

Chapter Service for the Socially Challenged

Introduction

Hello, my name is Brad Connatser, and I am socially challenged. Inhibited by extreme self-consciousness, I avoid people gatherings. When I do socialize, my mind becomes an elaborate staging area for the formulation of every potential syllable I may utter. Thus occupied, I cannot effectively contribute to discussions of any significance. Always fearing the verbal blunder or revelation of my inadequacies, I try to live by the Twain maxim: “It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.” Yet for years I felt compelled to somehow serve my STC chapter. After all, it was a list of employers compiled by my chapter that led to my employment in the field of technical communication. So, how do people like me, an STC member interested in the prosperity of my STC chapter, how do we alter our psychologies to suit chapter service? We don’t.

I’m OK, You’re OK

According to a survey conducted by the Carnegie Institute [or ToastMasters, get correct name and specific survey results], many people fear public speaking more than anything, including death. Magazines and newsletters are replete with pop psychologists itching to cure those who are burdened by this fear. Even STC publications feature therapeutic articles with “tips and icebreakers.” Personally, I find these articles offensive. They often call for the “shy” or “socially awkward” to conform to a standard of sociability that most shy people cannot achieve without

liquor. In fact, most shy people can't even place themselves in the very situations that pop psychologists assume as a starting point for rehabilitation.

Despite my wide reading about fitting in, I remain among the unconverted. It is painfully obvious to us shy people, I believe, that advice about social assimilation—even well written, well intended advice—cannot transform a debilitating shyness into serviceable charm. And that's all right, because our professional society should embrace all types of personalities. From the merely bashful to the nearly agoraphobic, the socially challenged can contribute significantly to a chapter's prosperity in many ways.

Private Contributions

Work for your chapter newsletter

Having served as editor of my chapter's newsletter for a year, I found working on a chapter newsletter my favorite behind-the-scenes way of contributing. As a shy person, I find buffers like telephone wires and paper comforting elements of communication. And basically, an editorship accommodates those comforts very nicely. I solicited articles and book reviews through email, newsgroups such as TECHWR-L, and letters. Occasionally, I picked up the telephone to beg for articles and late columns, but only the monthly executive council meetings evoked my performance anxiety. There, I had to report to the council about newsletter activities. I considered it the hardest part of the job.

Those attending the same meetings may be astonished to find out about my shyness. After all, it all happens in the brain, somewhere in the Cartesian theater of the psychological world. There are no obvious bodily symptoms of shyness such as swelling or hives. Silence or an awkward conveyance may have been the only clues to my adverse condition. But I survived those meetings, and our chapter newsletter went on to win an STC Distinguished Technical Communication award in its category.

Nevertheless, serving as a newsletter editor may demand more time and gregariousness than you have to spare. So, here are some other ways you can serve your chapter's newsletter. Your exposure to public situations will be minimal, if any at all. Just contact the editor, and tell him or her that you would like to help.

- Write a column. The newsletter of the East Tennessee Chapter, *Transcript*, has many columns just waiting for someone to manage. Columns about writing, editing, graphics, and so on need the careful attention of a subject-matter expert. This service can be conducted entirely through email.
- Lay out the newsletter. This position requires a bit more interaction with the newsletter staff, but no formal speaking is required.
- Create graphics. Let the editor of your chapter's newsletter know that you're available to create graphics upon request.
- Take photographs. This activity can lead to many social situations that you would rather avoid, so be specific when you volunteer your photographic expertise. Tell the editor that

you're good with science and technology photography and not, for example, portraiture and documenting chapter social events.

- Be a news watcher. Scan local newspapers for STC members in the news. Read newsgroups for announcements and news that may be significant to chapter members. Review publications for chapter members who have published articles. Report your findings to the newsletter editor. Believe me, you'll be doing the newsletter editor a big service.
- PDF or HTML the newsletter for Internet access. This can be a very valuable service to STC chapters with Web or FTP sites.

Just because someone is shy doesn't mean he or she is not a team player. You newsletter editors out there owe it to your chapter to seek out talented members and coax them into service, no matter how they're packaged.

Contribute original ideas

If you imagine ways to enhance your chapter, then submit your ideas to one of the chapter officers. Your chapter's newsletter should have a list of all chapter officers and their email addresses. If not, consult the STC Membership Directory, which is sent free to all STC members. There you will find the email addresses of your chapter's officers.

Write an article or book review

Admonitions about sharing expertise with fellow members may abound to levels of triteness, but the validity of this aphorism is no less true. Sharing your expertise through articles and book

reviews is one way of serving your chapter and the Society. Of course, the editor of your chapter's newsletter will be overjoyed to consider your submission. However, don't forget the national exposure you'll get by submitting to STC's other periodicals. By publishing there, you help your chapter become more visible and compete in the annual STC chapter public relations competition. You might want to send a query to the editor before writing an article or book review. Consider these STC periodicals:

Intercom Magazine: This periodical is the practitioner's archive of how-to information. The articles here are practical one and all, and many are reprinted from chapter newsletters. Here's who to contact:

Maurice Martin
Editor, Intercom
901 N. Stuart Street
Suite 904
Arlington, VA 22203-1854

(703) 522-4114
fax (703) 522-2075
maurice@stc-va.org

Tieline, the Society Leaders' Newsletter: This periodical is published to help chapter leaders do their jobs. The newsletter is distributed to chapter leaders—including chapter newsletter

editors—and its official mission is to “improve communication and serve as a link between the chapters, volunteer leaders, and the Society office.” Articles about enhancing STC chapter activities are welcome. Here’s who to contact:

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Technical Communication: This periodical is the Society’s journal. It has recently undergone quite a transformation from a mostly academic content to a mixture of academic and practical content. If you enjoy research, then *Technical Communication* is one way to publish your results. However, some articles in the journal are based upon experience and contain very few references. All submitted articles are peer reviewed. If you decide to write an article for the journal, be sure to read the Guidelines for Authors printed in the back of each issue. Here’s who to contact:

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Help your chapter's competition managers

There are many ways to help competition managers during the various competitions held by STC chapters every year. Technical art, technical publications, online, and other competitions need judges. Such service does not require public speaking of any kind. Another way to help competition managers is to volunteer to design or redesign award certificates, invitations, and the like. Your chapter's newsletter should list the competition managers. If not, ask an officer by telephone or email for the information.

Manage a Web page for your chapter

If your chapter doesn't already have a Web page, you can set up and manage one in the privacy of your home or office. Just get one of the officers to champion the project. Even if your chapter already has a Web page, you can notify one of the chapter officers that you're willing to help or take over if the current Webmeister resigns.

Last Words

My list of ways to privately serve your STC chapter is by no means exhaustive. Add to the list, but remember the invocation for tolerance at the beginning of this article and the type of service it implied. Limited public performance and limited formal assembly are the main criteria for service by the socially challenged. Although all chapter activities require small-group or one-on-one interaction at some point, formal meetings that comply with *Robert's Rules of Order*, for example, can be intimidating and nerve-wracking for the uninitiated and the shy. Chapter officers and other activity managers who need assistance can access a great untapped resource of local talent if they recognize the needs of the socially challenged and solicit their assistance on their terms.

So, did I miss the irony of this article? Have I overlooked the obvious, that “Society” is the “S” in “STC”? Not quite. The meaning of *society*—an organized group of people—does not express or imply homogeneity. To the contrary, *society* is an embrace of diverse people with common interests. To enrich the Society of Technical Communication with a diversity of viewpoints, chapter leaders should recognize the desire or need of some members to be private, accept it, and invite them to fill positions appropriate to their personalities, not challenge them to conform.