes it much, much easier to produce the content.

Chris: Nice. Yeah. We're really trying to know the person that we're speaking to for any content we're trying to make. Of course, because life science products can be complicated, and there could be multiple people involved in a decision process on the other side, it's easy to imagine creating many personas for your content marketing, but that can be a challenge if it gets too large. How do you decide on the right number and who those are going to be?

Paul: Yeah. I think it's a really good question as well, because the answer's complex, and it can be difficult to make that decision. I think, for us, it's about trying to figure out where that Goldilocks zone is in terms of having just the right number of personas.

To give an example of that, the more specific you can be in each of your personas, the more effective you're going to be in your marketing, because you're going to be speaking about a topic that really resonates with that group of people. If we think of an example, maybe a scientist is the buyer persona. We're targeting a scientist. Yes, there are going to be core things that are important to all scientists, but if we look at a scientist working within industry versus say farmer, then there are going to be different goals, challenges and pain points for each of those groups. If we can already make that differentiation, we're going to be much more effective in the content we're producing and the messages that we're sending out and the stories that we're telling if we speak to those two groups independently.

Of course, if you then take an academic scientist, you can break that down into maybe a PhD student, post doc, principle investigator, lab manager, lab technician, and, again, because their roles within the academic research institutes are different and they have different goals and challenges and pain points, if we can tailor our content and messages down at that level then our content's going to be even more effective. Of course, we need to balance that with actual practical reality. If we get too down in the weeds with our buyer personas, and we end up with say, 30, 40, 50 buyer personas that we're going to have to produce unique content for each of them, effectively we're going to destroy our marketing program, our content marketing program before we start, because we'll be overwhelmed by the simple number of buyer personas that we need to speak to.

Fundamentally, it's about getting that Goldilocks zone. It's not having one or maybe two personas that are really, really general, and therefore we can't really anything interesting to them because it's not really going to resonate, but we also don't want 30, 40, 50 buyer personas where we make it far too hard for us to produce any meaningful content across such a wide variety of audiences.

Chris: Let's say ... I'm just thinking. Let's say we have four or five, and then I know you do inbound marketing, and do the hub spot process. I mean, I think hub spots part of your process often, then they talk about four different stages of the buyer's journey, so that's a little bit different content for each of the personas there. It multiplies pretty quickly. How do you manage that? Do you sometimes create one piece of content that you know is good for more than one persona, or what?

Paul: Yeah. That's another really good question. I think that once you start doing the multiplication like that, and you've got 20 personas, and you need to do piece of content across four stages of the buying journey for each, so that many, many pieces of content, ideally, there probably are going to be four unique pieces of content minimum for each of those buyer personas. But what tends to happen, when you start to put them together, is you can see commonalities emerging in terms of the goals, challenges, pain points, frustrations, common issues that those people are facing. You may have, say, five or six buyer personas, but you might actually be able to see, once you've got down into those, that there's some key themes for subsets of them. It might be that you can use a key ebook or a series of blog posts that will actually talk to three of those buyer personas effectively because it's something that's core and is important to all of them.

Another way that you can leverage those commonalities is to produce an ebook around a topic where the title of that ebook is very focused on a specific buyer persona. Let's say how PhD students can ensure that they have the best change of getting published in high impact journals. Then do another ebook, which is how post docs can ensure that they can get published in the high impact journals, which is probably a very similar ebook, but with a different title, a different introduction perhaps into those eBooks. They'll feel very customized for those audiences, but the core content that underpins them is the same, so you get some efficiencies in terms of producing the content there. That tends to work quite well at the awareness stage, right up at the top of the funnel.

As you move down through the considerations and the decision stages of the funnel, things can get a little simpler. Because, fundamentally, when we get down towards the bottom of the funnel, we're starting to introduce our technology, our solutions, to the buyer. We're probably going to do that in a similar way for the post-docs, the PhDs, or for these related buyer personas that perhaps all fall under the class of scientists. Actually, when it comes to the nitty gritty of the service or product that we're offering them, the key benefits are probably the same. A single case study might work for all of those groups. What that means is you're content funnel looks a lot like your sales funnel in that you've probably have quite a lot of customized content at the top of the funnel, because you've got a series of buyer personas, but you've got less content as you move down the funnel cause your consideration stage office will work across them and perhaps your decision stage offers, your price and comparisons, your buying guides, they might work for all of your buying personas for that particular service or product. Ultimately, the goal at that stage is to get them to buy.

Chris: Right. I really like that, and I'll just point out that it's completely fair in content marketing to just change the title on a piece. That specificity, how does a post-doc insure a high impact journal and how does a graduate student do that. That level of specificity probably creates more conversions.

Paul: Absolutely. As long as they get value out of the piece of content, as long as they don't feel duped into reading an ebook they've already read, you're not going to have any issues. All you're going to do is help attract the right people to the right piece of content.

Chris: Exactly. Alright. Now let's talk about building the persona. How do you decide what information is important to know about this general description of a group of people turned into a single person, and what information that sometimes people talk about with respect to personas isn't important?

Paul: Yeah. For us, basically, we've tried to systemize some of this process to make it easier for us to collect this information. What it tends to mean is that in 80% of cases, or perhaps a better way to look at it is 80% of the information that we collect on every project is around the same things. Then there are certain buyer personas, certain market areas where there are certain questions or pieces of information that we probably just don't need to consider. The way that we look at that is to break it down into four key areas.

The first subset of content information that we look to collect is effectively the who part. This is where we try to get under the skin of exactly who these people are, so this might include things like thinking about what their job title is, their function within the business or the organization in which they work. I'm thinking very much here in terms of B to B, or, I guess, the scientist to scientist marketing that we hear sometimes shared as a term in our industry. Their career path to that particular point. What's their background in terms of their science training, or do they have business training? Did they end up in their role because they're a scientist, or because they were a business person and therefore, within the life sciences, are they a business person learning science or are they a scientist learning business? That kind of background, job function type stuff.

Then layered on top of that, often we try and look at some sort of demographic information, just to get a feel for what the rest of their life looks like in terms of is their job their life? Are the working seven AM til 10 PM every day? Or do they need to balance that type of stuff with a very active social life or family commitments? Cause that helps us to understand the richer context of the pressures that they're under.

Then, finally, within that who part is the communication preferences. Are they introverted or extroverted? Are they likely to be happy to receive sales calls? Or are they the type of person who's going to go looking for information online under their own terms? What types of trade magazines do they read? Are they active on certain social media channels? All that type of information that helps us to collect the who part. That's section one of four.

Section two is then the what part. What are they trying to do, and what can we help them with? This is three fundamental parts I've touched on a bit earlier in terms of what are their goals and objectives in terms of what they're trying to achieve within their role. Usually, trying to align that ... starting to align that with the types of services and products that we offer.

That gets subdivided sometimes into their big picture goals. I'm trying to cure cancer. Then the goals within the actual project that they're working on, which is I need to find a way of testing my cell model so that I can see if this particular drug's going to work. Or I need an assay technology that's going to allow me to do all this stuff much faster than I can now, cause at the moment my project is going to take year, and I need to complete in three months.

Then we try and reflect those goals into the challenges. What is it that's fundamentally holding those people back from achieving those goals. We try to document some of those.

Then, finally, we look at the nitty gritty frustrations because it's often, even though people have these big picture goals, and they have these big picture challenges, quite often it's the nitty gritty frustrations that motivate people to change. If it's the fact that I've just done another mini-prep and the thing hasn't worked again, and I've just spent two or three days doing this. I've gone to measure the amount of DNA in my tube and there's nothing there. There's nothing more frustrating than that. I'm using a kit that I'm trying to rely on to deliver results. Maybe it doesn't, maybe it does. Of course, there's all these different technologies and tools that we're using the laboratory every day, many of which are fantastic, but it's the nitty gritty frustrations that get in the way that can often annoy us. Most of those are because that's where technology's got to so far. If we were to find out that there was a cool technology that had been invented that actually overcame that barrier, we'd probably get really excited about it. That's the three what bits that we collect.

The next section's the how. Once we know what they're trying to achieve, and what's holding them back, we're starting to think now how we're going to position our solution. Now we're moving a little bit more in towards how we're going to resent that. We're starting to think about, okay, if we were going to present our solution to them, what would it look like, and how can we best serve them? So we may be looking here at the unique selling points that we can, in the technology, or service, or product that fits against those goals, objectives, and challenges, and really trying to think about how we're going to align them. This is the part where our brand core messages, our core unique selling points start to fit with the needs and challenges, goals of the buyer persona.

Then, finally, we're looking at things like common sales objections, common questions that they might have. Because content marketing is such a fantastic opportunity to produce content around those objections and those common questions that the prospects have during our sales process, if we can answer them in our content before they even speak to our sales team, it's just going to be much faster and easier for our sales teams to close those deals. That means that sales cycles are going to drop. The amount of time it takes to get someone through a deal is going to drop, because they'll have answered all their questions, or at least most of them, hopefully, by the time that that happens. In order to do that, we're usually collecting a number of proof point items that we would use to overcome those common objections and common questions. That makes up the majority of the information we'd like to collect in a buyer persona, because what we can then do is use that to reflect in different content pieces across that funnel from awareness consideration down to decision.

Chris: Nice. That's a very thorough description of how to build a persona. I really like some of the things you said in there. You put that together. There's some sort of exercise that you're going through with your clients when you're doing that. What do you recommend to make sure that after you've come up with these, that those personas reflect reality? How do you validate those things?

Paul: Yeah. This is key, right, because we can come up with the coolest stuff in the world that we think is great, but if it doesn't reflect reality, then we're not going to get results. I guess, fundamentally, it comes down to a couple of things.

The first thing is how the persona is developed in the first place. I think at one end, I guess if we think about that factors that influence the amount of time and energy and care that's put into producing personas, it usually comes down to how much time and resource a team has to invest in developing them.

At the faster end, but probably less accurate end, is getting a group of your customer facing people together, your internal people together. This might be your sales teams, your customer service teams, operations teams, product developers, and then workshop it together to answer some of those questions that I highlighted previously. That's going to give you a reasonable feel for the marketplace, but you're going to effectively bias that by what your internal perceptions are about what your customers care about.

At the other end of the scale, in the perfect world where we have loads of time and resource to do these projects, we'd want to collect that information from the customers and prospects themselves through primary research where we actually ask them these questions and get them to feed back to us. Usually, we do that through one to one interviews. What we find is that anywhere between six to 12, for a reasonably specific market segment, is enough to see common themes starting to appear so that you don't need to necessarily worry about interviewing 40 or 50 people.

Then most clients, for us at least, usually fall somewhere in between those two ends of the spectrum. Maybe we get to do a few interviews. Maybe it's mostly done with internal people, but a couple of those internal people used to be customer side, as it were, and can actually think like the company's customers. If you're not able to do the level of primary research that we'd ideally do during the persona development phase, you can at least reality check them afterwards by asking a friendly customer or two to review them, and say, "Hey, to you feel this really talks to what you're trying to achieve in your job function? Is this the things that keep you up at night? Are we way off base here, or does this sound right?" If you've got that relationship, you can potentially have quite a good conversation there. As I mentioned, you might have internal people who've been customer side. If they're relatively new to your organization, and it wasn't that long ago that they were customer side, they can probably give you a decent feel.

You can even do things like social media listening. Try to find out what people are blogging about or writing about on LinkedIn and Twitter, and maybe even tools like ResearchGate, to see if people are actually talking about the things that you identified in your buyer personas. If it's a real challenge that they're facing, you'd expect them to be going on to some of these sites and be saying, "Hey, this things really bothering me, does anybody have any recommendations that could help me?"

Chris: I like it. We've been talking this whole time about building a persona. How many, why it's important, and so on, but how do we actually use them? Then when you're working with a company, what is it, what kind of behavior in that company shows you that they've really adopted them and are using them seriously?

Paul: Yeah. I think, for us, what we really are looking to do is actually to create a strategic messaging document. That for us is what a buyer persona is. At least, as an agency, it is fundamentally and excellent piece of briefing material for us to give to our science and creative copywriters and say, "When you're writing, this is the audience that you need to have in mind." Whether it's the blog post or an ebook, having that strategic document always printed out next to you when you're writing every piece of content for that client, helps to ensure that you always have their goals and their challenges and their pain points in mind, but you also have the key USPs that we can, or at least in this case, the client can provide to help overcome those problems. You get to infuse that into all your content.

Ideally, then, to be honest, maybe that's a document to use to infuse into your whole marketing and messaging strategy. It shouldn't just be in your content marketing, but it should, perhaps, be some of the first things that a visitor sees when they land on your website. Is this something that should be front and center in your internal communication, so that everybody within the organization knows who we're trying to provide value to and how we're going to do it? I guess another key point then is to try to use those buyer personas within the sales team, so that when sales are interacting with prospects, they're speaking the same language that marketing's been speaking on the website and in content marketing efforts, so there's no disconnect in the experience for the customer. They read a piece of content on your blog, or they download an ebook, and if eventually, they end up speaking to a sales person, the sales person is speaking about the same challenges and goals and pain points and benefits because it's all encapsulated within this document.

Now, that's of course the ideal, but in small marketing and sales teams, that can be easier to achieve with big organizations that have sales teams working in different areas across the globe, of course that becomes much more challenging. How to know when you've really succeeded in having people flip into this buyer persona driven mindset? The best way I can think of to describe it is actually how you described it, where we had a previous conversation on this, Chris, is when people start to actually use the name of the personas internally. Right? They're talking about Buyer Tech Barry or Farmer Polly, or PhD Student Paul, and that's how they see their customers, and when everybody's using that language and referring to the buyer personas, I think you know that you've may have managed to instigate that change and made real progress.

Chris: Yeah. I've seen that happen, and it really does make a difference. It makes every conversation easier within the team, because it's a shortcut. They talk about this like it's a real person, and everybody knows what the makeup of that person is, what their preferences are and so on. It really speeds things up.

We've talked about building them, and defining them, and, of course, we talked about how you might have multiple personas within the target account. Give us an example of a couple of different pieces of content. How those might be different for two personas within the same account.

Paul: Yeah. Thinking about this and trying to think about some real life projects, I think quite often we're workings with technology providers, right, defining new assays or new screening technologies or whatever it may be. Quite often those technologies are going to be relevant in a number of different laboratory types. Fundamentally, the people using them, especially if there's something fairly complex, like chromatography systems, they're going to highly skilled scientists, but whether they're working in a food lab or a clinical laboratory or an academic laboratory, their challenges and their pain points, et cetera, are going to differ. If we were looking at some sort analysis instrument that's being used in a clinical lab to screen clinical samples versus an academic lab, we can already start to define there. People working in a clinical lab versus an academic lab. Within the clinical lab, they're probably using that technology for high through put analysis. They're trying to get through a number of samples a day. Their main pressure is going to be producing high quality, reliable analysis as fast as possible, because they've probably got a backlog of clinical samples. The pressures that are being placed upon them are about speed. They might be about accuracy in terms of they have a certain percentage of samples that they need to get an accurate result on when assessed by a second validating technology for example.

You look at then how that instrument's going to be used in an academic setting. And there maybe speed and percentage accuracy, maybe they have different levels of importance, especially speed. I'm sure we all want our analysis to be 100% accurate where they can be, but within that academic environment, maybe through put and speed become less important, and maybe it's actually more about flexibility. Because if you're working in an academic lab, where you're trying to do many different experiments, and maybe in three months time you'll have another cool idea, and you want to do a different type of experiment, you want a tool that's going to be able to adapt with you. Whereas in the clinical lab, maybe you've got three or four key tests that you're doing that you need to just do as high through put. Already, when you start to make that split, you can then see how a buyer persona of scientist or instrument user is not going to be a powerful way to speak to those two audiences. If you split them down in the ways I've just described, you can start producing content that will speak effectively to them.

I guess an idea for an awareness stage offer for the academic scientist is how to select a technology that will be flexible enough to allow you to do whatever experiment you can think of this year. Then for the clinical lab it's how to select a technology with minimal down time and fast through put. Instantly, they're going to speak much more effectively to those two buyer personas.

Chris: Beautiful. Alright. What about results? Where have you seen personas used and really make an impact on business results?

Paul: Yeah. I guess, fundamentally, this is what it all comes down to. One of the ways that we look at projects, all projects with clients by strata, is we always work back from the end goal. Fundamentally, because we work in the commercial areas of science, we're trying to convince people that our technology or service or product is a powerful tool for them to use so that they'll buy it. We're always thinking in terms of getting new customers, working back from there to maybe sales qualified leads, marketing qualified leads, and leads. When we're producing these content programs, it's with those KPIs in mind. We want to get more leads. We want to get better quality leads, and we want to see more of those leads turn into customers. What we've seen is, in order to produce lots of high quality leads, you need to produce, through content marketing at least, you need to produce content that just almost reaches into that person's mind or soul, and shows them we understand what you're going through, and we are here to help educate, inform, entertain, and inspire you to be able to do the things that you need to do.

What we found is the more accurately our buyer personas reflect who we're targeting, the more successful we're going to be. For us, the difference between having a persona and not can be massive in terms of the number of leads that we get, but also the quality of those leads. Then, of course, the more true to life our personas become, and based on perhaps primary research with actual customers and prospects, again, the better results we see in terms of lead generation, quality of lead, and eventually, ultimately, the amount of those leads that go on to become customers.

Chris: Fantastic. Paul Avery, I've really enjoyed this conversation about personas. I think for people that struggled building them or aren't yet using them, but know they should be, this is a great primer. I'm going to put a link in the show notes to BioStrata. Is there anything else you want to share with us?

Paul: Absolutely. If anybody wants to contact me to discuss buyer personas in more detail, they can email me, no problem at all, it's pavery, so that's P A V E R Y @biostratamarketing.com or just search for BioStrata on Google, and we'll pop up. Very happy to discuss buyer personas and just content marketing in general, really. I'm a bit of a content marketing geek, so anybody that wants to talk through that, I'm always very happy to do so.

Chris: Alright. Well, thank you very much for taking the time out to talk to us today.

Paul: Thanks for having me, Chris, I really appreciate it.

Chris: My pleasure.

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