A Conference First-Timer’s Random Thoughts and Initial Impressions

By Pamela Canale

Prior to becoming a technical writer two years ago, the only full-time work I ever had was as a locksmith for my grandfather’s security system company in Canada. After a stint writing manuals for a surveillance software and service company, I left the chilly north last year to take a job with an Orange County, California, investment firm to work in the Policies and Procedures Department.

My company has plans to publish all our policies and procedures online and eventually adopt an Intranet. Last spring, I asked my boss if I could attend the STC conference in Cincinnati to learn about these P&P issues. He said he would prefer for me to go to the conference to “take in the big picture of technical writing” because I’m new to the profession. I said, “Groovy,” which is what you can say to please an “I-don’t-sweat-the-details” millionaire surfer who happens to be your boss.

And so it came to pass that I was an STC Annual Conference “greenhorn” with specific instructions when I attended the event last spring. Until that morning in May, I had never traveled to any convention. Nevertheless, I came, I saw, I ate some Cincinnati-style chili, and I toured the world of technical communication outside the realm of P&P.

Here are some of my first impressions and random thoughts about my experience.

Conference offerings I considered obligatory were first-rate and fun. The best among them were the aptly named “First-Timers’ Session” and “Opening Session.”

It was stirring to hear the heartfelt remarks about technical communication that were given by the passionate professionals who were this year’s STC exemplars.

One of my favorite aspects of the conference was the spontaneous, generosity of the Liaison Team Needs Leader

By Audrey Cielinski Kessler

The trend toward chapter-level SIGs in STC is under way, and you can play a role in its development by volunteering to serve as the team leader of the Policies and Procedures chapter-level SIG liaison team.

In this capacity, you would work to encourage fellow P&P SIG members to form P&P SIGs in their local chapters. You also would have a hand in developing guidelines that members of the national/international SIG can use to promote P&P events and communication on the local level. Other activities could include identifying chapters that have P&P SIGs and coordinating the exchange of information among these SIGs and between the chapter-level SIGs and the national/international SIG.

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of STC veterans. While waiting for a session to begin and wondering absently about how good the latest version of Adobe Acrobat really was, a fellow sitting next to me said, “The latest version of Acrobat is fantastic. You’ll love it.” I asked him why, and the 11-year STC member told me in spirited and lengthy detail.

The most useful session speakers shared the nitty-gritty of how to meet technical communication objectives. These participants offered nuts and bolts about surviving and thriving in the wild, wild world of technical communication. For me, two sessions that hit this mark were “How We Built Our Tech Pubs Intranet Site with Cheap Stuff” and “Oh! Oh! The Job Ad Says OO!”

One of the most amusing conference quotes I heard came from Whitney Quesenbery during her session, “Search Interfaces: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” when she said, “The Web is the largest flat file we’ve ever searched.”

The uncommercial appeal of the vendors’ hall came courtesy of its commercial nature. These vendors seemed to recognize that it would be better to pursue conference-participants with trinkets and raffles rather than with high-pressure click-here, buy-now hype. I liked that, especially since I was there on an “information gathering” mission.

The range of technical session topics allows a curious newcomer to dip her toes in whatever fresh pond seems appealing. The sessions varied only slightly in quality (none I attended were expressly bad), and I was grateful for the dearth of Reddi-Whipped professional wisdom dispensed during the sessions.

I came away from Cincinnati thinking that one size does not fit all when it comes to attending a conference. The experience can begin with asking yourself how you feel about technical writing, what your professional goals and interests are, and how you would like to get to know the conference environs. By starting with the human element, you can take the STC offerings and create a plan unique for you.

You also can go to the conference confident that you will receive many fine things including a book bag, access to the profession’s leading technical writing practitioners’ programs that offer compelling ideas about technical communication.

It was a great experience, and my first conference isn’t likely to be my last. I’m already planning for the next year’s conference in Orlando, Florida.
Last year’s liaison team leader started the ball rolling, so you won’t be starting from scratch. You could just pick up where she left off. And she has offered to serve as an advisor to the team’s new leader. The position also could be filled with co-leaders. For example, one member has expressed an interest in handling the liaison function for the Canadian chapters if someone else were able to do the same for the U.S. chapters. If you want to take on the liaison job for both countries, that would work as well. The point is, you don’t necessarily have to do it alone. Team members could be enlisted to help.

Please give this valuable volunteer activity serious consideration. If you are or even think you might be interested in serving as the SIG’s chapter-level SIG liaison team leader, e-mail me at audck@aol.com or call me at 330/677-8598 or 330/677-1168. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have about the position or provide you with additional information, including the work that the previous leader has done and what her goals were for the future of the team.

Deadline for the December 1999 issue:
November 15th!!!

Please email Michelle_1962@yahoo.com with articles
Check This Out!

What: Introduction to Policies & Procedures Communication (online course)
Where: University of California, Los Angeles Extension.
Dates: September 28 - November 23
Fee: $550.
Instructor: Raymond E. Urgo
Contact: UCLA Extension 310/825-4192.

STEPS & SPECS

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STEPS & SPECS Is a Winner!

Thanks to our P&P SIG members for making STEPS & SPECS a winner - again. Your article contributions and honest feedback gave STEPS & SPECS the edge in achieving the Award for Excellence for SIGs in the 1998-1999 newsletter competition.

Thanks also to the talented editorial staff of STEPS & SPECS, without whom this achievement would not have been possible: Audrey Cielinski-Kessler, SIG manager, Luette Arrowsmith, co-editor and Susan Sereno, production, layout and design.

Visit us on the World Wide Web

We'd like to remind everyone that you can visit the P&P SIG on the Internet.

Go to http://stc.org/pics/psig/www/index.htm to get the latest SIG information on regional conferences, as well as read and download back issues of the newsletter. And don't forget to check out the main web site for STC, http://www.stc.org. With information about other chapters, SIGs, conferences, etc., this website is a key resource for technical communicators.

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The mission of the Policies and Procedures special interest group is to assist STC members in developing, implementing and managing policies and procedures communication through educational and networking opportunities, STC conference sessions and publications, and communication with other STC SIGs and professional organizations in areas of common interest.