Lines & Letters

Northeast Ohio STC Newsletter

Outgoing President's Column

By Lori Klepfer

Wow! June. I cannot believe a year has passed, and here I am writing my last president's column.

My personal mission one year ago was simple:

1. Do no harm
2. Build upon the achievements from my able predecessors
3. Leave the chapter a little better after my watch

The ultimate judges of my achievement are you, my fellow members.

Whatever our achievements this year, we reached them because of our dedicated volunteers, including the board. I wanted to thank them publicly at the June meeting, but the chapter picnic remained elusive. Allow me now to express my gratitude to them and list their achievements this year:

Beth Williams, our Immediate Past President

Beth, ever diligent and ever relaxed, managed our Online Communication Competition. She worked hard to provide you the candidates for this coming year's board. Thank you for your leadership, counsel, and effort!

Ken Rogers, our Treasurer

Ken served double-duty: Treasurer and web committee advisor. We have Ken to thank for our ability to register online and pay fees with Pay Pal. Ken even set up the ability for us to use Pay Pal for the competition entries. We have a chapter debit card, as well, so we don't have to use personal credit cards to hold meeting rooms or to pay our printer. Thank you, Ken. No challenge was ever too much. We are truly a better chapter because of your efforts!

Tricia Spayer, our Secretary

Tricia serves in the unsung, but vital, role of Secretary. Tricia is responsible for maintaining our image in the community. For example, speakers receive personal thank you letters from our chapter, thanks to Tricia. She handled the meeting minutes and chapter correspondence flawlessly, pitching in to help other areas as needed as well. Thank you, Tricia, for your service!

Kim Lindsey, our Vice President

Kim assisted in the chapter and program planning, and helped the web team by posting the meeting announcements. We have exciting times ahead for STC, and I know Kim will represent and lead us well! Thank you, Kim, for your counsel.

Committees:

Jessica Hendricks—PR

Jessica made sure Cleveland knew of our achievements and those of our members via press releases. We had a lot to tell! And Jessica made it happen. Thanks Jessica!

Candace Wintering and Beverly Peterson – Membership

Thanks go to Beverly and Candace for the free meeting cards and the volunteer opportunities form. Thank you Candace and Bev for your efforts!

Stephanie Webster and Dannette Thompson— Programs

Without Steph and Dannette we would not have had the great meetings we enjoyed this year. Thank you ladies for a job well done.

Myron Shawala and Sarah Burke – Employment

Sarah and Myron and their team reformed our employment pages to make it the valuable resource it is. Their efforts also made our career night a success. New employers know of STC thanks to their efforts. Thank you for your energy and enthusiasm!

Jeanette Evans – College Competitions and Bege Bowers – High School Competitions

Jeanette conceived of and created our college technical communication competition. This has the potential of being a highly visible chapter activity. Thanks, Jeanette, for your insight and leadership! Dr. Bowers, despite a new role at YSU, served as our high school competition chair, a role she has diligently filled for many years. Thanks, Bege, for your continued service and commitment to NEO STC!

Brian Baddour and team – Web Site

As always the web team is there to make sure we, as members, are connected. They spiffed up the calendar with icons and helped with our Pay Pal initiative. And, of course, championed us through our web host's crash and burn. National has appointed Brian to the Technology Team. Congrats, Brian! Look for great things for our chapter as a result of Brian's service.

Nora Ebie—Newsletter

The Volunteer of the Year Award speaks volumes. Nora served us well by keeping our chapter

members connected and informed, scouring the news sites for content. As a sole editor, her efforts should be commended. Nora's dedication triumphed in times of distress. Thanks Nora!!

When you see these people next, please thank them for their service. These people served our chapter while living their lives. We've had houses bought, marriages, new jobs, and not so good events occur. Most of all we've built relationships.

To remain a vital and innovative chapter we need you! Even if you only have 15 minutes to spare, you can make an impact on our chapter. Just ask a board or committee member how you can help.

Lastly, let me thank you, my fellow members, for the distinct privilege and honor of serving as your president this year. I truly enjoyed serving you and serving with such outstanding board and committee members.

What's in store for me next year, you may wonder? I'll be leading a team of your past, current, and future leaders as we revise our chapter's strategic plan. NEO STC is one of a few chapters piloting the chapter planning programs for the Transformation Committee. We will formalize the value our chapter provides us as members and chart the course to help us make the value a reality. So, if you receive a call or email from one of us, please take the time to help us help all of us!

Here's wishing you a safe and happy summer! And again thank you for the opportunity to serve our chapter as president.

Most sincerely,

Lori Klepfer

Incoming President's Column

By Kim Lindsey

Sustainable involvement.

That's the theme I have in mind for our chapter this year.

It means we want to set goals that are realistic in light of the time and energy we NEO STC members actually have to give. It also means we're willing to put some good ideas on hold in order to pursue others which have a greater immediate benefit for us and a greater chance of success.

Corollary to this theme is focusing on the needs of our own members, and not so much on lists of achievement criteria. STC international has wonderful ideas of what has worked for other groups, but those ideas should be

only one of many things we consider; they should not be the standard by which we measure ourselves and develop our self-image as a chapter.

And you know, it was amazing how many times I heard those same two ideas - sustainable involvement and focus on the needs of one's own members - coming from STC leaders at every level at the international conference in Baltimore last May. We are right in step with the Society as a whole.

I think it says something that, of the approximately fourteen people holding the highest elected positions in STC, two of them are not only from our Region, but from our own chapter. Two out of fourteen - that's one out of seven, and that's remarkable.

You'll be hearing more from me in the next few months about the Transformation of the Society. (Check out the information on STC.org if you're curious, but remember that nothing is finalized yet.)

For the time being, though, it will be business as better-than-ever for our chapter.

Our monthly meetings will be held at the Independence Holiday Inn the second Thursday of the month, September through November and January through March. The dates for December's social hour, the combined meeting with the Pittsburgh chapter in April, and the banquet in May have been set as well.- Watch for details on program topics and speakers very soon. It looks to be an exciting year!

We also want to offer more educational opportunities than ever before, including (but not limited to) the STC WebEx seminars. Topics at the intermediate to advanced levels are particularly desirable. Please contact myself or another board member if you have specific suggestions for training. We will offer as many opportunities as our budget allows.

The one aspect of STC's Transformation you should see right away, is an emphasis on providing every member with value for their membership dollar.

What would make STC, and especially NEO STC, more valuable to you? Now is the time to express your wants and needs, because now - like the folks at DayTimers say - "It's all about YOU!"

Chapter Awards for 2003-2004

Chapter Impact Award --For a program or activity that impacted the chapter or membership

- Sarah Burke For revitalizing the Employment section of the chapter's Web site.

- Jeanette Evans For developing and championing the chapter's college technical communication competition.

Continued Service Award -- Recognizing consistent service to the chapter.

- Stephanie Webster For your years of effort planning chapter programs. Well done!

- Myron Shawala For your invaluable contributions to the Employment Committee.

- Angie Dianetti For developing and executing the Networking Lunches.

- Jill McCauslin For developing and executing the Networking Lunches.

Volunteer of the Year

- Nora Ebie For stepping up to the challenge of sole Lines and Letters Editor and persevering in challenging times.

New Sr. Members:

- Irene Jones

- Jonathan Vasko

STC Conference: a Cost-benefit Analysis

By: Brian Baddour, Northeast Ohio Chapter, STC

The Costs: Self-Improvement on the Cheap

Didn't even consider going to the conference, did'ja?

If you thought that spending a couple hundred dollars for a dozen seminars was a bitter pill, think again. The whole trip typically costs well over $2000! (See the table below.) Don't blame the Society. Not only is registration a pretty modest slice of the expenses, it's only the third-largest category of expense.

	Typical	My Cost
Lodging	$900	$360
Lost wages	$800	$0
Registration	$535	$0
Travel	$200	$26
Meals	$105	$74
Child care	$80	$0
Transportation	$0	$1
Total	$2620	$461

Like many of you, I wasn't considering the trip to Baltimore. Then my chapter sweetened the cost-benefit balance. Hmm, could I make it cheap enough to be worth the trip?

- Lodging. I almost scalped my registration in dispair. From $180 to $280 per night? Plus 12.5% tax?? They must be high. (Pun intended.) Color me naïve, but I thought a cheap hotel would be an order of magnitude lower. I'd started hunting too late to find someone to split a room with. Hotels.com to the rescue. The Inn at the Stadiums was just over a mile away from the Convention Center, very pleasant, and under $80 per night! Sold!

- Lost work/wage. My boss tried to explain that the real cost to the company is not registration, but rather lost work time. I did the math. They're right. If you're an independent consultant, you understand. So I listed the 200 seminars and which corporate projects and divisions they could benefit, and told them the registration was already paid. Still no luck. Offering to pitch in a share of my own vacation time, plus lodging and travel expenses convinced them that I really believed in the conference, and they let me go.

- Registration. Someone at our chapter proposed that we hold a raffle for our members. More involvement earns more entries. Good idea, because it encouraged more people to attend programs, and knowledge to return to the chapter through the winners. As one of the two winners, I can tell you it worked. I wouldn't have been as involved locally or at the conference otherwise.

- Travel. Even online fares to Baltimore weren't attractive. I opted for the alternative seven-hour drive. With the efficiency of our gas-electric hybrid Toyota Prius, it would qualify as a Neil Zurcher "one-tank trip." During the whole trip, the car went 54 MPG! There were more bonuses: more comfortable seating than one finds in coach class, better ventilation, no security checkpoint delays, no extra charge for bringing my musical instrument or bicycle, and no need for a rental car once I arrived. In fact, I could have multiplied my savings if I'd found a traveling companion before everyone bought airline tickets.

- Meals. I didn't pay much more than I would have if I'd stayed home. I joined the gang from our chapter at classy places only twice. Other times, if I wasn't too busy to grab a bite, I ordered from the healthy

menus at the fast food chains instead of the formal places recommended by the Visitors' Bureau.

♦ Child care. Here's just another reason a strong family pays. A really understanding spouse with whom good will was already built up, and parents who still live close by, made this adjustment not only less expensive, but also less traumatic for the kids.

♦ Transportation. When many hotels are a catwalk away from the convention center, you don't need a rental car. I brought my bicycle to commute the flat mile from bed to bustle. Other pros included welcome exercise and a wider range for sight-seeing. Even in the 80-degree heat, I needn't break a sweat. Of course, this option requires one to be street-wise and weather-ready.

Other tips

Glad I brought our family's laptop computer. Instead of waiting in line at the cramped kiosks, I kept in touch with home and work, checked Cleveland news, took seminar notes, searched them and downloaded seminar materials easily, and sent thekids some photos from Baltimore, all from the comfort of my hotel room at no charge. One security tip: I hear laptop bags are theft targets. A backpack was better camouflage against would-be thieves, and was easier to carry between seminars and on the bicycle.

Though still not a cost to be trifled with, the 82% savings made the difference between "no way" and "well, maybe, if the benefits are attractive enough." With some forethought and luck, lighter costs can make the conference's benefits worthwhile.

The Benefits: Invaluable or Unvaluable?

Our junior high school class took field trips like most take: The Cleveland Orchestra, the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, even the Crown Filtration Plant. Teachers knew it would be a real-world, educational experience -- a bunch of "teaching moments." The kids' spin? "What-everrr. It's a day outside that dull, stinky classroom, fine, let's go."

My co-workers have that careless attitude about conferences, although once we get there, we take our self-improvement much more seriously. Maybe your employer won't give you a "free ride" for that masters degree you'd like. So all the more reason to milk every last drop of self-improvement out of a conference.

Why doesn't management send me to these things more often? Do they think these soft skills and intangibles are so simple and automatic to understand, let alone execute? Maybe they overheard my co-worker, who practically kicked his heels together and exclaimed, "It's a day outside that dull, stinky office. Let's go!"

Eenie, Meenie . . .

He with the gold makes the rules. OK, so of the 200 seminars, those that might best benefit my sponsor went on the itinerary. In my case, it was easy to strike out seminars about students, globalization, and contracting. I highlighted seminars that might directly benefit my sponsor's active projects for stronger consideration.

Then I got stuck. What about the topics I know a lot about already, but just want to brush up on? What about those I just want to get some fresh ideas about, because the quick Google search in my time of need didn't give me the whole story? I'm no know-it-all, but I know enough to be productive. There's the rub: I already have more skills and ideas than I have time to apply.

That was a scary realization.

Sure, conferences teach you stuff you didn't know. Sure, they give you answers you'd have a hard time "googling" for. But isn't that stuff crème -- a nice-to-have that you could live without? Similarly, my life's a little better because of the street-corner musician, but what kind of tip is he worth? And surely you've heard this appeal: "What's public broadcasting worth to you? A dollar a day?" It's an arbitrarily-valued benefit that my sponsor will compare to a hard cost.

Heresy!

Scarier yet, the benefits of my involvement in the STC are just as difficult to quantify. I bring them back fresh ideas and policies. Usually, those ideas can be expected to translate into better customer sales and support, but only after a daunting amount of effort.

Oh dear, the STC conference and even my society membership are (gulp) worthless! At least that's the case for technical communicators with sufficient skills and workload.

(Comment to the editor : you did ask for a way to generate more "letters to the editor," right?)

There's Hope

Society members who attended the "STC Transformation" seminar or otherwise learned of the proposed changes, there's a glimmer of hope.

Centralization and sharing of chapters' computerized tasks and information, and the establishment of communities should enliven not only the society, but also its annual conference. Time will tell.

Personally, I'd prefer to set aside time to drop everything, give ear to what my peers are trying, and reevaluate my own business methods in light of those presentations. I have to prove their value.

So, it's time for me to distill some of those actionable tips, ideas and policies that are relevant to my sponsor. The "cost-benefit analysis" will be their duty. Will they see it as valuable enough to send me next year? Will a trip to Seattle in 2005 be worth the time away from my family and friends in Cleveland?

Whatever. It's a day outside that dull, stinky mindframe I'm stuck in. Let's go.

Baltimore Conference Impressions

By Kim Lindsey, Incoming President, NEO STC

The thing that made the biggest impression on me at the STC conference in Baltimore was the accessibililty of the top leaders in our field. People whose names you'd recognize as authors of seminal books and journal articles were simply all over the place, talking freely to anybody and everybody who approached them. I spoke with many Society board members - not just our own Mike and Bob, either!

As incoming chapter president, I kept a sharp eye and ear as to the inner workings and politics of STC. It was interesting to observe who was talking to whom, who took part in Society business meetings and who hung around outside talking in little groups - that kind of thing. The Transformation has inspired some past leaders to move out of the background and make their voices heard again. I see this as a good thing - we can no longer complacently assume that STC will always be the same: living organizations need to adapt and evolve, and we can be part of what drives that process.

Two sessions especially piqued my interest. The first was a panel discussion of STC luminaries (Judy Glick-Smith, Lance Gelein, Bonnie Graham, et al) on the topic, "Learning from Our Mistakes - If I'd Known Then What I Know Now." Ideas that kept coming up were: Always think of yourself as a consultant and prove your value every day; Keep in touch with the goals and plans of the upper management in your company; Be alert and realistic about the general business climate; Always treat people with respect and you'll be glad you did; When talking with management, always offer a solution, not a problem.

The second was another panel discussion, this one titled, "The Future of the Web: Reaching 'Any User.'" The distinguished panel consisted of Karen Schriver, Steve Krug, Whitney Quesenbery, and Ginny Reddish. (Who could ask for better than that?!) Main points were: Clarity will raise all boats (i.e., poor design and content will only make translation and accessibility issues worse); Be aware that there's a difference between 'reading to DO' and 'reading to KNOW;' We need to cultivate public intellectuals who will promote our field to outsiders.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to attend the conference and would highly recommend that others attend whenever they can.

Session Review: The Tech Writer's Essential Toolkit

STC 2004 Conference, Baltimore, MD

By Bob Young, Vice President, NEO STC

Mention to a tech writer a software tool that saves time and money and you will get their attention. Quickly add that there are more then 50 of these time savers less than $100, including some freebies, and you'll likely draw a crowd.

Such was the case at the 51st annual STC conference in Baltimore. One hopes to find a session packed with information that you can take home and put to use. This nugget was a gold mine, which didn't go unnoticed. There were attendees squeezed wall-to-wall to hear Frances Wirth tell us about her list of inexpensive goodies to save time and, yes, a bit of sanity on deadline.

For example, there is an expandable ruler that quickly changes from inches to pixels for cropping photos or illustrations. Need to make a calculation, no problem. Click the icon on the ruler and enter the numbers. (See "CoolRuler" in the Graphic Aids section below.)

Or, maybe you need to edit an audio track or create an HTML page from plain text. All three of these slick devices are available for free. That's right, free!

Wirth, with the help of the STC Carolina Chapter, has put together a handy packet entitled, "The Tech Writer's Essential Toolkit." You can access this handout at www.stc.org/51stConf/sessionMaterial/dataShow.asp?ID =167.

The handout is grouped into three main sections: Software tools, Web resources, and Reference tools. (The reference section referred me to "Read Me First," which is an excellent book on grammar, style and technical writing. I suggest this book for any writer. At $40, it's truly a bargain and easy read.)

Here are some examples of the gadgets, followed by a website and cost. I've experimented with some of these tools but I'm not offering any product endorsements.

Screenshots

- MWSnap, www.mirekw.com/winfreeware/mwsnap.html, Free -- Windows screen capture program has a lot to offer, and it's free! Donations are accepted. You can use this tool for viewing graphics or converting images to different formats. A preview panel allows you to enhance images, including adding multi-color frames.

- RoboScreenCapture, www.macromedia.com/software/roboscreencapture/, $34 -- Features handy keyboard shortcuts for capturing images in many different formats.

- SnagIt, www.techsmith.com, $40 (price break for multiple licenses) -- Easy to use screen capture tool. You can capture an entire screen, an object or define an area. A neat feature is the ability to have the software scroll a large screen and make one screen capture.

Graphics

- OmniGraffle, www.omnigroup.com/applications/omnigraffle/, $70 -- You'll never need to draw boxes and circles on a napkin again. Software allows you to quickly make professional looking diagrams. Lines actually stay with their shapes.

- Paint Shop Pro, www.jasc.com, $55 (after rebates) -- Easier to use than PhotoShop for editing photos, adding layers, or creating icons.

- XnView, www.xnview.com, free for non-commercial use -- Allows you to view and convert graphic files.

Graphic Aids

- Click Art 200,000 (No cost provided) -- Printed thumbnails of all the images allows you to look over the collection and pick the art you need. Having the thumbnails in hard copy is a real time saver.

- CoolRuler, www.fabsoft.com/products/ruler/ruler.html, Free --

They got the name right on this one! The ruler easily converts from inches to pixels, allows you to change font, and displays vertically or horizontally. Oh yes, a calculator also is available on the ruler.

- Visual Thought, www.freeware4u.com/modules/mydownloads/singlefile.php?lid=141&title=Visual%20Thought, Free -- Tool helps you make flowcharts, diagrams and organizational charts. The graphics can be placed into Word and FrameMaker documents or right on a web page for an imagemap.

Publishing

- Jaws pdf Editor, www.jawspdf.com/pdf_editor/index.html, $39 -- Tool allows staffers and clients to review copy without the full version of Acrobat. Post-it annotations and comments can be made on pages.

- FrameMaker Helpers Archive, www.frameexpert.com/plugins/brucefoster/index.htm, $20 -- Reduces storage space on your hard drive because all references in the archived book are a relative path and point to text and graphics under the archive directory. Extraneous files are not repeated, thus reducing the storage space.

- AutoText, www.siliconprairiesoftware.com, $10 – The plug-in allows you to define a set of text or graphic items and insert them into a FrameMaker document by making a menu selection or a key sequence. This creates consistency for repetitive items, such as company logos with text, anchored frames, and tables.

- Mif2Go, www.omsys.com, Free offer (normally $295) -- Free offer is for unemployed technical writers and underemployed technical publications consultants. Software converts FrameMaker files into online help in HTML, XML or Word .rtf formats.

Dictionaries

- Merriam-Webster online, www.m-w.com, Free -- An easy to use dictionary and thesaurus that are free. You type in the word and click "GO," it's that simple.

- Onelook, www.onelook.com, Free -- Search several dictionary sources, from regular to computer wordsmiths, for a definition. It's fun to compare the meanings of a word from the different dictionaries. Try "online," for example.

- Webopedia, www.pcwebopedia.com, Free -- Good source for providing meaning to technical terms.

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Meeting Review: April Employment Event

By Kim Lindsey, Incoming President, NEO STC

Our monthly chapter meeting for April was held at Tri-C's Corporate College in Westlake.

This was our first meeting with an employment-centered format, but surely won't be our last - in fact, many attendees suggested making it an annual event.

At the beginning of the meeting, guests munched appetizers while perusing job postings distributed throughout the room and visiting informational tables. These tables were manned by chapter members and representatives from the acadamic community who provided useful advice on such topics as resumes, portfolio-building, interviewing and networking.

Dinner was an all-you-can-eat pasta buffet with various pastas, sauces, and optional grilled chicken.

After dinner, a panel of six accomplished writers shared their experiences and advice with the group. The variety of their expertise showcased the breadth of opportunities possible in our field, while their unanimous urgings to "Know your audience" and "Keep up with trends" kept us focused on how important the basics really are.

Overall, the meeting was a resounding success.

Heartfelt thanks to the team who made it all possible: Stephanie Webster (Programs), Jessica Hendricks (Public Relations), and Myron Shawala and Sarah Burke (Employment). Fantastic job!

Web Committee Report

By Brian Baddour, Chapter Web Committee Manager

Not All It's Cracked Up to Be

If a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, then a significant sect of our chapter is interested in helping out with its web site. Kudos to people such as Rick Elliot and Bob Clark for their willingness to help out wherever needed, and for their recognition that such involvement counts as experience and self-improvement.

You two in the bush -- may I recommend offering some of our vibrant committees with their contributions to the Web site? Our chapter practices a casual kind of collaborative online publishing. Committee managers like Myron Shawala (employment) and Nora Ebie (newsletter) correctly see the Web site not as an initiative in and of itself, but rather as a medium through which to enact initiatives.

So if the Web Committee has already empowered other committees to publish online, what's left to do? Pretty urgent yet dull stuff: apply minor corrections and updates to pages, address accessibility complaints, answer a lot of "can we" and "how to" questions (50 e-mails in April, over 100 in May in addition to the usual broadcast and listserv messages), work with society-level folks on society-level web-based services, and -- ahh! -- troubleshoot downtime!

Exile of (Not From) a Site

To all of you who feared looking like an idiot because you had trouble reaching our chapter web site over the years, and especially since mid-April, I say, "You're not crazy." Sporadic reports of web site downtime grew to a feverish pitch in the last week of April as our "web host" -- the company on whose servers our chapter web site resided -- folded. We weren't alone as two sites can attest.

Does it make sense for a "site" to be in exile?

Magically, another company picked up the slack. Will we keep our site on that sorcerer's server? Will the new company live up to our expectations?

Stay tuned bat-fans...

Contracting with the United States government

By Barbara Philbrick

Like almost everyone else these days, work has been a little harder to come by and a little slower in coming. So I had a bit of time to try to figure out how to get contracts with the government.

Although I have not yet gotten a government contract, I have found out a lot of information and put pieces in place that should result in a contract.

> "The good part about the government is that they give you lots of information. The bad part about the government is that they give you lots of information.

Check with local government agencies

For my particular area of expertise (technical writing for control equipment), a logical first choice was the NASA Glenn Research Center here in Cleveland. The Internet has improved things tremendously! Many moons ago, I made a similar effort to get government work, but it

involved going to NASA and examining a huge bulletin board of contract listings. I gave up in despair after a few futile trips.

Anyways, these days, there's a web site. It wasn't completely up-to-date, especially contact names, but it provide loads of free information on how to contract with NASA. One of the sources led me to the NASA Acquisition Internet Service (NAIS), where you can subscribe to information about upcoming and ongoing contracts, and who is awarded them.

Having been to the web site, I was still left a bit confused, so I emailed a contracting officer for advice. He pointed out a few resources, and recommended that I attend an open house that NASA was sponsoring. It was $75, but, as it turns out, it was well-spent: I got a lot of good information and clarification on several things. If you find an open house in your area, I recommend attending.

GSA and FedBizOpps

One of my first points of confusion was where to start. There appeared to be two main entries in to government contracting: through Federal Business Opportunities (at http://www.fedbizopps.gov/) and through the U.S. Government Services Administration (GSA, at www.gsa.gov).

As it turns out, both are valid entry points. FedBizOpps is a central repository for all requests for proposals over $25,000, including those that will be procured through a GSA Schedule. It was quick and easy to sign up for notification on solicitations through FedBizOpps.

GSA is more focused on supplies (for example, supplying toilet paper to the military), but does support some services, too. To work through GSA, you must get on a GSA Schedule (also known as a Multiple Award Schedules (MAS)), which is essentially a contract between you and the U.S. government. The GSA works as a matching organization between suppliers and vendors. Once you get on schedule, you are granted a five-year contract with three five-year options.

The problem with the GSA is that it takes 99 days on average to get on schedule (according to a GSA representative; a Small Business Administration representative said that was "optimistic"). The other problem (for me, anyway) is that they don't have a schedule specific to technical writing; it's lumped with marketing services. The contact for the marketing schedule also told me that the technical writing in that schedule is mostly technical marketing material.

One of the advantages of being on a GSA schedule is that, at least in Ohio, the state will rubber-stamp a state-level GSA schedule if you are on a federal GSA schedule. There are also other organizations, like local community colleges, that buy off schedules.

The GSA encourages teaming arrangements (where several small business join to offer services on one GSA schedule). I am going to try this with another small business that offers graphic arts services.

For more information on GSA schedules, see https://fsstraining.gsa.gov/

To search schedule solicitations for one that applies to you, go to www.gsa.gov/elibrary.

Handy tip: The GSA liaison that spoke at the NASA open house recommended that you send in your GSA schedule with your highest prices. You will negotiate actual prices per contract.

Doing business with a particular government agency

Another session I attended gave information specific to NASA (and Glenn Research Center here in Cleveland, in particular). I believe this information generally applies to other agencies as well, though some of the specifics might be different.

For NASA, there is no vendor registration (other government agencies do require registration) and no particular method for getting in: you approach them like you would any other customer. Try to get names of people that need your services and make sure they have your information the next time they have a project. Fortunately, their web site contains lots of lists of departments and the people who work in them. The hard part isn't finding people — it's figuring out which people are your best contacts.

For services under $25,000, vendors must use direct marketing. For items under $2500, you can contract directly with individuals that have government-issued credit cards. Government agencies must supply lists of people who have credit cards under the Freedom of Information Act. (However, I happened on a newsletter to internal NASA employees that admonished them to be nice to vendors who call, so it appears that there is some resentment about their names being out there.)

The contracting officer that spoke at the open house said that it is OK to call and contact individuals within NASA to offer services. You can also check the

acquisition forecast to see if there are plans for acquiring your services, so you can get in early on contracts.

Also check existing contractors: they have a mandate to work with a certain percentage of small businesses. Again, NASA supplies lists of their contractors and the points of contact for them.

Handy Hint: The Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU) at NASA Headquarters (http://osdbu.nasa.gov/) is responsible for the development and management of NASA programs to assist small businesses. The office oversees and directs the activities of corresponding offices at each NASA Center. The mission of the OSDBU is to ensure that small, small disadvantaged, and women owned small businesses, including historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and other minority institutions, are provided the maximum practicable opportunities to participate in NASA prime contracts and subcontracts, particularly in the high tech areas. This includes technology transfer and commercialization activities.

What you need to have in place to do business with the US government

Most of these items were simple to come by — it involved following a link from one web page to another and most of them took less than a day to acquire.

♦ A D&B (DUNS) Number (see http://www.dnb.com/us/)

♦ Central Contractor number and a Trading Partner Identification Number (TPIN) (get these at www.ccr.gov)

♦ Ability to accept credit cards (required for GSA schedules and preferred for other agencies)

♦ You should also know:

♦ Your NAICS code (this is the North American Industry Classification System, which has replaced the U.S. Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) system. NAICS was developed jointly by the U.S., Canada, and Mexico to provide new comparability in statistics about business activity across North America.) For technical writing, the NAICS code is 561410.

♦ Your classification code, either: For technical writing, it's T013.

Bits and sundry

A SBA representative recommended that I don't bother certifying as a woman-owned business. Currently, this can be accomplished by writing a letter detailing why you believe you are a woman-owned business. This might change; there is a law on the books that says you must be certified, but currently, it is not being enforced. I have heard that certification can cost in the ballpark of $200, so this was good news.

The Department of Defense has a group called Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTACS) whose mission is to help small business procure government contracts. They offer a Bidmatch program for free that searches federal, state, and local government sites for jobs and emails them to you. They also offer help with unsolicited proposals and subcontracting. Some local Ohio PTAC offices are at www.lcede.org/ptac and business.kent.edu/KRBA/ptac.asp, 330-672-1275) Also see www.sellingtothegovernment.net for PTAC information.

Handy hint: The government is mandated to pay in 30 days; if you accept credit cards, they are mandated to pay in 10 days.

About the author: Barbara Philbrick, President of Caslon Services Inc. since 1992, is an accomplished technical writer and business owner. She has written, designed, and developed hard copy manuals, online help, and marketing materials for such clients as the Ernst & Young, Rockwell Automation, Rockwell Software, Reliance Electric, and North American Manufacturing Company.

5th Annual Documentation & Training Conference at Boston University

HELPING PEOPLE UNDERSTAND TECHNOLOGY

October 4-5 will see technical communicators from across North America and Europe gather at the Boston University Corporate Education Center in Massachusetts for the fifth annual Documentation & Training conference. The theme of this year's conference is "It's All About Effective Content".

The keynote speakers for the conference are Jesse James Garrett and Andy Ihnatko.

Garrett, author of the book The Elements of User Experience, will deliver a talk titled, "The Evolution of Information Architecture." In his talk, Jesse explores the art and science of structuring information and predict its future evolution.

Ihnatko, a popular technology columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times and Macworld magazine, delivers a humorous and insightful talk titled, "Where's My Atomic Heligyro?" Andy talks about the rate of saturation humans have for new ideas, and why some concepts catch on immediately while others take decades to penetrate.

In addition to the two keynotes, the conference includes 32 nationally-recognized presenters talking on topics related to content design, development, and management. The sessions provide a rich mix of high-level and implementation-level discussions, with speakers ranging from company CEOs to technology book authors, consultants, and software tool vendors.

"The sessions provide specific ideas that can immediately improve an organization's creation of content," according to conference manager Mike Doyle. Doyle believes this to be the only industry conference blending the specialized professions of technical writers, course developers, instructional designers, and usability specialists.

"These professions have historically operated in isolation," Doyle said. "However, as technology companies look to consolidate functions and costs, we believe they'll continue to look at merging the various technical

communication professions because they all work towards the same goal providing communications that help people better understand and use technology.

SESSIONS

CONTENT MANAGEMENT:

- Content Management: What's In It For You?
- Creating Usable Indexes
- Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) Standard
- Just-In-Time Delivery of Content
- Outsourcing for Localization
- Successful Project Management
- Understanding Metadata and Taxonomies
- What the Heck Is Single Sourcing, Anyway?
- XML: Overview of Structure and Tools

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT:

- Advanced Single Sourcing with FrameMaker
- Automating Document Production and Conversion
- Automating FrameMaker with FrameScript
- Blended Learning: A Case Study
- Creating Simulations & Demonstrations with RoboDemo
- Developing Training & User Assistance with Macromedia
- FrameMaker Template Development
- Going Beyond Digital Paper
- Help & Training: Split, Merge, or Fight?
- RoboHelp Advanced Features & Functions
- Secrets of Successful Online Simulations
- Using Dreamweaver Extensions
- Using Virtual PC Environments
- Writing to Persuade

CONTENT DESIGN:

- Designing Multimedia for Interactive Learning
- Designing with Wireframes
- Instructional Design Basics
- Introduction to XSL Transformations
- Moving from Instructor-Led to Computer-Based Training
- Structured Writing to Support Content
- Unmasking the Myths of Usability
- Using Games to Teach, Motivate, & Engage
- Using Style Sheets for Web Accessibility

Visit http://www.doctrain.com or contact Mike Doyle (mdoyle@pubsnet.com or 978-649-8555) for details.

Lines & Letters

Northeast Ohio STC Newsletter
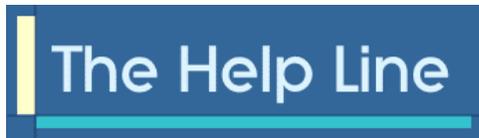
The Help Line

A new feature beginning with the first issue of the new year.

The Help Line will offer tips, tricks and how-to's from OUR MEMBERS (that's you, dear friend) on software operation, hardware configuration and/or peripheral (printers, modems, speakers, etc.) setup.

Do you have a favorite tip, trick or helpful suggestion you can share with your fellow members?

Share Your knowledge!

Send it to me at newsletter@neostc.org and I will put it in the next issue of The Help Line.

White Board

Announcements, Notes and FYIs from NEO and around the region

From Kris Henige:

Audrey Cielinski-Kessler, a senior member of our chapter, was awarded the Distinguished SIG Service Award for her work with STC's Policies and Procedures SIG. I worked with Audrey on P&P SIG activities 5-6 years ago when she was SIG Manager, and this award is very well-deserved.

From Barbara Philbrick:

Did you know that the domains "example.com," "example.net," and "example.org" have been reserved for software documentation?

From the Editor:

At risk of exposing my ignorance, I just found out about them the other day. If you go to www.example.com, a web page with the message:

"You have reached this web page by typing "example.com", "example.net", or "example.org" into your web browser.

"These domain names are reserved for use in documentation and are not available for registration. See RFC 2606, Section 3."

Anyway, thought others might like to know, too.

News from National: Transformation Update

Hello STC Members!

You've said want more value in your STC membership, and we're listening!

As you might know, the STC Board of Directors and a team of amazing additional volunteers is leading the Society through a transformation to provide increased and improved value to you. You probably have many questions about this effort and what it means to you, so the Communication Committee is providing several information resources for you to read and hear about the transformation and ask questions and provide feedback.

With this short note, I personally invite and encourage you to take advantage of these resources! Here's a list and brief description of what's available today. I hope you'll opt to receive updates, as we have several other interesting programs rolling out in the fall.

♦ www.stc.org/transformation/ On the Transformation Web site you'll find articles and presentations, as well as instructions for subscribing to the Transformation News distribution list (go to the Web site, and click the "Transformation Discussion List" link at the top of the left column of the page). -- Transformation News (transform@lists.stc.org): Subscribe to this distribution list to receive Web site update information and other tidbits (go to the Web site, and click the "Transformation Discussion List" link at the top of the left column of the page).

♦ transform@stc.org: Send a note to the Communication Committee to ask questions or provide transformation feedback and suggestions.

Enjoy!

Andrea Ames - STC President (pres@stc.org)