BRAND STORY

Module 7: Know Thy Customer
Building Your Brand Personas
Learning Guide | with Bruce Miller

This learning guide captures the full content of Module 7 of the Brand Story course for readers who prefer text over video. All key concepts, examples, and insights from the video are preserved below.

From "Build It and They Will Come" to Knowing Your Customer

Module 7 is where the work gets personal. The goal is to move beyond abstract market segments and form a vivid, specific picture of a real person who needs your product or service. Forget "If we build it, they will come." Your task is to find them first.

Before going further, if you haven't already made a list of potential customer categories for your own business, do that now. Those categories are the raw material for building your personas — the most likely customers at the top of your bell curve.

To ground the process in a familiar example, this module builds a complete persona for Cardiac Cal, the Beyond Meat customer introduced in Module 6. The persona is constructed the old-fashioned way first — through observation, insight, and intuition — and then compared against what an AI produces. The differences are instructive.

Downloadable persona forms are available in PDF, Word, and slide deck formats in the Attachments tab.

Key Insight: *The persona exercise isn't a demographic spreadsheet. It's an act of empathy — getting inside the head and heart of one specific person so that your brand story speaks directly to them.*

The Persona Framework: Six Elements

A complete brand persona has six components. Each one sharpens your understanding of who you're talking to and why they need you.

1. Name and Image

Give your persona a name and find a photograph from the web that captures their personality. The name and face make the persona feel like a real person rather than a data point. For this module, the persona is Cardiac Cal.

2. Description

Write a short, plain-language description of your target customer in your own words — as if you were telling a story about a fictional character. Don't overthink it. Just describe who they are.

3. Background

List the demographics and lifestyle details that illuminate your persona's connection to your brand. These might include age, education, region, income, ethnicity, cultural preferences, or politics. For Cardiac Cal:

Plant-Based Meat | BRAND STORY CHARACTER | "Cardiac Cal"   22

PROBLEM:	SEEKING:	SUMMARY STATEMENT
• BMI, cholesterol, glucose, and blood pressure are up. • Warned to lose weight and change diet by his doctor for cardiac health.	• Transition to a more plant-based diet without major lifestyle changes.	Mainstream consumers who seek to reduce meat consumption for health reasons.

BACKGROUND:	INTERESTS:	BRANDS/MEDIA:	GOALS:
• 54-year suburban dad • Sales rep for a medical device company • Comfortable salary • College degree: Marketing	• Watching sports • Coaching kids' soccer • Grilling out with friends	• Ford Explorer • Marvel action movies • Nirvana, REM, Pearl Jam	• Increasing sales commission to save for retirement. • Save money to pay for kid's college.

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Age & Family	54-year-old suburban dad
Career & Income	Sales rep for a medical device company; comfortable salary (relevant because Beyond Meat carries a premium price); college degree in marketing
Lifestyle	Watches sports, coaches his kids' soccer team, grills out with friends
Brand Affinities	Ford Explorer, Lands' End, Marvel action movies; music: Nirvana, R.E.M., Pearl Jam
Life Goals	Increase sales commission, save for retirement, pay for his kids' college

Cal is a meat-and-potatoes guy. His brand choices reflect it. That context matters because it tells you exactly how far Beyond Meat has to reach to earn his trust.

4. Problem

Describe the specific problem that drives your persona toward your product. This is the heart of the exercise. Not a generic frustration — a precise, product-relevant pain point.

For Cardiac Cal, the problem is clear: he's been told to reduce saturated fat and cut back on red meat because of cardiac issues. He loves burgers. His cardiologist does not.

The same discipline applies across any category. A few examples that illustrate how specific a problem statement should be:

- **Fruit-based gelato:** *"I love ice cream, but my doctor wants me to cut back on sugar. The 20g of sugar in Ben & Jerry's is suddenly a problem."*
- **Ergonomic chair:** *"I sit at a computer all day. Repetitive stress injuries have become a problem."*
- **Dog training classes:** *"We just got a super cute Russell Terrier, but training a high-energy dog has become a problem."*

5. Solution

The solution box describes what your persona is actively seeking to resolve their problem. It should mirror the problem statement precisely — this is the direct line from customer pain to your brand promise.

- "I'm seeking a gourmet ice cream with half the sugar."
- "I'm seeking an ergonomic chair with highly adjustable armrests."
- "I'm seeking a dog trainer with experience working with difficult breeds."

6. Target Statement

The target statement is a summary that describes your customer in one or two sentences. It can be written broad or narrow, depending on your strategy.

Broad: *"Mainstream consumers who love meat but seek a plant-based alternative for their health, to protect the environment, and/or for the welfare of animals."*

Narrow: *"Meat-eaters who seek a plant-based alternative for their cardiac health."*

Research suggests that 6–8% of men have heart disease — not a massive market, but large enough to build a profitable business. By contrast, vegans represent just 1% of the population. Climate-motivated consumers and animal welfare advocates are also relatively small segments. These groups can't be ignored, but they shouldn't anchor your positioning.

Key Insight: *You can't be all things to all people. The narrower the focus, the more likely someone can say, "This brand is for me." That is the goal of brand positioning.*

Broad vs. Narrow: The Positioning Decision

Every brand faces the same tension: go broad and reach more people, or go narrow and speak directly to a specific someone.

The Schweppes case from Module 5 illustrates the stakes. Instead of positioning Schweppes broadly as a soft drink — competing head-on with Coke and Pepsi — David Ogilvy focused the brand narrowly on someone mixing gin and tonics. That narrow focus made Schweppes the unchallenged category leader.

Narrowing your focus sharpens your message. Instead of writing copy for everyone, you're writing a heat-seeking missile zeroed in on one person's problem. For Beyond Meat, a cardiac-focused ad (**Fire Up the Grill!**) will miss young vegans entirely — but today's social media algorithms make it possible to target both audiences with separate, precisely tuned messages without diluting either.

For a start-up, this is liberating advice. You don't need to capture the whole market on day one. Narrow down, speak clearly to your most likely customer, and earn their loyalty. Expand from there.

Special Cases: Wholesale Products and Non-Profits

Wholesale Products

Not every brand speaks directly to the end consumer. If you're selling a wholesale product — think McCain USA, which provides frozen food items to restaurants — your target customer is not the diner. It's the restaurant owner. McCain's brand story for its Harvest

Splendor® sweet potato fries isn't "a delicious, nutritious alternative to regular fries" aimed at the person ordering. It's "grow your profits and your menu" aimed at the person who writes the check.

But the decision isn't always that straightforward. Sara Anderson designs artist-original silk scarves and sells them wholesale to gift shops. Unlike McCain, Sara elected to keep her brand story focused on the end consumer — the person who will ultimately buy and wear the scarf. Her reasoning: the gift shop buyer will evaluate her product through the eyes of their own customers. By speaking to that end customer first, Sara's story resonates at every level of the chain.

The lesson: ask who actually needs to fall in love with your brand story. That person is your target customer — even if they're not the one writing you the first check.

Non-Profits

For non-profit organizations, the instinct is often to center the brand story on the people you serve — the beneficiaries of the mission. But those people are not your target customer. Your target customer is the donor. A non-profit is, at its core, in the business of soliciting funds by appealing to donors' consciences, values, and sense of purpose. Build your persona around the person who gives, and your brand story will speak to them directly.

Building Personas with AI: A Comparison

The persona exercise is designed to develop a deep, almost intimate understanding of your target customer — built from observation, judgment, and personal insight. But could AI shortcut the process? To find out, the following prompt was submitted to Claude:

> *"Hey Claude. Identify the most likely customer personas for Green Griller, a new alternative meat product — very similar to Beyond Meat. Identify the top-of-the-bell-curve customer and other prospects.*
>
> *This plant-based processed food product mimics ground beef and is made from peas, brown rice, mung beans, and faba beans. It carries a premium price — twice that of ground beef and even more than organic beef. Health advantages: It is completely free of cholesterol, hormones, and antibiotics found in beef."*

The results were remarkably close to the personas developed manually for Module 6. Here's how they compare:

Claude AI Persona	Bruce's Persona	Notes
Conscious Omnivore	Mary the Mommy (partially)	*AI prioritized childless urban professionals due to premium price. Bruce combined this with Mary the Mommy.*
Health-Conscious Parents	Mary the Mommy	*Close match. Bruce merged these two AI personas into one.*
Performance Athletes	(not identified)	*A blind spot in the manual process. A useful catch by AI.*
Committed Vegans / Vegetarians	Yolanda the Yogini	*AI made an error: it didn't account for the product's highly processed nature, which would disqualify this group.*
Medically Motivated Switcher	Cardiac Cal	*AI ranked this lower. Bruce ranked Cal #1 — knowing Cal, he'd sneak a burger on the road if he could feel good about it.*
Climate-Motivated Consumer	Climate Clint	*Near-identical match.*

The AI results were uncannily close — close enough to raise a wry question about whether the language model had encountered the Beyond Meat personas from Bruce's Brand Story book during its training. But the comparison reveals something important: AI is a useful thinking partner for persona development, but it requires human judgment to validate.

Claude assumed that Committed Vegans would respond positively to a highly processed plant-based product without factoring in the real-world health scrutiny that caused Beyond Meat's sales to decline. The AI didn't know what it didn't know.

The old-fashioned approach — observation, intuition, and genuine curiosity about real people — remains essential. AI can generate a solid starting list. Only human insight can stress-test it.

Key Insight: *Use AI to generate persona candidates quickly. Use your own judgment to pressure-test them against reality. The best results come from both working together.*

Pretend You're Steve Jobs

Once your persona is complete, return to the question that Steve Jobs made the foundation of everything Apple built:

> *"To sell $8 billion, $10 billion of product a year… you've got to start with the customer experience and work backwards to the technology."*
> **— Steve Jobs**

Pretend you're Steve Jobs. Look at the persona you've just built and ask: how can I solve this person's problem? How can I improve their experience? That question — not the product spec, not the feature list — is the real reason you're starting a business.

Once your customer persona is complete, the next step is to create your Brand Positioning Statement — the formula that positions your product as the precise solution to your customer's needs. That's where the course goes next.

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