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This printer-friendly version of the ActiveVOICE includes the same content as the online newsletter on the chapter Web site (www.stc-sf.org). The text has been reformatted to reduce the number of pages required to print the newsletter.

June 2006 Meeting -- Acting Lessons for Interviewees

Presented by Alfred B. Stansbury

The June meeting is on Wednesday, June 21, 2006, from 6:00 pm to 8:30 pm at the Elephant & Castle in San Francisco's financial district. For details about the location and instructions for purchasing tickets, visit www.stc-sf.org/stc-meetings.htm.

About the Presentation

Job interviews are among the most stressful situations anyone ever faces. Some of the stress is biological, and there for a very good reason. Much of it we create ourselves. All of it can be managed and put to good use.

This Reader's Digest Condensed Version of the "Acting Lessons for Interviewees" course will offer you a new paradigm for interviews that can help you stay relaxed and in control of the process. It will also offer tips and techniques from the acting trade that you can use to make your interview time more productive and enjoyable.

Because the material is large, and the time so short, I'll have to spend some of it talking "at" you, telling you things directly. But please do come prepared

to participate in a relaxing and enjoyable exercise or demonstration or two.

About the Speaker

Alfred B. Stansbury is a part-time actor and teacher, and full-time technical writer who is fascinated by the power of acting techniques applied in the "real"



world. He's been teaching acting and interviewing for some 20 years now. Alfred is a resident of Alameda who loves his job and delights in commuting into fabulous San Francisco through the world-famous views on the bridge and on the water.

July 2006 Meeting -- Digesting the "Alphabet Soup" of Technical Writing and Publishing

Presented by Bret Freeman

The July meeting is on Wednesday, July 19, 2006, from 6:00 pm to 8:30 pm at the Elephant & Castle in San Francisco's financial district. For details about the location and instructions for purchasing tickets, visit www.stc-sf.org/stc-meetings.htm.

About the Presentation

XML, DTD, XSLT, XSL-FO, DITA, CMS... What does it all mean? Technology has moved into the technical writing industry in a big way through structured writing and content management, making content more accurate and writers more efficient and productive. As technical writing becomes more sophisticated, technical writers and technical communications managers are bombarded with confusing acronyms and jargon.

In this presentation, Bret Freeman will give an overview of a structured writing environment and content management.

Attendees will learn:

- The advantages of structured writing.
- How to migrate to a structured writing environment.
- What the basic building blocks are for a structured writing environment.
- What the common acronyms mean and how to use them.
- The basics of content management.
- How to choose the right system for your specific needs.

Who should attend:

- Writers
- Editors
- Managers

About the Speaker

As Senior Sales Engineer for Vasont Systems, Bret Freeman is responsible for technical support for the sales and marketing staff. In this role,



he consults with prospective clients and demonstrates Vasont's technical features and capabilities, and frequently delivers presentations for Vasont's Webinar Series, industry conferences, and media events. He has extensive knowledge in content management strategies and complex multilingual outputs. Bret has more than ten years of experience in the information management and publishing industry.

March 2006 Meeting -- Designing Datasheet Templates

Presented by Jackie Athey and reviewed by Keith A. Albert

Datasheets are documents that contain information about a product, designed to convince readers to purchase that product, explained Jackie Athey at the

March meeting of the San Francisco Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.

Consisting of both marketing and technical information, datasheets are more compiled than written. Typically, they consist of discrete segments of prose designed for business-to-business communication, resembling, more than anything else, product briefs (which could be viewed as abstracts of datasheets). Some brochures, especially automotive ones, qualify as datasheets when they include technical data. On the other hand, datasheets are not reference manuals: although high-level, they do not exhaustively list components and functions. Nor are they user guides: datasheets aim to explain why to do something, not how to do something.

Each of the two parts of a datasheet is substantially different. The first part, targeting decision makers, is both marketing oriented and marketing driven, and is written at a high-level. The second part is technical in nature, comprised of the nuts and bolts of the product. It seeks to motivate decision influencers. Although each of these components is capable of standing alone, datasheets weld them together.

The style and content of datasheets varies from industry to industry.

- Automotive brochure datasheets place glossy, marketing elements next to high-level technical specifications such as dimension and capacity.
- ATMI containers, such as bag-in-a-bottle and bag-in-a-can, are marketed through brief, visually appealing datasheets designed for rapid comprehension.
- Banking datasheets seek to encourage readers to purchase a product and list technical data about rates.
- Datasheets promoting Loctite, a type of anaerobic adhesive for chemical manufacturers, feature very little marketing information, are not at all

glossy, may spell out directions for use and may also contain safety information.

- Safety datasheets have almost no marketing information, but provide heavily regulated safety information such as instructions for disposal, proper environmental safety procedures (e.g., eyewash, antidotes) and emergency contact information.
- The semiconductor industry has several forms of datasheets including broadcom, which summarizes datasheets information for a general audience, spansion datasheets, which summarize multichip products, incorporating several datasheets into one. The latter includes purchasing information and timing diagrams and is quite marketing oriented.

As always, the principal idea for any technical communicator to keep in mind when writing datasheets is what are the expectations of the audience. Follow the company's stylebook, and for longer datasheets, consider adding a table of contents, chapters, pagination, descriptive headers or a glossary.

New and Transferred Members

By Marc Smircich

We welcome the following people who joined and transferred into the San Francisco Chapter STC during March, April, and May.

New members:

- Raymond P. Angelo
- Osca Cardenas
- Patricia Egan
- Maria Goodavage
- Steven Heitman
- Jennifer Kinion
- Christine X. Ng
- Catherine E. Rudiger
- Robin P. Timm

Members transferring into the chapter:

- John J. Alt
- Kathy R. Arizon
- Megumi Ashakawa
- David M. Bergantz
- Roger A. Dearth
- Philip D. Grisier
- Wendy Lawrence
- Lea Mason
- Brenda W. Newmann
- Chris L. Scannel
- Ann M. Shogren

Two Down, One to Go

By Beau Cain, Director, The Region Formerly Known as 8

The Board of Directors meeting at the Society's Annual Conference in Las Vegas marked the end of my second year as a Director, and the beginning of my third and final year in that office. In the two years that have passed, Region 8 chapters and members have made notable contributions to the future operation of our Society. I would like to see Region 8 lead the Society into its next round of changes during my final year as the Director of our region.

Changing Communication Technology

I can hardly believe it, but STC's **Communication Director Maurice Martin** has already posted STC's very first podcast on the Society's Web site.

www.stc.org/stcmembers/podcasts01.asp (member login required)

Although podcasting isn't bleeding edge technology, this deployment of a new communication technology seems to have happened at light speed compared to decades of the Society's seeming technophobia. Not only that, but Maurice is ready to publish the Society's second podcast, too!

More personally, I'm pleased that the Society's first podcast is the audio recording of the Leadership Day presentation Chapter Public Relations Best

Practices Forum, presented by my long-time STC buddy, **George Slaughter**, of the Houston chapter. The second podcast will be the audio recording of the Leadership Day presentation about the new STC-CDX.org site ("STC Communication Department eXperimental website") which was given by TransAlpine chapter's commanding **Jang Graat**. Cleverly, stc-cdx.org is the site where these podcasts will be available for downloading.

Everyone, please listen and learn, then contribute! Bravo George, Jang, and Maurice!

Changing Criteria For Recognition

Over the past two years, fewer and fewer Region 8 chapters have applied for Chapter Achievement Awards (CAA), but more chapters have been contenders for my pick as Pacesetter Award winning chapters. The Society's Pacesetter Award is given to no more than one chapter in each region in a year for successfully deploying innovative operations or programs that can be adopted beneficially by other chapters. It was a tough call to distinguish Orange County chapter for its radically different strategy and plan to make their operation self-supporting.

The Community Achievement Award Evaluation Committee (CAAEC) is now accepting input from chapter leaders to help re-design the CAA criteria to make it more relevant to community operations. I encourage every volunteer who has served as an elected leader to send their suggestions to me before July 1. As well, I thank **Berkeley chapter President Joe Devney** for already giving me his table of very well-considered suggestions. If you want to read President Devney's list of suggestions, e-mail me.

Changing Community Representation

Separating community sponsorship from the Directors is the most profound and pervasive change that the Board has adopted for the Society in decades. Members now elect their Directors at large rather than by region, because by law Directors of non-profit organiza-

tions must represent all members, not just members in their region.

But the Board of Directors recognizes the importance of chapter and SIG activities in the Society's operations, and realizes that these entities deserve Board-level attention. We now have the Leadership Community Resource (LCR), a standing committee of volunteers that communicates with all the chapters and SIGs, and that reports directly to the Society's Executive Director.

The truly great aspect of the LCR is that since it is a committee, it allows for greater volunteer participation in chapter and SIG assistance than did the old Director-Sponsor model. Now you can volunteer to assist communities, and not just your chapter or your SIG, but all STC communities, through participation in the LCR. Contact the LCR through **De Murr** (deirdre.a.murr@disney.com) to get involved and become known as a great servant leader in our Society.

Changing the Community Funding Model

There's not a chapter or SIG officer among us who doesn't recognize this: community funding is changing. The old system of rebating a small portion of a member's dues to the chapters and SIGs to which he or she "belongs" is under scrutiny. In fact, the Board of Directors now avoids using the word "rebate" when speaking of community funding. Instead, they use the word "funding" to help them keep an open mind about how member money might reach chapters and SIGs.

What does this mean for your chapter? I believe it means that every chapter must examine its operation to determine how it can become a money-maker, and then prepare to charge for its services. I hope that each and every community identifies the value they provide their affiliates, determines an attractive price for that affiliation, and sells it. Do you know what your chapter can sell that would pay for its operation? What services are you willing to pay your chapters or SIGs for?

And how does this align with the Society's operation? Isn't STC a non-profit charitable organization? Are we allowed to sell services in order to accumulate financial reserves that help us assure our continued operation and service to members and the community at large?

Read on.

Changing Our Strategic Plan

I encourage every chapter leader to examine the Society's new strategic plan.

www.stc.org/ppt/orgChart0506.ppt

In particular, pay close attention to the new strategic objectives chart in slide 6, and the explanatory slides 7 through 12. In keeping with the nature of our craft, even the design of this strategic objectives chart is different from our old Strategic Plan. There are concentric circles that identify our core values, surrounded by objectives stated in segments.

The core values are:

- Communicating Effectively
- Cultivating a Risk-taking Global Culture
- Supporting STC with Leading-edge Technology

The objectives are:

- Telling our powerful story
- Implementing a strategic business model
- Growing relationships and choosing partners
- Making money
- Growing and supporting our leaders
- Improving practice through research and education

This is radically different from recent strategic plans in that it is strongly business and marketing oriented. Our communities need to be strongly business and marketing oriented now, because we are recovering from losses related to the struggling economy.

To that end, I ask you to contact Presidents **Jeff Randolph** and **Adele Sommers** in order to get solid ideas about how to make your chapter a well-marketed, money-making business. I urge you to do so this month, as we begin our last year of serving Region 8's members and colleagues together.

Orange County STC Web site:
www.ocstc.org/

San Luis Obispo STC Web site:
www.slostc.org/

As well, I urge each chapter officer to read **STC President Paula Berger's** slideshow, *The New World of STC*:

www.stc.org/ppt/orgChart0506.ppt

Pay close attention to slides 14 through 22. They are the graphic depiction of the managing entities that will drive STC's operations this year, and they name the people you will want to contact in order to get answers or give service.

Two down, one year to go, colleagues. Let's make Region 8 lead the way in beneficial changes for STC, our craft, our colleagues, and ourselves.

Something for Everyone at STC Las Vegas Conference

By Patrick Lufkin

In May, the STC held its annual international conference in Las Vegas. At least five San Francisco members attended, and a few of us have elected to share our thoughts and impressions.

The conference extended over five days from May 7-11, starting with a leadership day on Sunday, followed by three days of conference proper on Monday through Wednesday, and an additional day of workshops and tutorials on Thursday. With close to two thousand attendees, the conference required the facilities of two connected hotel/casinos, Bally's and Bally's Paris.

Like everything along Las Vegas' famous "strip," the conference crackled with

excitement. At any given moment, you could choose from among several dozen sessions. Sessions covered everything from the latest tools and techniques, to procedures for authoring various kinds of deliverables, to industry trends and management issues. There was truly something for everyone. If you began to suffer from information overload, you could drop by the business meeting of a SIG, browse the offerings of several dozen vendors of technical communication related services and software, or hang out with friends or check email in a large relaxation area. Evenings were devoted to partying, including a night of "open mike" performances, and a lavish awards banquet.

Click the following links to read each correspondent's impressions of the conference.

- Life on the Strip, Graphic Design, Failed Espionage, and the Grand Canyon, by Susan Becker
- STC Vows to Tell its "Powerful Story," by Patrick Lufkin
- Vendor Show, Conference Sessions, Lessons Learned, and Architectural Musings, by Marc Smircich

Impressions of the 2006 STC Annual Conference: Life on the Strip, Graphic Design, Failed Espionage, and the Grand Canyon

By Susan Becker

Editor's Note: Susan Becker, Patrick Lufkin, and Marc Smircich attended the STC's 53rd annual conference, which took place in Las Vegas from May 7-11. They have written articles describing their experiences for this edition of the ActiveVOICE. More articles about the conference are available at: www.stc-sf.org/newsletter/2006-jun/conference.html

Having attended the WritersUA Conference in Las Vegas in March 2005, I had some idea of what I was getting into by attending the STC Annual Conference there in May 2006: lots of cigarette

smoke, long hikes through the din of electric slot machines to get just about anywhere, and outside, early summer in a desert. But I was also looking forward to some enlightening workshops, time with old friends, and an opportunity to sneak off to the Grand Canyon before the conference began.

Living on the Strip

The first thing you should know about Las Vegas is that people smoke cigarettes there, in every place, at all times. Except when they are smoking cigars. With some persistence, if you are a non-smoker, when you check in to your hotel, you might get the non-smoking room you requested months before, or you might be able to switch to a non-smoking room early the next morning. But you might just have to put on your big girl (or boy) panties and deal with it. In any case, cigarette smoke is a given. If you're used to living in Northern California, this situation can be rather irritating, and I'm not just speaking metaphorically here. But I'm done with that subject now.

So we can move on to another rather bizarre thing about Las Vegas: the Fountains of Bellagio.

I spent one enjoyable evening, dining al fresco (it cooled down enough to make that bearable) at the Mon Ami Gabi, watching, across Las Vegas Blvd, the Fountains of Bellagio dance, squirt, spurt, shoot sprays of water over 30 feet into the air, and perform other damp activities all to music every 15 minutes (in what the Bellagio Web site describes rather well as a "breathtaking union of water, music and light"). I asked some of my STC buddies at lunch the next day what the word is for this contrast: extravagant fountains in the middle of a desert. I liked best the suggestion of a cognitive disconnect, with its possibility of both delight and discomfort.

That Crazy Belgian

But about the conference. My goals were to learn something about CSS (cascading style sheets) as a tool for Web page design and anything about graphics. Also, since I was not presenting a session or representing the

chapter this year, I hoped to view the conference more as an outsider or a "spy" for the rank and file membership.

I found only one mention of CSS as a minor point in a description of a session on Dreamweaver. But the conference had more to offer me on graphics. I attended three of the four sessions listed in the program's index under graphic design and graphics, two with Jean-luc Doumont and another with Patrick Hofmann.

Jean-luc Doumont, whom I thought of rather unfairly as that crazy Belgian (he is Belgian and "articulate, entertaining, and thought-provoking" as his Web site says, but not at all crazy), presented sessions on Effective Page Layout for the Nonartist and on Effective Slides: Design, Construction, and Use. I also attended his session on Magical Numbers.

In Page Layout, Jean-luc covered many of the basic concepts most of us have learned and forgotten, like using panels to design the page and lining up items. One idea I found new and particularly interesting, was that Jean-luc suggested using a single family of typefaces (like Lucida) that contains all the variations that you want to use in a single document (for example, not just regular, bold, and italic, but both serif and sans serif) rather than mixing fonts (like Times New Roman for serif and Arial for sans serif).

For Effective Slides, Jean-luc pulled pages from the session materials posted on the STC Annual Conference site and critiqued them based on his principles. For example, he believes that slides should not include footers (date, location, page number, etc.) because most of this information is irrelevant to the presentation. It is either archival data for the speaker (date, time, location) or simply an artifact from when presentations were made on transparencies using an overhead projector. (If you dropped your stack of transparencies, the pages had better be numbered!)

For a feeling of Jean-luc's ideas and his own spare and clean design, visit his

Web site www.principiae.com. I would recommend any presentation he gives, including Magical Numbers, in which you can "learn the myth and reality behind the magical numbers $7+/-2$."

Community Graphic Standards

Patrick Hofmann gave a well-organized presentation, packed with suggestions and tips, on Polishing Your Pictures: Bringing Consistency and Meaning to Your Visuals. The idea I found most immediately helpful was Patrick's concept of building standard attributes; that is, establishing styles for your graphics and then sticking to them. According to Patrick, your standards should define "Lines (line weight and colour), Fills (shading and colour values), Text (font, size, style, colour), Annotations (line, text, alignment)."

These styles are not necessarily supplied by the graphics tool you are using, but enforced by you. Patrick said his testing showed that users found the document "cleaner" even when they couldn't pinpoint why. Of course, it seems like we should all know this, but that's why I go to conferences: to be reminded and, yes, OK, maybe I don't know everything. You can review more of Patrick's presentation, which is posted with the session materials on the STC Annual Conference site.

What Happens in Vegas...

As far as being a spy, I failed. It turns out that having presented in the past and worked as the San Francisco chapter's president for a couple of years, I just know too many people to be an outsider. I'm one of those irritating people that speakers call on by name during presentations (though unfortunately not Patrick or the crazy Belgian). I even ended up sitting at the president's table at the awards banquet not through any merit of my own, but because San Francisco chapter member, Dana Chisnell, received a President's Award for her work as AP (Assistant to the President) for Virtual Communities.

The most interesting event on the STC side was the board meeting (which in my attempt to be an outsider, I skipped, to go swimming). It went on for almost

three hours one evening, bogged down (or embroiled) in a discussion of a motion put forward by Jeff Randolph (an STC member, but not a board member) on directing money to the SIGs and chapters. The meeting then moved into a discussion of who could vote, what a quorum was and if there was one, before the session was recessed until the following day.

I did attend the reconvening of the meeting and can confirm that our new secretary, Char James-Tanny, recounts it well in the 2006 Annual Business Meeting Report at www.stc.org/PDF_Files/0605_AnnualBusMtgReport.pdf, which you can read from the STC Web site if you're a member. In a nutshell, the STC Annual Business Meeting provides an opportunity for members to communicate their concerns face-to-face with the board. But we members can't make motions or vote. Board members can vote, and they can present issues to the entire membership for a vote by mail.

Grand Canyon Blues

Finally, I just can't cover the Grand Canyon in this short article (which could really be even shorter). For now all I can say is go, stroll along the rim or sit quietly and watch the colors change for an hour or two, hike down below the rim, even just a mile and a half as I did, watch the California condors eat trash or, if you're lucky, soar.

Impressions of the 2006 STC Annual Conference: STC Vows to Tell its "Powerful Story"

By Patrick Lufkin

Editor's Note: Susan Becker, Patrick Lufkin, and Marc Smircich attended the STC's 53rd annual conference, which took place in Las Vegas from May 7-11. They have written articles describing their experiences for this edition of the ActiveVOICE. More articles about the conference are available at: www.stc-sf.org/newsletter/2006-jun/conference.html

While the sessions and parties were exciting, for me the big news was the

announcement that STC's inward-looking transition period is officially over. While organizational changes will continue to be made, the Society has vowed to turn much of its attention outward.

Perhaps for the first time, the Society has clear plans to aggressively promote the profession, "to tell our powerful story," and to earn us the respect we deserve. Our story, when told, should make it clear that we are not "geeky scribes" or "tool jockeys," but professionals with a unique discipline and skill set and a great deal to bring to the table.

To help us tell our story, a new executive director, Susan Burton, has been hired to be the "new face" of the STC. Burton, who comes with an impressive background in professional and trade association management, has told the STC that she wants to work with the Board "to transform STC into the preeminent organization for technical communicators seeking professional advancement in the world," and to make it "the professional portal that will serve globally as the 'Technology, Tools, and Service Central' for the profession of technical communication."

In truth, the world desperately needs our knowledge and skills. This was made very clear when closing speaker, Anita Salem, a technical communicator by profession, told of her experiences working as a Red Cross volunteer at the Houston Astrodome when Hurricane Katrina forced thousands of New Orleans refugees to seek shelter there.

Arriving in a scene of total chaos, Anita soon applied her skills in information design to set up a primitive, but very usable, system using paper slips to manage and track the hundreds of requests for service -- food, blankets, translators, medical help -- that were coming in every hour. With little more to work with than a table in an arena, she established a system that matched needs and providers, while remaining simple enough to be used by volunteers with little training and disparate backgrounds.

For comparison, Anita said the public relations people -- the other communication professionals on the scene -- set about creating alphabetical lists of agency contacts, which may have helped some news reporters, but which did little for the people in need.

While Anita's experience was unique, it showed that skills and thinking patterns that are second nature to technical communicators -- audience analysis, user-centered needs assessment, design for immediate understanding and use -- have applications far beyond manuals and web pages. I came away convinced that, as individuals and as a profession, we should be taking every opportunity to show the world what we can do. Our skills are needed everywhere, but people need to be shown.

Impressions of the 2006 STC Annual Conference: Vendor Show, Conference Sessions, Lessons Learned, and Architectural Musings

By Marc Smircich

Editor's Note: Susan Becker, Patrick Lufkin, and Marc Smircich attended the STC's 53rd annual conference, which took place in Las Vegas from May 7-11. They have written articles describing their experiences for this edition of the ActiveVOICE. More articles about the conference are available at: www.stc-sf.org/newsletter/2006-jun/conference.html

The STC's 53rd annual conference was held on Sunday, May 7 through Thursday, May 11, in Las Vegas at Bally's Las Vegas Hotel and the Paris Las Vegas Hotel. About two thousand technical communicators from around the world attended. The article conveys some of my many experiences during those five eventful days.

Vendor Show and Single-Sourcing

I've heard a lot about single-sourcing and content management at STC chapter meetings. But I didn't realize what a big business it was until I got to the vendor show. It seemed like at least half the

vendor booths were staffed by firms selling one or more of the following: single-sourcing, content management, and translation and localization services.

The three are tied together. Content management (often using XML to tag content) enables a company to have an orderly, structured way for creating and managing content. Single-sourcing enables reuse of the same content in various publications, such as a PDF manual, Help system, Web site, and training materials. Content management also makes translation projects easier to manage and less expensive.

Conference Sessions

I went to a variety of sessions at the conference. I was looking both for information that I could use at work, as well as hoping to learn about new things. Overall, I was quite pleased with the conference sessions. There were some time slots where I wanted to go to several of the couple dozen or so sessions offered, which is something I consider to be a sign of a good conference. As I expected, some sessions were better than others, but there were no real clinkers.

The following is a sampling of what I gained from the sessions that I attended.

In "Wikis: Quick, Free, and Ready-to-Use," Sissi Closs and Lisa Swallow revealed the magic behind wikis, such as Wikipedia. There are several ready-to-use kits for making wikis that require little technical expertise. Every technical writer has the skills needed to create a wiki -- the hard part (as with Web sites) is coming up with useful content and maintaining it. A company can build an in-house wiki to facilitate sharing of information, such as one allowing field workers to share their knowledge without having to constantly reinvent the wheel.

In "Challenges and Rewards of Lone Writing," I learned that I was not alone in my mixed feelings about working as a lone writer and got some tips on how to deal with being in that position. Al

Hood echoed my sense of its advantages and disadvantages. A lone writer has more autonomy and visibility than one who is part of large staff, but that uniqueness also limits opportunities for advancement and professional development. There was a very lively discussion of how writers have responded to being asked to spend a lot of their time on clerical and administrative tasks. I gained a new insight: lone writers can exist in large companies if each department has its own writer who works in isolation. And I may even join the Lone Writer SIG.

In "Improving Product Documentation through Customer Contact Programs," I got a good reminder of how important it is to be in contact with customers. Fawn Damato and Sadie Lewis described the customer contact program at Cisco Systems. Customers fill in feedback forms, and a technical writer monitors the responses. There is also a site visit program where writers get to meet real live customers. This is a win-win situation. Writers are able to create documentation that meets the customers' needs, and customers are happier with the company's product.

In "Exploring and Implementing Embedded Help," Paul Meuller provided an overview of embedded help, which means that the user interface includes all the information users need and want (such as how TurboTax and TaxCut guide you through each step of preparing a tax return). Traditional help systems don't work, as people are reluctant to ask for help. In a usability study, Jared Spool found that 0 out of 10 people clicked a [Help] button, but 7 out of 10 people clicked a [Hint] button. Embedded help can take many forms and use different technologies. This approach requires that writers be involved in the design process and take ownership of the text in the user interface, which is something that developers are glad to relinquish in many cases.

In the information products review and index review, I brought samples of my work for review. It was very helpful to get first impressions from people who saw

the work for the first time. I especially liked the index review, as I got some tips on how to improve my indexes that only a professional indexer could provide.

STC members can go to the STC Web site and download the handouts from many of the conference sessions.

Conclusions

A lot went on during the five days I was at the STC conference. As I reflect on the experience, several things stand out.

Lessons Learned. Was the conference worth it? Yes. I hope to take some lessons home and apply them. Even though there is no chance of doing the full-scale embedded help as described in Paul Meuller's session at my present job, I can apply those principles to the limited areas where I do have influence. Even though there is no formal customer contact program in my current job, I can be aware of the importance of customer contact, make the most of the limited opportunities that present themselves, and try to create additional ones. I hope that these lessons stick and that I keep doing what I can. As Voltaire reminds us in *Candide*, we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, but we can make the best of what is possible by cultivating our own gardens.

Perhaps more importantly, the conference provided a very strong reminder that XML, single-sourcing, and content management are things that I should learn more about now, instead of keeping them on my "maybe some day" list of things to explore. That's where the world is going. Dylan was right when he sang that the times, they are a'-chagin', and you'd better start swimming or you'll sink like a stone.

Don't Forget the Fun. One of the most important reasons to go to the STC conference is that it's a lot of fun. After all, we humans are social creatures. There are many formal opportunities for socializing, such as receptions, dances, lunches, and banquets. There is also plenty of time for informal socializing between and after sessions.

I was able to renew old acquaintances and meet new people. During chance encounters, I saw people from other Northern California chapters whom I have worked with before, but have not talked to for a long time. I also got to meet people from all over the world. Sometimes I learned from them, and sometimes they from me. This year, I even skipped a session to hang out with someone I met at the conference and exchange ideas and experiences.

Linguistic Humility. I left the conference with a very strong sense of just how monolingual Americans are. During the conference, I encountered people from all over the world who were able to communicate in clear, understandable English. Some were apologetic for their accent, but their English was a lot better than my Dutch, French, Italian, German, or Hindi. How many American technical writers could go to a conference conducted in French or German and fully participate?

Faux Architecture Good and Bad

This article has gone on long enough, but I can't resist ending with comments that have nothing to do with the conference itself. One prominent aspect of Las Vegas is the faux architecture in the themed casinos, such as Caesar's Palace, New York, Paris, the Venetian, Excalibur, and the Luxor. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't.

A Riverboat in the Desert. The faux architecture in Las Vegas can be risible at times, such as a riverboat-themed casino south of Las Vegas along I-15. The casino and hotel are built in the shape of a very large riverboat, complete with a paddle wheel (no doubt a replica of the many riverboats that ferried passengers and freight through the deserts of southern Nevada in centuries past). At the entrance to the parking lot, a sign in old West style lettering informed me that there was a Burger King inside. As I approached the entrance to the casino, a Madonna song was blaring over the loudspeakers.

Paris and New York Come to Vegas. At times, faux architecture can create an enjoyable experience, such as the Paris and New York casinos. If the London Bridge can come to Arizona, why can't Paris and New York come to Nevada?

The Paris casino presents a very convincing Parisian street scene, complete with cobblestone streets, stone buildings, and signs in French. The presentation is quite dramatic. The entry to the casino is a narrow shop-lined street with a low ceiling. The passage leads to a large open area with the replica of the Eiffel Tower rising from the floor. This large space is the main casino, with the requisite banks of slot machines and tables for Roulette (with both 0 and 00), Blackjack, Craps, and various Poker games.

The New York casino has its restaurants in a street scene to the side of the main casino. I suppose it's a recreation of several blocks of Greenwich Village with two- or three-story brick buildings. If you can suspend disbelief, it is very much like walking through a city looking for a place to eat. It's a pleasant place to go out to dinner, and most of the restaurants are reasonably priced.

ActiveVOICE Article Submission Policies

The *ActiveVOICE* welcomes articles from technical communicators. Having a published article is a good addition to your portfolio. This document describes the guidelines for submitting an article to this newsletter. If you have any questions, you can email the editor at newsletter@stc-sf.org.

Publication Information

The *ActiveVOICE* is published six times a year in February, April, June, August, October, and December by the Society for Technical Communication, San Francisco Chapter, PO Box 2708, San Francisco, CA 94126, www.stc-sf.org. The editor is Marc Smircich (newsletter@stc-sf.org).

Submission Guidelines

Submit all articles via email to the newsletter editor (newsletter@stc-sf.org) in either of the following ways:

- Microsoft Word format as an attachment.
- Plain ASCII text in the message body or as an attachment.

If your article contains copyrighted materials, you are responsible for obtaining permission for the *ActiveVOICE* to publish the copyrighted materials.

Please include the following with your article:

- Your name. Please spell it exactly as you want it published.
- The title of the article. If you get to choose the title, make it descriptive and inviting. When readers are looking at the front page of the online newsletter, the title is the only basis they have for deciding whether to click on the link to your article.

NOTE: For recurring monthly articles, such as reviews of meetings, you do not get to choose the title.

- Headings. Please include headings so that it is easy for busy readers to scan your article (just as you do when reading technical publications). Headings are especially important when people are reading online. If your article does not have headings, the editor may add them.
- A brief bio (no more than 50 to 75 words). This bio is a chance for you to say a little bit about yourself that you want to share with the world.

Articles Published

The *ActiveVOICE* publishes the following kinds of articles:

- Reviews of previous meetings. Each edition contains reviews of previous meetings. The typical length is 500 to 1,500 words. Take as many words as are needed for adequate coverage -- but do keep in mind how very few

people have the patience to make it all the way through *War and Peace* or *Moby Dick*.

- Columns by STC officials. To keep our audience informed of what is happening with the STC, the newsletter accepts articles from STC officers at the chapter, regional, and international levels.
- Publicity for STC events and other professional organizations. The newsletter accepts publicity articles for conferences, seminars, and other events sponsored by the STC, an STC chapter, an STC SIG, and closely related non-profit organizations.

- Articles related to technical communication. The newsletter accepts software reviews, book reviews, information about industry trends, tips on how to use popular software packages, and other such articles. To be accepted for publication, the primary purpose of the article must be to inform and educate, rather than to market a particular product or service. If you have an idea for an article, please contact the newsletter editor at newsletter@stc-sf.org.

Editorial Discretion

The Society for Technical Communication, San Francisco Chapter reserves the right to edit all submitted articles for length and appropriateness. The chapter is the sole arbiter of whether to accept an article for publication and

when to publish it, either in whole or in part.

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