

northbay news

The monthly newsletter of the NorthBay Chapter of the
Society for Technical Communication

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A Visual Communication Primer



Agilent’s Judi Marley gave a presentation titled “Visual Communication Primer” at the July meeting. Marley brought in examples of her work as a technical illustrator and emphasized that her guiding principle is “keep it super simple” (KISS). For example, when charged with creating front and back views of a personal transaction machine (much like an ATM), Marley decided that isometric drawings would allow her to produce the best results most efficiently. (In an isometric drawing, all lines are parallel or perpendicular.)

On another occasion, Marley was asked to create multiple tables that showed organizational relationships—and make them all fit onto one overhead transparency. Because she had internalized the KISS principle, her immediate response was “No.” She chose instead to create a PowerPoint template that allowed her to group organizational teams by color and present them in a more readable format.

In addition to approaching projects with a clear eye toward which concepts are essential and how to show these concepts in the least amount of space, Marley takes culture into account. She pointed out that different gestures

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Verbal Communications Skills for Technical Writers

Ron Douglass, NorthBay Chapter

August’s chapter meeting, with two speakers, four topics, and a small but appreciative audience made for an interesting midsummer evening.

Dave Rosas, a former technical writer for Agilent who’s now investigating claims for an insurance company, began his presentation on the advertised topic, “Verbal Communications Skills for Technical Writers.” He had one basic message: the paradigm shift we’re all witnessing from paper to CDs to video means that the role of technical writers is shifting to one of being producers. As with producers who make TV shows and theater movies, technical writers-cum-producers have to know video production inside out, including script writing, directing, photography, and the work of bringing video projects to fruition.

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STC Mission Statement

The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.

August Meeting

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For those who find the thought of making movies daunting or else think that they learned everything they need to know about camera angles and lighting when videotaping their one-year-old's first encounter with a wading pool, help in developing professional video production skills is at hand.

The Community Media Center on Mendocino Avenue, a nonprofit organization run by Santa Rosa's cable-TV provider, offers instruction on handling video equipment, writing scripts, storyboarding your ideas, and related topics. Membership in the center (\$40 a year) gives members unlimited access to the center staff's expertise and entitles them to use the center's extensive collection of video production equipment. It's a terrific bargain, Rosas maintained, for anyone interested in moving into the new frontier of video technical communication.

Shifting his focus from video production to speaking in public, Rosas described how much participation in a local club of Toastmasters International has enhanced his speaking skills and diminished the butterflies that afflict him when he has to stand up in front of others and actually say something. His engaging explanation of Toastmasters' 10-speech program, the ongoing centerpiece of club activity around the nation and abroad (including Antarctica), incited a lively exchange. Toastmasters members wanting to hone their skills further or to develop such specialties as storytelling can continue for advanced certifications. Local clubs are in Santa Rosa, Healdsburg, Cloverdale, and elsewhere. For more information, including the locations and meeting times of local clubs, see <http://www.toastmasters.org>.

Finally, Rosas negotiated a not exactly obvious segue from both his prior themes to a pitch for the attractiveness of processing insurance claims. Pointing out that his company, Allied Insurance, has what he called a "desperate" need for additional claims adjusters, Rosas explained how his new job draws both on his writing skills and on the self-confidence he has developed through the Toastmasters program.

Capping off the evening was Rolfe Dlugy-Hegwer presenting ViewletBuilder3, the latest discovery in his Nifty Things Found on the Internet series. A step beyond such screen-capture programs as SnagIt, ViewletBuilder from Qarbon.com is a tool for rapidly creating animated online presentations, demos, instructional materials, and whatnot.

Dlugy-Hegwer used it to illustrate how to transform a dull, ugly presentation slide into a much more attractive and compelling one. Using screen captures augmented with such features as a moving mouse pointer and explanatory balloon comments, he readily produced a 24-step, easy-to-follow demo of the process. ViewletBuilder3 is now available for Windows in free or fee versions; STC members can get the licensed product at a 50 percent discount. Versions for Linux, Mac OS X, and Solaris are on the way.

A Day in the Life of Odd Todd (and Other Tales of Survival)

Donald Tired Kelp, NorthBay Chapter

You've got a witty technical writer on your team, right? Someone who posts ambiguous newspaper headlines above his monitor ("Reagan Wins on Budget, But More Lies Ahead"). Someone who gets sidetracked by musing about the difference between "The stuffy nose can lead to problems" and "The stuff he knows can lead to problems." Someone who finds a way to quote Groucho Marx at every spec review meeting ("I once shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I'll never know"). Someone who can even recite the dead parrot monologue from Monty Python's Flying Circus (though not in the *northbay news*).

He's fun to have around, if only for his ability to see the double meaning in the tiredest of prose.

But after surviving a year of layoffs, broken dreams, layoffs, broken promises, layoffs . . . these witty ones are redefining their relationship to humor—not just to ward off boredom, but as a survival strategy.

Take Todd M. Rosenberg, the creator of "Laid Off: A Day in the Life of Odd Todd," an animated cartoon about a man who watches television all day, clad in a blue bathrobe. The cartoon is just one of many fascinating links on Rosenberg's Web site (<http://www.oddtodd.com>), which also includes links to Rosenberg's dot.com game, "Burn Rate!" ("If you went through the whole dot-com roller-coaster thang, you'll dig it!"), and to his "Daily Fact I Learned from the TV."

Rosenberg's creative response to having been laid off has caught the attention of most of the major media. Wall Street Journal reporter Joyce Slaton writes that Rosenberg's Web site helps "those of us who lived through the dot-com bubble . . . get a degree of closure, a little catharsis, some symbolic revenge, or even just a few knowing laughs."

Long before Rosenberg was laid off, psychologist Robert J. Lifton was studying human resilience in the aftermath of trauma. Lifton writes in *The Protean Self* that humor "lubricates" experience. "We constantly seek new ways to convey the gap between what we are supposed to feel and what we actually do feel."

When confronted by the absurd, says Lifton, "what is to be experienced cannot be taken at face value. One must keep much of the self aloof from it, lubricate the encounter with mockery or self-mockery, with irony or humor."

If Lifton is right, wordplay, irony, satire, and even self-deprecation are all important coping strategies for technical writers in the Bay Area. The following section lists Web sites of interest to technical writers, whether they aspire to elicit laughter from cube-dwelling colleagues, or merely to take a break from the daily grind.

*"Lifton
writes in The
Protean Self
that humor
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experience."*

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STC Conference Update

Eunice Malley, Berkeley Chapter

It was late April, and my current technical writing contract was about to end. I had nothing else lined up, and the STC annual conference brochure had been lying invitingly on the kitchen table for several weeks. Nashville had been on my list of must-see destinations for years. I could deduct all the conference costs on my taxes and basically have a free mini-vacation. So I made a concerted effort to lessen my cognitive dissonance about splurging big time and decided to go.

Was it worth it? Absolutely. This was my fourth STC conference, and since this was on my dime, I was able to attend sessions regarding my own personal growth in the field instead of those that would benefit my employer. I was able to take time to tour Nashville, too.

When I wasn't touring, I attended some very good sessions on marketing communications for technical writers, proposal writing, and grant writing. I also went to an excellent session that discussed the differences between HTML and XML.

The marketing presenters all stressed that in order to break into marketing writing, you need to either revise an existing document you have written so that it has a marketing twist or volunteer to do some marketing writing in your company (or for another if you are unemployed). To get into grant writing, volunteer to write a grant for a charitable or community organization you are involved with. In other words, in this market, employers consider only experienced marketing writers for marketing writing jobs, and being an experienced technical writer is not enough (surprise!).

“As for HTML and XML, it seems to me that XML is the only way to go for publishing on the Web, and HTML is on its way out.”

As for HTML and XML, it seems to me that XML is the only way to go for publishing on the Web, and HTML is on its way out. So if you are employed and just starting an HTML project at your company, consider looking into XML before the projects gets too far along.

I wasn't able to attend any of the sessions on single sourcing because my touring interfered, but thanks to a CD of the conference proceedings, I was able to read up on what these sessions covered, and I learned a valuable thing or two. The proceedings are a great source of reference material long after the conference is over, and the presenters generally include their contact information to facilitate further discussion. In fact, even if you can't attend the conference, you can purchase the proceedings separately for a small fee.

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A Conversation with Rolfe Dlugy-Hegwer

Ellen Jakes Kelm, NorthBay Chapter

Rolfe Dlugy-Hegwer has followed an interesting career path leading to his current position as lead technical writer for TrueTime. TrueTime designs and manufactures precision time and frequency products for synchronizing computer, communication, and instrumentation systems. Its products range from miniature time-code instrumentation and PCS synchronization sources to extremely precise military code and Global Positioning System (GPS) timing receivers. Established in 1973, TrueTime is located on Westwind Boulevard in north Santa Rosa and employs 130 people.

How did you begin your career as a technical writer?

*“I was thirsty
for
knowledge
and spent
lots of time
reading and
tinkering.”*

I’ve always been fascinated by how things work. As a kid, I occasionally disassembled the family alarm clocks and invented things, like balloon-powered aircraft. I was thirsty for knowledge and spent lots of time reading and tinkering.

For my tenth birthday, I received *How Things Work*, a three-volume encyclopedia with diagrams and explanations of equipment. I spent hours reading the articles, absorbing the information, but also absorbing how language and illustration were used together to communicate information.

Much later, as financial systems administrator at a big company, I enjoyed volunteering for technical writing and training projects. I realized my calling and decided to make a career of it. I took courses through the UC Berkeley Extension and eventually found a technical writing position.

Jean Burns, the financial systems director at LS&Co., (thank you, Jean) hired me into my first writing position. Later, I took the leap and found a three-month contract as a technical writer at a software company in Los Gatos.

Was your background primarily writing or technical?

Both, in parallel. In college, I studied some computer science, while my emphasis was on language and writing.

Where has your career path taken you?

Past employers include Levi Strauss & Company, San Francisco; Centric Software, Los Gatos; Fireman’s Fund Insurance Company, Novato; XUMA, San Francisco; MarchFirst, San Francisco; Franklin Templeton, San Mateo; and [now] TrueTime, Inc., Santa Rosa.

What are your current responsibilities at TrueTime?

I manage one writer, which includes coordinating projects and doing performance evaluations. I identify upcoming projects and negotiate the

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A Conversation with Rolfe Dlugy-Hegwer

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scope and timing with stakeholders and subject matter experts. Then, I write. Projects include user guides, reference manuals, white papers, test procedures, and training presentations.

What is the level of complexity of your projects?

The deliverables range in size from a few pages to a few hundred pages. The products are moderately complex and require some background in time and frequency to understand. The different products are related to each other, so the knowledge gained from one project is usually transferable to another. The real challenge is developing a meaningful understanding of the different scenarios the products and documentation will be used in.

What type of schedule do the projects typically follow?

The documentation life cycle for a new product release effectively has a six-month window, with a moderate “hump” at the end. By contrast, the documentation life cycle for a product update is a couple of months long, and the hump comes earlier. When we get a special request from a customer, we do the documents right away. It’s important to respond quickly and satisfy their needs. When I have the time, I reread and polish existing documents.

What is one of the most rewarding projects on which you have worked and why?

Collaborating with the lead engineer, I developed a training module for our latest product. I sat in and listened as we trained two groups of pilot users. I recorded the first group’s questions and responses from the trainer and applied them to the module for the second group. The second group finished its training ahead of schedule and clearly had a better understanding of the product. They were happier, and you could see it on their faces. I used the second group’s feedback to fine-tune the module for a nationwide training tour the following week. That was exciting!

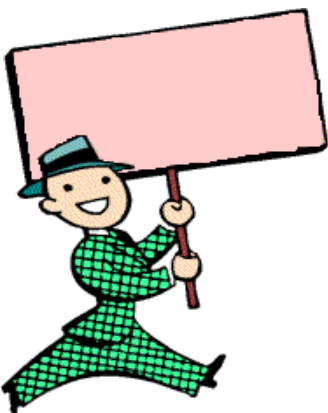
What was one of the most difficult projects on which you have worked and why?

I’ve been a team member on a number of troubled projects. All of them had some combination of the following:

- Ambitious scopes
- Unspecified goals
- Wishful-thinking schedules
- Poorly defined roles and responsibilities
- Diminishing executive sponsorship

The cost of these projects was unacceptable. Most of the time, the teams were composed of competent, well-meaning, hardworking individuals.

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A Conversation with Rolfe Dlugy-Hegwer

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They would bust their rears to fix the problem and deliver the results, or they would go into survival mode, staying on the sidelines to try to remain unscathed. All of these projects should be stopped, cancelled, and resurrected as smaller, more doable subprojects. There's a positive aspect to the current business environment: Businesses are being more cautious in the projects they select and execute, ensuring the most valuable results are delivered before proceeding with the next phase.

What are some of the challenges in your work that help to keep you interested?

I enjoy being a manager. A good manager can be the catalyst for a win-win relationship between the company and its employees. That's the kind of manager I want to become. I hope that I'll become more skilled at it over time and will earn responsibility for more people.

Also, I'm an eternal student. I love learning new things. Working with TrueTime's products has introduced me to time and frequency concepts and applications. I'm also taking a C-programming course in the evenings because most embedded-devices programming is done in C.

Have you worked as a freelancer?

Yes. It pays well and is a great way to gain experience both technically and professionally.

What do you like or dislike about working in Sonoma County?

I think more companies should set up shop here. The quality of life is better and more affordable than it is further south. The natural beauty and climate is great. The regional economy is diversified and less susceptible to the vicissitudes of NASDAQ. We get all this, plus the benefits of living in the Bay Area. When we get a light rail system, this region will get even better. Please vote to fund light rail.

July Meeting

Continued from page 1

mean different things in different cultures. So she doesn't "do hands," when trying to convey action.

For more information on visual design, refer to the following:

The Visual Display of Quantitative Information, Edward R. Tufte

<http://www.visualjournalism.com/>

A Day in the Life...

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Favorite Funny Sites for Technical Writers

The AdCritic

<http://www.adcritic.com/>

Formerly an amusing source of humorous television advertisements. Recently acquired by The AdAge Group. Here's hoping that it remains free.

The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest

<http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>

"Where 'WWW' means 'Wretched Writers Welcome.'"

The Darwin Awards

<http://www.darwinawards.com/>

"The Darwin Awards illustrate Mark Twain's observation that 'Man is the only animal that blushes—or has reason to.'"

George Carlin

<http://www.georgecarlin.com/georgecarlin/index.html>

"Thanks for visiting. Stay cool, and don't believe anything the Bush administration tells you. In fact, play it safe: don't believe anything anybody tells you."

International Save the Puns Foundation

<http://www.punpunpun.com/>

"They brought them up safe and sound, except for a few miner injuries. 'I smelt gold,' said one. 'Whose, yours ore mine?' said another. While in the almost flooded shaft, they sang Coal Porter songs ..."

Jon Carroll Archives

<http://www.sfgate.com/columnists/carroll/>

It's a Frank Capra movie is what it is, except with a lot more Koreans and Yemenis and lesbians. We are creating our utopia in a tiny corner of Oakland. Blink and you'll miss it."

Laid Off: A Day in the Life of Odd Todd

<http://www.oddtodd.com/>

"When you're not working, you start to realize how important money is and stuff."

Monty Python

<http://www.montypython.net/>

"He's a lumberjack and he's OK. He sleeps all night and he works all day."

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STC Conference Update

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The sad part about the conference was the number of attendees. About half the usual number were in attendance, down to 1500. Only a handful of us were from the Bay Area.

The best part about every conference is meeting so many friendly people who happen to be in the technical communications profession. The instant camaraderie that occurs between technical communicators who have just met continues to amaze me.

As for Nashville, take the Southern Mansions tour if you ever go there, and see the Country Music Hall of Fame even if you aren't a country music fan.

A Day in the Life...

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The Official Dilbert Web Site

<http://www.unitedmedia.com/comics/dilbert/>

"Wally, our CEO is visiting next week. I want you to hide in the restroom."

The Official Peanuts Web Site

<http://www.unitedmedia.com/comics/peanuts/>

"No way. Joe Cool always sends out for pizza."

The Onion

<http://www.theonion.com/>

"America's Finest News Source."

Richard Lederer's Verbivore

<http://pw1.netcom.com/~rlederer/>

"For stimulation, Honoré de Balzac wrote in a monk's costume and drank at least twenty cups of coffee a day, eventually dying of caffeine poisoning."

Like many of life's pleasures, exchanging funny URLs with friends on company time is something of a risk. If you are snickering on a day when everyone else is stunned in the aftermath of the morning news, you might be labeled as insensitive—or crazy. Too, your company might be recording your keystrokes: You could get in trouble for causing traffic congestion, for not being productive enough, or even for violating copyright law.

Risks of online humorous exchanges aside, humor is a survival strategy, and it comes as no surprise that many technical communicators keep a list of favorite funny sites by their side—and incorporate laughter into each workday.

News Briefs

Touchstone Seeks Entries and Volunteers

STC's annual Touchstone competition for excellence in technical communications seeks entries and volunteers. See <http://www.stc-touchstone.org> for more information.

List-Servs Open to Virtually All

To join the Society for Professional Journalists' new list-serv, send a blank e-mail to: Pointybird55@aol.com, or see <http://www.spj.org> for more information.

To join graphixgrrls, sponsored by the San Francisco Women of the Web (SF-WOW), send a blank e-mail to: graphixgrrls-subscribe@topica.com, or see <http://www.topica.com/lists/graphixgrrls> for more information.

To join North Bay Multimedia Association's (NBMA) list-serv, send a blank email message to: nbmaevents-subscribe@yahoogroups.com, or see <http://www.nbma.com> for more information.

To join SofTECH's list-serv, send an e-mail message with 'subscribe softech' in the body to: mailmngr@softech.org. See <http://www.softech.org> for more information.



Professional Development Opportunities

Documentation Training and Conference

October 7–8, Boston

\$599

<http://www.doctrain.com>

NBMA: Entrepreneur SIG - Public Speaking, Presenting a Project, Presenting Your Portfolio

October 8, San Rafael

Free to NBMA Members; \$10 for non-members, \$5 for students with valid ID

<http://www.nbma.com/events/calendar.html#oct>

Human Factors in Information Design

October 10–11, San Francisco

\$1275

<http://www.bentley.edu/ce/infodesign>

American Society of Indexers' Fall Workshop: Money, Money, Money: Making It and Collecting It

October 12, Orinda

\$25–\$55

cmwatsky@yahoo.com

Mapping Business Communications

October 14–15, San Francisco

\$995

<http://www.infomap.com/offerings/tipss.htm>

On the Same Page with Proofreaders

October 17, San Francisco

\$60

http://www.editcetera.com/workshops_fall_02.htm

Making Web Content Work

October 23–24, San Francisco

\$995

<http://www.infomap.com/offerings/tipss.htm>

NCSWA Freelance Workshop

November 2, 2002, San Francisco

\$10.00 (\$5.00 for students)

<http://www.ncswa.org>

E-Learning Workshops

November 19, 20, and 21, San Francisco

\$1295

<http://www.vignettetraining.com/workshops.htm>

On the Same Page with Indexers

November 21, San Francisco

\$60

http://www.editcetera.com/workshops_fall_02.htm

