

SAN FRANCISCO
April 2002

ActiveVOICE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

April 17th Meeting

Usability methods to empower technical communicators

Presenter: Dana E. Chisnell

Intuitively, you know that you want what you produce to be usable, but how do you find out whether it really is? In this highly interactive presentation, you will get to try a couple of methods, and we will explore other options for gathering data about what users do and how they interact with products. Learn how and when to use different methods to uncover problems that real users encounter with all types of products.

An independent consultant for half of her 20-year career, Chisnell also has worked at TecEd, IBM's Nordic Lab, and the Document Design Center (DDC) of the American Institutes for Research. She is a long-time member of the Usability Professionals' Association, a senior member of the STC, and a member of ACM SIGCHI and BayCHI. She is an award-winning author of *Effective Web Design in 3 Days*. Chisnell has presented at various STC international and regional conferences and local meetings, at the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society, and at Tech*Com's SOLUTIONS conference. This spring, she will teach a usability methods survey course in the technical communication certificate program at University of California Extension, Santa Cruz.

May 15th Meeting

Wish you had been in Nashville?

A lively recap of the STC's Annual Conference

Presenters: Susan Becker, Judith Plummer, Hillary Russak, and Paul Sinasohn

If you miss the STC's Annual Conference in Nashville, May 5-8, you won't want to miss this report from a panel of local STC members who attended. We will share tips from some of the 200 technical sessions, latest news from other chapters around the world, highs and lows of being a presenter, and more. Our goal is to make you wish you had been there or at least consider going next year.

Becker is a contract technical communicator and vice-president of the San Francisco chapter. She is presenting a workshop on "Developing Your Own Professional Web Site." Plummer has served as a Touchstone judge and is a Senior Technical Editor for Siebel Systems, Inc. Russak is the Writing Team Manager for the Environment, Safety, and Health Division at Stanford Linear Accelerator Center. She also edits science, health, safety, and educational documents. Sinasohn is a Senior Technical Course Developer and Instructor for Sendmail, Inc., and VP, Programs for the Berkeley chapter. He is presenting a workshop on "Making Feedback Meaningful" and participating in the Instructional Design SIG progression.

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



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Branding 101: How to Sell Your Brand (YOU) in Today's Marketplace

by Kristina Y. Connoy

Our January 16th chapter meeting addressed the issue on most of our minds today: how to be competitive in today's job market. Michelle Molitor of Nectar Consulting presented strategies drawing upon conventional marketing wisdom and a heartfelt belief in the importance of following one's genuine passions.

Building a brand

Molitor began the discussion by noting the importance of branding, a business strategy that applies to individuals in the job market. Branding yourself as a highly competitive job seeker and employee means clearly communicating what is unique about what you have to offer. According to Molitor, branding may be described simply as "what you stand for and what you deliver to your clients."

To begin to build a strong brand for yourself, you need to look at what you believe and what you are selling. What you are selling as a potential employee involves skills, relationships, strengths, and values. Essential questions to establishing your own brand include, "What kind of work will I not do, regardless of how slow the pipeline may be?" and, "What ethical lines am I not willing to cross, no matter what the price or what they may offer to pay me?"

Identifying a mission

Molitor led attendees through an exercise in creating a personal mission statement, a thought-provoking consideration of what is truly fulfilling to us as individuals. She asked participants to complete statements such as, "I'd like to be . . .," "I'm effective when . . .," "I want to lead a life centered around the principles of . . .," and, "To find happiness, fulfillment, and value in living I will . . ." To the last statement, attendees shared responses from, "Get organized," to, "Balance work and personal life," and, "Take risks."

Another tool used in branding is a standard exercise of market research: a SWOT analysis, the consideration of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. In considering the importance of identifying one's weaknesses and dislikes, Molitor offered the memorable adage, "Don't be a karmic thief;" that is, if you don't excel at something, don't take away someone else's opportunity to do it really well.

Positioning your brand

The next essential activity to selling your brand is brand positioning, how you actively communicate your brand identity. Brand positioning includes communicating brand value, identifying a target audience, and demonstrating the unique benefits of your brand. Molitor asked attendees to create brand positioning statements highlighting the key benefits of their brands versus their competitors'.

Visibility, involving networking and relationships, is essential to brand positioning. Achieving successful visibility means considering how you are selling yourself, what is working, and what is not working. A fail-safe strategy for visibility development is informational interviewing.

You should research your target market to understand the companies you are interested in working with. You should be politically discerning and identify particular corporate cultures. Are you looking for a team-oriented environment? Do you really want to be part of a cutthroat corporate atmosphere? As your career matures, you should continue to nurture your network of relationships and redefine your personal values and standards. Basic principles of marketing and brand positioning can be applied effectively to individuals, and determining one's personal brand can be a satisfying and empowering experience.

Kristina Y. Connoy is a technical editor in Silicon Valley.

The Art of Reviewing Documents and Judging Technical Competitions

by Andria Strickley

Paul Sinasohn is a man who knows his audience. During his presentation at our February 20th chapter meeting, Sinasohn spoke about critiquing technical documents in a way that maximizes benefit to the authors.

Reading other writers' documents, either on the job or through judging competitions such as STC's Touchstone, is a prime way to find ideas for borrowing and to see pitfalls to avoid in your own work. Judging documents at Touchstone also means working with a team of talented technical writers, providing great contacts.

Responsibilities to writers

Though Sinasohn underscored judging's career perks, the main focus of his talk was the responsibility that reviewers have to their writers. Feedback, he said, should go beyond one-liners such as, "Great job," or, "What the heck is this?" — a comment Sinasohn once actually received. It might take more work, but reviewers should strive to give criticism (and praise) the author can actually use. Sinasohn gave the following three guidelines as the primary responsibilities of any reviewer:

- Understand the document's audience. This makes it easier to determine whether the work matches readers' level of expertise or is over their heads.
- Become as familiar as possible with the subject matter. Often the best way to do this is to start out by looking at the introduction and the glossary.
- Provide substantive, thoughtful feedback to the author by the deadline.

Giving useful feedback

Sinasohn shared a number of tips for giving the most useful feedback while easing the often arduous reviewing process. One of his first hints for reviewers: know your limits. If you're faced with a 1,000-page magnum opus you can't possibly read in its entirety,

pick sections. At a minimum, review the table of contents, index and two chapters, he said. The TOC and index give reviewers a good taste of the document's flow and usability, its most important aspects.

Reviewers should be familiar with the document's source. That way, they'll know by what standard to judge the work. "It does not make sense to judge a \$5 million IBM Redbook by the same standard as something from a Shareware startup," Sinasohn said.

Judge the quality of the communication, and don't be unduly influenced by the budget. "Some of the best communication that I ever saw were things that were three ring binders, looseleaf, things that obviously came off of somebody's laser printer," Sinasohn said. "Some of the most esoteric, badly constructed documentation comes out of the largest companies in the world with the biggest budgets."

Tips for good judging

Sinasohn offered some other tips:

- Don't point out isolated errors.
- Judge the document, not the subject matter.
- Be specific.
- Read any notes from the writer. Review the audience and purpose statements, if provided.
- Make sure graphics and tables are useful, easy to follow and don't get in the way of the communication.

Overall, Sinasohn said, be kind, yet be instructive. Explain why something is a problem, and then present the solution. Remember that writing contestants want something back for that \$100 they plunked down to enter. "Your comments," he said, "are the most important thing writers take away from competitions."

Andria Strickley is a freelance technical writer in the Bay area: strickaj@WellsFargo.com.

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 between Sacramento & Clay.

Reservations

Make advance reservations at <http://www.acteva.com> (search for "stc").

Admission at the door is on a space-available basis.

Cost

With advance reservations:
\$5 STC members; \$15 non-members; \$5 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 Marc Smircich

*Marc Smircich is a Senior Technical Writer for Quintessential School Systems in San Mateo, California. He has 14 years of experience documenting financial and human resources applications.
Email: info@stc-sf.org.*

Welcome to Our Chapter!

New STC Members

Ellyn R. Farrelly
Brian H. Jacobson
Alice K. Lee
Arley Lewis
Billy C. Maher
Terry M. Reagan
Debbie Revette
Heather D. Reynolds

Transfer and Reinstated Members

Eric S. Gilmore
Kristine B. Hahn
Wilson M. Hill

Congrats on Senior Member Status!

Molly A. Hovorka
Timothy E. Sammon
William F. Wray

Do you know the way to Nashville?

This year, the STC's annual conference is in Nashville from May 5 through 8. There are over 60 sessions to choose from during the conference, as well as over a dozen post-conference workshops. This conference is a unique opportunity to meet technical communicators from all over the world, learn about new trends in technical communication, and have a lot of fun. For more information, visit www.stc.org.

Spring break special

For April and May only, students and STC members can attend our monthly meetings for only \$5.00. Because the economy has been in recession, we are giving STC members a temporary price break. To get this discount, you must register in advance through Acteva. Normal prices apply if you pay at the door. See page 3 for details.

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 2nd 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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