Why a Buyer's Situation Trumps Persona

What I Learned Selling Knives in College

One summer during college, I sold cutlery and cookware door-to-door. During training, the instructor stressed the importance of targeting particular profiles. He defined the ideal profile as:
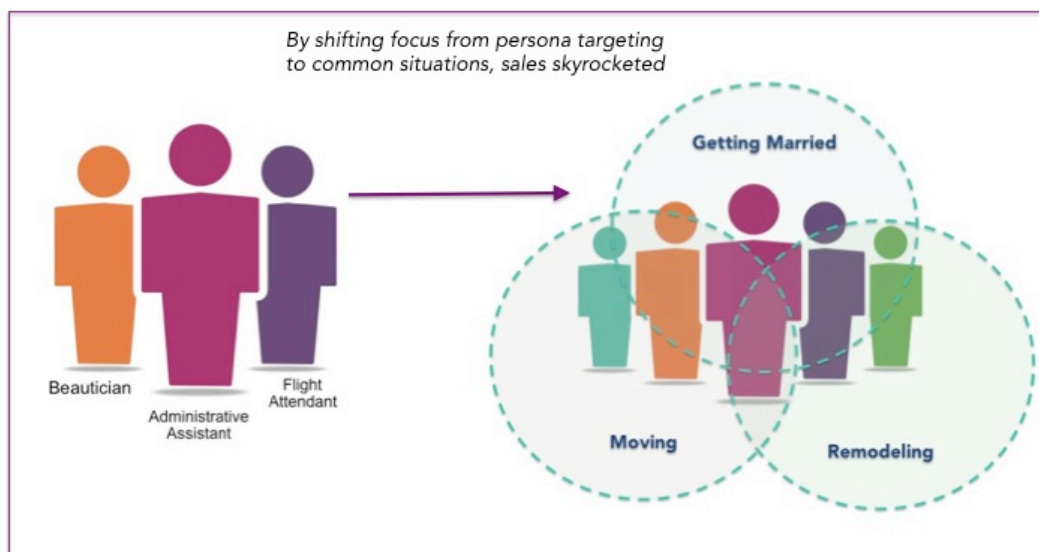
- A female between the ages of 18 - 35;
- Lived in an upscale neighborhood;
- Worked as a beautician, administrative assistant or flight attendant (I never really understood this one).

We were told to continually ask our friends and relatives for people who met these criteria. My first few weeks didn't go well. I soon ran out of "ideal" leads and had to revisit my secondary references.

My Epiphany

I remember getting an appointment with a middle-aged married couple, who lived in a less-desirable section of town. As I started my pitch, I noticed a kitchen filled with every knife, pot and pan I could imagine -- on the surface not the best prospect. But … they had two daughters in their early twenties -- one was getting married, the other was moving to her first apartment. Both needed what I sold. I was at the right place at the right time. I left with a $2,500 sale and a new perspective. _A person's situation trumps their profile._

From that day on, I looked for people who were getting married or moving to a new home. (I later added "remodeling a home" as well). I ended the summer as the top sales person for my region.

By shifting focus from persona targeting to common situations, sales skyrocketed

Beautician — Administrative Assistant — Flight Attendant → Getting Married, Moving, Remodeling

Personas aren't buyers

As a content marketer, you might be taking the approach that I first did. You focus on personas first, rather than situations and write your content accordingly. The flaw in this approach is that personas don't indicate when someone is good sales prospect. They simply provide demographic data.

In the example above two people might have the same profile (24-year-old beauticians living in the same ZIP code), but one is moving out of her parent's house, while the other has been in her own apartment for three years. Who is the better prospect? The situation is the key -- and situations are not revealed through persona data.

Use circumstance to start a conversation

When you create content for personas only, devoid of any consideration of the appropriate situations, attracting the attention of a viable prospect is a random event. The result: you settle for click-through rates of less than 3% (in other words, a failure rate of 97%).

A better approach is for you to consider what circumstances are catalysts for buying, and then prioritize and build your content accordingly. If I were still selling cookware, I might create a flyer that started out "Moving to a new home? You need to update your kitchenware."

Regardless of the person's profile, I have targeted the right situation -- and I have planted the right seed with someone who probably wasn't even thinking about buying new pots and pans.

The advantage of this approach is a much higher response rate. More importantly, the prospect relates with content that describes their particular situation -- one that is known to result in a sale, regardless of their demographic or persona.

When you create your next piece of content, think about the common situations your early stage prospects face and tailor your message to address these issues. You'll have a much higher chance of attracting the right buyer earlier in the process.