

A Word from Our President

Chapter meeting attendance better than some other chapters

By Don King

Recently, I was involuntarily added to an e-mail listserv for all STC chapter presidents. Almost immediately, I was deluged with more e-mail than I would ever want to read, but a quick scan of subject lines intrigued me. Nearly every message I received was the continuation of a long discussion about meeting/program attendance. This has been a main topic of discussion at our last

two annual board meetings, so I began to follow the endless trail of reports and opinions. What I discovered was interesting and encouraging, and it gave me new perspective about our chapter.

As presidents of chapters all over the world chimed in about chapter member participation, I began to see the big picture a little more clearly. It turns out that most of the presidents who offered commentary explained that their chapters do not have consistent attendance at their periodic meetings. Also, most of these chapter presidents are

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Chapter News

Our last meeting

September's meeting featured a teleconferenced discussion of the process Lexmark recently used to design a new printer product.

Along with the physical modeling that you might expect a project like this requires, members of the Lexmark Information Development group took us through their first steps from technical writing to usability engineering and described a very involved process used to create a friendly user interface for the product.

This month

The title of our Nov. 16 meeting will be "Transition from Print-Based to Computer-Based Interactive Multimedia Curriculum."

Computer-based interactive multimedia curriculum is rapidly becoming the preferred method for instruction in many classrooms, especially where distance learning is involved. However, the transition from existing print-based curriculum is not a trivial matter.

Member Rob Tarr will review the overall process Amatrol, Inc., is taking to convert their curriculum into a dynamic, entertaining, and highly educational training system.

In addition, some of the tools themselves will be detailed, and several examples of Amatrol's finished product will be on display.

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Contest

Worst Manual Contest

Just a reminder for the holiday season, when when all else fails, read the manual.

Have you ever been so frustrated with a manual or set of instructions that you cursed the author and wished you had never bought the product? Do you remember the last time you used Help on your computer and every click of the mouse led to a new set of decisions?

Does this sound familiar? How about \$500 for your frustration? Technical Standards, Inc. (TSI), a Southern California documentation services company, is offering \$500 for the winning entry in their "Worst Manual Contest."

Send a manual or set of instructions that is hard to understand, poorly written, or just plain wrong. Send it if it has bad grammar, too much legalese, is poorly translated, or has missing steps. If it is the worst entry, you will win \$500.

"We thought we would have fun with this contest. Everyone has had trouble with a manual," says Michelle Wier, Director of Operations of Technical Standards, Inc. "That's why we started our company. People like products they understand how to use, and good technical documentation reduces the need for technical support. That's why good manuals are so important."

You don't have to send the whole manual; excerpts of the worst parts are okay. The deadline for submissions is Jan. 15, 2001, so check those holiday gifts for potential entries. Entries must be in English. For complete contest rules see the TSI Web site at <http://www.tecstandards.com>.

Technical Standards, Inc. specializes in contract technical writing projects, technical writer staffing, and training. Technical Standards, Inc. is located in San Marcos, California.

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unhappy with the level of involvement of their fellow members. Some presidents even mentioned that their meetings consist of only officers. Of course, a couple of the larger chapters reported huge turn-outs for impressive programs that included dinner. However, a closer, comparative look at the percentage of attendees versus membership for these chapters revealed that Kentuckiana is no group of slackers. As a matter of fact, we are doing quite well as far as the percentage of members that attend meetings. I do not believe that member involvement should be a competition among chapters, but comparing our situation to others provided a good reference point for our participation level. Kentuckiana seems to fall in the most comfortable place - the middle of the road.

I suppose you might question the usefulness of this information, and you may wonder if you should look at the glass as half-empty or half-full. Always the optimist, I believe that we should feel

good about our current member participation at meetings. We have very experienced, knowledgeable members who are stepping up to present useful programs about various aspects of technical communication. We have coordinators in two cities who work smart and hard to prepare conference rooms, audio/video-conferencing equipment, hand-outs, and light dinners. Finally, we have had nearly a quarter of our total membership at recent meetings, and folks have been sticking around after presentations to get to know each other a little better.

Measuring the vitality and growth of an organization like ours is sometimes a grasp for the intangible, but I think we are demonstrating definite signs of life. In order to continue our growth, I suggest that we communicate with each other as much as possible in order to make our needs known. This will allow the chapter to become an organization that truly serves its members' professional development. Our input is fuel for the chapter. Otherwise, we are just a bunch of names on a list.

A Word from the Editor

No burning editor effigies?

By Mike Walton

Apparently our translation of *Techniques* into a PDF format has been well-received by the Kentuckiana Chapter of STC.

I say that because I have not heard of any drunken orgies featuring a burning effigy of the editor, so I'm assuming that from the lack of anything but a few positive comments, everyone is OK with the new format. Also, I'd be pretty disappointed if there was a drunken orgy and I wasn't invited!

If you are having any problem with the PDF format of the newsletter, please e-mail me at mwalton@techrepublic.com and let me know.

I am still in a desperate search for contributors, so if you feel a moment's inspiration, please let me know.

A breakdown of the possible columns which need your input are:

- Member News — Here we try to profile a member every issue. Know someone interesting in the chapter? Write a brief professional and personal history of them.
- Let's Get Technical — Here is a chance to describe an aspect of technical writing that works for you and others in the profession.

Web Watch

Every edition of *Techniques*, we try to list some helpful Web sites that have made your life or research easier in some way. If you would like to contribute a site or more, please e-mail your URLs to the editor.

- The Kentuckiana Chapter of STC is at: <http://www.stc.org/region4/kty/kyhome.html>
- Join the chapter's e-mail loop at: <http://www.onelist.com/community/kyinstc>
- Issues, product reviews, and other discussions

- Picture This — Technical illustrations are playing a greater importance in what we do. We all need to know more about this.

- Trade Secrets — Are you using a tool that you can't do without? Have you heard of something on the horizon that holds promise? Write about it.

- Back to Basics — This is just what it sounds like. There are basic writing concepts we all know, but it helps to be reminded about them.

- Career Notes — Career-specific information and experiences that our members have had.

- Web Watch — Here's an easy way to contribute to the chapter's collective knowledge, and it can be a great resource for everyone.

- Talk Back! — Got a question? Got an answer to someone else's question? Got a comment about STC or what the chapter is doing?

Let's see, math isn't my strong point so this may take a leap of faith, but if there are eight columns and more than 60 members, and a different member wrote one column for each of four issues in a year, doesn't that mean that any particular member would only have to write one column every two years?

Does that work out? E-mail me and let me know you're breathing out there!

about information technologies and the people who in the field can be found at TechRepublic at <http://www.techrepublic.com/index.jhtml> (Editor's note: OK, I'm biased because I work there, but you might find useful info anyway.)

- Ever curious what kind of speed you are getting out of your Internet connection, find out here: <http://www.computingcentral.com/topics/bandwidth/speedtest.asp>

- Want the time? Try: <http://www.time.gov>

Back to Basics

Writing for your audience

By Mike Walton

At our September meeting, we were treated to an excellent example of the effort that is sometimes required to make a product user friendly.

At Lexmark, their Information Development group crossed the line of simply writing about a new product's user interface, to participating in the actual design of the product with the user in mind.

Among the things discussed at the meeting was how the team defined customer personae and how that would impact the design of the product.

It was fascinating to hear the degree of detail they put into describing these different personae, and equally fascinating to hear how real these imaginary future users became in their group discussions.

For me, it served as a reminder of what one of my mass media professors told his class nearly 20 years ago.

When this professor was writing for a newspaper, he told us he had a mental image of his typical reader. She was a middle-aged housewife with a strong civic interest.

Whenever he wrote a story, no matter how complex or emotive, he would imagine that he was sitting at the kitchen table of this reader and telling her his story.

He didn't want to insult her intelligence, but he wanted her to understand what had happened. There was a balance between detail and broader observations.

Our friends at Lexmark reminded me we all have an audience, and some of us have a very specific audience at that.

In the same way that Lexmark was designing a

product to be user friendly for this audience, writers need to design their information for the audience who will see it.

Documentation for a mechanic in the field might feature a lot of illustrations, showing how all the parts fit together or the sequence in which tasks should be done.

A technician may need illustrations also, but they may need more detail on specifications, options and troubleshooting.

The user of a product may need complete, but basic, instructions on how to use the product.

There is a leap between the information we have and what the user of that information actually needs.

To make that leap successfully, it is a matter of assembling only the information that this user needs, in a form that encourages the user to use that information.

It's often a matter of translation — the complex to the simple — the technical to the common — the words to pictures.

The easiest analogy is one of language itself.

I once bought a bamboo bird cage that was made in an Asian country.

The unassembled cage came with construction directions, complete with steps that were composed of a crude drawing and a paragraph of description.

It was quite obvious that the person who wrote the directions was under the misapprehension that they knew the English language.

It was a comical attempt at word use with absolutely no value to the reader. The crude drawings had to do.

Remember that it isn't what you know about the subject you are documenting, but what the user of the documentation needs to know.

That's your audience.

“In the same way that Lexmark was designing a product to be user friendly for this audience, writers need to design their information for the audience who will see it.”

Mike Walton

Director's Notebook

By Thea Teich (Thea @TeichTMC.com)

The STC Board of Directors met in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, September 14-17 and covered a great deal of ground, including:

- Forming a policy about chapter formation outside the United States and relationships with existing techcomm organizations in other countries
- Branding and corporate identity
- Web site hosting for chapters
- Approving a whole lot of Merit Grants.

Congratulations to these many chapters with so many innovative and important programs in the works!

These major issues were addressed along with the "regular" STC business of, among other subjects, chapter affairs and program areas, including research, SIGs, professional development, competitions, conferences, communications, and external affairs. Because this article has to be relatively brief, these subjects cannot be described in detail. Several of them could easily be main topics of articles. It took the board 2.5 long days to deal with them. So, please contact me if you have any questions.

Committee and Program Updates

The board authorized the STC office to conduct a membership drive using the services of a professional marketing company.

STC will become an affiliate member of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The annual fee for this is \$5,000. W3C determines standards for Web-based communication, among other wide-ranging concerns of specific interest to STC.

The board acknowledged three new chapters approved by the Executive Council over the summer:

- The San Luis Obispo Chapter in Region 8
- The Texas A&M Student Chapter in Region 5.
- The Netherlands Chapter in Region 4

The Instructional Design & Learning Special Interest Group (SIG) was approved with an initial budget of \$1,900.

Denver, Colorado, will be the location of the

52nd STC Annual Conference in 2006.

Minneapolis, Minnesota, will be the location of the 53rd STC Annual Conference in 2007.

Freya Winsberg of the Phoenix Chapter was appointed program manager for the 50th STC Annual Conference Dallas, 2003).

The Conference registration fee for members for the 48th STC Annual Conference in Chicago in 2001 will be \$420. The discounted rate for speakers will remain \$350.

The following members were appointed as managers of Society committees: Edward Carbrey, Boston Chapter, Jay R. Gould Award Committee; Dale Erickson, Lone Star Chapter, New Media Delivery Systems Committee in the Communications area; Jon Baker, Boston Chapter, New Media Publications Committee in the Communications area; Jack Molisani, Los Angeles Chapter, Chapter and Regional Conferences Committee in the Chapter Affairs area (2nd Vice President); Amy Burdan, Hoosier (Indiana) Chapter, Scientific Communication SIG; Roy Hartshorn, Toronto Chapter, Canadian Curricula in Professional Development Committee in the Professional Development area.

Merit Grants and Loans to Chapters

- \$3,000 USD to Central New York to implement a comprehensive revitalization/growth plan.
- \$3,000 USD to Mid-South to build its scholarship fund.
- \$3,000 USD to Atlanta to build its scholarship fund.
- \$1,200 to Hoosier to develop the Insight Award to recognize Indiana corporations and organizations that innovatively use the skills and capabilities of their technical communicators.
- A \$6,000 USD multichapter loan to Mid-Valley and Willamette Valley to host the Region 7 conference in Portland, OR, October 2001.

Budget

STC follows a system of zero-based budgeting. It

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cannot operate or begin the fiscal year at a deficit. The board approved a budget for FY 2001 of income = \$4,725,250; expenses = \$4,711,849; and a net surplus of \$13,401.

Branding and Corporate Identity

The board approved a new logo and stationery program for the Society. By the end of the year, chapter presidents will receive information on how

to use the new logo and various design elements in chapter stationery and hard and electronic copy materials.

As most of you know, Past President Mary Wise announced the new STC mission statement, *Designing the Future of Technical Communication*, at Leadership Day at the Orlando conference.

Another external brand tool is the organization's "story," a brief explanation of what the organization stands for, who its members are, and how it views its future. The STC board approved the STC "story" our consistent "face" we present to the rest of the world.

While it is not meant to replace the more extensive literature we provide to prospective members and others, the story is the "elevator message" we can use to briefly explain who and what we are.

Web site Hosting for Chapters

For the past several years, the board has been dealing with a number of difficult issues related to decentralized versus centralized hosting of chapter

Web sites. Recent problems and service difficulties as STC.org's bandwidth needs have exceeded what our current ISP can provide makes this issue urgent as well as extremely important.

Over the next few months, committees in the Communications area, managed by Lory Hawkes, AP for Communications, will be developing and implementing a transition plan that will enable chapters to select their own ISPs and maintain their

own Web sites in a decentralized system. Such a system means that, within some general guidelines (we do have to present a fairly consistent "face" to the world; see Branding above), chapters will have greater creative latitude and capabilities to develop and change their Web sites. ISP and other costs associated with Web sites have decreased considerably over the years, so most chapters will be able to maintain their sites with their chapter funds. Small and new chapters, which may not have enough funds, are eligible for grants for Web site startup under the existing Merit Grant program. Contact your Director-Sponsor for more details. Again, moving chapter Web sites from the volunteer-run STC.org site to ISPs selected by individual chapters will occur according to a careful transition plan, and chapter presidents will be contacted.

Again, the issues mentioned in this article are far-reaching and important, but the discussions here are necessarily brief. Please contact me with your questions.

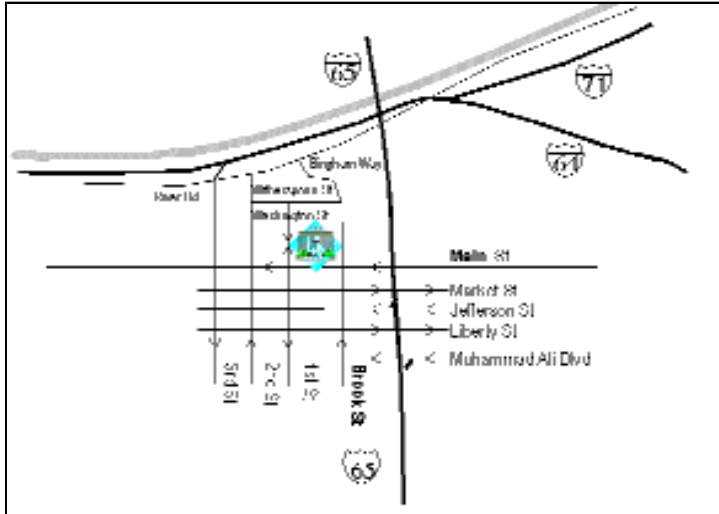
STC Story

Through information sharing and industry leadership, STC helps professionals design effective communication for a technical world. Because technology touches everyone, STC promotes public welfare by encouraging the development of better-educated professionals whose jobs are to make complicated information usable by many.

The organization's growth has mirrored our growing dependence on technology. Initially, STC was primarily made up of engineers who, among other activities, wrote instructions and descriptions of how electrical and mechanical products worked. A profound change took place as the pervasiveness of technology and the need to understand it became an integral part of our everyday lives. With the emergence of the Internet and online communication, our members now focus on supporting all aspects of the rapidly evolving world of technology.

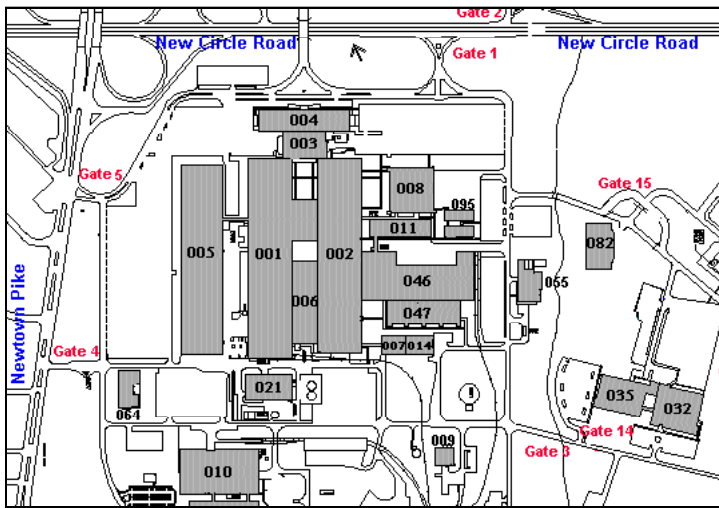
The organization began because those working in the field recognized themselves as professionals with unique training and career issues. Today, STC is nearly 50 years old, with 150 chapters and 25,000 members worldwide. It is the largest organization for technical communicators. STC offers industry leadership and the education, networking, and information required in a world where change is "the way it is."

Directions to the Upcoming Meeting



Louisville

AdWare is on the 10th floor of the Humana Waterside Building. The building occupies most of the block bordered by Brook, Main, First and Washington Streets, with entrances on both Washington and Main. There is on-street metered parking, if you can find a spot. Space may also be available in either of two parking garages, one on Washington Street between Brook and Floyd Streets, the other at First and Witherspoon (one block north of Washington).



Lexington

Meetings are videoconferenced from Lexmark's Building 032. To get to this building, follow New Circle Road past the Lexmark main entrance and turn right on Russell Cave Road. Just before the railroad tracks turn right. Building 032 is the first building on the right with a visitor's parking area in front of the building. Guests should let Joni Stowe know they are coming, see below, so she can have someone in the lobby to escort them to conference room L.

At Your Service

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September Meeting: November 16 from 5 to 7 p.m

We are meeting via videoconference.

Where: Lexington Lexmark, Inc. (map and detailed directions on page 7)
Host: Joni Stowe
740 New Circle Road at Newtown Pike

Louisville AdWare Systems, Inc.
Host: Linda Stein 10th Floor, Waterside Bldg.
101 East Main Street (between Brook and First Streets)

When: Arrive by 4:45 p.m. Videoconference begins at 5 p.m. Light supper provided at 6 p.m.

What: Member Rob Tarr will review the overall process Amatrol, Inc., is taking to convert their curriculum into a dynamic, entertaining, and highly educational training system.

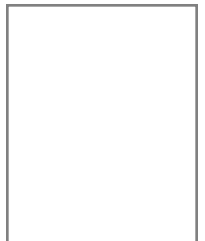
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