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Letter from the President

by Maryann Bowen, STC/SM President

Looking back / looking forward

It hardly seems possible, but here we are at the end of summer and the beginning of a new school year. In our STC Southeastern Michigan chapter, this is

also a time of transition from one program year to the next.

This issue of *TECHcomments* provides a look back at the 2010-2011 program year. One of your council's goals for last year involved an increased commitment to technical communication students in our area, recognizing they are the future of our profession. You'll see that goal reflected in the articles about programs and activities. You'll also see reflected our equally important goal to provide quality services to our professional members.

Looking forward, we are building on this student-professional partnership with a major initiative in 2011-2012. Candice Cooper is a graduate student in technical communication at Lawrence Technological University and a student member of STC/SM. To fulfill the practicum requirement of her degree program, she is

working with us this semester on a project to help us optimize the value of chapter membership. Expect to hear much more about this project as the semester progresses, as we'll be asking for your input and feedback at various points. We welcome Candice and look forward to working with her.

This transition time is also when we traditionally thank our outgoing chapter leadership for their service and welcome new council members. In that tradition, we bid farewell to Sharon McDonnell as chapter Treasurer and welcome Barry Matthews in that position. We can't really say goodbye to Sharon, however; she is serving as editor of *TECHcomments*, beginning with this issue. Thank you, Sharon!

Thanks and best wishes to Elizabeth Ali, Angel Belford, and Elizabeth Donoghue Colvin, who have transitioned out of the roles of Educational Liaison, Publicity Manager / Professional Liaison, and Newsletter Editor, respectively. Thanks and a renewed welcome to all other chapter officers and volunteers who continue in their council positions. And last but not least, I extend an invitation to all STC/SM chapter members to join us in serving our chapter. Visit stc-sm.org for more information about opportunities to volunteer.

STC/SM Leadership 2011-2012

Administrative Council

President
Maryann Bowen
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Immediate Past President
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Treasurer
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Secretary/Historian
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Membership
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Nominations
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Publicity
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STC/SM Election Results for 2011-2012

President – Maryann Bowen
Vice President – Jill Money
Secretary – Thomas Glennan
Treasurer – Barry Matthews
Nominations – Andrea Frazier

STC/SM President Named Associate Fellow



Congratulations to Maryann Bowen on being elected an STC Associate Fellow!

Associate Fellows are outstanding members who have been in STC for at least 10 years and have worked in the field of technical communication for at least 15 years. In addition, they have contributed to other organizations and “told STC’s powerful story” through their involvement in these organizations.

Maryann (center, above) has done all these things, not only within and outside of STC as a member of the technical communication profession, but also through her extensive and long-term involvement in the Girl Scouts of the USA organization. Maryann was recognized during the Honors Banquet at the STC Summit in Sacramento in May 2011.

Membership Renewal Drawing

We are pleased to announce the winners of our renewal drawing. Winners who did not attend the April STC/SM program meeting received their prizes by mail.

Congratulations to all the winners!

\$25 Borders Gift Card

George Hinman
Nancy Hoffman

T-Shirt Winners

Geoffrey Mann
Douglas Walls
Thomas Beverly
Kristen Hatcher
Mitchell Jarosz
Marilyn Kisly (door prize winner)

STC/SM October Program Recap — Biz Blogs: Developing, Managing, and Marketing a Company Blog

by Thomas Glennan

In his introduction to the October, 2010 program meeting, STC/SM Secretary Tom Glennan gave a brief review of the evolution and development of web logs for business, or “business blogs.” And in her opening remarks, program speaker Charlotte Bohnett noted that during the brief introduction Tom had given, approximately 480 blogs had been created and 4,464 blog entries posted! Such is the power and popularity of one of the most successful recent forms of personal and corporate electronic communication and branding.

According to ePolicy Institute founder Nancy Flynn, while a new blog is now created every second, corporate blogging remains relatively new and largely untapped. In 2005, only 10 percent of small businesses had incorporated blogs into their marketing plans. As the Creative Director for Midwest Tape, a 300-employee media distributor that works exclusively with public libraries in the U.S. and Canada, Bohnett recognized that a business blog, or “biz blog,” could provide a strong competitive opportunity for her company and suggested it to her company’s leadership. After receiving approval of and support for her suggestion, she spent more than a year successfully investigating, developing, and implementing a biz blog for Midwest Tape. Bohnett also used this project to meet the requirements for a practicum (course of study) required for her Master of Science degree in Technical and Professional Communication (MSTPC) at Lawrence Technological University (LTU). In her presentation at the October STC/SM program meeting, Bohnett chronicled and shared her experiences transitioning from blog reader to blog developer, manager, marketer, and ultimately professional blogger. Specifically, Bohnett:

- Discussed the topic of blogging, including some key terms and history as well as how businesses use blogs to build their brands
- Shared her blogging expectations and the methods employed to develop, promote, and manage her employer’s company blog
- Reviewed the outcomes of her blogging endeavor
- Elaborated on how her company’s blog has evolved since completing her practicum

Bohnett began her presentation by reminding her listeners that the first rule of effective communication is to know your audience. In that vein, she began with a series of questions to establish the level of understanding of blogs on the part of those present. In reviewing the early steps of her investigation, Bohnett explained that one of her first challenges, given her own limited experience with blogs, was to learn everything she could about them. This included learning what blogging is, how it developed historically, how blogs differ from websites, the terminology and language of blogging, and why people enjoy and use blogging so much, the answers to which she then shared with her audience. This led into a discussion of the use of blogging in personal and corporate branding, which has recently received considerable attention and consideration by bloggers, especially among those using it for commercial purposes. There are many advantages to this approach to branding, including that it is very profitable and cost effective and offers dialogic opportunities through which the blog viewers can offer their feedback and comments. This last point is especially critical because it allows a person or company to respond to feedback with honest and credible dialogue, which builds credibility, community, and loyalty. This viral, or word-of-mouth, marketing is also very powerful in that it can spread almost instantly throughout the web and increase traffic to a website or blog much more quickly and at a fraction of the cost of a traditional marketing campaign using conventional communication media and methodologies. Bohnett then demonstrated the effectiveness of a blog-based strategy using the 2005 UpYourBudget multimedia campaign of the Budget Rent A Car company, which was considered a huge success with over a million first-time visitors to the site in four weeks at a significantly smaller cost than would typically be required. Bohnett then gave a brief review of the dialogic aspects of blogging and the advantages and innovations that this two-way communication provides the blogger with respect to strengthening brands. She quoted author Nancy Flynn, who states in her 2006 book *Blog Rules**: “Organizations that blog externally communicate a number of equally important messages to a diverse group of equally important audiences. That is a feat no brochure, no advertisement, no press release, and no promotional event could accomplish on its own. That is the power of the business blog.”

*Flynn, Nancy. *Blog Rules: A Business Guide to Managing Policy, Public Relations, and Legal Issues*. AMACOM, New York, NY, 2006.

TECHcomments

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

Managing Editor
Sharon McDonnell

Assistant Editor
Elizabeth Donoghue Colvin

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Member Spotlight: Nancy Hoffman

What is your educational background? How long have you been a member of STC? In what STC positions have you served?

I have a Bachelor's degree in business administration from Eastern Michigan University that I finished by taking classes at night while working full time as a writer. I have been a member of STC for 33 years, having joined when I was two (just kidding!). I've served in many positions in our chapter, including President, Vice President, and Chair of the Nominations, Membership, Professional Liaison, and Publications committees as well as Assistant to the President for Communication. At the Society level, I was elected to the international board of directors to serve for three years as Director-Sponsor of Region 4 and was appointed one year to the board as Assistant to the President for Communication. Most recently, I managed the Associate Fellows Nominating Committee.

Why did you decide to join STC?

Several people in my department at Comshare, where I worked for 20 years, were members of STC. I had the opportunity to join STC and go to the international conference in Dallas with two department members one year. The following year, I went to the conference in Los Angeles and picked up an Award of Excellence in the International Technical Publications Competition. Ray Bradbury was the keynote speaker at the conference; I got his autograph!

Why did you decide to pursue technical communication as a career?

I started typing (yes, on a typewriter) and editing computer hardware and software manuals at Comshare. I discovered that the valuable skills I'd learned in high school English classes served me well as a writer and editor. I moved up through all the department's writing positions at Comshare.

Where are you currently employed?

I have my own company, Creekside Communication Services, where I work part time.

What are your job activities? What do you find most interesting and/or satisfying about your job?

I do editing (and some original writing, if forced to). I principally edit doctoral dissertations for students at EMU and Michigan. At Comshare, I used very primitive word processing systems (starting on a mainframe computer) and performed all phases of technical writing projects, from original concept through four-color printing. Of all the job functions I've performed, editing is what I enjoy most.

What are some examples of projects you are particularly proud of?

I'm proud of the project for which I received the international STC award. It is a self-guided training manual developed in 1978, long before such training was put on a computer. It was very "slick" and state-of-the-art at its time. I'm also proud of some of the dissertations I've edited as well as the work I produced as part of a marathon team to deliver six manufacturing proposals (color coded purple, red, blue, green, orange, and yellow) to the National Institute of Standards and Technology on deadline.

How has being an STC member helped you with your career?

STC has been invaluable to my career. I've had opportunities to do so many things that were not options in my job as a technical communicator. Managing major projects and budgets and people are among a few. I've traveled all around the United States and some in Canada and even went to Paris for STC! Along the way, I've made lifelong friends in STC.

What advice do you have for students as they are entering the field of technical communication?

Get involved with STC! Don't just join STC; become an active participant at both the local chapter and the society levels. You will gain valuable career, volunteer, and life experiences. The contacts you make in STC as well as the experience you acquire are the best ways to get jobs throughout your career.

What else would you like our readers to know about you?

I live in northeast Ann Arbor with my husband and my cat, Tangles. I'm an avid MEECHIGAN football, volleyball, and hockey fan. I've attended approximately 30 STC annual conferences. I'm a Fellow of STC.



STC/SM October Program Recap (continued)

Having established a foundation for the effectiveness and efficiency of biz blogs, Bohnett then focused her presentation on the expectations she and her company had for their biz blog, including the frequency of posts, the traffic volume, the informational content, and the best ways to work with the feedback received, including negative comments. Bohnett also reviewed the methods and resources she used to develop her company blog, including its layout and elements. This involved understanding how people use blogs, what information they look for, and how to structure the blog to use that knowledge as a competitive advantage. Bohnett explained the "anatomy" of a blog that most bloggers follow, such as the inclusion of a header, body, sidebar, and favicons (small graphics or icons

associated with a particular page or website), commonly found in blogs, and talked about the purposes of each. Finally, Bohnett discussed the naming of the blog, which Midwest Tape decided would be "News & Views."

The promotion of the blog was the next subject that Bohnett covered. This involved the content of the blog itself as well as how to create a general awareness of the blog using the blogosphere. The content and headlines of the blog, and especially its links, are all key factors in determining an interest level among its readers, and Bohnett reviewed the strategies for increasing the effectiveness of each of these elements. Success in using the blogosphere itself to promote and increase other users' awareness of a blog depends to a large extent on success in creating the dialog and content that other users are interested in as well as fostering the sense of community and reciprocity that other users are looking for. However, Bohnett and her company's leadership found that their participation in the blogosphere was something they really struggled with because of the issues and



challenges it created. These included things like limits on blog participation due to management's concerns, the suitability of some comments for further dialog, and the availability of time to participate in a blog. Each of these issues, and others like them, needed to be addressed before the full benefits of the biz blog could be realized. This required considerable time and discussion to resolve. Bohnett also discussed other tools she found for promoting her company's blog, including "tagging," "pinging," the use of social bookmarks and RSS (Really Simple Syndication), and even traditional advertising.

Having covered the investigation, development, and promotion of her biz blog, Bohnett then switched to a brief discussion of what she had learned about the management of a blog. This involves the creation and use of metrics that are available for understanding and improving the effectiveness of a blog as well as the issue of receiving and responding to comments. This can be one of the most frustrating aspects of managing a blog, especially with respect to the number of comments received and what that says about the perceived value of the blog to its readers. In comparing the outcomes expected for the biz blog with the actual results to date, Bohnett reviewed what she and her company did to address the lower-than-expected volume of responses and comments that News & Views generated and how she worked to achieve the level of quality of participation and feedback that they encountered. She then concluded her presentation with a general overview of the areas that she and her company's leaders had identified for further improvement and the corrective actions they are considering to improve the performance of their biz blog even more. These include:

- A refinement of the blog's purpose
- A better understanding of the company's expectations for the blog
- A more realistic appreciation for the time commitments required to make a blog effective, including the frequency of blog postings
- Further revisions to the blog to increase readability and scanability

Following a question-and-answer period with the audience, Bohnett concluded her remarks by briefly summarizing the steps she had taken in successfully implementing her company's biz blog and the lessons learned along the way. She emphasized that blogs are an essential tool for companies for building brands, increasing loyalty, and extending market reach. She recommended that it is absolutely imperative for companies to incorporate blogging into their marketing plan, as consumers are already blogging en masse and a company's success may very well depend on joining its potential customers in the online conversation. As a final argument for business blogs, Bohnett said studies indicate that during her presentation, roughly 7,200 blogs would have been created and 67,000 blog entries would have been posted. Another testament to the ongoing presence and power of blogs!

Reading Round-Up: Gestalt Rules of Design

Simple guidelines

Once you understand the fundamentals behind a layout, then you can push the limits to create something unique.

Let's take a look at the gestalt theory of design to see how it relates to the way designers work today. The study of gestalt originated in Germany in the 1920s. Much of the theory stems from psychology and higher order cognitive processes, but we'll focus on the gestalt theory of visual perception.

By definition the term gestalt means "a unified, physical, psychological or symbolic configuration having properties that cannot be derived from its parts." The concepts are broken down into separate categories:

- *Closure*. The mind provides the missing pieces in a composition. Take for example the FedEx logo. Although there's no arrow actually placed in the logo, the mind processes the information and recognizes that the negative space in between the E and the x makes the shape of an arrow.
- *Continuance*. The eye continues in a specific direction. For example, when reading a newspaper, your eyes will travel horizontally with each headline, while the small vertical columns of text within the page prevent your eyes from traveling right off the page. A simple explanation of this concept can be demonstrated by how you'll continue reading from left to right even when there's a break in the text.
- *Similarity*. Objects that are similar are grouped together. When looking at a design as a whole, viewers tend to form groups in logical ways based on what the information looks like and where the various items are located. Size, shape and color also help to establish groups. By having similar shapes or colors you can create unity within a design; or if you choose to do the reverse, you can easily create disorder.
- *Proximity*. This is the relationship of objects based on placement. Where you place certain elements within a design will affect how they're perceived. For example, if you have text overlapping text, they'll become one form and you'll lose readability, whereas text on separate lines is easy to read and the words remain separate components.
- *Alignment*. Place items so that they line up. By lining up the separate elements within your layout, you're actually forming groups and organizing information to create order.

Test the theory

As you're creating a layout or design, take into account each of these principles. How are you grouping the objects within the page? Have you created a visual harmony? Are there groupings of information? Are you allowing the viewer to establish closure? All of these are important aspects of creating a successful design.

Break the rules

As important as these rules are, there will come a point where they just don't apply. Undoubtedly, you'll always incorporate one or two aspects of gestalt, but do you really have to align each object in a layout? Of course not. The key to gestalt is to look at the image as a whole and to see how each element affects one another. As long as there's balance visually, you can virtually do anything.

Information

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Links to Other Organizations

Check out what other organizations are doing. Get information on programs you can attend and activities you can participate in.



stc-sm.org

Society for Technical Communication
Southeastern Michigan Chapter

wms-stc.org

Society for Technical Communication
West Michigan Shores Chapter

neostc.org

Society for Technical Communication
Northeast Ohio Chapter

<http://www.hu.mtu.edu/~stcclub/>

Society for Technical Communication
Michigan Tech Chapter



miupa.org

Usability Professionals' Association
Michigan Chapter



amwa.org

American Medical Writers Association



detroit.iabc.com

International Association of Business Communicators
Detroit Chapter



prsadetroit.org

Public Relations Society of America
Detroit Chapter

cmprsa.com

Public Relations Society of America
Central Michigan Chapter



detroitastd.org

American Society for Training and Development
Greater Detroit Chapter

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Ann Arbor Chapter

mm-astd.org

American Society for Training and Development
Mid-Michigan Chapter