



tecolote

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Tecolote is the official newsletter of the New Mexico Kachina Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. Our mission is to advance the profession of technical communication across New Mexico by increasing networking among professionals, creating opportunities for members to improve skills, and recognizing technical communication excellence.

Our Active Students

Much has been going on at the two campuses where the majority of our Society's New Mexico student members live and study.

At New Mexico Tech in Socorro, Dr. Julie Ford invited two technical writers to address her introductory technical communication class in mid-September. The two presenters were Janie Johns, an independent writer and local business owner, and Bob Johnson who works with me as a Senior Technical Writer at Ktech Corporation. Janie and Bob told of their experiences in the technical communications field, what it takes to be a successful "communicator," and the benefits—both material and personal—that they have found in this line of work. Bob also spoke about our Society (STC); how it has added value to his career and why students would benefit from joining. The students listened eagerly and asked good questions.

On October 21st our chapter provided a panel presentation to the students taking course work in the Professional Writing Program at UNM. Dr Scott Sanders, director of the UNM professional writing program, and Education Committee Chair for our Kachina Chapter, was our host. All attendees were treated to deli sandwiches and cold drinks, which Dr. Sanders graciously provided. Five STC members sat on the panel. They were Todd Heinrichs, Bob Johnson, Amy Matteucci, Kathy Pallis, Judy Prono, and John Stikar.

Another panel with a similar focus addressed students involved with New Mexico Tech's Technical Writing program on October 28th. At that event, we presented a check to the Trinitite Chapter (STC student chapter). President, Ms. Carmelita Wasson, and seven other students will use the \$320 to help offset costs to attend our Region 5 Conference in Dallas on November 2-4. We are excited that eight students are able to attend and even more excited that two will be providing presentations! Two of our chapter's members—Konnie Andrews and John Stikar—will represent our chapter at the conference. We look forward to hearing about the proceedings!



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We welcome submissions from Kachina
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Ambassador of User Experience Stresses Joy

(Workshop on Saturday, September 16, 2006)

by Jonathan Price

Increasingly, we are documenting software that runs in a browser—web applications. The context is the whole Web, and the conventions are those of the browser...and apparatus such as database forms, wizards, widgets, chats, and wikis. How can we organize the content, the interface, the graphic look for our site, so that visitors get an exhilarating experience?

User Experience design combines many forms of user analysis (summarized in personas), information architecture (what content goes where, with what priorities?), marketing (what's the point of the brand?), usability (does it work?), and emotion. But wait: What was that? Are we letting passion creep in?

Yes, say two representatives from ClearWired, a local web firm—Chris Rivard and Kevin Silver. In fact, emotion may be the link we need when we present all this analysis to a graphic designer, and a programmer, to pull together. We need to focus on the emotional experience of the site, from moment to moment, so users feel joy. What?

We used to think of tech writing as neutral, objective, unemotional, and definitely without humor. But which sites make people so happy that they tell others, via instant messages, chats, discussion boards, and what not? Apple, Amazon, eBay, Intuit, Google—they are all fun to use. Vastly different in personality, they are united in their close attention to the actual experiences of their users.

And in this day of agile development, rapid prototyping, and user-centered design, we often have to revise our site's interface and content every few weeks. No more waterfalls: those old cycles of development, where analysis preceded design, and design preceded implementation, and the whole development process took two years, minimum.-0p i89

Instead, we start each redesign by a return to the customers. Who are the people who use our site? What are their roles? What contexts do they come from? What do they need? Based on this investigation, we come up with personas, fictional representations of major groups of users, who have their own goals, and priorities. These personas act as representatives for users, guiding our decisions about functions, features, content, look and feel.

Untying the Wireframe

In the old days (a few years ago), information architects tended to create skeletal designs of pages called wireframes—on the analogy with the delicate structures used by 3D designers before they wrap these complex structures with skins. But Rivard and Silver point out that sometimes a customer sees the wireframe, and thinks, “There, that is the design!”

The problem: the designer gets locked into a fairly crude model, constrained to a clear but visually uninteresting design. Ditto, the programmer.

To free up the creativity of the other members of the team during rapid prototyping and user-centered design, Rivard and Silver advocate “deconstructed wireframes,” which describe the functionality and content for each page, indicating priorities, without sketching the whole page, as in a traditional wireframe. Dan Brown describes the idea in Boxes and Arrows, at http://www.bboxesandarrows.com/view/where_the_wireframes_are_special_deliverable_3.

Chris Rivard and Kevin Silver put the user at the center of analysis and design. Their presentation evoked excitement and enthusiasm from our members—and interest in attending the brown bag lunches that they occasionally present at their offices. Want to find out more about their approach? See: <http://www.clearwired.com/>.

More Web Events

Interested in Web activity in New Mexico? Join an informal conference called a BarCamp, on November 11, 2006: <http://barcamp.org/BarCampAlbuquerque>.

The idea: You have to present if you attend; but there is no formal schedule before the event. The ClearWired folks are helping set this up, but they can use your contributions.

Welinske Talks Trends

Thursday, October 5, 2006

by Jonathan Price

Joe Welinske runs conferences on help and customer assistance, so he recruits speakers, schmoozes with vendors, and listens to managers of technical communication groups. He stopped off at Fiesta's Restaurant to talk with our members about the trends he sees in our field. Here are some highlights:

Real Estate is Shrinking

For years, we've been able to assume that the user is looking at a computer screen...but now we have to cope with as many as four dozen different operating systems, multiple browsers, and little screens such as those for PDAs and cell phones. Joe showed a slide from the makers of the Opera browser showing a grid of mobile units—tiny computers bundled with telephony, camera, video, music...oh, and a little customer assistance.

Bob Johnson was impressed with this chart. "It identified the multitude of information/communications devices that are now in use. And to think that not too long ago (within the baby boomers' lifetime) we only had the telephone! I guess I am a neo-communications outlaw because I still prefer face-to-face communication when possible."

Microsoft Won't Support Vista Help by Outsiders

Jan Wright, who has done a lot of work for Microsoft over the years, said, "I was astounded to hear that the Vista team was not going to provide any engine for outside application developers to include Vista Help.

"Joe's WritersUA conferences have covered Vista help's features, as they have decreased in scope, every year. Two years ago I was horrified to find that there would be no index. Now to find that there was no way for developers to have a standard help system that matched Vista's is astonishing.

"One thing that access to a standardized help engine has done is to provide users with something predictable, even if the quality of content fell short. They may hate help, but at least they know what the tabs mean. Now users will have to cope with help with no predictable location, labeling, or operation. All I can say is 'What can they be thinking?'"

But Joe also said that Adobe was going to support RoboHelp after all, even though it has lost market share to upstarts like Flare, from MadCap, the programmers who wrote RoboHelp in the first place.

XML is Everywhere

Even though the most-widely used tool is Acrobat, noted by more than 85% of the respondents to one of Joe's surveys, that tool is still not used in a very sophisticated way, because most groups simply use it for the production of PDF versions of manuals designed for paper. But most large companies are moving toward content management, for which the lingua franca is XML.

This trend dovetails with the move toward ubiquitous computing. For example, XML's parser is so lightweight it can fit in the tiny CPUs embedded in cell phones, and most of their help systems are done in variations of the Wireless Markup Language. Joe pointed out that we may soon have to learn Voice XML, to prepare scripts so that the nice announcer person can respond to questions from the user, without having to display any text on screen.

Joe encouraged us to learn a bunch of web technologies, too, such as HTML, DHTML, XHTML, CSS, and JavaScript. And, as Leslie Beach noted, "Technical writers will increase their value if they can do document architecture and template design. 'Structured authoring' is the current buzzword."

Summing up

Mary Hamel said, "It was a most enjoyable presentation—I wish we could do more like that!"

Mary, we'll try.

For More Info

Joe's website has lots of tool tips, advice, and resources: <http://www.winwriters.com/>.

Competition Judging Begins

Saturday, October 21, 2006

Fourteen technical communicators picked up their judging packets at the University of New Mexico today, as technical communicators in Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma began evaluating more than five dozen entries in the Southwest Regional competition. Bob Johnson is running the competition, and Judy Prono gave the judges their instructions.

The judges will review print publications, art, or online information, then get together on November 11, 2006, to reach a consensus on each entry. Awards will be given out in January, at a banquet.

Afterward, several judges participated in a panel talking about careers in technical communication, answering questions from students at UNM. Then some students met with individual writers, editors, and managers, to learn more about breaking into the field.

Judging is Hard Work

So why do people volunteer to judge these entries? Helen Moody, of the Professional Training Company, says, “It’s very interesting to see what other professionals are working on. I always learn from the process of reviewing and then discussing comments with the other team members at the consensus judging.”

Todd Heinrichs, a writer and editor at LANL, enters the competition almost every year. He says, “Judging gives me a chance to give something back to the Society for the help and advice—the guidance the other judges have given me over the years. Also, seeing other entries shows me how other professionals achieve their communication goals. These can spark new ideas or tactics in my own work.”

Jay Tracy, an artist who has won awards in the past (and developed our chapter logo) says, “Coming up with a constructive critique exercises one’s own perceptions of what works and what doesn’t work—and helping others in the process, which is a dialogue, is always a good thing.”

Tips from the Judges

Experienced judges can give you good advice on how to win. Some tips are practical. For instance Ellen Cline, a freelance communicator who has judged a lot of art over the years, says “Watch out for type printed over colors and design elements. Have many people proof your work. If you are showing an item in a size that is different from the original (like a large display), tell us its original size.”

Sheina North urges you to contribute next year. “First of all, you have to take the step to enter. I say this, because people often think about it or procrastinate, but then do nothing. Next, I’d say it’s a good idea to really check (and double, triple check) your work, including that paperwork which needs to be submitted for the entry.”

If You Don’t Win

Moody suggests you attend the banquet to look at the publications that have won awards. “Learn from the winners. And review the evaluation criteria.” Those criteria ensure that each judge is applying the same standards—created by teams of technical communicators, and refined almost every year, the criteria codify best practices.

If you do not win an award, Heinrichs urges you to try again. “Read your evaluation forms carefully (especially the comments of the judges) and work to implement their suggestions. And just remember that, extenuating circumstances aside, we are here to recognize superior communication products—not to pat each other on the back. Nearly everything entered holds communicative merit, but that does not mean that any specific entry necessarily merits an award.”

North stresses what you can learn from the feedback. “Take what you can from all the comments and feedback, but don’t beat yourself up if you don’t get an award, or get the kind of glowing feedback you’d hoped for. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and move forward. Set a standard for yourself, and keep trying to meet it, then go beyond. This is true even if you do win an award. Raise the bar and don’t get a big head!”

STC Webinars

The Kachina Chapter is presenting STC webinars again this year. These lunchtime learning seminars are presented free of charge to members and students, although any and all contributions towards the expense of presenting them are appreciated. Attendance is free for STC members and students; \$10 for non-members.

All webinars take place on Wednesdays from 11:00 am to 12:30 pm. Webinars are held at K-Tech Corporation at 10800 Gibson SE (south of I-40, east of Eubank).

RSVP to Jonathan Price in advance at jprice@ktech.com or 254-4148. We must have a minimum of five members signed up to purchase these presentations. If we do not receive enough indications of interest, we will cancel the webinar.

October 25, 2006 — Ten Ways to Increase Your Value as a Technical Communicator.
Presenter: Holly Harkness

November 8, 2006 — Choosing the Right Usability Technique (to Answer the Right Question).
Presenter: Whitney Quesenbery

November 22, 2006 — Selling Technical Communication Services—Both Inside and Outside Your Organization
Presenter: Robert Dianetti

December 6, 2006 — Creating Training That Sticks
Presenter: Maggie Haenel

January 17, 2007 — The Xfactor—From HTML to XHTML.
Presenter: Neil Perlin

You may view a description of upcoming STC web seminars on the Society's website at <http://www.stc.org/seminarsList.asp>.

Upcoming Admin Council Meetings

Saturday, November 18, 2006 — Administrative Meeting, 11 am
Dane Smith Hall on UNM Main Campus