TECH comments

The newsletter of the Southeastern Michigan chapter of the Society for Technical Communication

Letter from the President, Paul J. Sisler

I recently found myself at one of those grown up cocktail parties where people shake hands and ask each other what they do for a living. More than once I found myself smack in the middle of the oldest joke in our profession...

Spouse's Colleague: "What do you do?"

Me: "I'm a help developer."

Spouse's Colleague: "A what?"

Me: "I'm a technical writer. I write online manuals for software applications."

Spouse's Colleague: "So... What does that involve exactly?"

Me: "I'm a programmer."

Spouse's Colleague: "How nice. That's a good field to be in these days."

What amuses me most is that the profession of technical communicator has become less rather than more well defined over the years since the Internet became as ubiquitous in American homes as telephones, televisions, and a trash can under the kitchen sink. You would think that my grandmother, who now has Internet access, might have a little better idea about what I do today. All she knows is that the jobs of half her children and most her grandchildren old enough to be legally employed, "have something to do with computers."

So I'm asking myself a lot about what it is we do exactly these days. I'm starting to believe that the biggest challenge to our families', friends'--and yes even colleagues'--ability to understand what we do in our cubicles and meeting rooms all day is more than just the diversity of our profession, it's the pace with which it's evolving and changing.

The theme for the recent Region 4 conference was Retooling the Future. Ben Weisner, of Weisner Associates in Minneapolis, MN delivered a keynote titled "Revolution or Evolution? The Future of Technical Communications," in which he described his key role and the role of the consultants working with him as solving problems.

Coming Events

Networking Lunch
Wednesday, November 29
Paesano Restaurant
Washtenaw Ave
For more information contact:
Kathy Carter
E-mail: bluehoo@provide.net

Inside

society for technical communication
southeastern michigan chapter

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Letter from the President, *Continued*

Sometimes these problems are technical: How do we deliver online help for a web-based application supported by three different browsers running on four different platforms? Sometimes these problems are managerial: How do I manage a team of writers, designers, and developers who are dispersed across three continents? Sometimes these problems are aesthetic: What's the best color for this logo?

We who call ourselves technical communicators do many things. Weisner hinted, and I agree, that more and more, few of these things are what we'd traditionally call "writing." Our work increasingly involves direct involvement in product development. That many of us call ourselves "communicators" rather than "writers" is not new. We've been fighting this battle at conferences and on listservs for some time now, and we're prettymuch in agreement that we do more than write when we produce documents. What is new, however, is that many of us produce fewer and fewer documents.

I've palmed the business card of more than one STC member whom I considered a technical writer to find on later inspection that it bore the title, "Information Designer," "Information Architect," "User-Centered Design Specialist," User Experience Engineer."

My own new business card now proclaims that I, Paul Sisler, am an "Interaction Designer." And while my initial reaction to this proclamation is something along the lines of, "Gee, How pretentious. I wonder if it'll make me more money." It's actually a better match for the work I find myself doing than technical writer or even help developer.

When I design and write help for ecommerce start ups, Intranets, and other new ventures I'm typically more involved in the development of the user interface than programmers are. I design application flows. I write behavioral specifications. I conceive, build, and test all the place the application touches the user.

It's not that I've changed jobs, and now I'm a user interface designer. It's that I've followed what I believe to be a natural progression toward moving information supporting technical products, specifically software, further into the product itself, from manuals, to online books, to context-sensitive help, to embedded help, to information rich interfaces.

While these changes present dramatic challenges, I'm excited for all of us for many reasons. These trends are an indication that companies and clients find us more valuable and higher on the critical path toward product success. These trends mean that all the years that technical writers have dedicated to fighting for positions on development teams are paying off.

These trends mean that we're evolving. It may feel like revolution. Growing pains hurt. But we're becoming. All this is grand, of course, and intended this meditation to be inspirational. But how on earth to I explain to my grandmother that I'm an "Interaction Designer"?!

Marketing Communications: What's the Media?

by Thea Teich

Let's get right to the point. The purpose of marketing communication (marcomm) is to sell. Notice I did not say, "lie, cheat, steal, or sell out," just "sell." And, what is being sold is not necessarily a product with a physical shape and weight. Sometimes what's being sold is a point of view. Think about elections and "the selling of the candidates," for example.

Sometimes one purpose of technical communication (techcomm) is to sell, but primarily the overall goal of techcomm is to inform. The line between the two is a moving target; it shifts all over the place and all the time, so it eludes precise definition. Good marcomm leads customers to buy products from your company and its effectiveness can be measured by sales. Good techcomm helps those customers use what they've bought. Sometimes good techcomm can lead customers to buy more from your company, but that's not its major purpose. Please also notice that I've said nothing about the creativity behind marcomm versus that of techcomm. That's a different topic entirely, and I'm not going there today.

However, like good techcomm, good marcomm should be driven by the needs of its audience—not by the fact that your company's competitors have a Web site and your company does not. Do your customers need a Web site? Would all/most/many/some/few of them use it? It may be that your marcomm goals would better be served by maximizing efforts elsewhere, while maintaining the site at some level. It all depends on the audience, that is, the customers you have and those you hope to attract.

The Web site, the brochure, the booklet, the direct mail, the promotional video, the advertisement—these are all marcomm *tactics or media*—meaning, in this case, *communication methods,* and they receive a great deal of attention, because after all, this is the end product of all the marcomm effort. But the tactic—or the "how"—is really just the finishing touch on what should be a thorough marcomm process that strategically determines the why (objectives), who (specific targeted customer group), what (products, candidates, school levy, resolution, etc.), where (sales venues), and when (launch timing). My premise— and my experience—is that the "how" (the tactic) presents itself once these other factors are tied down. Unfortunately, too many marcomm projects start off at the back end. "We need a brochure—or Web site, or direct mail campaign, or ad"—but we'll figure why we need it, who we want to see it, how we're going to get it to them, and what we're going to say, later.

Tech comments is Available by E-mail

TECH comments is also available in pdf format and can be sent directly to your computer via e-mail. If you're interested in receiving Tech comments through e-mail, please send your request to the Newsletter Editor at Cytheria1@aol.com.

Marketing Communications: What's the Media?, *Continued*

What's the first step you take? Professional technical communicator that you are, it's off to the Web! Check out the manufacturer's site. Then, look for evaluations in printed magazines and trade pubs or online. Talk to family, friends, and perhaps, complete strangers (like I did in a hotel parking lot when I was contemplating the purchase of a PT Cruiser) about their experiences and opinions of your prospective choice. Find out if they know of additional sources of information. Check them out. In other words, get your hands on all the marcomm you can.

Quiz question 1: How different would your parents' information search process be? Your child's? Your next door neighbor's?

Quiz question 2: /what effect does the answer to Quiz Question 1 have on marcomm efforts?

Marcomm has its greatest impact in these early stages of the sales cycle. It creates awareness, supports potential customers' exploration, and motivates their selection. Later, after the sale, if the manufacturer of the item purchased is really marketing- and/or customer-oriented, those customers will receive further marcomm support to sustain their loyalty and affirm their purchase decisions as intelligent ones.

Marcomm's Emotional Appeal

If you'll permit me to be somewhat facetious, good marcomm "hits us where it hurts;" it specifically appeals to emotional factors with messages of how the features of a product will solve our problems by benefiting us in some way. Good marcomm also differentiates that product from the competition; there's got to be some reason for purchasing a specific computer or car or passive attic ventilation—or voting for a specific candidate—and not the competition's offering.

To be even more facetious, marcomm exploits the concept of PFEEGGLS. This acronym stands for Pain, Fear, Ego, Envy, Greed, Guilt, Lust, and Sloth. A good many marcomm messages focus on one of these common human conditions in convincing you of the benefits of a particular product. Aren't you afraid your neighbors will find out about the ring around the collar of your shirts and won't you feel guilty if they do? Wouldn't you be the envy of everyone on the street if the vehicle in your driveway was the latest, biggest SUV from whatever auto manufacturer you want to fill the blank with? Plus, how far would your head swell? Sit back, take it easy, and let blank blank blank handle all your cleaning/cooking/banking/and so on needs.

You probably have better examples than I do.

Marcomm's purpose is to persuade and convince you that a particular product has the features and benefits that will solve your problems and reduce your pain (decrease frustration and difficulty). As a result of your purchase, well, you might not be the envy of all the other guys nor may you be able to leap tall buildings, etc. But at least, you'll no longer have to listen with growing trepidation and fear, with your ego shriveling, to your slow computer churn its way through a slow download, envious of the guy next door who just received a new IBM/Compaq/Dell/Gateway/etc. rocket ship. That's a good thing.

Employment Opportunities

Consultant in Instructional Design

The National Center for Manufacturing Sciences (NCMS) has established a line of business called Education Services, under which NCMS is offering on-line and traditional instructor-led training. NCMS is located in Ann Arbor, MI.

Ken Johnson, Director of Education Services, is looking to find an instructional designer (local) who can "translate" material created for traditional in-class learning into Web-based material, on a contract basis.

If you are such a person or know of someone with experience in this field, or require more details, please contact Ken at 734-995-4977 or kenj@ncms.org.

To find out more about NCMS, we're on the Web at www.ncms.org.

Technical Writers

Compuware Corporation, a world-wide provider of quality software applications and services, is seeking candidates to join a team of talented writers who create online help, user guides, and tutorials for Windows- and Web-based software applications. These individuals will be responsible for interviewing subject matter experts in product development, effectively managing documentation projects to meet dynamic release schedules, and preparing master files for printed production and online delivery.

Candidates for these permanent, full-time positions must possess a relevant baccalaureate degree and excellent writing, communications, and project management skills. At least one year of software-related writing experience with FrameMaker, RoboHELP, and HTML is preferred but not required.

For more information about Compuware, please visit www.compuware.com

Please submit your resume to:

Amy Germain
Compuware Corporation
31440 Northwestern Highway
Farmington Hills, MI 48334
amy_germain@compuware.com

Employment Opportunities

Manager of Corporate Communications

Local company looking for Manager of Corporate Communications. Reports directly to Director of HR Supervises small staff of professional personnel Manages the development, implementation, and administration of the employee communication program. Advises management on human resource issues. Oversees the preparation of printing of employee communication newsletters, communications, and electronic correspondence.

Primary Duties/Functions:

- Plans an develops long and short range content for official employee communication vehicles, coordinates editorial content to meet corporate goals.
- Assigns articles, photography, video and artwork to support company/department goals. Supervises and approves the work of writers, graphic artist, video crew, photographers and clerical personnel. Edits work of staff/freelance writers.
- Oversees bidding process to ensure the most cost-effective production methods.
- Prepares budget estimates and projections for review by successively higher levels of management.
- Makes and evaluates on-going work and project assignments for Unit personnel.
- Participates in hiring, selection, training, and development of staff.

Qualifications:

- Bachelor's degree in Journalism, English, or related field.
- Experience in the publication of a newspaper or magazine to include:
- Writing for internal audience using a variety of communication mediums (a writing sample will be required at the time of the nterview)
- Production aspects of the publication process
- Editing of written and graphic materials
- Publication layout/design techniques
- Communication/planning
- Experience in preparing effective oral and written materials
- Supervisory ability to include organizing and planning, decision making, staffing, budget preparation, coordinating and controlling major projects
- Knowledge of state and federal employment regulations, effective employee communication techniques, video production and its capabilities
- Ability to prepare and presents reports and/or proposals to all levels of management.

Send your resume and salary requirements to:

Toni Pollock
Account Manager
Jawood Management Associates
Phone: 248-269-9988
Fax: 248-269-9644
E-mail: tonipollock@jawood.com

society for technical communication
southeastern michigan chapter

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The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.

The mission of the Southeastern Michigan chapter of the Society for Technical Communication is to:
- foster a sense of community among technical communicators and provide a forum for professional development,
- enhance the professionalism of the members and the status of the profession by promoting the technical communication profession to business, government, and academic organizations,
- provide information through publications and reports,
- promote the education of members and encourage professional and academic mentoring,
- encourage the development of university, academic, and professional courses and research activities in the field of technical communications,
- encourage professional development through competition; technical programs that provide professional education related to communication technologies, methods, and applications; and networking opportunities.

TECH comments

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