

Determining the Needs of Your Audience

by Donna Marcotte, Independent Consultant

Many thanks to all the contributors mentioned in this article for taking time to provide information about their activities for determining audience needs.

The feature article in the September 2000 issue of *Dateline Houston* stated that technical communicators add value by designing documents that meet the needs of our audiences. But how do we know what our audiences need?

One way to find out is simply to *ask* them. However, there are often obstacles to direct access to our audience members. For example, audience members may be geographically distant, or production schedules may be so tight that it's difficult to find time to meet each other. In these cases, technical communicators must be creative in the ways they gather information to determine audience needs. This article discusses several methods used by STC Houston chapter members.

Use Internal Resources

Mary Cameron, an information developer at BMC Software, Inc., was conducting user task analysis for a new product. She was able to identify groups of employees within BMC who were currently or had previously performed the job functions related to the new product.

Working with Denny LeCompte, a BMC usability engineer, Mary developed a questionnaire. She originally intended to distribute the questionnaire online; however, Denny encouraged Mary to conduct personal interviews, explaining that the quality of the answers and information would be better. Because Mary had identified employees with similar job functions within BMC, she was able to conduct these interviews and gather valuable information that she could extrapolate to her intended audience.

Use Surveys—and Internal Resources

While personal interviews may yield more information and greater details,

sometimes written or online surveys are suitable. Patrick Rockecharlie and Linda Oestreich, also from BMC Software, Inc., had a very specific issue for which they were trying to gather data.

They had recently changed the delivery medium of a particular type of information; they wanted to know what their audience thought of the new delivery medium and what other documentation needs they may have.

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Dateline Houston

Dateline Houston is the newsletter of the Houston Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication, a nonprofit organization. Ten issues are published each year (September through June).

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Staff Writers: Heather Shelly
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Submissions

Submit newsletter contributions by the first of each month for the coming month's issue. Submissions in ASCII, Microsoft Word 97 or FrameMaker 5.x format are appreciated. Send submissions to Rhonda Hector:

e-mail: rhonda@newmc.cc

phone: 832-200-9000, ext. 107

All submissions are subject to editing.

Reprints

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The cover is based on an original photograph by Catherine Bendig. The graphic design is by Ruth Metcalf.

The membership directory password is homer+wagner.

From the Editor...

Taking the Reigns

Rhonda Hector, President, New Millennium Communications

I am very excited to be taking over as Managing Editor of *Dateline Houston*. From the past issues I have seen, the most recent editors Donna Marcotte and Verna Dunn have done an excellent job in keeping the newsletter fresh and interesting. We intend to continue bringing you informative articles regarding the technical communications field and STC Houston. Any comments or suggestions you may have on how the newsletter can best serve your needs would be greatly appreciated.

Although no general meetings will be held in December or January, *Dateline Houston* and the STC Houston Web site will keep you up-to-date on chapter happenings and events. Check out the chapter Web site periodically at <http://www.stc-houston.org/>.

If you would like to know more about the Region 5 Conference, which our chapter is hosting, go to <http://www.stc-houston.org/r5conference/region5.shtml>. And finally, the Region 5 Web site has been revamped recently, so take a look at <http://stc.org/region5/www/>.

I look forward to meeting more of you in the near future and wish you all a safe and happy holiday season. (And here's hoping that we have a President by the next issue!)

Update on Fundraisers

by Janette Sexton-Shahout, Contract Technical Writer, Dynegy, Inc.

Six months ago, STC Houston Chapter enrolled in the Kroger Share Card and the Randalls Good Neighbor Programs. Both companies rebate one percent of participants' total grocery purchases on a quarterly basis.

The chapter realized \$84 in income at the end of the third quarter (\$54 from Kroger and \$30 from Randalls). By tying STC's member number **8716** to your current or new Randalls card, you can assign one percent of your total grocery purchases to the chapter. Participation in the Randalls Good Neighbor Program does not affect your eligibility for other store giveaways or promotions, and your participation in the program continues only as long as you wish. Kroger provided 500 free Share Cards, which are available at our monthly program meetings (and upcoming Annual Awards Banquet). Please pick one up, or request one from President Deborah Long at deborah.long@enron.com.

Participating in both programs is easy—just present either card when paying for your groceries. Proceeds benefit chapter activities, so do something that makes you feel good the next time you shop for groceries. Help fund STC Houston Chapter activities by enrolling in one or both of these fundraising programs!

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

From the President . . .

The STC Story

by Deborah Long, Strategic Communications, Enron Net Works

At this special time of year, Jocelyn and I would like to extend warm holiday wishes to you and your families. It also seems fitting to share the following STC story with you, as we reflect about the past year's experiences and look forward to the coming year's challenges:

"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 communications, 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'."

We hope that these words will continue to provide inspiration throughout the year 2001, as we design the future of technical communication according to STC's new mission statement. Thanks to Suzanna Laurent, our Region 5 Director-Sponsor for forwarding this story to us.

Happy Holidays!

Deborah Long and Jocelyn Williams



Deborah Long

Scenes of the STC 2000 Region 5 Conference

Judy Glick-Smith, STC First Vice-President, and Suzanna Laurent, Region 5 Director-Sponsor, were among those in attendance.



See Page 6 for more of this photo essay by Melanie Flanders.

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Before developing the questionnaire, Patrick and Linda worked with people in other BMC departments who already had regular contact with this audience. First, they tried to better understand some of the general needs and concerns of the audience, then they tried to develop an appropriate and useful survey.

Use Technology

The Internet has provided the technology for facilitating communication. Heather Shelly is an information developer at BMC Software, Inc. and works on the PATROL product line. She uses PATROL Express, an internal BMC Web site, to gather information from customers and to keep abreast of latest product development.

The site is staffed by BMC employees from the Software Consulting, Professional Services, Research and Development, Education Services and Marketing departments to provide a single, comprehensive information source about the PATROL product line. BMC customers and employees subscribe to the site. Useful features of the site include frequently asked questions and discussion forums. Information developers monitor the site to help determine audience issues and needs.

Capitalize on Travel Opportunities

Previously, I worked for a major oil company, where the audience members for whom I wrote were located in drilling offices worldwide. In addition to writing software documentation, I coordinated a special project in which our development team conducted an analysis of these groups' needs for software tools. This

The determination of audience needs is vital to developing useful documentation but is not always easy to accomplish.

project was deemed important enough to require visits to these sites.

While usability was not the specific purpose of these trips, I took advantage of these travel opportunities to conduct usability testing and to informally observe and evaluate my audience and their surroundings. I also had a chance to simply meet the users face-to-face, which helped with future e-mail and phone correspondence.

The determination of audience needs is vital to developing useful documentation but is not always easy to accomplish. However, it does not have to be the sole responsibility of the technical communicator nor the primary reason for visiting client sites. Look at other resources or ways to maximize other events or opportunities, and you may find a lot of useful information about your audience needs.



Report from Hawaii

by Verna Dunn, Information Developer, BMC Software, Inc.

The Region 7/8 Pan-Pacific Conference in Waikiki Beach, Honolulu, Hawaii, drew 560 attendees from as far away as Israel. The same three things that sell real estate also sold many on this event—location, location, location. Hawaii's magnificent scenery, perfect weather, and Aloha spirit draw visitors from around the world, and Regions 7 and 8 used that drawing card well.

Our current Region 5 director-sponsor, Suzanna Laurent, gave a presentation about team building. Lori Lathrop gave a session about indexing. Our former Region 5 director-sponsor, Judy Glick-Smith, gave an all-day workshop about single sourcing. Martha Baer, senior contributing editor and former executive editor of Wired magazine, gave the keynote address. Our current STC president, Mark Hannigan, and immediate past-president, Mary R. Wise, led the closing session on the dinner cruise.

I salute the planners of this conference for allowing conference attendees time to enjoy the beauty of the location and for using the local charm and facilities to enhance our conference experience. Several of the organizers, while exhausted from this effort, were already discussing the possibilities for next time—Japan? Tahiti? Bali? New Zealand? If they plan it, I'm sure that many (including this writer) will come.

P.S. A look at the classified ads and a conversation with a writer from Honolulu spoiled all thoughts of relocating in Hawaii. The jobs are few, the applicants are many, and the cost of living is high.



New Member News

by Lisetta Lavy, Manager, Documentation, Aspen Technology

Melissa Britt

Melissa Britt, technical editor for PSINet, has five years of experience as a technical writer and editor in the educational publishing and computer hardware industries. She graduated in 1998 with her M.A. in Technical and Expository Writing from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Before moving to Houston in September of this year, Melissa and her husband lived in Austin, Texas.

Steve P. Delaune

In August, Steve graduated from the Professional Writing program at the University of Houston Downtown. He is interested in technical writing and electronic media. For one of his internships, Steve created a Shakespeare Web site (www.academic.dt.uh.edu/~cunningm/frames.htm). He is proficient with Adobe PageMaker and is learning FrameMaker. He also has experience creating newspaper layouts.

Kendra Garroutte

Kendra is from Prue, Oklahoma, and graduated from the University of Tulsa (Oklahoma) in May 2000 with a BS in MIS. She moved to Houston in early June. She is new to technical writing, having started work for Landata Systems, Inc., in mid-June as a documentation specialist. Since starting her job, she has primarily been training and shadowing other writers to gain knowledge and experience.

Alyssa Fox

Alyssa has four years of experience in technical communications and is currently a technical writer for PentaSafe Security Technologies, Inc. She is interested in usability and online help.

Bill Lynch

Bill has been living in Houston for the last three years. During that time, he has been teaching in the School of Design at the Art Institute of Houston and the Art Institute Online, based in Pittsburgh, PA. He is originally from Kansas City, Missouri, and is a graduate of Central Missouri State University. Currently, he is continuing his graduate coursework in Information Sciences and Educational Technologies online at the University of Missouri in Columbia. His work in the graphic design field over the last 20 years has included everything from packaging and labeling, publishing, and environmental design to online content development.

Kirk Meyer

Kirk was a member of the St. Louis (Missouri) STC chapter for about 12 years while he worked for Philip Services Corporation in Columbia, Illinois. He began working full time in technical communication in 1987 when he joined a predecessor company to Philip as a Technical Editor for reports, operations manuals, and other technical documents. Before that, he held a number of environmental scientist/engineering

roles with consulting firms in Missouri and Louisiana. His most recent role at Philip was Senior Proposal Manager, Corporate e-Commerce Team Member, and Corporate Marketing Committee Member. In that role, he frequently traveled to Houston (nine times in 2000 alone). He recently started work for ENSR International in Houston as a Regional Marketing Services Manager, where he prepares proposals, statements of qualifications, and presentations related to environmental engineering and consulting.

Kathy Polanski

Kathy is a native Houstonian who was transferred to Atlanta as a result of a merger. After one year, she's back home and still holds the position of Director, Policy & Procedure Development, with the same major long-term care (nursing home) company for which she has worked for 16 years. She has produced their policies and procedures manuals for the last seven years. Their Infection Control Manual received Best of Show in Houston's 1995-96 Technical Publications Competition and went on to receive the Award of Excellence for Technical Publication in the international competition; Kathy is very proud of that accomplishment. She achieved Senior Member status in STC last year.

Scenes of the STC 2000 Region 5 Conference from Albuquerque, New Mexico

Approximately 106 people attended the STC Region 5 Conference held October 13-14, 2000, at the Sheraton Old Town in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The Kachina Chapter hosted the event and arranged for it to occur during the annual Balloon Fiesta.

Featured Keynote Speaker was Paula Berger of SOLUTIONS. Speakers from the Houston Chapter included Peter French and Rebecca Ideus of Compaq, and Maria Ellul, Ivor Ellul, and Wayne Schmadeka of Kitba Consulting Services.



STC 2001 Region 5 Conference Co-managers Nicole Smart-Wycislo (standing, l) and Melanie Flanders (standing, r) spent time with 2000 Region 5 Conference Comanagers Rick Johnson-Sheehan (standing, c) and Shelley Strong (seated, l) and Registration Manager Teri Wilkins (seated, r) to exchange ideas and discuss the challenges of planning a regional conference.



Attendees gathered at a local Mexican restaurant for a banquet Friday night and to sample traditional New Mexican fare. Pete Cedeno, Melanie Flanders, Lori Buffum, and Nicole Smart-Wycislo smile while Linda Cedeno (not shown) snaps a photograph.

Photo essay by Melanie G. Flanders, Chief Information Architect for KnowledgeMasters, Inc.

Photographs taken by Linda Cedeno, Melanie G. Flanders and Janette Sexton-Shahout.



Attendees from Houston included (standing, l-r) Lori Buffum, Wayne Cooper, Charles Frausto, Maria Ellul, Ivor Ellul, (seated, l-r) Melanie Flanders, Linda Cedeno, Nicole Smart-Wycislo and Janette Sexton-Shahout.



Weather prevented the balloons from lifting off during the first part of the week, but on Friday, they arose in full splendor.



Ivor and Maria Ellul relax after their late afternoon conference presentations.

Calendar of Upcoming Events

Date	Time	Event/Topic	Location	Contact
Jan. 1	EBD*	Deadline for Feb. newsletter		Rhonda Hector rhonda@newmc.cc
Jan. 9	6:30 p.m.	STC Houston Admin. Council Meeting	La Madeline - The Carillion	Deborah Long deborah.long@enron.com
Jan. 26	6:30 p.m.	Awards Banquet	Westchase Hilton 9999 Westheimer	Heather Shelly heather_shelly@bmc.com
Feb. 1	EBD*	Deadline for March newsletter		Rhonda Hector rhonda@newmc.cc
Feb. 13	5:30 p.m.	General Meeting Speaker: Andrea Ames	Westchase Hilton 9999 Westheimer	Dorothy Murray dorothy_murray@email.msn.net
Feb. 19	6:30 p.m - 7:30 p.m.	Online Documentation SIG Meeting	Hal-PC Headquarters 4543 Post Oak Place Drive, Suite 200	Larry Dybala lwd@hal-pc.org

Please note: Because of the holidays, there is no general meeting in December. See you at the awards banquet in January!

*End of business day

January 26, 2001

Houston Chapter Awards Banquet

The 2000-2001 Technical Publications, Art and Online Communications Awards Banquet will be held on January 26, 2001. This annual banquet honors our colleagues who won awards during the season's competitions, and allows members to view the winning entries, which are showcased at the event.

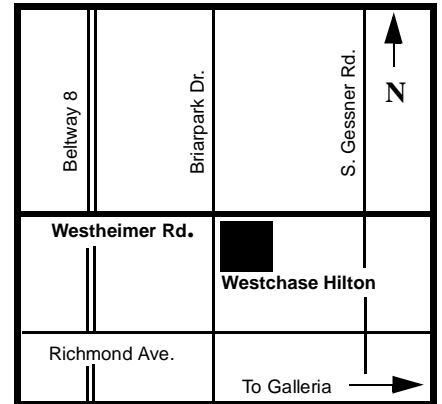
From 6:30 - 7:30 p.m., attendees can view the awards while enjoying hor d'oeuvres and a cash bar. The banquet and awards presentation takes place from 7:30 - 10:30 p.m.

Watch for your invitation in the mail. We hope to see you there!

January Banquet

Place:

Westchase Hilton Hotel
9999 Westheimer Road
(at Briarpark, between
S. Gessner and Beltway 8)



Date:

January 26, 2001

Time:

6:30 - 7:45 p.m.

Exhibits, networking and cash bar

8:00 - 9:00 p.m. Dinner

9:00 - 10:30 p.m. Program

Cost:

\$35 per person

There are no general meetings in December 2000 or January 2001. General meetings will resume on February 13, 2001.

