

## PROBLEMS IN THE FIELD

---

### The reader of the text: In the text?

#### Creating personas for your readers

Communication is a social phenomenon first and foremost. It is about creating and maintaining relationships between senders and receivers, so it is not surprising that so much attention has been given to reader-focus as an important communication strategy in documents.

As we all now know, many problems concerning the effectiveness of documents can be related to the fact that the writers of these documents do not always manage the distinction between different foci in the documents properly. In every document that we produce we have to deal with the following tripartite division:

- Topic-focus, where the topic of the particular document takes centre stage, while the other elements in the communication model are given a lesser position.
- Writer-focus, the natural egocentric position, where the writer makes a personal or an organizational perspective one of the focal elements in the text, concentrating on what the culture, the image, the knowledge, the needs, and so on of the source are.
- Reader-focus, where the reader (the client) takes center stage and the focus is on the culture, the attitudes, the knowledge, the needs, and so on of this role player.

In many cases the writer-focus gets the upper hand and this quite often feeds into a situation where the reader may feel cheated and even alienated. Given the almost natural egocentric orientation of most human beings, this is a situation

that one very easily ends up with. As Jaspers and Janssen (2002a, p.15) describe one of their examples:

“The amazing thing about these extremely intelligent writers was incidentally that they are readers too, and have to work with texts from the branch offices that they are very dissatisfied with. But as long as no attention was paid to this explicitly, as it was in this process, even they apparently do not make the transfer from their own demands as readers to those of their readers and thus to the quality of their own texts.”

To transpose yourself as a writer into the position of the reader is of course a very difficult thing to do. This difficulty stems from a number of things, among them the difficulty of making the transposition itself, which entails traveling some ‘cognitive distance’ from your own position to that of the reader, imagining what the reader is like, what the reader’s beliefs and attitudes are, and what knowledge the reader has, to name but a few aspects. The difficulty also stems from the fact that in the real world of the writer there is hardly ever any time to research the reader profile, so that in the end it becomes a guessing game, granted of course that one tries to make it an educated guess.

To demonstrate this rather uncomfortable position that writers often find themselves in, I will address two cases concerning the creation of a persona for the reader.

## Reader persona as a tool to establish customer-orientedness

In the literature (e.g. Coney, 1992, Steehouder & Coney, 2000) a distinction is made between two kinds of readers, one being the real reader (with a real identity, values, attitudes, etc.), as opposed to a reader created in and for the text. In this second case we refer to the 'creation' as a persona, a hypothetical archetype of an actual reader or readers. These personas can be defined with relative precision, at least so the theory goes. Creating an accurate persona for the reader (or the writer, for that matter), becomes a mechanism to make the text more human, more reader-focused. The question, of course, is whether this rhetorical role-playing is as easy as it seems. While researching texts in two sectors of South African society, namely the banking sector (marketing brochures) and the medical sector (HIV/AIDS information leaflets) I developed the distinct impression that as we go in search of the ideal persona we quite often take the wrong route or we overdo it.

### Which persona to choose?

In a study conducted at the Unit for Document Design in Stellenbosch, South Africa, concerning the evaluation of reader persona in Afrikaans banking brochures, Ter Hoeven (2002) found some interesting phenomena. She researched the brochures of three banks, working with texts that have students as their target audience, hoping to find answers to questions like the following:

- How do the students appreciate the writer and reader personas created in the brochures?
- Is there a relationship between the personal values of the audience, the appreciation for the personas in the text, and the general appreciation for the text?

- Which roles does the audience play when reacting to the text?
- Does the audience have a preference for a strong persona or a more neutral persona?

She conducted three experiments in her research in order to find answers to the above questions. The details of these experiments and the results following from them will be discussed in Ter Hoeven, De Stadler, & Steehouder (in preparation). In this contribution I would like to comment on some of the results that seem to be pertinent to the issue addressed here.

Ter Hoeven used Transactional Analysis (as developed by Eric Berne) as her theoretical framework. In this model three roles are distinguished, namely the Parent, the Adult, and the Child, with further subdivisions, for instance between Critical Parent and Nurturing Parent, and Adjusted Child and Free Child. In the second experiment Ter Hoeven tried to determine how the reaction of participants to the roles in the text correlated with their own attitudes. A high correlation would be favorable for the effectiveness of the document: Since the role of Free Child (to make your own decisions, be free to plan your own life, etc.) was highly valued during the first experiment, reactions given from the perspective of the Free Child role would be expected and would be favorable. This was the 'identification' experiment, and in general there was a strong identification with this role in the text.

Without going into the details of the experiment and the results, what intrigued me was that those text fragments containing the more pronounced descriptions (the stronger) of the persona stimulated the most wide-ranging reactions: either strongly positive or strongly negative identification. One of the brochures contains the following passage:

Congratulations, you are a student now! You would prefer a balanced lifestyle, with a combination of study time and newly acquired independence ...

Students reacting from the role as Free Child feel relatively positive about this passage. Some of them feel it is ‘cool’, while others appreciate the acknowledgement of their needs. Other students, however, reacting from the role of Adjusted Child (likes to do routine tasks given by others) feel that it is too patronizing and that some of the phrases make them feel inferior (“It is not necessary to tell me what to do or what to think”). In some cases they even adjudge some of the phrases as “silly.” In this particular case the reader persona was a rather strong one, but clearly it led to a diversity of reactions by the audience, ranging from very positive to very negative, leaving one with the impression that, at least for a certain (and rather substantial) part of the audience, the pitch was just not right.

So the question then was: Would a more neutral version of the reader persona lead to a better overall positive evaluation of the text? The third experiment, a motivated choice experiment, tried to find an answer to this question. Participants were given two versions of the same text, one with the stronger definition of the reader persona and the other with a more neutral version. Two passages from the two texts will give an idea of the range of the manipulation:

Neutral version: First National Bank has a clear understanding of the great number of issues that people have to deal with, and that a person’s financial position can add to these issues.

Strong version: You have a lot of worries, and First National Bank understands only too well that you would not like to stress about your finances.

The results show that there is an average preference for the strong version of the reader persona. Women had a stronger preference for the stronger version than men (as expected). There was an overall positive appreciation for the text, but there were indications that in at least some instances the bank was taking it too far. But how sure can one be, especially given the diversity of reactions in the second experi-

ment? What advice would one give on the basis of this experiment? At least the following options are possible: You are safe in your choice; or: Be careful — there is a shift in attitudes that might suggest that Afrikaans-speaking youth are becoming more critical and would opt for a less naïve persona (less Free Child and more Responsible Adult?).

What this study clearly shows, among other things, is just how difficult it is to choose the correct persona for your audience. What seems to be an obvious choice for students is shown to be less than perfect for another rather substantial section of the audience.

### To create a persona or not?

In another study that we are presently conducting at the University of Stellenbosch we are also trying to find an answer to the question: When to create a persona and when not to? The idea that not all texts have strongly identifiable writer or reader personas needs no debate. It is almost obvious that certain genres do not favor persona creation, among them genres like scientific articles and annual reports. But in a number of cases, notably in persuasive texts, the choice to create personas or not is not always that clear-cut. Which brings me to my second case.

Stellenbosch University published a brochure on HIV/AIDS, with the title *HIV/AIDS: An information pamphlet for a better-informed campus*. Although the brochure is reader-focused at least to the extent that the reader is addressed, there is no strongly defined reader persona in the text. Here is a typical fragment from this text:

Is there HIV/AIDS in Stellenbosch?

Yes. You can get infected with HIV by having unprotected sex with anybody at any time, anywhere in the world. Stellenbosch consists of a community of people from various origins and is therefore not immune to the rapid spread of HIV.

The brochure is a typical example of an informative document providing information on the virus, the spread of the virus, and measures that one could take to prevent oneself from contracting the virus. It is a rather neutral, even academic-sounding text with no strong appeal to the values, the attitudes, or the fears of the target audience. Although, according to the writers, this is an informative and a persuasive document, there are hardly any strong persuasive or motivational mechanisms in the text (strong appeals to values and attitudes, appeals to fear, attacks on the attitudes of the students, etc.).

The context in which this brochure has to function includes a student population with diverging views concerning the influence of HIV/AIDS in their personal lives. A rather large percentage of the population seems to think that HIV/AIDS is not their problem, that is: that they do not form part of one of the “designated groups.” However, as research proves, the student population is not immune to the AIDS pandemic. So the question is whether the presence of a stronger reader persona which provides a more honest view of the (sometimes rather dangerous) value and attitude profile of the target audience would not have increased the persuasive quality of the text. Or do we choose a style (in this case opting for a neutral persona) which reflects our analysis of the characteristics of the target audience?

In the preliminary test we did a very quick (and admittedly not fully scientific) motivated choice experiment with a few rewrites of particular segments, among them the one presented above. This fragment was rewritten as follows:

Are you in danger?

You have led a rather sheltered life, protected from all the bad stuff this world has to offer. And not surprisingly, you think that AIDS is not your problem — it is something that other people have to deal with. Well, you’re wrong: Somewhere, somehow you might just make a mistake by having unprotected sex, and unwittingly become a victim. Stellenbosch consists of people

from various origins, all of whom are in danger — nobody is immune to the rapid spread of HIV.

What the preliminary research shows is that students have no problem when asked to reflect on their appreciation for the first text: The neutral style and the informative layer have a very definite appeal. However, when confronted with the choice, they opt for the second version since “it is more persuasive, even though I do not necessarily identify with the reader addressed in the text,” and “it makes me think.” Even though we still have to complete a full set of experiments, the preliminary results do suggest that the choice not to create a strong reader persona may have been the wrong one. And of course, there is the other recurring question that our research will have to resolve: Which persona to create?

To conclude: Quite often we wish to, and in many cases even need to, create a strong reader-focus in our texts, but then the question always is: How to achieve this? One mechanism is the creation of a reader persona, but then a new set of problems crops up: First, to create the persona or not, especially when you have a diverse audience. And secondly, after deciding to create the persona, to pitch the most persuasive, most convincing persona for the particular target audience. As my examples show, it is not always easy when you are operating in the field and have so little time and other means to research the issue.

LEON G. DE STADLER  
Stellenbosch, South Africa

## References

- Coney, Mary. 1992. Technical readers and their rhetorical roles. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 22, 149–158.
- Jaspers, Joep & Daniël Janssen. 2002. Learning from readers. *Document Design* 3(1), 13–15.
- Jaspers, Joep & Daniël Janssen. 2002. Customer-orientedness – some dilemmas. *Document Design* 3(3), 224–226.

- 
- Steehouder, Michaël & Mary Coney. 2000. Role playing on the web. Guidelines for designing and evaluating personas online. *Technical Communication* 47, 327–340.
- Ter Hoeven, Claartje. 2002. *Auteurs- en lezersrollen in wervende teksten*. Thesis, University of Twente.
- Ter Hoeven, Claartje, Leon de Stadler & Michaël Steehouder (in preparation). The writer and reader persona in banking brochures.