Blue pencil

Writers Without Borders

Region 4 Conference Opening Presentation by Nancy Ott

By Nancy Carpenter

The Region 4 conference was held Saturday, April 17, 2004 in Pittsburgh, with 60 people in attendance, including vendors and speakers. This conference explored how we are reinventing ourselves in today's technical writing market. Nancy Ott, President of the Pittsburgh Chapter, opened the conference with a description of some of the issues that we face – on-line publishing, active glossaries, help systems, e-commerce response to user input, reuse of content in many outputs. The speakers eloquently treated these and many other issues. Four vendors demonstrated the latest in tools. WorkQuest staffed a table. Chapter Historian Janis Ramey displayed pieces of the history of the Pittsburgh Chapter.

Some of these presentations are summarized throughout this special issue of the *Blue Pencil*. Inside you will find:

- *The Return (Again) of Content: What Does "Content is King" Mean for Technical Communicators?* Cheryl Lockett Zubak
- *Essential Consulting Skills for Career Success*, Beth Williams and Lori Klepfer
- *Small Steps to Single-Sourcing*, Neil Perlin
- *XML and Single Source Evangelizing*, Rob Frankland (vendor demonstration)
- *Using FrameMaker for Single-Source and XML Publishing*, Alan Houser
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Pittsburgh Chapter President Nancy Ott welcomes attendees to "Writers Without Borders," the 2004 Region 4 Conference

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The Return (Again) of Content: What Does 'Content is King' Mean for Technical Communicators?
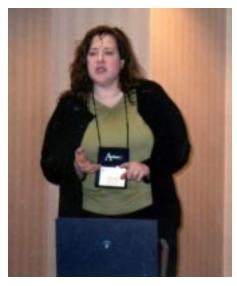
Keynote Presentation by Cheryl Lockett Zubak

by Diana Mathis

In her keynote presentation, Cheryl Lockett Zubak reported that there is enormous interest in "content development" as shown by the fact that her Google search on the term came up with almost five million hits - about equal to the **total** number of hits for "war with Iraq", "risk of heart attack", "American Idol", and "the passion of the Christ" combined. "Content is king" all over the world and in a wide variety of disciplines. What does this widespread interest in "content development" mean for Web development, software interface design, and the way technical writers work?

With regard to Web content development, Cheryl focused on two types of sites. For "knowledgebase" sites such as the Microsoft Windows 2000 Professional "help" site, technical writers are faced with organizing and providing access to voluminous amounts of information, which we have traditionally achieved through tables of contents, indexes, and database search functions. With an "e-commerce" site such as Amazon.com, however, the goal is to achieve the Web equivalent of a real-world experience - in this case, browsing/shopping in a bookstore. Well-designed e-commerce sites are contextual and personal (they recognize you on a return visit and remember preferences), dynamic, and helpful. Writers of content for these sites gather information from a variety of sources and can help developers identify trends in user needs.

With regard to software design, the trend is toward inductive user interfaces that facilitate use of the program without previous knowledge or reliance on non-intuitive tools such as help systems. The goal is to break the features of the program into "pages" of text, each of which explains how a single feature or task works and offers links to

Keynote speaker Cheryl Lockett Zubak holds forth on why content is king ... again!

secondary tasks. "Money 2004" is an example of this new type of software design. Writing content for this type of program requires that the technical writer collaborate with other professionals (programmers, editors, end users) right from the start of the development process (what a concept!) and it requires that the writer develop strategies that can be implemented repeatedly, without revision, for **all** of the various features that need to be documented. As Cheryl summarized: "The old way is to look at how content is displayed **as** we create it, leading to constant interruptions in the process of writing by the process of redesigning. New processes for content development require that we think of all possible outputs and decide how all content should be displayed **before** we create it." The catch-words are "planning" and "single-sourcing" (as distinct from simply "repurposing").

Essential Consulting Skills for Career Success

Presented by Beth Williams and Lori Klepfer

By Nancy Carpenter

We are all consultants, whether we are independent contractors or permanent employees. Building a client base is similar to building a writing department. Beth and Lori described four skills that are essential to success:

- Become a trusted advisor
- Create processes and methodologies
- Obtain business acumen
- Provide stellar customer service

The foundation for a trusted advisor is technical expertise - that is, clear writing. Our processes and methodologies should involve entering into the life of the product, called engagement management. Learn what the each member of the product team does. Get involved in product planning. Know the audience for our work. Get an advocate to promote our work.

Business acumen helps us to fit into the company as a valuable asset and to contribute to its success. Learn the manager's goals and what makes him look good in the company. Customer service is stellar when we have effective relationship skills, create awareness of our work, market our services and show a positive attitude.

During the session, the speakers invited the attendees to give examples of ways that they have acquired or demonstrated these four essential skills.

You can contact the speakers at:

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Small Steps to Single-Sourcing

Presented by Neil Perlin

Neil Perlin shows us baby steps towards single-sourcing

By Nancy Carpenter

What is single-sourcing and do you need it? Neil Perlin guided us to enter this new world. If we are creating on-line help and print from one document file, then we are already there. Whether we need the big guns – XML, content management and version control – depends on our needs and whether single-sourcing meets them.

Neil described the elements that are crucial to successful single-sourcing: planning, standardization, structure and continuous learning.

First, we should discuss documentation needs with our client and make sure that we have the same understanding of the goal. Then we should decide whether to go to single-sourcing.

Next, to avoid designing only for today, we should be aware of the client's direction, new technologies that could affect them, and what could go wrong under various documentation models. For instance, how will your web site appear on a cell phone?

Finally, we should establish tool standards and develop structured documents.

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XML and Single Source Evangelizing

A Vendor Demonstration by Rob Frankland

By Nancy Carpenter

Rascal Software's Veredus provides an easy interface for single-sourcing. Rob Frankland, President and CEO of Rascal Software, demonstrated its capabilities.

Veredus imports several file formats and produces XML but you do not have to learn XML. Though not WYSIWYG, it shows you a simple version of your format such as bullets and headings. And it provides a preview so you can see the actual project.

Rascal Software trimmed the DTD to give you just what you need and still provide flexibility. It takes advantage of your existing knowledge of Word and FrameMaker by using interfaces that are similar. It provides XML but hides the more complex details. This makes it easy to learn. It provides flexibility for the more advanced user by allowing you to show structure details and add elements to handle overlapping hierarchies. And it produces the types of output that you expect – print, pdf, postscript, html, web help and Apple help.

Veredus provides a few other interesting features. It can automate generation of API documentation from Java or COM files, Java, Visual Basic, C++ syntax. It automatically adds index entries once you define the first one for that term. It uses Boolean logic to handle conditional text so that you now can use overlapping conditions.

You can reach Rob at:

http://www.rascalsoftware.com.

Rick Shinners from Vasont and Rob Frankland from Rascal Software chat in the Vendor Room

Using FrameMaker for Single-Source and XML Publishing

Presented by Alan Houser

By Nancy Carpenter

Single-sourcing is no longer just about print and online help. It now can involve new output devices, different navigation mechanisms and new requirements such as accessibility. It can be driven by continually changing business requirements. All these factors present us with new constraints, capabilities and opportunities for reuse of the content that we write.

Alan Houser explained how FrameMaker 7 can meet these challenges using XML. The structured application provides metadata to your content and allows you to separate format from content. Using standards-based programming languages like XSLT, you can extract, manipulate and publish your content to multiple devices.

To use structured FrameMaker, you need an information model for your content and you need to develop the following.

- DTD to define the information model
- EDD to specify formatting of the elements in the DTD
- Read/write rules to translate between XML elements and FrameMaker elements
- FrameMaker template to define the page layout of your print or PDF document

To complete the transformation to multiple outputs, you need a working knowledge of XML and XML programming.

Alan used FrameMaker 7 to publish a document to a web site, a wireless device and voice. In conclusion, he discussed how you can introduce XML into your organization. To decide whether you need XML, you should assess your business requirements. Once you decide to proceed, you need to acquire the new skills and work with your developers to set up the DTD, EDD, read/write rules and FrameMaker templates. Do a pilot project first, and migrate to XML in

Alan Houser demonstrates FrameMaker

stages. Provide training for all who are involved, and allow ample time for the whole conversion to be completed.

You can contact Alan at:

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Usability LIVE! Be part of the User Experience

Presented by Mike Bates

By Nancy Carpenter

A high-quality user interface is vital to the success of a product. Usability is the measure of the quality of the user's interaction with a product. Usability analysis measures the effectiveness, efficiency of use and satisfaction of this interaction. It includes ease of learning, memorability and error frequency and severity.

Mike Bates described how you can conduct such an analysis and showed examples at various stages of the process. He guided the attendees through setup of a usability lab, selection and recruitment of test users, development of user scenarios, observations and interpretation of results. He gave a few tips to avoid biasing the results. For instance, don't show surprise and don't problem solve. The fixing comes later.

Janis Ramey (seated) and Rocky Hayeslip tell the curious about WorkQuest and the Pittsburgh chapter's history

Enhancing Your Creativity

Closing Session by John Hedtke

By Nancy Carpenter

Creativity can be defined as ways to solve problems. John Hedtke led us through a most entertaining tour of the creative process.

First, identify the problem. "I need a new car **but** I cannot afford one." This problem seems to be a roadblock so change your how you express it. "I need a new car **and** I cannot afford one." Now you can think creatively. Ask yourself a lot of questions. What if I cannot solve this? What if a variant to my expected solution is possible?
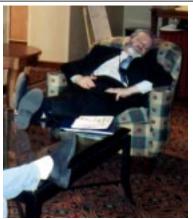
Now prime yourself for creativity. First, a problem-free life is well ordered. However, we need some randomness in our lives to generate new thoughts. Since most of us face problems, we are all started on the road to creativity! Second, most new ideas tend to come from eclectic thinkers, so acquire new skills. Third, mental exercise increases alertness and nimbleness. Try some of these techniques.

- Distract yourself. Do something new and let your thoughts gel on the problem.
- Combine dissimilar things. Find two concepts that pair up in a Google search and that get exactly one hit. Or set a poem to an unlikely tune.
- Record the ideas as they occur. Use the easiest, handiest tool.
- Be positive. Optimists ask the right questions and keep trying.

Creativity spills over into other areas of your life. So practice it on problems, and watch it grow in the rest of your life.

Closing speaker John Hedtke takes a well-deserved nap

Beverly Spagnolo, Chapter Treasurer Darlene Mullenix, Chapter Vice President Barb Stanton, and Chapter Membership Coordinator Nicky Bleil await a few late registrants

Cheryl Lockett Zubak unveils the mysteries of Windows "Longhorn" help