

SAN FRANCISCO

February 2004

ActiveVOICE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

February 18th Meeting

The Changing UI of Technical Communication: Transforming Your Career and Moving from Commodity to Strategic Contributor

Presenter: Andrea L. Ames

The economy's taken a downturn. Perhaps you've already been laid off—or you're concerned you might be. You've heard that many companies are "offshoring" technical writing for fees as low as \$5.00/hour—effectively commoditizing the writing and Help development skills you've relied on for years. You're ready to take the next steps in your career.

Join Andrea L. Ames for a brief look at the state of the industry and how you can progress in your career. She'll discuss the characteristics of commoditized technical writing, what you can do to contribute to product profitability and company strategy, and how you can demonstrate your additional value to your company or clients.

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March 17th Meeting

White Papers In Your Future

Presenter: Beau Cain

How do white papers help managers, engineers, governments, and consumers justify decisions in today's lean economy? How do you, the Technical or Marketing Communication Writer, know what type of white paper will do the job best? (Hint: there are ten types of white papers.)

Explore this most versatile and most misunderstood of all business and engineering document types. Discover the difference between a white paper and a whitewash, and learn how white papers can be an excellent tool for insinuating the tech pubs department into the planning phase of product development.

Beau Cain began writing successful marketing and advertising copy in the early 1970s. Since then, he's developed a principled approach to writing white papers ("White papers, not whitewashes"). He teaches a lively and provocative course on writing white papers at San Jose State University's Professional Development Center.

SEE INSIDE FOR MEETING TIMES, LOCATION, & MORE DETAILS!



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How to Extract Information from Subject Matter Experts

by *Diane FitzGibbon*

Presented by science writer, Monya Baker, and technical writer, Andrea Fortus, November's meeting focused on medical and science writing. The presenters' enthusiasm for their work came through during their presentation, and they encouraged those who are looking for a new direction to give it a try.

Before you begin writing your article or talking to subject matter experts, thoroughly prepare yourself.

1. Assess your needs.
2. Access your sources.
3. Complete your interviews.
4. Follow-up.

One of the most time-consuming aspects of research is locating the written sources; however, conducting searches on Google and PubMed (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PubMed) can prove to be a time-saver. The following websites can be helpful: American Medical Writers Association (open) at www.amwa.org; National Association of Science Writers (requires membership) at www.nasw.org; Northern California Science Writers Association (open) at www.ncswa.org. *Literature Review* was also suggested. Be sure to read reviews that are germane to the subject.

Spend more time preparing for your interview. Keep in mind that although you may be ready to interview your source, your source may not be ready for you, either involuntarily or purposely. Here are some useful interview techniques:

1. **Live interview.** This technique is best for a walk-through of the product, manual, etc. Tips: ask more questions than needed; group questions logically, sandwiching hard core questions

between soft questions; interview as many people as possible—try to avoid confining yourself to the upper echelon. In the medical field, consider interviewing patients, nurses, doctors, and members of academia at all levels.

If you find it difficult to schedule an interview, try networking. For a more direct approach, follow your source out of a meeting. If your source is a smoker, accompany him or her on a "smoke break."

2. **Email.** This approach is best for quick results. Tips: limit yourself to five questions, keeping them short and concise; include a deadline; send a reminder email the day of the deadline. This method is helpful when interviewing sources in other countries and different time zones, as well as sources who are not forthcoming with information.

3. **Snail mail.** This method is best if your source has a secretary who screens telephone calls and e-mail. Postal mail usually gets through. Make your questions concise.

Follow-up your interview with fact-checking and additional research, if necessary. Also, don't promise your source too much or send multiple follow-up questions. Remember to *always* express your thanks.

Diane FitzGibbon is a member of the San Francisco chapter of the STC.

Charting a Bold Course

The Region 8 Conference will be held at UC Davis, July 25–27, 2004. For more information, visit www.stcregion8conference.org.

Holiday Party Fun and Prizes

By Keith Albert

On December 17, 2003, our chapter held its fourth annual holiday party at the London Wine Bar. The event drew over 40 technical communicators from the San Francisco chapter, as well as a few of our neighboring chapters.

Partygoers had the opportunity to visit with their peers and enjoy the large selection of hors d'oeuvres, beer, wine, and soft drinks.

Highlights

The evening included the traditional networking game and distribution of door prizes. The highlight came when the grand prize, an edition of RoboHelp X4 provided by eHelp, was given away to Carol Fager-Higgins, who produced the winning ticket. Carol also proved herself to be the best-informed guest by dropping the bombshell that Macromedia was in the process of acquiring eHelp. This purchase was announced on October 22 on the Macromedia web site and finalized on December 19, 2003.

Networking Game

Susan Becker explained the rules of the evening's game. Players were to interview one another. When interviewees had an affirmative answer, they signed their names on a questionnaire. Some of the twenty questions included: Who has been a judge in Touchstone? Who works in the biotech industry? Who has written or edited HTML documents professionally? When the contest ended, prizes were awarded on the basis of the following three criteria: the most names, the most questions answered, and the widest variety of names.

Web team member Emily Wilska garnered the most signatures. Secretary

Reyn Johnson and Yasaman Sohrabi tied for the most questions answered. John Tinonga collected the greatest number of different names. These winners were awarded pairs of SF STC logo wine glasses. Then, the remaining prizes were raffled off.

Prizes from Our Sponsors

Peachpit Press provided us with six of their titles, including *Adobe Acrobat 6 for Windows: Visual QuickStart Guide*, *FrameMaker 7 for Macintosh and Windows: Visual QuickStart Guide*, *Macromedia Dreamweaver MX 2004: Training from the Source*, *Real World Digital Photography*, *Robin William's DVD Design Workshop*, and *Web Design on a Shoestring*.

Other prizes and donors included RoboHelp t-shirts from eHelp, Adobe Acrobat 6.0 Standard from Adobe, and Doc-to-Help 6.5 from ComponentOne. Our chapter contributed Microsoft Project Standard 2002 and several SF STC logo wine glasses.

Heartfelt thanks to all of our donors and guests. May you all have a happy and prosperous year!

Keith is a member of the programs committee.

Ames

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Andrea L. Ames has 20 years of experience in user experience design, specializing in interactive information architecture and usability. She is a Senior Information Developer at IBM Corporation, Associate Fellow and member of the STC Board of Directors, coordinator for two UC Extension technical communication certificates, published author, and frequent conference presenter.

Our Meetings

When

Third Wednesday of every month.
6 pm: Networking and hors d'oeuvres; 7 pm: Program.

Where

Downstairs at the London Wine Bar:
415 Sansome at Clay.

Reservations

Make advance reservations at www.stc-sf.org. (Click Reserve Now.) Admission at the door is on a space-available basis.

Cost

With advance reservations:
\$10 STC members;
\$15 non-members; \$8 students.
At the door:
\$13 STC members;
\$18 non-members; \$11 students;
first-timers free with coupon
(from our Web site).

Directions

From BART

Get off at the Montgomery BART Station. Leave by the Sansome Sutter exit and walk straight ahead.

From the East Bay

Take the Bay Bridge (Hwy 80). Take the first exit, Fremont. Follow Fremont across Market, where it becomes Front. Go 1 block. Turn left onto Pine. Go 2 blocks. Turn right onto Sansome. Go 2 blocks.

From the Peninsula

Take Hwy 101 heading N. Continue on Interstate 80 heading NE. Take the 4th St./Embarcadero exit. Continue straight on Bryant for 1 block. Turn left on 3rd. Turn right on Folsom. Turn left on Fremont. Follow Fremont across Market, where it becomes Front. Bear right on Front. Turn left on Pine. Go 2 blocks. Turn right on Sansome.

From the North Bay

Take Hwy 101 heading S. Turn left on Broadway heading E. Go down Columbus heading SE. Bear right on Montgomery. Turn left on California. Turn left on Sansome.

Parking

The closest parking garage is at One Embarcadero Center. The entrance is located on Battery between Sacramento and Clay.

President's Notes and News

by Susan C. Becker

Susan Becker is a technical communicator and online help developer. She has 16 years of experience working primarily as a contractor in software development for the financial services and human resources industries. sbecker@codewords.com

Welcome to Our Chapter!

New Members

Julia G. Carroll
Corey C. Fake
Stephen P. Lewis
Louis Martin
Sheila Sarkar

Transfer and Reinstated Members

Janet Isadore
Mike R McKinley
Martin E. Rosse
Richard L. Smith
Marsha L. Talley

Congratulations on Senior Member Status!

David A. Fonseca
Andrea L. Fortus
Anne C. Gardner

STC initiated a transformation effort last year to increase services, create long-term financial stability, promote membership growth, and be a leader in our profession. "Transformation: Whys and Wherefores," at www.stc.org/transformation.asp, explains its goals and background more completely than I can here. Because these changes will affect you and our chapter, I encourage you to read about the transformation effort and to respond through the Transformation Team blog at <http://trans4mation.typepad.com>.

While you're STC surfing, check out the new look of our chapter web site: www.stc-sf.org. Meeting announcements front and center, easy-to-find *ActiveVoice* archives, news, resources, and more. My thanks from the chapter go to our new web team: Janet Bran, Julia Cope, Gilbert Gonzalez, Carol Fager-Higgins, and Emily Wilska. And thanks again to Todd Hawley, our web master for the past several years.

San Francisco Chapter Information

Web site: <http://www.stc-sf.org> Phone: (415) 820-1566 Email: info@stc-sf.org

Regional STC Chapter Meetings

San Francisco chapter meets the 3rd Wednesday of each month.
For details: www.stc-sf.org

Silicon Valley chapter meets the 4th Thursday of each month.
For details: www.stc-siliconvalley.org

Berkeley chapter meets the 2nd Wednesday of each month.
For details: www.stc-berkeley.org

East Bay chapter meets the 1st Thursday of each month.
For details: www.ebstc.org

North Bay chapter meets the 3rd Thursday of each month.
For details: www.stc-northbay.org

Sacramento chapter meets the 1st Wednesday of each month.
For details: www.stcsacramento.org

SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

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