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THOMAS EDISON: THE "SYMBOLIC ENGINEER"

BY JAMIE HUTCHINSON

Since my days as a writing teacher I have known of Charles Bazerman through his popular textbook tandem, *The Informed Reader* and *The Informed Writer*. Two years ago, after having changed careers and become an editor of electrical engineering publications, I learned that Bazerman was still doing work that could shed light on mine; he came to the campus where I work and gave a talk about communication in Thomas Edison's companies. The talk focused on how company communications, technical and otherwise, centered around the charismatic personality of Edison himself, until his enterprise grew to such a size that more impersonal organizational forces took over.

Now Bazerman has published that talk, along with a wealth of related material, in *The Languages of Edison's Light* (MIT Press, October 1999). Scholarly and engaging, Bazerman analyzes everything from laboratory notebooks and patent applications to publicity pamphlets and stock reports. The result is a fascinating portrait of a master engineer—an engineer not only of electricity but of symbols.

Communication professionals will find in Bazerman's book a deeper understanding of how our functions help bridge the gap between the laboratory and such places as the boardroom, the newsroom, the courtroom, and—most important for technologies aimed at the consumer market—the living room. As Bazerman puts it: "For any technology to succeed (that is, to establish an enduring place within the world of human activities), it must not only succeed materially (that is, produce specified and reliably repeatable transformations of matter and energy), it must also succeed symbolically (that is, adopt significant and stable meanings within germane discourse systems in which the technology is identified, given value, and made the object of human attention and action)."

Edison didn't need Bazerman to tell him this; he seemed to know it in his bones. From his days as a young telegraph operator, he recognized how print and electronic communication media could further his ends as a technician, inventor, and entrepreneur. When his inventor's eye turned to incandescent lighting and the centralized generation of electric power, Edison showed extraordinary adeptness at establishing an open and fertile communicative environment in his laboratory, generating effective publicity (aimed at both the general public and investors), and navigating the patent system. Edison was less adept in the professional scientific arena, where he had difficulty establishing a good reputation for himself and his work. Nevertheless, as Bazerman shows, Edison recognized the importance of this arena despite his distaste for it and managed to establish his lighting system as an accepted technology among scientists and engineers.

Despite his success at communication, Edison was in many ways a negative example. He lied to reporters and investors, claiming to have achieved a working system for his incandescent light when success was still very much in doubt; he gave company stock to reporters in exchange for favorable press; he attempted to hide his financial interest in a journal that he used as a vehicle for publicity; and he gave misleading demonstrations of his lighting system.

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INSIDE

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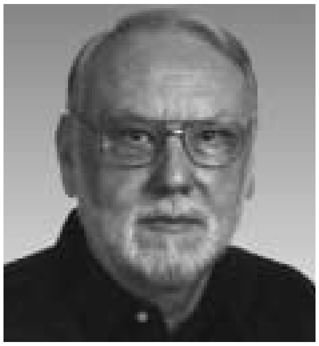
FROM THE EDITOR



RUDY JOENK

Oops!

Most of you received a November/December issue in which pages 7-22 were misaligned vertically, though no text was lost. We and the printer apologize for this production problem.

Celebrity

Former PCS AdCom member David Kemp has just completed a two-year term as president of IEEE Canada and has been elected IEEE secretary.

AdCom

Incoming president George Hayhoe has been appointed to the TAB Periodicals Committee.

The AdCom members, their terms of office, and their e-mail addresses are listed on the back cover of this issue.

The next meeting is in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 5-6, 2000. After that, the next meeting, which is the annual election meeting, is on September 24 preceding IPCC 2000 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Members are welcome at AdCom meetings.

E-mail

Hanspeter Schmid wrote me that if your e-mail software has security holes, simply reading your e-mail *can* activate a virus such as Bubbleboy (which was announced after the last instalment of NET NOTES went to press). Keep your e-mail and antivirus software patched and current.

Recently I took a small, unscientific survey of preference for *e-mail* or *email. E-mail* was preferred about 2:1. Proponents of *email* note its simplicity and the trend of hyphenated words to lose their hyphen.

The IEEE has adopted *e-mail* for use in its publications, though this use hasn't spread throughout the IEEE yet. Elsewhere I heard that the English form *e-mail* is being used in other languages (as scientific terms sometimes are) for lack of a simple equivalent term.

Potpourri

Y2K made it into the new edition of the *Oxford Concise Dictionary* last year but it's also one of the words that *PC World* magazine recommends burying, along with *dot-com* and *e-* or *cyber-* anything.

Construction sign on U.S. 40 near Berthoud Falls, Colorado: "Thanks for your patients." Error or anticipation?

Pontiac has described its 2000 Bonneville model as "a new level for the next millennium," whatever that means.

Info for Authors

One thousand words makes a nice page-and-a-half article, although longer and shorter articles may be appropriate. Proposals for periodic columns are also welcome.

If you use a wp program, **keep your formatting simple**; multiple fonts and sizes, customized paragraphing and line spacing, personalized styles, etc. have to be filtered out before being recoded in *Newsletter* style. Headers, footers, and tables lead the casualty list. **Embed only enough specialized formatting and highlighting—boldface, italics, bullets—to show me your preferences.**

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

SETTING A STRATEGIC DIRECTION FOR PCS

GEORGE HAYHOE

Best wishes for the New Year to all members of the IEEE Professional Communication Society! As the incoming president of PCS I'm devoting this column to my plans for the year and to encourage you to provide feedback or otherwise participate in our activities.

Before I do that, however, I thank Roger Grice, our immediate past president, for the excellent job he did over the past two years to strengthen PCS and to increase the Society's visibility within the IEEE. Like his predecessor, Mark Haselkorn, Roger devoted much of his attention to letting other entities within the Institute know who we are and what we have to offer. As a result we are a stronger society that's better equipped to deal with the challenges that face us in the coming years.

The most important initiative I propose to the AdCom and the general membership is to institute a strategic planning process for PCS. I think that this activity is so important that I've asked our AdCom to devote the first day of our two-day meeting on 21-22 January to a strategic planning workshop.

Why a Strategic Plan?

A strategic plan describes an organization's goals and three to five years of activities that will help the organization make progress toward those goals. Such a plan provides an excellent opportunity to take stock of the organization's current situation and identify specific ways to improve, as well as to give the organization consistent direction despite frequent changes in leadership.

...a shared realization of today and a shared vision of tomorrow.

Why bother with a strategic plan, you ask? Well, without a strategic plan each successor to the organization's top office must reinvent the organization by defining goals of his or her own. With a limited term in which to achieve those goals and without guaranteed buy-in across the membership, the president may be able to achieve only a few of those goals. Perhaps that is why the leaders of volunteer organizations sometimes burn out so quickly: They lead without a vision shared by the rest of the organization.

An organizational strategic plan is a shared realization of where the organization is today and a shared vision of where it needs to go to ensure future success. It's a blueprint the leadership can use to build a solid and successful organization.

Like all organizations PCS is characterized by several internal strengths as well as by some significant internal weaknesses. Like other organizations we need to leverage external opportunities and counteract external threats. By capitalizing on the strengths and opportunities and by minimizing the weaknesses and threats, we can ensure success in the long term.

Strengths and Weaknesses, Threats and Opportunities

Although the AdCom hasn't yet held this strategic planning workshop, it's easy to predict a few of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that we are likely to identify during that exercise.

Our strengths include our publications, conferences, and educational opportunities. The *PCS Newsletter* and the *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* provide information designed to keep both practicing engineers and professional technical communicators at the top of their game. Our annual International Professional Communication Conference combines world-class speakers, a scale that provides lots of opportunities for interaction with speakers and other attendees, dozens of high-powered technical sessions, and an attractive location, all with the goal of making top-quality professional education available at a very reasonable price.

Our other educational opportunities consist of short courses for engineering professionals that can be customized for a particular group or offered at a Section meeting or at the conference of another IEEE Society. We need to define ways of capitalizing on these strengths and developing other ways to serve our members.

There is no question that our greatest weaknesses are membership and finances. We've been steadily losing members for about five years, and the smaller we get, the larger our financial problems become. The major sources of the Society's income are the $22 membership dues we collect each year (the Society receives no share of or rebate from the much larger general IEEE dues), library subscriptions to our *Transactions* and conference proceedings, and surpluses generated by our conferences.

...grow and develop in ways that will benefit our members, the Institute, and the world at large.

Because the cost of producing, printing, and mailing our publications to members exceeds what we receive in dues, however, we must budget very carefully to avoid deficits and the resulting need to spend down our modest reserves. We need to determine why members leave PCS and reverse that trend, identify ways of attracting new members to achieve economies of scale in our publications, and develop other products that will result in new revenue streams.

Fortunately, we face substantial external opportunities and relatively few external threats, a fact that should help us eliminate our weaknesses and build on our strengths. The economy in much of the world is very strong, particularly in the electronics industry where many of us are employed. Many countries that have experienced fiscal challenges find their economies growing again. And the need for clear, effective communication has never been greater. The fact that PCS is part of the greater IEEE offers us many opportunities to grow and develop in ways that will benefit our members, the Institute, and the world at large.

At the same time, the only notable threat we face is the inevitability that the economic boom of most of the past decade will almost certainly not last forever. That is why we need to put our Society on a course that will increase our membership and grow our financial reserves so that we can withstand the next economic contraction and emerge strong once again.

The "Future" Game

Throughout human history, people have attempted to predict the future, most with mixed results. Thriving businesses, though, achieve their success by leaving prediction to the amateurs and instead adopting strategies that prepare them for any eventuality. This kind of preparation allows them to thrive in good times, survive the bad, and constantly find innovative ways to cope with challenges and leverage opportunities. This is the challenge the AdCom faces at our January meeting.

If you have any comments or suggestions to pass along to the AdCom as we prepare for the strategic planning workshop, please write to me at *g.hayhoe@ieee.org*. I will share your comments with the other AdCom members, and will share the results of our strategic planning session with you in a future column.

From the Editor

(continued from page 2)

If you borrow text—more than a fair-use sentence or two—from previously published material, you are responsible for obtaining written permission for its use. Ditto for graphics. Always give credit to the author or artist.

I prefer to receive articles by e-mail; most WordPerfect, Word, and ASCII files are acceptable.

Deadlines

The 15th day of each odd-numbered month is the deadline for publication in the succeeding odd-numbered month. For example, the deadline is March 15 for the May/June issue, May 15 for the July/August issue, etc. You won't be far off—and never late—if you observe the Ides of March, May, July, etc.

Win–Win for the Audience and You

By Joseph A. Robinson

Flash, paper presenters: Nowhere is it written that you must burden us with every single word of your masterpiece. You might have titillated us to peek at the moment of conception, but why subject us to the agonizing labor of a tedious delivery?

We understand the variety of reasons you worked so hard to produce your paper and have it accepted. Tangible evidence of accomplishment for dean or boss; academic or commercial recognition among friends and colleagues; another entry for that wannabe resume; perhaps most important, authorization and expenses for the next IPCC conference.

But once your paper is accepted you're through that gate and on your way to the conference. The powers back home won't know (probably wouldn't care) whether you drone through your paper (and visuals) word for word before an eye-glazed audience. Why not instead turn your presentation into a real learning experience for your audience and yourself?

We do not need to know everything you know about the topic.

Who Are We, Why Should We Care?

Most of your audience comes with some expectations based on a combination of the announced topic and your reputation. More important, we come with some unfilled needs for which you may have some answers. The better you can surmise or ferret out those needs the better you can select the key points you have to offer that may help meet them.

That's why audience analysis is your equivalent of real estate's *location, location, location*. You already have a general idea who we are, why we're here. But more specifically, what do you have buried in that masterpiece that we might find useful? A new or different answer to some old question? A novel approach to gather or analyze key data? An uncomfortable challenge to accepted wisdom?

Your challenge is to select and present your pearls as persuasive answers to *What's in it for us? Why should we care?* Tie them into *our* needs and desires. Help us see how they answer those two questions. You can use case histories, personal anecdotes, evidence gathered along the way to your paper. But spell out what and why—the connection will not be as obvious to us as it is to you. For example, you've written about competitive intelligence on the World Wide Web—how can *we* benefit by using it without divulging our organization's secrets?

What Do We Need to Know?

Now the hard part: Picking out of all your pearls just the few we need to realize those promised benefits. Here is where your learning starts, with a couple of questions you address to us in the audience:

- How to realize those benefits?
- Any blind alleys we might rule out right away? Why?
- Concerns about cost/benefit, ethical, legal, policy implications?

Some give and take at this point will help refine your original judgment about what this audience really needs to know if we are to benefit from your presentation. We almost certainly do not need to know everything you know about the topic, nor more than a fraction of what you have distilled into your paper.

Think instead about what we can reasonably absorb and carry away. We have the details in the proceedings; how much will we have in our heads and hearts? Probably no more than three or four of your key points, the points most vividly driven home by specific examples, personal testimony, a compelling visual aid. Almost certainly the answers we understand for *What's in it for us? What do we need to know?* as we have interpreted and absorbed your answers to those questions.

What's in It for You, the Presenter?

Shifting emphasis from your presentation to us, your audience, and to our reactions and comments offers several rewards:

Turn your presentation into a real learning experience for your audience.

- Eases traditional presentation concerns (see "Naked No More," this *Newsletter*, November/December 1999, p. 11)
- Sharpens your focus on what you accomplish in the eyes of your colleagues
- Broadens your understanding of how others view the topic
- Stimulates feedback during and after the presentation
- Builds your reputation as scholar *and* effective communicator.

Enjoying the response and involvement of an audience you cared about enough to meet on their own ground can change you. It can help you start future papers with more attention to your prospective readers, why they should care, what they need to know. It can help you sort, prioritize, and discard material with regard to those questions. And with a presentation it can help you look forward to a true learning experience above and beyond what you learned and share in your string of pearls.

Dr. Robinson is a Life Member of the IEEE, having started with 1941 student memberships in the predecessor AIEE and IRE. As a consultant to professional management since 1963, he serves corporate clients, law and accounting firms, banks, and professional organizations. He is a frequent presenter at IPCCs. E-mail: sanfranjar@aol.com.

THE "SYMBOLIC ENGINEER"

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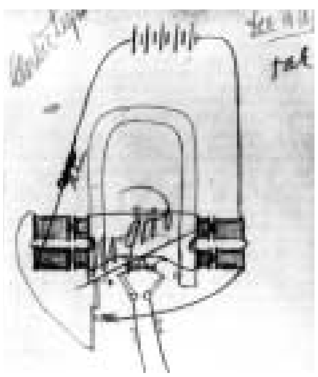


Edison wrote "no good" across this electric light design in his notebook.

Source: Edison National Historic Site, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

"Results! Why, man, I have gotten a lot of results. I know several thousand things that won't work."
Thomas A. Edison

One domain in which Edison's communication ethics remained intact, and in which he established perhaps the most impressive communication system of all, was his laboratory at Menlo Park, New Jersey. Bazerman's reading of the Menlo Park notebooks brings to life the intensely collaborative atmosphere of that workplace:

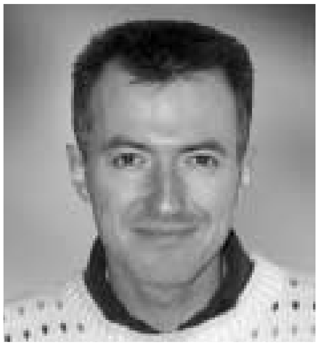
"Often, on a single day or over a period of days, various individuals, such as Edison, Batchelor, and Kruesi [the latter two both machinists], all draw the same or related items, each for a different purpose: Edison perhaps sketches out an idea; Batchelor works through some of the details or provides a sketch for the machinists, often with a note for Kruesi; Kruesi add some details to direct his own work or that of his subordinates; then Batchelor records some results and makes some future plans, with perhaps further evaluative comments by Edison, followed by some calculations by Upton [a physicist and mathematician]. Moreover, they are all likely to have signed off as witnesses or added commentaries on one another's drawings. Each person has characteristic work, but at times they may take on surprising roles, as when [accountant] Carman records some results. Each level of work modifies or adds to the previous work in a collaborative process."

Edison's enterprise grew into General Electric, a bureaucracy whose routine and formalized communication systems displaced the intimacy and spontaneity of Menlo Park. Indeed, Edison himself was forced out of the company, and Edison's laboratory—what Bazerman calls "the most interactive, most intimate, most humanly satisfying and bond-building locale in his life"—disappeared with him.

To borrow Bazerman's term, we communication professionals are "symbolic engineers," and Bazerman thoroughly exposes the double-edged character of Edison's expertise in our field. Edison engineered symbols to lie and cheat; he also engineered them to help establish the most ubiquitous and powerful technology of the 20th century, a technology that has improved the quality of life for millions (though not without cost, as Bazerman explains in detailing how electric light displaced the "culture of the hearth"). *The Languages of Edison's Light* provides symbolic engineers with an affirmation of our importance in technology enterprises, and with (pardon the pun) illuminating examples of how, and how not, to practice our profession.

Jaime Hutchinson manages the publications office of the Electrical and Computer Engineering department of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (hutch@ece.uiuc.edu). *He is a member of the PCS Editorial Advisory Committee.*

GOOD INTENT, POOR OUTCOME



JEAN-LUC DOUMONT

MY NAME IS JOE

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Joe and in the next 20 minutes I am going to give a talk on 'Climatic Changes and the Culture of Cucurbits in Southern Patagonia.'" The participants of my training programs on public speaking usually have strong preconceived ideas about how to begin a technical presentation: You say who you are and then you explain what you are going to talk about. Isn't this what the audience wants to know right away? In a sense, yes, but…

Introducing a presentation by stating its title and the speaker's name is classic (few chairpersons ever do more) yet it is seldom efficient. Besides being a poor attention getter, it usually fails to motivate the audience. Without proper context, the title and speaker mean little. Why should *we* care about the culture of cucurbits? Who on earth is Joe? And what does *he* know about climatic changes?

More motivating beginnings explain the why before they state the what.

Written documents may suffer similar well meant but abrupt beginnings, supposedly telling the reader as soon as possible what the document is about. I remember receiving one whose opening line read: "This is the user's guide to NEPAL." Huh? *I*'m not going to Nepal; what *is* this? It went on, "NEPAL is a software environment that…." Ah…software. "It was developed to address the need for…." At last I understood what it was about, but I found myself rereading the previous sentences to reinterpret them in the proper context.

Maybe the audience should indeed be told as soon as possible what the presentation or document is about so they know what to expect and, in the case of a document, can decide whether to read it now, later, or not at all. Placed at the very beginning, however, this information may well be presented "sooner than possible": Audience members cannot grasp it properly; they lack links between such raw information and previous knowledge. How can they then be expected to remember it?

Gentler, more motivating beginnings place context before contents: They explain the *why* before they state the *what*. They introduce the speaker or author by relating him or her to this context, thus establishing credibility. They state the title or preview the contents once the topic makes sense—as soon as it makes sense but not sooner. Specifically, they establish the *you*, the *I*, and what goes between the you and the I, with a need, a task, and an object.

- The *need* or problem statement motivates the audience by showing the gap between current and desired situation. Indirectly, it answers the question "Why are *you* (the audience) concerned?"
- The *task* introduces the speaker or author, usually by stating what he or she undertook to address the need. Indirectly, it answers the question "Why am *I* (the speaker or author) involved?"
- The *object* or rhetorical purpose states what the presentation or document contains or tries to achieve. Indirectly, it answers the question "Why is this presentation given?" or "Why was this document written?"

Frequently, people object to placing context first because "the audience consists of specialists, so they already know all that." Do they, really? Audience members may know much about climatic changes, or about the culture of cucurbits, or about Southern Patagonia, but not likely about all three. Moreover, they may not have the information in mind when listening or reading. Even if it tells the audience nothing they did not know, the right context at first helps put them in the right frame of mind.

Wouldn't you say that's a good start?

At JL Consulting (www.JLConsulting.be), *Dr. Jean-luc Doumont teaches and provides advice on professional speaking, writing, and graphing. Over the last 15 years he has helped audiences of all ages, backgrounds, and nationalities structure their thoughts and construct their communication.*

FLOCCINAUCHINIHILIPILIFICATION

BABEL FISH

BY MICHAEL BRADY

Countries have national animals, birds, flowers, and even stones. Why cannot the professions claim similar arrays? Why don't we wordsmiths have a figurehead animal of our profession?

In Christian ecclesiastical recognition, most traditional professions have a patron saint, and we writers are blessed with two: Francis de Sales and John the Evangelist. But there is no animal to represent the craft of writing. That lack cries for remedy.

I propose the Babel fish, which feeds on the energy of brain waves and excretes a telepathic stream of meaning. Stick a Babel fish in your ear, and you can understand any language of the galaxy. The connection is clear, as the ideal writer can convert any thought into text that can be understood by anyone.

Who writes the worst poetry in the galaxy?

Well, almost. The Babel fish is mythical. But so is the Chimera, the fire-breathing monster that I nominate to represent some—but not all—editors. Unlike the Chimera, the Babel fish is not a lone creature. It is part of an immense imbroglio, which best can be explained by a chance conversation overheard at a restaurant: "There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable."

That restaurant is at the end of the Universe and is integral in the scheme of things according to the *Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy (HHGTTG)*, first produced in the late 1970s as a BBC radio show.

The story starts one morning in the West Country farmland of England when Arthur Dent awakes to find that his house is about to be demolished to make way for a highway bypass around the nearby village. A friend drops by, surveys the situation, and takes Arthur to a pub. Unbeknownst to Arthur, the friend is an extraterrestrial being who, upon arriving on Earth 15 years before, took the name Ford Prefect, then a popular make of car in England.

At the pub Ford warns Arthur that a far more serious event is imminent. A Vogon construction fleet is on its way to demolish the Earth to make way for a hyperspace bypass. The Vogons are uncompromising and are also known to write the worst poetry in the galaxy. There is no escape on Earth. So Ford and Arthur hitchhike their way off the doomed planet. They then travel throughout the galaxy and meet the creatures, events, and circumstances that comprise the stuff of the *Guide*.

The story's mix of science fiction, black comedy, satire, and philosophy caught on immediately. Books and CDs followed and led to *HHGTTG* becoming a popular cult concept, now with dozens of Internet Web sites devoted to it and to its author, Douglas Adams, who was born in 1952 and educated at Cambridge, from which he graduated with honors in 1974.

Aside from writing assignments for radio, television, and theater, Adams' curriculum vitae includes stints as a hospital porter, barn builder, and chicken coop cleaner—an assemblage of skills worthy of Monty Python, with whom he has worked. His writing has been compared to that of Lewis Carroll and Kurt Vonnegut.

For wordsmiths, *HHGTTG* is not only entertaining; Adams' irrelevant views of technology and bureaucracy are a refreshing reminder of the forces that trap us all in exercising our craft. Moreover, *HHGTTG* is as quotable in contemporary technical communication as is Shakespeare in discussions of English literature. It belongs in the intellectual toolkit of the contemporary technical communicator. And the two-word dictum on its cover unquestionably is good advice: "Don't Panic!"

The de facto signals of *HHGTTG* awareness are relevant quotes from it. Mention of the Babel fish in questions of intelli-

(continued on page 10)

NET NOTES

WHAT IS THE WEB FOR?

ELIZABETH MOELLER

I was all set to write a column covering some Web usability issues when I found myself in the midst of an interesting and ongoing discussion with a colleague. The Web usability issues will have to wait until the next *Newsletter* because I believe the discussion is something that needs a wider audience.

I was doing some research on the Web and found a transcript of a presentation Tim Berners-Lee gave while accepting a Distinguished Fellowship of the British Computer Society. In this 1996 presentation *(http://www.bcs.org.uk/news/timbl.htm)*, Berners-Lee talks about his vision of the World Wide Web as he started to create the basis for it. His original goal was to facilitate shared workspace and interactivity and to create a universally accessible place to store information. In this same presentation he acknowledges that the state of the Web in mid-1996 was "pretty much a corporate broadcast medium."

Now enter the discussion with my colleague, a communication consultant who primarily focuses on marketing, advertising, and public relations. In our conversation my colleague asserted that the Web is a *marketing* medium. I argued that it is a *communication* medium with purposes other than simply marketing. My colleague responded by saying that no matter what an organization puts on the Web, they are still marketing themselves—all communication is some form of marketing. I still disagree and feel that there are forms of communication that are not marketing.

Visitors to a Web site want content and useful toys.

It is very easy to see how people, especially marketing professionals, would view the Web as a marketing tool. Many companies are now ending their television commercials with their *.com* address often to the exclusion of their local street address. IBM is running television commercials suggesting that your business will survive in this new culture only if they provide an e-Commerce solution for you. Some companies do not even exist outside the Web—Amazon.com and CDNow.com being two examples. Jakob Nielson has created Alertbox *(http://www.useit.com/alertbox)* columns dedicated to the usability of e-Commerce applications.

But what about all of the Web sites that are not commercially oriented? What about the educational sites? The nonprofit-organization sites? Personal sites? Can we argue that they are marketing products or services as well? When viewed through the eyes of a marketing professional, we can. The home page of a university Web site addresses two distinct audiences: those who are already students (or parents of students) at the university and those who might like to attend the university. In this case, the site serves two distinct purposes: providing information for students and marketing the university to prospective students. Similar uses can be found at sites for nonprofit organizations. The product they are marketing is themselves. Their Web sites are designed to provide information to their members and to prospective members. Nonprofits are always looking for new people to join their organization and help support their cause.

Personal sites, however, are quite different. They run the gamut from showing pictures of a new baby to being fan clubs for a favorite celebrity to expressing personal beliefs in a forum accessible to many. Is this marketing communication? My answer is no. While owners of these Web sites are still communicating information, they are definitely not marketing anything.

Where are we going? This is a huge question. If we look back at Berners-Lee's original intent—an interactive workspace where people can collaborate and access information from wherever they may be—we can start to chart a course. The first step is defining, in the minds of Web site developers and visitors, the use of the Web. We are making progress. Remember the early years of the Web when sites looked like all the really bad newsletters we saw when desktop publishing became affordable? We've made strides and Web site developers now recognize the importance of good design and interactive features. A great example of collaborative interactivity is the Lands' End "Shop with a Friend" feature *(http://www.landsend.com)*. Admittedly it is a marketing tool, but it works well for its intended purpose.

We are also starting to come out of the "cool toys" phase. Remember when Web sites were defined by how many animated files, Java applets, Javascript toys, and background tunes they had? The novelty is wearing off. Visitors to a Web site want content and useful toys. The cool toys were nice the first time around; now they want information. The question is, What type of information and how is that information projected?

Some companies do not even exist outside the Web.

Experience with my clients indicates that they want to provide information their customers will find useful. At the beginning of each project, we discuss what they want to accomplish with their Web site. For most, the final goal is increased sales. For many, goals include answering the basic questions they receive online, providing technical support for their products, keeping their information timely, and providing ways for customers to reach them when they are not in the office or store.

Is this marketing communication? Some of it is, some of it is not; all of it is how you perceive it. Is the Web living up to the goals of Tim Berners-Lee? Is the Web living up to what you feel it should be? What do you think about this topic? We have set up a bulletin board on the PCS Web site to discuss issues like these. The address is *http://www.ieeepcs.org/discussion.html*.

Please weigh in on this topic as well as start any other discussions related to the work we do as professional communicators. If there is enough interest in this area, I will consider a follow-up column for a future *Newsletter*.

Elizabeth Weise Moeller is PCS vice-president and former chair of the Publicity & Marketing Committee. She owns Interactive Media Consulting (518 366-8765, beth@imediaconsult.com*), a World Wide Web and Internet training firm in Saratoga Springs, New York, which provides Web-site design and Internet training for businesses in the northeast.*

Babel Fish

(continued from page 8)

gibility is one. For describing complex topics, The Total Perspective Vortex is best. It postulates that since all matter in the Universe is interrelated, the whole of Creation, every Galaxy, every sun, every planet, their orbits, their compositions, and their economic and social histories can be extrapolated from one small piece of fairy cake (a small, individual iced sponge cake). For queries concerning the meaning of just about anything, there's the Ultimate Answer: 42. Why a simple, two-digit number? Ask the conglomeration of *HHGTTG* super computers that generated it. Or maybe the Babel fish.

For those who want to pursue the Babel fish: *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, the Original Radio Scripts*, London, Pan Books, 1985, 256 pages soft-cover, ISBN 0-330-29288-9; a four volume set of pocketbooks, also published in 1985 by Pan: *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, ISBN 0-330-25864-8, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, ISBN 0-330-26213-0, *Life, the Universe and Everything*, ISBN 0-330-26738-8, and *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*, ISBN 0-330-287090-1; *Don't Panic, the Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, set of six CDs, BBC Records and Tapes, 1988, BCC CD 6001.

"The first rule of holes: When you're in one, stop digging."

—*Molly Ivins*

Shakespeare Mystery: Whodunit?

By Wen Smith

This article is a review of and comment on "The Ghost of Shakespeare," which appeared in the Folio section of Harper's Magazine, *April 1999, pp. 35-62. That article comprised debates between pairs of authors in five categories that might help decide whether the bard was the usual suspect from Stratford on Avon or Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.* Harper's *left the matter open, so read on for Wen Smith's opinion. Ed.*

You stand in the little church beside the Avon in Stratford and read the words carved in stone above Will Shakespeare's supposed burial place:

GOOD FREND FOR IESVS SAKE FORBEARE,
TO DIGG THE DVST ENCLOASED HEARE.
BLESE BE Y^{E} MAN Y^{T} SPARES THES STONES,
AND CVRST BE HE Y^{T} MOVES MY BONES.

It's doggerel, you can hardly doubt. Yet for nearly 400 years the good people of Stratford have believed it the self-composed epitaph of the man who wrote the finest poetry in the English language.

Today that belief (writer Joe Sobran calls it "the legend of Stratford Will") rests on unstable ground. Scholars around the world, their number growing, now believe they've solved the long running mystery of Shakespeare authorship. They say the works, both poetry and plays, were written by Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, whose life was entirely different from that of the man Stratford knows as Will Shakespeare. So sure are these Oxfordians that they now distinguish the "man of Stratford" as *Shakspere*, the Earl of Oxford as *Shakespeare*.

"We will have a lot to discuss about Shakespeare." Sigmund Freud, 1937.

Sobran, in his book *Alias Shakespeare* (Free Press, 1997), makes the case for Oxford as author of the sonnets, other poems, and plays. He and four others presented their arguments in the April 1999 issue of *Harper's*, side-by-side with opposing arguments by Stratfordians. The case favoring Oxford and spoiling the four-century legend of the Bard of Stratford, if not conclusive, is certainly stunning.

Life, Mystery, Drama, and Love

The debaters square off on four aspects of what Shakespeare's fans know of him—his life, his mystery, his dramas, and his loves. As to the life, the Oxfordians point out that what's revealed in the sonnets about their author is totally inconsistent with what little is known about Will Shakspere of Stratford but is markedly agreeable with the much better documented facts about the life of nobleman Edward de Vere.

Commoner Will Shakspere of Stratford, the Oxford contingent contend, is unlikely to have written the brilliant plays that show such wide knowledge of history, literature, mythology, law, and human nature. Will went to school but briefly, and nothing is known of what he may have learned there. There is no evidence that he ever traveled outside England, and no evidence that he owned a personal library. How, then, could he have acquired the astounding range of knowledge displayed in the works?

A Matter of Genius

The Stratfordians respond simply: Will was a genius. But writer Tom Bethell, one of the Oxfordians, skewers their argument easily. "Genius," he says, "does not convey knowledge. Yet the author was surely one of the best educated men in England." The facts of Oxford's life meet the test. Born the son of an earl, he took a degree at Cambridge at the age of 14, traveled widely in Italy (the setting of so many of the plays), and early in his life wrote passable poetry—though he published none under his own name after 1573, when he was but 23. De Vere too, there's little doubt, was a genius.

And Why the Pseudonym?

But why did he take the pseudonym? Daniel Wright (another of the Oxford supporters) points out that an earl's reputation was expected "to be won by sword and shield, not achieved by pen and ink." Writing for the nefarious theater, he says, would have been a "no-no" for a public man of his time, and playwrights "were likely to be impugned by such bad association if they were discovered."

Edward de Vere had still other reasons to hide his identity. He was widely suspected of sexual deviance—indeed, was several times charged with misbehavior with young boys. Many of the sonnets are clear admissions of a homosexual bent. To have his own name attached to them might have led to prosecution.

Meanwhile it's to be noted that Will of Stratford had no reputation for deviant behavior of any kind; the sonnets describe nothing of his life. Yet, as Sobran finds, "The sonnets are too odd and earthy, too guarded and allusive, too personal and idiosyncratic, too full of loose ends, to have been fictional." Once we consider Edward de Vere as their author, many of the sonnets' mysteries are explained.

"...those amazing works —works in some respects greater than anything else in recorded literature."
Walt Whitman, 1889.

A Thin, Though Lovely, Argument

The pro-Shakspere, anti-Oxfordian, contingent does not especially want those mysteries explained. They prefer to stick with the texts and not concern themselves with the life of the author. Among them, Harold Bloom of Yale nevertheless points out that the Earl of Oxford, who died in 1604, "was dead before Shakespeare's last twelve dramas had even been composed."

Alas, Bloom's argument begs the question. We do not know when the plays were composed, though we do know when some of them were produced on the London stage—and that may have been long after their author's death. (Shakspere of Stratford lived on until 1616—and, oddly if he was in fact the famous author, his death went utterly unnoticed in London.)

Also among the Stratfordians, Jonathan Bate, author of *The Genius of Shakespeare*, points out that the works display intimate acquaintance with the language of lowly trades as well as with that of nobility and the courts. Will of Stratford, son of a glover, grew up with that homely idiom, and Bate cites passages that are pure country, not courtly. "It is because of such lovely little things as this that my money and my reputation will always be staked firmly on…'our Will,' the Stratford lad. There is too little room for doubt."

Bate's argument is thin, though lovely, and there is much room for doubt. If the ordinary man of Stratford could have acquired the language of royalty and the erudite, surely the noble Edward de Vere could have acquired that of the country.

Assaults, Not Arguments

Less lovely, and far from helpful, is the tendency of the Stratford defenders to attack the Oxfordians with angry derision. Bloom refers with a sneer to Joe Sobran as "the Earl of Sobran," scorns "the hapless suggestion that Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare," and styles Oxfordians as "the sub-literary equivalent of the sub-religious Scientologists."

Gail Kern Paster, editor of *The Shakespeare Quarterly*, also burdens the debate with invective. "The authorship question," she says, ranks as "bardolatry for paranoids." The idea that Stratford's school could not have produced a Shakespeare, she declares, is "a pernicious doctrine." These are assaults, not arguments, and name calling has no just place in the debate.

Paster defends the traditional view, saying, "All we need to prove is that such a man from Stratford could have written the plays, not that he did so." Her case weakens when we realize that the same argument might serve the Oxfordians. All they need to prove is that Edward de Vere could have written those plays, not that he actually did so.

But in most ways the Oxfordian argument goes beyond "could have" and produces strong support for "probably did."

The Debate's *Dramatis Personae*

Also on stage for the traditionalists are Marjorie Garber of Harvard, who wrote *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, and independent scholar Irvin Matus, author of *Shakespeare, In Fact.* On the Oxfordian side of the debate are Sobran, Bethell, and Wright, joined by Massachusetts writer

(continued on page 14)

BLACK TOOLS

HANSPETER SCHMID

The next *Newsletter* will have a recapitulation of the 38 tricks.

THIS MAY WORK IN THEORY...

But it is wrong in practice. Logically seen, these words are utter nonsense, because if it does not work in practice, the theory is simply not good enough. However, if you answer such an attack by trying to defend your theory, you have already lost.

Let me explain why with the four words *know, think, feel,* and *care. Know* stands for education, tradition, and revelation; *think* stands for rationalism, logic, and mathematics; *feel* stands for intuition, feelings, and creativity; and *care* stands for values, society, and environment.

In the middle ages, knowing and caring were very important, but thinking for yourself was not—it could even be dangerous. Technological progress almost stood still during this time. The middle ages are often called "dark" because the enormous progress made in knowing and caring is little appreciated today, although it was the very basis of our Western civilization.

The advent of modern science, which places thinking above everything else, rang in a time that was dubbed "enlightenment" with reference to the dark middle ages. And indeed there came light, or perhaps one should better say there came light bulbs. In the past 300 years the dominance of the catholic church as the purveyor of truth was replaced by the dominance of science and its institutions. Technology made such enormous progress that many scientists and philosophers started to believe that you could solve *all* problems by pure logical thinking in a completely rational world view from which everything irrational was banished.

It became clear very soon that this was not even remotely possible, since without "feeling" the right way, without intuition, no scientific progress could happen at all. However, many scientists still believed that science should be completely free of values: Science should only think, not care. And we're still paying the price for that, since although many technological gadgets make our life easier, we also have hurt our environment very badly and, with nuclear weapons and genetic engineering, we have two frightening specters we can scarcely control. Luckily, humanity *can* learn, and the reconciliation of knowing, thinking, feeling, and caring is finally under way.

Unfortunately, lured by the speedy development of the technical sciences, many economists try to imitate the pure scientific methods propagated one hundred years ago. The buzzwords for this thinking-only approach are shareholder value, new public management, and globalization. Our environmental problems will be dwarfed by the social problems this uncaring economy will cause. There's still some hope, since efforts to reconcile caring and thinking in economy are afoot as well, but they are lagging far behind the developments in the technical sciences.

Few people can express all this, but most *feel* it, and it frightens them badly, as it frightens me. This has implications for us technical writers. It means that whenever we communicate technical information to nonexperts, we must appeal to both their intuition and their values. In other words, we must tell how it feels to us and show that we do care. This is also the best way to answer the reproach, "This may work in theory, but it is wrong in practice," because in most cases what the speaker actually means is, "Your theory is not intuitive, and I don't believe that you care anyway."

In contrast to this 33rd discussion trick, all other tricks I present in this installment are quite simple to understand. Trick 34, "Breaking a Noisy Silence," is one of the simplest of all. If your opponent does not give a direct answer to a question, or asks a question in return, or tries to change the topic, he is actually keeping quiet about something, although in a noisy way. Then you know that you have found a weak spot that you can exploit. There is no countermeasure against this trick because, if your opponent has found your weak spot and is determined to nail you down, it is already too late.

Trick 35, "As You Don't Like It," is to show your opponent that he'd really *not* like it if his idea got realized by showing him, for example, that the results are bad according to his most fundamental values. If you are creative enough and know your opponent well enough, you can always do that. This trick is most powerful if the message gets across in a subliminal way. Since it aims at making the opponent feel insecure, it is normally sufficient to be aware of this trick in order to avert it.

Explaining a confused situation to a naive person gives people the good feeling of being more intelligent.

Trick 37 is often used at scientific conferences. I call it "Toasting Bad Proofs." If your opponent's position is actually defensible, but he defends it badly, you can toast his proof, and the audience will think that the statement he proved is wrong, too. If you get toasted and your proof is in fact bad, the only thing that can be done here is to admit that your proof has a hole and immediately give intuitive arguments for your position.

In the next issue of this *Newsletter* you will find a recapitulation of the 38 tricks I have presented in this column. You have already read about 37 of them, and I have kept the one I like most until the end. It's Trick 36, "If You Can't Convince Them, Confuse Them." I'll let the British Prime Minister and his Cabinet Secretary from the British TV series "Yes, Prime Minister!" demonstrate this trick and its countermeasure for me.

Jim Hacker (Prime Minister): It was the one question today to which I could give a clear, simple, straightforward, and honest answer.

Sir Humphrey (Cabinet Secretary, doing Trick 36): Yes. Unfortunately, although the answer was indeed clear, simple, and straightforward, there is some difficulty in justifying assigning to it the fourth of the epithets you applied to the statement, inasmuch as the precise correlation between the information you communicated and the facts insofar as they can be determined and demonstrated is such as to cause epistemological problems of sufficient magnitude as to lay upon the logical and semantical resources of the English language a heavier burden than they can reasonably be expected to bear.

Jim Hacker (countermeasure): Epistemological? What are you talking about?

Sir Humphrey: You told a lie.

*[In case you forgot, as I did, Trick 38 appears in the first article in this series (*Newsletter*, March/April 1999, pp. 9-10) and is there referred to as the "Last Trick." Ed.]*

*Hanspeter Schmid (*h.p.schmid@ieee.org*) is an analog-IC designer and Ph.D.-degree student at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (Zurich) who has an untamable interest in modern philosophy of science and society. He found that many unfriendly people suddenly become very friendly if he applies Trick 36 and at the same time acts very naive. Perhaps explaining a confused situation to a naive person gives people the good feeling of being more intelligent and experienced, and some will do almost anything to enjoy this feeling a bit longer.*

SHAKESPEARE MYSTERY

(continued from page 12)

Mark Anderson and Richard F. Whalen, author of *Shakespeare: Who Was He?*

Will the "Cvrst" Prevail?

So whodunit? The debate has raged now 70 years or more and will continue. But the *Harper's* essays show the Oxfordians with a staggering advantage in logic. Perhaps their scholarly digging, though "cvrst" by traditionalists and by citizens of Stratford, will at last force the world to move *Shakespeare*'s bones—even if Will *Shakspere*'s "dvst" remains forever buried deep beneath stones beside the Avon.

For more than two decades Wen Smith taught Shakespeare at Santa Monica College in California.

PROFESSOR GRAMMAR

Possessives of Inanimate Objects (or, Can a Pet Rock Own the Shelf It Sits Upon?)

The Professor sometimes stays up late at night looking at the Red Wing pottery auctions on eBay. She rarely finds anything to bid on, but she is often perversely amused (she has given up being horrified) by the ingenuity of the people who write their own auction descriptions. Recently, one seller indicated a fondness for using an apostrophe before the letter *s* in every plural word. The Professor got such a kick out of this creativity that she decided to write about a similar use of apostrophe-s that she sometimes sees in technical information. This often inappropriate use gives an inanimate object the ability to possess something:

the computer's memory
the file's extension

Both examples obviously do not need the apostrophe-s. While the computer might have memory (one would hope so!), and the file might have an extension, these are inanimate objects and they are not actually capable of possessing something. The words *computer* and *file* should be used as modifiers of the objects that are presumably the focus of the discussion:

Not all inanimate apostrophe-s constructions are incorrect, e.g., today's paper, but let clarity for your audience be your guide.

the computer memory
the file extension

The Professor is quite sure that none of you would be tempted to use the following construction:

Windows's capabilities

Yet she has seen this more than once:

Windows NT's capabilities

One of the rules of using trademarks is to not use one in a possessive sense when it is a product name. It is entirely appropriate (and ultimately translatable) to use:

the capabilities of the Windows NT system

This construction also lessens the likelihood of legal difficulties, assuming that one is not writing something slanderous about the capabilities of Microsoft Windows NT.

To summarize:

- Instead of using the possessive with an inanimate object, make the inanimate object the modifier.
- Instead of using the possessive with a trademarked term, precede the term with a phrase, such as "the features of the ThinkPad."

In closing, the Professor would like to share with you this bit of personal trivia: The Professor's pet rock does indeed have a shelf in her office all to itself. But it is not the pet rock's shelf, it is the Professor's.

Afterword: The Professor is aware of the debates over the difference between the possessive case and the genitive. Most of the examples in this lesson can be considered forms of the genitive, and not strictly possessive. However, you must remember that you are writing for an international audience, and the less complicated you make your inanimate objects, the better your audience will understand what you are trying to say about them.

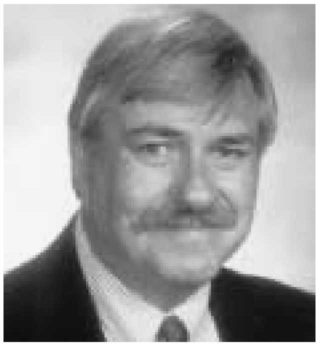
 Professor Grammar is an advisor to the IBM Santa Teresa Laboratory Editing Council. Each month she sends a lesson to the technical writers at the Laboratory. The Council recently authored the Prentice-Hall book Developing Quality Technical Information: A Handbook for Writers and Editors. *Many of the Professor's lessons are based on tenets described in this* Handbook.

"When you have nothing important or interesting to say, don't let anyone persuade you to say it."

—H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

MASTERS OF STYLE

SOME APHORISMS ON STYLE



RONALD J. NELSON

This column attempts to generate interest in style by quoting various people's perspectives on the subject. We can learn much about style by thinking about what others have said about the matter. By reflecting on others' perspectives, we can move toward greater sophistication and aplomb.

Here, then, are some slants on the subject, taken from Robert Andrews' *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993)—a book that is replete with pearls of wisdom on a myriad of subjects.

1. "Style is the dress of thoughts; and let them be ever so just, if your style is homely, coarse, and vulgar, they will appear to as much disadvantage, and be as ill received, as your person, though ever so well-proportioned, would if dressed in rags, dirt, and tatters." (Lord Chesterfield, English statesman and man of letters)

"Your style is an emanation from your own being."

2. "What is line? It is life. A line must live at each point along its course in such a way that the artist's presence makes itself felt above that of the model…. With the writer, line takes precedence over form and content. It runs through the words he assembles. It strikes a continuous note unperceived by ear or eye. It is, in a way, the soul's style, and if the line ceases to have a life of its own, if it only describes an arabesque, the soul is missing and the writing dies." (Jean Cocteau, French author and film maker)
3. "Style is the image of character." (Edward Gibbon, English historian)
4. "To me style is just the outside of content, and content the inside of style, like the outside and the inside of the human body—both go together, they can't be separated." (Jean-Luc Godard, French film maker and author)
5. "Style [is] the hallmark of a temperament stamped on the material in hand." (Andre Maurois, French author and critic)
6. "You do not create a style. You work, and develop yourself; your style is an emanation from your own being." (Katherine Anne Porter, American short-story writer and novelist)
7. "Fashions fade, style is eternal." (Yves Saint Laurent, French couturier)
8. "Style is not something applied. It is something that permeates. It is of the nature of that in which it is found, whether the poem, the manner of a god, the bearing of a man. It is not a dress." (Wallace Stevens, American poet)

This next group of aphorisms comes from Jon Winokur's *Writers on Writing* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1986), a book that contains perspectives on a great variety of writing points, like writer's block, advice to young writers, tools, beginnings, work habits, words, technique, process, success, angst, talking about it, grammar, and good writing.

9. "Style is character. A good style cannot come from a bad, undisciplined character." (Norman Mailer, American writer)
10. "The style is the man. Rather say the style is the way the man takes himself. If it is with outer seriousness, it must be with inner humor. If it is with outer humor, it must be with inner seriousness." (Robert Frost, American poet)
11. "Style is the physiognomy of the mind, and a safer index to character than the face." (Arthur Schopenhauer, German philosopher)
12. "Style is effectiveness of assertion." (George Bernard Shaw, British playwright)
13. "Proper words in proper places, make the true definition of style." (Jonathan Swift, English satirist born in Ireland)
14. "If a man wishes to write in a clear style, let him first be clear in his thoughts." (Goethe, German writer)

15. “All the fun’s in how you say a thing.” (Robert Frost)
16. “Style is the mind skating circles round itself as it moves forward.” (Robert Frost)
17. “A good style should show no sign of effort. What is written should seem a happy accident.” (W. Somerset Maugham, British writer)
18. “A strict and succinct style is that, where you can take away nothing without loss, and that loss to be manifest.” (Ben Jonson, British playwright and poet)
19. “Every style that is not boring is a good one.” (Voltaire, French writer and philosopher)
20. “We are surprised and delighted when we come upon a natural style, for instead of an author we find a man.” (Blaise Pascal, French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher)
21. “A change of style is a change of subject.” (Wallace Stevens)

“If a man wishes to write in a clear style, let him first be clear in his thoughts.”

22. “Style comes only after long, hard practice and writing.” (William Styron, American writer)
23. “The greatest possible mint of style is to make the words absolutely disappear into the thought.” (Nathaniel Hawthorne, American writer)
24. “As for style of writing, if one has anything to say, it drops from him simply and directly, as a stone falls to the ground.” (Henry David Thoreau, American writer and naturalist)
25. “A good style must, first of all, be clear. It must not be mean or above the dignity of the subject. It must be appropriate.” (Aristotle, Greek philosopher)

I hope you find these aphorisms worthwhile.

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PCS Members Meet in Minneapolis

By Rudy Joenk

That's "meet" in the sense of encounter rather than coming together for action. Partly planned and partly coincidental, an interesting confluence of PCS members occurred in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in early October 1999. Although I may have missed others, I met there:

Minneapolis attracts PCS members.

Irv Engelson, attending the IEEE Sections Congress (SC), who is director of Region 1 and former IEEE corporate staff director.

David Kemp, attending the SC, who is secretary of the IEEE board of directors and former president of IEEE Canada.

Leann Kostek, an invited speaker at the SC on Women in Engineering and the GOLD program, who is a recent member of the PCS Administrative Committee (AdCom) and chair of its Membership Committee.

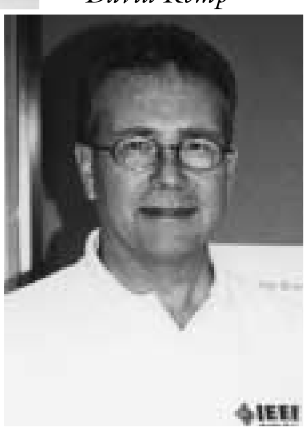
Henrich Lantsberg, a delegate to the SC from IEEE Region 8, who is vice-chair of the Russia Section and chair of the PCS Russia Chapter.

Jim Lufkin, who lives in Minneapolis and was president of PCS in 1968 and again in 1975. (See more about Jim and his famous plays in the 1997 40th anniversary issues of this *Newsletter*.)

Basil Osborne, attending the SC as secretary of Region 8, from the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland Section, who was program chair of our IPCC 90 in Guildford, England.

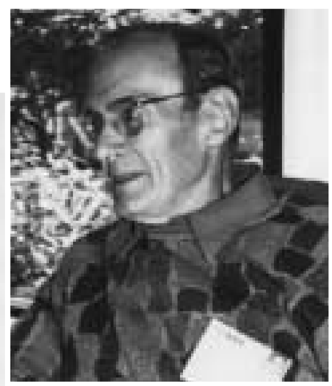
Stephanie Rosenbaum, who was in the area to present "How Usability Research Contributes to Successful Products and Training" to the Professional Association for Computer Training (PACT), and who is also a recent member of the AdCom and of its Editorial Advisory Committee.

Leann Kostek



David Kemp

Rudy Joenk, Stephanie Rosenbaum, Jim Lufkin



Basil Osborne

Henrich Lantsberg

Irv Engelson

Success-full Stories

By Emily Sopensky

Storytelling is as important to a company's success as are a good product, marketing, advertising, and even maintaining employee morale. Getting visibility for a company and its products almost always includes sharing success stories. Such stories explain why the technology is important without having to make a "gearhead" of the reader; for complex technology, stories are a godsend. Sharing a story of how a company solved a client's problems is important in establishing credibility and rapport with both new and repeat customers.

Because…

Whether you're selling office supplies or complex planning software, telling a story is important to the health and wealth of your company for several reasons:

- The more complex and technologically advanced the product, the more important the story is in demonstrating how the product works. Such stories can show how the technology is applied to solve a problem in a new way. For example, do I care what radio frequency identification (RFID) is when I'm breezing through the Dallas Tollway without having to stop? The technology is not as important as what it does, how it is used, and who uses it.

Stories must be both interesting and true.

- Does the technology make my life easier, simpler? Yes! I don't need to scrounge for quarters while driving, slow down to throw them into the coin machine, or come to a complete stop while an attendant makes change for me. RFID is the technology underlying electronic toll collection—the same technology used to time the Atlanta Olympics marathon.
- Case studies, application stories, and scenarios are important for sales at all levels. They provide examples that can be reviewed, emulated, and even repeated. Such stories provide something memorable for customers, prospects, and your own salespersons.
- Company lore and legends are based on successes. Although the sheer number of companies that were "started in a garage" or "begun in a spare bedroom" sometimes dilutes the impact, such stories nevertheless build employee morale and establish tradition.

The Steps

To develop a useful success story or case study, follow these guidelines:

1. **Determine the purpose** of your success story and how it is going to be distributed. If your complex technology affects different markets, you may want to have more than one version of the story. Together or separately, the stories can be used in sales literature, press kits, and advertising, and they are particularly appropriate for "advertorials" as well as being the basis for scenarios in training exercises.
2. **Identify the stories to be told.** Choose stories that fold into your marketing or training plan and reflect the industries you are targeting. For example, if you are targeting the banking industry, a story about clients in the entertainment industry may be amusing but does not make your point effectively. Find interesting stories that are true.

   A stranger who comes into your store and plops down $10 000 for a slew of home improvement tools can be an interesting story, but only if you find out why. Making up a story may get your point across initially but if it's not true or representative, you lose in credibility what you may have initially gained in sales. When you involve your customer, a fact-checker must be able to come up with a clean slate.
3. **Get agreement from the customer** whose story you are going to document. This is a crucial step. Although you may have a great relationship with a customer, that does not necessarily

mean they want to share this success and their company's name in print—especially if they have no control over the outcome. Assure your customer that the story will be used only after company approval. Determine who has final authority.

4. **Outline the ingredients** that make the story unique but interesting. If you have direct experience with the customer's problem and how your company helped solve it, sketch this out yourself. Otherwise, have the account executive give you the essentials of what happened. It helps if you know the customer's criteria for making the decision. What were the reasons that compelled the customer to chose your company's solution?

Don't overtax the client's resources for story material.

5. **Write a succinct, compelling story.** There is nothing worse than a great story told poorly. Being able to tell the story is just as important as getting the right information. Be sure your writer can write the story accurately *and* interface with the client without overtaxing the client's resources. A note of caution: A colorful writer, who has a tendency to exaggerate, may be the next blockbuster novelist but might be extremely poor in maintaining good relations with your customer. Or a very technical writer might get carried away with the details.

   Be sure to get the facts right and make the story flow. Cover the problem, the process of resolution, the decision, and the solution. Quotes from those directly involved in the process make the story real and tangible.

6. **Get approvals.** This is the formalization of step 3—and frequently the hardest step. Some larger companies are notorious for their anti-litigious nature, which means you have to run through a gauntlet of protectors. Understand that this can go exceptionally quickly or exceedingly slowly, depending on your clients and you and your company's relations with them.

7. **Distribute the story** based on the plan in step 1, but don't forget to first let those who contributed to the story see the final product.

Emily Sopensky is owner of The Iris Company, which is dedicated to helping high technology companies communicate their successes. Secretary of the IEEE Intelligent Transportation Systems Council and a member of PCS, she can be reached at emily@iriscompany.com.

Looking for International, Independent Writers

We'll be adding a column to the *Newsletter* this year about the business of being a technical writer or editor in business for oneself. It will cover such issues as finding and keeping clients, building a portfolio, dealing with isolation, setting fees, negotiating contracts, paying taxes, and the differences between contracting and consulting. The author will be Julia Land, who has been an independent technical writer for more than five years.

We don't want the column to be just about being independent in the United States. We'd like to add an international perspective by recruiting independent writers from other countries. These writers would participate in e-mail conversations with each other and with Ms. Land so that the column can reflect the realities of working independently outside the U.S.

Do you live or work outside the United States? Have you made your living for at least a year as a freelance technical writer? Do you have a few non-billable hours you'd like to contribute to this project? Or do you know someone who may fit that description? If so, please communicate with Ms. Land at *julia_land@ieee.org*.

Proofreading Horror Stories Need Not Be Repeated

By Stephen Wilbers

What's the worst proofreading oversight you've ever heard of? What's the most embarassing lapse you yourself have been guilty of?

(By the way, ending sentences with prepositions is acceptable when it results in a more natural word order, as in "proofreading oversight you've ever heard of" rather than "proofreading oversight of which you've ever heard." When Winston Churchill was corrected for ending a sentence with a preposition, he expressed his annoyance by retorting: "This is the sort of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put.")

Proofread multiple times at well separated times.

I'm thinking of something worse then certain commonly mispelled words, such as *embarassing* for *embarrassing*, *then* for *than*, and even *mispelled* for *misspelled*.

I'm thinking of those egregious gaffes that make you howl with laughter or cringe in embarrassment—depending on who's error it was. (Yes, that should have been *whose*.)

Proofreading lapses can be divided into three categories:

Errors of Ignorance

English grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation are tricky, and sometimes we just don't know the rules. For example, should it be, "The network, along with the supporting systems, are down" or "The network, along with the supporting systems, is down"? "My colleagues are flaunting the rules" or "My colleagues are flouting the rules"?

Should it be, "To choose to loose your page in a book is better than being lead by your head to read something you've already red" or "To choose to lose your page in a book is better than being led by your head to read something you've already read"? And should the question marks in the preceding examples be inside or outside the closing quotation marks?

Answers: The latter choices are correct in all four examples.

Errors of Haste

Often we do know better, but we miss errrors because we're in such a hurry to complete one task and get onto the next.

Consider the two errors in the preceding sentence, for example. You no doubt know that *errrors* is not spelled with a triple *r* and that prepositions used to inflect or complete the meaning of verbs do not form solid compounds with subsequent prepositions (as in "to get *on to* the next task," but "to get *onto* the bus," and "to turn *in to* the lane," but "to turn *into* a pumpkin").

In addition to slowing down, you have three defenses against errors of haste: (1) Always use spell check (but never trust it entirely), (2) let time pass between drafting and proofreading your text, and (3) proofread by making multiple passes through your text, first looking for large mistakes such as missing pages and repeated paragraphs, and last looking for small mistakes such as, unnecessary commas (as in comma after such as) and misused words and phrases (as in using *i.e.*, which means "that is," in place of *e.g.*, which means "for example").

Errors of Technology

We use powerful machines to help us write, and these machines can cause us to make high-power errors high-power errors. In most word-processing programs, the difference between *copy and paste* and and *cut paste* is a single key stroke or click of the mouse, and if you accidentally *copy* when you meant to *cut* you may end up with repeated repeated text.

To guard against word-processing errors, be especially vigilant when using template or boilerplate material. What could be more embarrassing than a proposal with the wrong client's name in the header?

New PCS Constitution Requires Member Approval

By George Hayhoe

If the general membership approves, the Professional Communication Society will soon have a new Constitution.

This accomplishment has a long history. The initiative to revise the society's governing documents began during Richie Robinson's presidency (1992-1993). A new draft Constitution was finally approved by the AdCom in September 1996, and new draft Bylaws were approved by the AdCom in July 1997.

After several rounds of review by the IEEE Technical Activities Board (TAB), the AdCom approved several amendments requested by TAB at its meeting on 7 September 1999 in New Orleans and again on 29 September 1999 by electronic ballot. Once those amendments were approved, the Technical Activities Board approved the new Constitution and Bylaws.

Now we must submit the new Constitution to the membership for approval. PCS members are requested to review the text of the new Constitution at *http://www.ieeepcs.org/constitution.html*. Anyone who objects to the new document should register his or her disapproval by e-mail to *society-info@ieee.org*, or by post to:

TAB Secretary
c/o Society General Activities
445 Hoes Lane, P.O. Box 1331
Piscataway, NJ 08855-1331
USA

All objections sent by e-mail must be time-stamped by midnight at the sender's location on *29 February 2000*; objections sent by post must be postmarked by the same deadline.

If fewer than five percent of PCS members of IEEE Member grade (or above) object in writing by the deadline, the proposed Constitution will become effective on 15 March 2000.

The new Bylaws became effective upon their approval by the AdCom and TAB. The text of the new Bylaws is available at *http://www.ieeepcs.org/bylaws.html*.

Proofreading Horror Stories

Speaking of embarrassing proofreading errors, please share your funniest, most outlandish examples with me. I'd like to include them in a future article.

Minneapolis consultant Stephen Wilbers offers training seminars in effective business writing. Write to him at P.O. Box 19114, Minneapolis, MN 55419, or send e-mail to wilbe004@tc.umn.edu; http://www.wilbers.com.

Forum 2000 Program Available

Forum 2000 is scheduled for the Commonwealth Centre in London, England, June 12-14. The preliminary program for this once-every-five-years conference sponsored by INTECOM lists topics and presenters and provides travel and accommodation information.

Request a complimentary copy from *r.blicq@ieee.org* or Ron Blicq, 569 Oxford Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3M 3J2.

PROPOSALS SOUGHT FOR

IPCC/SIGDOC 2000

In the autumn of 2000, ACM SIGDOC and IEEE PCS will host a joint conference at the Cambridge Marriott Hotel and MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
Save the dates: ***September 24-27, 2000.***

Headlining the featured speakers is keynoter Nicholas Negroponte of MIT's Media Laboratory and author of *Being Digital.*

The deadline for proposals is ***March 1, 2000***, with final versions of accepted papers due June 15 for the conference proceedings. Notifications of acceptance will be sent in mid-April.

We extend our invitation to engineers, managers, academics, researchers—anyone who helps develop technological products that accommodate human needs.

Theme and Issues

The theme of *Technology and Teamwork* expresses the need for us as professional communicators to balance technological and humanistic aspects inherent in document production and knowledge dissemination because we truly work between machines and people, mediating communication experiences.

Although we have listed technology first in this pairing, we recognize that both aspects of our work are equally important. This theme asks participants to think about how we balance the needs of our human audiences with the needs of our technological environments. You are encouraged, though not required, to consider the following areas that address this balance:

- The writer as team member
- Teamwork to develop technological products
- Technology and how we work
- Accommodating users and audiences
- Educating team members

Technology & Teamwork

Presentation Types and Rules for Submission

For all submissions include, on a cover page, the name, title, organization, address, telephone number, fax number, and e-mail address of each participant. Indicate the principal contact and presentation type. Identify any hardware devices needed for presentations or software demonstrations.

All presenters must register for the conference. Because papers are published in the proceedings prior to the conference, presenters should be prepared to discuss their topic with the audience instead of reading their paper.

Open forums: Submit a 200- to 300-word description of your topic. Forums take place early in the conference. You are responsible for presenting the results at the end of the conference.

Panels: Submit a 500- to 1000-word description of the topic, outlining the connected theses, the main points, and the implications for the field. Identify the moderator.

Papers: Submit a 500- to 1000-word description of the topic, outlining the thesis, main points, and implications for the field.

Posters: Submit a 200- to 300-word description of your topic or software demonstration.

Tutorials: Submit a 750- to 1000-word description of the tutorial organization and audience. Discuss how hands-on activities are included.

Send proposals and 100-word biographies by *March 1* to:

IPCC: Bernadette Longo, *blongo@clemson.edu*
SIGDOC: Michael Priestley, *mpriestl@ca.ibm.com*
On the Web: *http://www.ieeepcs.org/2000/*

Alias the AdCom

The Administrative Committee (AdCom) invites comment from PCS members about any of the Society's activities. All the AdCom members have an electronic alias at the IEEE that automatically forwards e-mail to the member's actual electronic address.

You can address the whole AdCom at *adcom-pcs@ieee.org*, or any of the members individually at the addresses listed in the table. The year in parentheses marks the end of the member's term.

If you would like to obtain (or update) an alias of your own, go to the IEEE Web page, *http://www.ieee.org/eleccomm*, and supply the information requested there (you will need your IEEE membership number).

Members are always welcome at AdCom meetings. See the notice of meetings in the editor's column.

In addition, chairs of IPCCs and editors are *ex officio* members of the AdCom: Joe Chew, *j.chew@ieee.org*, IPCC 2001; Laurel Grove, *l.grove@ieee.org*, and Paul Seesing, *p.seesing@ieee.org*, IPCC 2002; and Rudy Joenk, *r.joenk@ieee.org*, *Newsletter*.

Ron Blicq (2001) *r.blicq@ieee.org*	Roger Grice (2001) *r.grice@ieee.org*	Terrance Malkinson (2001) *t.malkinson@ieee.org*
Kim Sydow Campbell (2000) *k.s.campbell@ieee.org*	George Hayhoe (2002) *g.hayhoe@ieee.org*	Beth Moeller (2002) *b.w.moeller@ieee.org*
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Marjorie Davis (2000) *marj.davis@ieee.org*	Bernadette Longo (2002) *blongo@ieee.org*	Tom van Loon (2001) *t.vanloon@ieee.org*
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 Send Form 3579 to: IEEE, 3 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10016