The Florida Fireflies
By Mike Murray, President

Something happened to me one evening recently that I’ll always remember.

I don't recall if I have ever seen fireflies in Florida. Perhaps there has been the occasional one or two, but not enough to even remember.

Fireflies were an extremely pleasant part of my childhood in Kentucky. Every evening, those fairy-like twinkles of light danced around the yard, making for a truly enchanting environment along with the rustling oak trees and cool, sweet-smelling Kentucky grass. These sensations were occasionally topped off by the distant wail of a train's whistle, a sound that enchants me to this day. It was a magical time in my life.

Well, a few evenings ago, my wife and I were having dinner on our back porch. That's not always something you can do in Florida due to the uncomfortable humidity, but the day and evening were particularly pleasant. The Kentucky fireflies popped into my head, and I said to Kay, “You know what would make this evening perfect? Fireflies.” She agreed, and we finished our meals and went back inside to avoid the mosquitoes.

About an hour or so later, when nightfall had completely descended, our dog Butterscotch indicated that she needed to make a trip to the backyard, so I put a leash on her collar, and out we went. Where our back yard ends, a thickly wooded area begins. As I stood there waiting for Butterscotch to finish, I could not believe what I saw — and yet, there it was again, the unmistakable twinkle of a firefly near the woods! As I watched, I saw one more near that one. They seemed to blink 3 or 4 times just for my pleasure, then they disappeared. As I turned, a third firefly blinked just above Butterscotch's head. She saw it immediately and stood up on her hind legs to investigate. Two more blinks, and the third and final fairy melted away into the cool evening.

I stood there for a full minute or more looking around, totally thrilled to the depths of my soul. I'm not sure if the goose bumps have ever completely gone away. I excitedly told my wife, who asked (with a big smile), “Fireflies in Florida?” I assured her that I had seen them, and that Butterscotch was my witness.

I'll long remember my night with the fireflies, the ones that don't exist in Florida. What an awesome world we live in, and what an important reminder as to what’s really important and beautiful in our world!
Special Interest Groups
By Mike Murray, President

STC’s Special Interest Groups (SIGs) provide a way for STC members to share their interest in particular areas of technical communication. Society SIGs at the international level have hundreds, even thousands, of members, and many publish a newsletter, host an electronic newsgroup, and sponsor events and sessions at STC’s annual conference. Chapter SIGs usually have fewer members, but because their members live in the same area, they can meet regularly and address members’ local needs.

Each SIG fosters an environment that:

♦ Offers its members a basic understanding of the special interest area and its effect on their role as technical communicators.
♦ Encourages member-to-member dialogue as well as dialogue with other professional organizations to broaden the range of members' technical knowledge.
♦ Offers its members a platform from which to demonstrate and share information, especially with a view to educating novices.
♦ Keeps members abreast of new developments in the special interest area.

Society-Level SIGs
Following is a sampling of some of the current Society-level SIGs, followed by an Internet link that leads you to detailed information and a contact for each SIG, a “SIG Sign Up Form” for Society-level SIGs, and various SIG administrative documents.

♦ AccessAbility
♦ Canadian Issues
♦ Consulting and Independent Contracting
♦ Education and Research
♦ Emerging Technologies

For details, go to: http://www.stc.org/sig_info.asp

Chapter-Level SIGs
If our chapter has members who are interested in a specific area of technical communication, and no organization, either within or outside our chapter, addresses their unique needs, then we need a SIG! Note that it’s okay to have a chapter-level SIG on a topic that is not represented at the Society level. For example, if members wish to form a Multimedia SIG, they may certainly do so (with chapter guidance) even though a Multimedia SIG does not exist at the Society level.

An effort is currently underway to get a Job Search SIG established here in Orlando.

When deciding if you wish to be involved in forming a chapter-level SIG, an important fact to keep in mind is that your group will be expected to form and manage the SIG. While chapter leaders are more than willing to provide expertise, guidance, and reference materials, these members already have their hands full with other chapter responsibilities.

If any group of members wishes to form an Orlando Chapter SIG, please have a representative from your group contact chapter president Mike Murray at mike.murray@lmco.com or 407-306-4681 (days) or 407-384-6657 (evenings) for guidance, resources, and encouragement!

Selling Yourself with Your “Elevator Speech”
By Richard Phipps, Employment Manager

An elevator speech is a brief description of what you do and who you do it for. It describes how you offer value, benefit, and quality to your customer, client, employer, or prospect. It is short, concise and it comes out naturally. And most importantly, you phrase your elevator speech in such a way that the other person can't say:

• That's nice, but I'm already doing business with...
or
• We already have someone who does that in the office. or
• Thank you, but we don't need any.

An elevator speech is typically 15 to 20 seconds in length. The idea behind the elevator speech is that—by accident—you meet a target prospect in an elevator on the 25th floor. She asks what you do. You have an opportunity to give it your best shot before getting to the ground floor where you both get off. When you arrive at the lobby she now knows everything of importance about what you do for a living, and why it is valuable to her and her company to consider becoming a customer or employer of yours.

You are going to use it to sell you!

If you think you can communicate your sales message clearly and concisely without doing this exercise or discipline, it might be an interesting exercise for you to try doing it your way with a disinterested third party, and then circle back and do it this way, and let them compare.

The elevator speech is a very powerful job hunting tool for almost everyone. Here are the six basics of constructing an elevator speech:

1. What is your product/service/solution?
2. Who is the customer it is intended for?
3. What need or problem does it address?
4. What does it do?
5. How does it work and what are the benefits to me?
6. Why are you different and better than others?

Try some of these techniques on your own, and see how they work.

Remember, In a world where we're all competing for people’s attention, an elevator speech gives you the edge. Best of all, these mini-speeches can be given anytime and anywhere, not just in elevators!
Anti-ossificatory (adj). Designed to resist rigidity and promote flexibility. Antonym of ossificatory (adj), meaning to cause rigidity and reduce suppleness. From ossification (n), meaning the process that converts animal tissue to bone. Root word is ossify (v.i.), meaning to turn into bone; become hard or calloused. While technically applicable in a physiological context, as in “anti-ossificatory medications can be useful in delaying the calcification that causes a heel spur,” the term is more commonly applied within a behavioral or institutional context. For example, an “ossified attitude” applied to a person indicates an inflexible personality characterized by an unreasonable and unwavering adherence to pre-conceived beliefs, whether or not those beliefs collide with empirical evidence or situational reality. Applied to an institution, such as a company, “ossification” refers to rigid policies rooted in the past that are often counterproductive in the face of current business realities yet which are zealously defended by the ossificatory powers that lurk deep within the bowels of an organization. In this context, then, “anti-ossificatory” refers to any action designed to breach the adamantine walls of bureaucratic obstructionism and to defeat the intractable green-visored automatons whose cerebral cortex has long since been subject to irreversible ossification. Anti-ossificatory activism within a corporate culture is generally viewed as a high-risk activity, because one of the foremost characteristics of the terminally ossified is the inability to recognize their own fossil-like behavior; therefore, armed with the power of rank within the organization, severe ossificants can not only be obstructionist, they can be extremely dangerous. Examples: (1) Business: Ossificationally crippled by cyber-phobes in senior executive positions clinging to deep-carpeted corner offices against increasing pressure to retire, the enterprise was unable to display the nimbleness necessary to flourish in the burgeoning world of e-commerce and wound up in Chapter 11. (2) Personal: Marsha told Harry that unless he showed some sign of life during Monday Night Football, she was going to defenestrate (see “Word Mint I,” Memo to Members, January 2003) the television, to which he replied, “Sheddup and gimme ‘nudda beer”—clear evidence both of his advanced state of ossification and the likelihood that not only the television, but Harry himself, would soon be subject to retaliatory conjugal defenestration.

“Ol’ Bonehead,” a.k.a., Green-Visored Ossificant in Natural Habitat. Note stone-like countenance. Do not approach with new ideas; can be dangerous when aroused.

First Phone Seminar Scores A Big Success
By Dan Voss

The Orlando Chapter added a page to its professional development playbook on September 10 when Intuitive Information hosted a successful STC telephone seminar on Paper Prototyping conducted by Carolyn Snyder. In paper prototyping, representative users interact with a paper version of an interface that is manipulated by a person “playing computer.”

Intuitive Information not only hosted the event, which was coordinated by staff writer Dale Reichel, it also underwrote part of the cost, enabling the five chapter members who participated to do so at the bargain basement price of $15 apiece.

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Tool Tips: Finding It on the Internet
By David Coverston

If you have ever tried to find something on the Internet, then you probably have used a search engine. For years several search engine sites battled for the clicks of users. HotBot, AltaVista, the list goes on. Recently one site has emerged as the top dog for technical communicators and IT personnel to find the information that they need — Google.

According to Danny Sullivan, the editor of the Search Engine Watch online newsletter, Google represents 75% of all Internet searches. Google customers include Yahoo and AOL, which license Google’s technology and even route search queries through Google. Google has even been verbied, as in “I googled ‘XML and EDD’ and found the answer to my problem.” A recent USA Today article gave these amazing figures: 200 million search requests a day — more than 2,300 every second — in 88 languages, indexing 3.1 billion Web pages with the help of 10,000 supercomputers. See http://searchenginewatch.com/ for more information on Google and other search engines.

According to the USA Today article, Google bases its results on popularity, judging pages by how many sites link to them from other sites. More links give higher results on the PageRank.

There are several Google sources of information of interest to technical communicators. One I frequently use is the newsgroup archive. In 2001 Google acquired Deja.com’s Usenet archive dating back to 1995. As one person put it, it’s Deja News all over again. You can find it at: http://news.google.com

In addition to the news site, Google has a beta Internet shopping site, http://froogle.google.com/. If you are looking for stuff for your office or home, don’t overlook this site.

There’s a lot more. But my favorite way to mine Google’s riches is with the Google Toolbar. Like my other favorite toys, this one is free, too. You can get it by going to http://toolbar.google.com/ and clicking the Get the Google Toolbar! Button.

You will be taken to another page which explains their privacy policy. There are two versions of the toolbar, one with advanced features and one without. In respect to the toolbar with the advanced features, Google has been criticized for its privacy policies, which include the use of a persistent cookie. This cookie contains a unique ID that’s assigned to your browser. When you visit Google, with the advanced features version of the toolbar, the cookie helps it remember it has seen your browser before. The user is anonymous, but it can track where you go on the Internet. I don’t particularly like that, so I chose the version without the advanced features.

You can also clear your search history on the toolbar, which is another measure you can take to protect your privacy. To use the toolbar, just type your search terms in the search textbox on the toolbar, and press Enter. Google support Boolean searches, and will take up to 10 search words, but there are ways around this limit by using wildcards. When you click a link on the search results page, your search terms will appear next to a search icon, like the word “Tahiti” in Figure 1. Click that link to find and highlight your search term on the page being displayed.

Clicking the Google drop-down menu gives you quick access to more tools, such as advanced searching and language tools. If you want to search the newsgroups with the same search you just used for searching the web, just click Google Groups on the drop-down menu and Google will search the Usenet archives with your search terms. You can even customize your toolbar!

For more information on how to use Google, check out the Google Help page, or try the titles offered at Amazon.com. One I particularly like is the O’Reilly book. To get to Amazon, remember to use the link on the STC web page. It won’t cost you any more, and the STC will benefit from it.

For more information:
How to Use Google: The 30 Most Important Tips, Hacks and Tricks by Tod Sacerdoti [PDF]
Google in 30 Pages or Less by TimesaverBooks.com, paperback
August Meeting Recap
By David Coverston

If you missed our last meeting, then you missed seeing our washline collapse. Not the annual washline meeting, but the washline itself—the one with all the pieces of paper with pictures on them representing topics that had been presented at the national conference. Not to worry, though—a couple of volunteers hung it back up.

Conference attendees veterans Karen Lane and W. C. Wiese, along with newcomers Christina Hammock and Esther Schuyt, answered questions about the conference and gave some enthusiastic presentations on their topics.

Christina spoke about the transition from students to employees, and said the one thing they all had in common the first day on the job was not having a computer. She also spoke on Avoiding Traumatic XML/SGML Transitions and a related topic, Selecting the Right Single Source Tools. With her employer moving to Arbortext, she was able to share some first-hand experience on this topic.

Christina’s fellow employee Esther, tackled the topic of Content Management. Her advice was “If you can’t figure your DTDs and FOSI, then you should consider hiring someone to do it for you.”

Karen pulled out a couple of older topics on Cascading Style Sheets and Copyright Implications of Intellectual Law. She said that Internet publishing has changed a lot of parameters in copyright law. The 1998 Digital Copyright Act has not been very helpful. Karen also spoke on Web Design for the Visually Impaired. She said web sites are required to comply with government regulations for the handicapped.

W. C. took us on the adventure of Exploring Our Future: Technical Communication in the Year 2013. The way technical writing is taught today will change by encouraging more self expression. Telecommuting will put individuals into global competition, and certification becomes more important. W. C. also took the topic of Information Process Modeling. The basic principles are write what you do and do what you write. To assess where you are in a maturity model you need metrics.

Also during the August meeting, Bonnie Spivey kicked off the Mentoring program, Jon Kessler provided some information on the student writing competition, and W. C. caught us up on happenings at the national STC level.
A very special guest speaker will be making her way from a “little town in Texas” to school us on the history and present use of XML. Mrs. Kimberly Willmott, co-owner of Pentecom (a document conversion company) has been involved with both technical and managerial positions in the SGML/XML conversion and publishing industry since 1992. Kim has been a driving influence in the information systems industry since the mid-’80s.

Here is a little taste of what’s in store for us on Tuesday. XML evolved from Standard Generalized Mark-up Language (SGML) out of a need to electronically transfer data. SGML was too stringent and HyperText Mark-up Language (HTML) was too loose. XML allowed for the viewing capabilities of HTML along with the intelligent reuse of data that we see in SGML.

The XML revolution started with the exchange of financial information over the web, but now is incorporated in software such as desktop publishing systems, word processing applications, and bookkeeping packages. Most of these products provide XML support to some degree. XML provides a consistent way to break up data into small components so that you may reuse your information. XML is sufficiently structured that you can specify the granularity of your document. This information is capable of being set up for automatic assembly for different audience types or multiple types of media.

Some of the tools Kim will be demonstrating are Arbortext®, XMetaL®, Stylus Studio® and Antenna House®. Time permitting, Kim will be giving a demonstration of structured FrameMaker®.

You do not want to miss this learning experience. If this technology has crossed your career path, you will want to attend this meeting. If this technology has NOT YET crossed your career path, IT WILL. We look forward to seeing you all there!