



Saving the World One Pixel at a Time

by Mark D. Stucky

“Beauty will save the world,” wrote Dostoevsky. Although he would have valued inner beauty more than eyeliner and plastic smiles, beauty can inspire, ennoble, bring joy, and stir the soul.

We try to capture the world’s beauty in photographs, but the limitations of our cameras and our skills mean our photos don’t live up to the beauty we have seen. So how do we make a photograph of our kids, our dog, or our company’s new widget more beautiful (or in crass corporate terms, more marketable)?

We can learn how to take better photos (more on that later), and/or we can learn how to enhance what we get. The ultimate tool for the latter is Photoshop, the world’s leading image editing software.

Armed only with Photoshop and a mediocre point-and-click digital camera, in the last few years I have reluctantly become Utilimaster’s “official” photographer. I have been learning how to capture beauty better.

As one example of what can be done in Photoshop, three photos of a Utilimaster truck body are shown here. The first is the original image from the camera. The background surrounding the truck is hideous and greatly detracts from the image of the truck.

The second photo has gone through exten-

sive editing of brightness, contrast, and color balance. The background has been cut out, and an artificial drop shadow has been added. Enhanced and liberated from its cluttered background, the truck is...well, beautiful for a truck.

Photo #1



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St. Joseph Valley Chapter Information

President - Kirsten Klassen

MMA.
PO Box 483,
Goshen, IN 46527
(800) 348-7468 or 533-9511

President Elect - Mark Stucky

54663 Holiday Dr.
Elkhart, IN 46514-4542
(574) 264-0614

Treasurer - Gary Futoma

17409 Barryknoll Way
Granger, IN 46530
(219) 243-5819

Public Relations - Bethany Rusbasan

Perry Ballard, Inc.
St. Joseph, Mi 49085-9264
(269) 983-0611

WebMaster - Mark Stucky

54663 Holiday Dr.
Elkhart, IN 46514-4542
(574) 264-0614

Newsletter Editor - Ralph Rumpf

Documentation Specialists
6036 Legion Road
Stevensville, MI 49127-1110
(269) 429-5174

Region 4 Director Sponsor - Mike Bates

Mike Bates • Senior Member,
Northeast Ohio Chapter •
mpbates@software.rockwell.com

Editorial Information

Article Submissions

E-mail: ralph@parrett.com
Mail: Send to *Watermark* Editor

Submission Deadlines

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WEBSITE: www.stc-sjvc.org

President's Column

We're winding down to the last meeting before we take a summer break. During the summer, the St. Joseph Valley chapter leaders meet to plan the meetings for the next season.

While we recognize that our careers and families – and yes, even hobbies – sometimes result in long periods of absence from our chapter meetings, we'd appreciate any and all suggestions you have that would make it easier or more compelling for you to come to a meeting.

We're interested in locations, topics, guest speakers (yes, you can volunteer yourself - see page 5.), times of day and times of year. I've been wondering if we should try to have one summer meeting – just because the long drives home are nicer when it's still light outside. Please contact me or one of the other officers with your input.

We hope to see you April 29.

And, if you're planning to attend the STC conference in Baltimore in May, please let me know.

– *Kirsten Klassen*

STC Mission Statement

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

Society for Technical Communication

901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904

Arlington, Va 22203-1854

(703) 522-4114

www.stc.org

Editor's Column

Another meeting year coming to a close already. Hard to believe.

As you may notice in the President's column, and in the Call for Presenters on page 5, we are once again looking for your help.

Our chapter has changed a lot in the last year or two. From my perspective as the membership chairman (and the newsletter editor) there are a lot of new names on the membership list. Unfortunately, I don't have a face to place with the names.

Admittedly, part of that is my fault. I have had a very hectic time for the last year and haven't been able to get to as many meetings as I would like. But still, it would be nice if we could get to know each other a bit more.

New names also mean new ideas, new thoughts and new needs for our members. We would like to address those by having more of you take a more active part in your chapter activities. Kirsten has asked for your input and suggestions. The Call for Presenters on page 5 takes a more active approach.

It has long been my attitude that when it comes to specific areas of our profession, you are the experts. You are the ones who encounter the new software packages, work through the bugs, solve customer problems and develop new solutions to old (and new) problems.

In my role as an independent contractor, I share some of those experiences and frustrations. I am often required to quickly learn a new application and turn it into a professional tool I can use to meet customer needs. While I am usually successful at finding some kind of a solution, I would much rather KNOW that I have a Good solution. Believe me, if I had to learn a new application and ran into a problem, I would really prefer to call one of you for assistance than any technical help desk.

Even with applications I have used for years, I often encounter a new customer requirement that means I need to rethink the way I use the application. Again, I would rather ask someone with more experience about the

problem or even brainstorm a little with one of you than pay a help desk to get a canned reply that may, or may not, answer my needs.

Likewise, I suspect that many of you, at least occasionally, find yourselves in a similar situation. Given your druthers, would you prefer to call the company help desk, your IT department, or a peer with more experience to try to solve the problem?

And that has always been the point. We have a great resource of experience around us, but I wonder if we ever really tap into that pool of experience.

So, we are coming to you. We want to get your ideas and thoughts on how to improve what your chapter means to you and how well it meets your needs. We can, of course, only do this if you talk to us. So, think about it and see how you feel. You may have a great idea for a presentation, or the basis of a great presentation in the work you do every day. I am certain there are fellow members who would enjoy sharing information and experiences with you.

So give it a whirl. So far as I can remember, no one has ever been bitten at a meeting, as a matter of fact we tend to be rather cordial. With the constant changes in our industry, we all feel a need to share more information to keep abreast of these changes. New ideas and concepts are a welcome addition to our normal meeting fare. Besides providing new input for older members, it gives everyone an opportunity to look at an idea from a different perspective.

Personally, I am excited at the opportunity this represents for the chapter. I also look forward the possibility of discussing new technologies, applications and approaches to using these in new and productive ways.

I hope some of you share in this excitement and will give serious consideration to offering your talents to the chapter. I assure you it can lead to some exciting and very informative meetings. It can also help improve the overall experience level and productivity of your fellow members.

Think about it.

April Meeting Notes

TOPIC: Better Photographs

Kathy Mull, Studio A's in-house photographer, has over 20 years of experience photographing in the RV, marine, and auto industry. Her experience has included product brochures, ads, weddings, and portraits. She'll talk about what makes a good photograph and offer suggestions on any photos you bring along to have critiqued.

PLACE: Studio A in Mishawaka, 203 N. Main St. across from Doc Pierce's restaurant.

TIME: 5:30 IN time at Studio A

Meet at Studio A Advertising at 5:30 for a tour. Studio A is a full-service ad agency that produces Best Books and Michiana's Executive Journal, in addition to promotional radio, video, and television. We'll get to see their in-house production department and photography studio.

DINING: Dinner at Doc Pierce's (across the street) around 6:30.

So, don't miss this chance to find out how to take better photos and see Studio A.

RSVP: Make your reservation by April 28, contact Kirsten Klassen at 533-9511 or (800) 348-7468, Ext. 432, or kirsten.klassen@mma-online.org.

IMPORTANT:

There is a one hour time difference between SW Michigan and Mishawaka (our meeting location). Please plan for this time difference when you start out for the meeting.

Refer to the map below (also available on the chapter website) for the meeting location. We hope to see you there.



St. Joseph Valley Chapter

2004 - 2005

Call for Presenters

Need a new insight?

Want to share a topic?

Want to share your experience?

Recognizing the vast array of skill and talent the St. Joseph Valley Chapter has in its members, the Officers' Board has decided to issue a Call for Presenters for the 2004 - 2005 meeting year. This is the perfect opportunity for you to participate and make a contribution to your chapter.

How it works

You deliver a presentation proposal to the chapter officers by June 30 (e-mail or snail mail is fine - no specific proposal format is required. Officers are listed on Page 2.) Include, the topic, when you would like to present the topic, where you would like to present, any special equipment needs you might have and whether or not you would like to also host the meeting or have someone assume host responsibilities (that means planning the meeting location, etc.)

During the annual Officers' Meeting all proposals submitted will be reviewed and six selected for next year's meeting schedule. The presenters will be notified after the board meeting and final scheduling arrangements will be made before the start of the new meeting year. If selected, you will also be asked to prepare a brief introduction article for your topic for the newsletter.

At the end of each meeting, attendees will be asked to rate the presentation and at the end of the year, the top presentation will receive an award. Naturally, as the presenter, your meal costs will be absorbed by the chapter for that evening.

Benefit

This is the perfect opportunity to share a hot new topic or technique, expand or improve your experience talking to groups or share your expertise with your fellow members. We know that there are new developments in our field all the time, and many of us wonder about the changes but can't take time to attend a three-day seminar. Now, you can share your experience and help fill the gap for the rest of us.

By making a presentation, you are helping your chapter to grow and you are improving the general knowledge level of your fellow members - an important goal in today's changing world. You will also be published in the newsletter, which appears on the chapter website. Many other chapters research the articles in other newsletters to find material for their own chapter newsletters. That means you may end up published in several newsletters. Who knows you could start a new career!

Then there is the prize offering. We would like to make this a substantial and useful award for the presenter. That could include software, PDAs, gift certificates, etc. In all probability, the award will be coordinated with the winning presenter.

So there you have it. An opportunity like this may not come your way again. Are you up to the challenge?

Continued from page 1

Photo #2



The third photo is a collage with a new dark-colored background that provides a better contrast for a white truck than white paper (at least on a high-resolution color brochure). The background's globe elements implicitly add that Utilimaster is a *world* leader in its industry and that its trucks are *world* class.

To learn how to create better images, a few years ago I joined the National Association of Photoshop Professionals. For anyone who dabbles seriously in image editing, their web site and publications are well worth the price of membership. (If anyone is interested in learning more about NAPP, check out www.photoshopuser.com.)

Photo #3



Recently, for the first time, I also attended the Photoshop World Conference and Expo in San Francisco. It was similar to STC's annual conferences in attendance and struc-

ture. Overall, its activities tended to be much more right-brained than the left-brained STC technical communication seminars—although many of the advanced functions of Photoshop are very technical indeed.

The other major difference was that instead of having two dozen elective workshop tracks operating at the same time, Photoshop World had only *three* tracks. Each workshop had hundreds of people in a large seminar room. Even though they had very large screens and projectors, I learned at the first session that I wanted to get to each classroom early and stake out a chair near the front—otherwise seeing the details of the instructor's demonstration would be difficult. Although these sessions were very large, I got a lot out of them because the workshop leaders were outstanding instructors (who often made at least part of their living doing Photoshop training).

Photoshop helps us deal with the photographs we have. We will examine how to shoot better photographs at our next STC chapter's meeting. See the details on page 4.

New Senior Members Announced

We recently received notification from STC National Headquarters that Senior member status has been conferred on the following individuals:

Susan A. Antonovitz

Barbara L. Ridley

Melissa B. Bailey

Anne M. Kolaczyk

This means they have all been active members of the STC for five years.

Please join with us in offering them your congratulations when you next see them.

TECHNICAL STANDARDS NAMES WORST MANUAL

Annual Contest Taps into Universal Frustration Caused by Poor Documentation and Underscores the Importance of Clear Technical Writing

Escondido – Technical Standards, Southern California’s source for specialized documentation staffing and technical writing, today announced the winning entry in its fourth annual Worst Manual Contest. This year’s \$100.00 prize went to Rhonda Bracey of Western Australia for her submission of a two-page Safety Section from her friend’s air-conditioning unit.

“The frustration that’s caused by a poorly written manual is almost a universal experience. Poor documentation can cause more confusion than comprehension and could lead to liability issues and hidden costs for companies,” said Michelle Wier of Technical Standards. “On the other hand, good product documentation results in satisfied repeat customers, reduced costs, and limited liability exposure for companies.”

With entries solicited from the 25,000+ membership of the Society for Technical Communication, Technical Standards’ Worst Manual Contest is designed to underscore the importance of clear technical writing for everything from consumer products, computer hardware and software, to employee handbooks.

This Year’s Winner: The Safety Section of a commercial air-conditioner User’s Guide

This year’s worst manual, submitted by Rhonda Bracey of South Perth, Western Australia, is a section of a User’s Guide for a commercial product marketed to the general public. Rhonda’s entry only consisted of the two-page Safety Section, but that was enough! As Rhonda Bracey puts it, “translator beware!” If the phrase, “...to have the observance without fail to prevent the damage to harm and the property beforehand to the person who use this product and other persons” doesn’t scare you, then some of the other text will!

The symbol key alone provided much material for the staff at Technical Standards to question. For example, the symbol key contained a symbol (twice) that wasn’t referenced in the text, but didn’t contain a symbol that was referenced. In another instance, the same symbol was used for both Warning and Caution, but each represented very different consequences. The difference between possible death compared to minor injury or material damage seems worth having its own distinction. There were also some amusing symbol descriptions such as, “Attention rousing,” “Prohibition” and “Compulsion.”

A few excerpts:

“Please do not put the one embarrassed because it gets wet under the air conditioner.”

“To apply the cold wind to the body for a longtime and so as to not exist about cooling too much”

“Do not blow the wind to animals and plants directly. It occasionally causes a bad influence for animals and plants to be exerted.”

Often, poorly written manuals for consumer products can be attributed to translation problems. Clear, accurate translations are extremely important when communicating health and safety warnings associated with operating or assembling a product.

“For many end users, bad documentation amounts to nothing more than an inconvenience and possibly a poor impression of the company,” said Wier. “But for companies, the results can affect the bottom line in terms of overloaded help lines, reduced revenues from dissatisfied customers who won’t come back, and increased liability.”

To view the top entries and more information about Technical Standards’ fourth annual Worst Manual Contest, go to their Web site at www.tecstandards.com.

About Technical Standards

Technical Standards provides documentation writing and staffing services to Southern California companies in a wide range of industries.

Chapter support is good for all

by Linda Ostreich, Region 5 Director-Sponsor

There has been a flurry of activity on the STC Presidents' Listserv regarding who pays for what to support chapter members who go to the STC Annual Conference. Tieline for March 2002 addressed that issue in an article called, "Appropriate Use of Chapter Funds." I've received a few emails from chapter presidents to get my opinion on this situation, and so spawned this month's topic!

Ed Rutkowski, from the STC Office, responded to the listserv with some actual quotes from that Tieline article. I repeat some of what Ed said here:

As with all questions regarding Society expenses, this one raises the issue of whether the return on the chapter's investment primarily benefits the Society, or whether it primarily benefits an individual. Please note that Article 4 of STC's Articles of Incorporation states that "none of [STC's] net earnings shall be distributed to or enure to the benefit of any private . . . individual."

As explained in the article, chapters may subsidize a chapter president's travel to Leadership Day at the annual conference "because the training obtained at Leadership Day would benefit the chapter. Many technical sessions at the conference also focus on chapter leadership duties, so funding conference registration for a chapter leader who attended these sessions would also be acceptable.

However, simply funding a valuable volunteer's travel to the annual conference (without his or her attending Leadership Day or a number of STC-related sessions at the conference) would NOT be acceptable, since information learned at the conference would primarily benefit the individual."

So, what does this mean? It means that if a chapter and its administrative council believe that subsidizing costs for a member to attend the conference will benefit the chapter and the Society, by all means, do it. It also means that a chapter should not just pay for a member to attend the conference as a "gift," with no strings attached.

If the member you send returns with information, leadership skills, and added connection to the STC community he or she belongs to, and that benefit is returned to the chapter in a more experienced and better informed volunteer, then it is NOT inurement, but a wise distribution of funds for the good of all.

As an administrative council, make wise decisions. You know your membership. You know those who will return and share their experiences and lessons learned to the community. And by so doing, the rules are followed. Subsidizing an incoming or current president, subsidizing someone who is receiving an honor, subsidizing someone who has been of long-time service. All these cases are valid IF those people return to the chapter and provide value to the membership.

The money in your treasuries belongs to the membership, not to the admin council, not to the president, not to the treasurer, but to the members. Insist that you receive receipts for funds expended. Pay for something that is recordable: the conference fee itself, perhaps. Some of the presidents who responded to the listserv noted that they require their chapter leaders who go to share a room or to do other things that will limit the expenses to the chapter.

Not every chapter will be able to afford the same level of subsidy. Don't put your treasury in jeopardy, but if you have the budget, use it. Don't hoard your funds. As that Tieline article also says, "weigh the benefit to the individual against the benefit to the chapter in the context of your chapter's financial robustness."

In this time of unemployment and severely reduced employer support, I believe that the chapters who can help should help. And, certainly not a small thing, this particular year will be an important one for your leaders to be there. Transformation will be spoken about at Leadership Day, in the halls, in the sessions, and at the lunches. The more your leaders know about it, the better they will be able to question it, understand it, help define it, and support it. So, reach into your treasuries and offer that support. But do it with wisdom. Only support those who will, in return, support your members.