
Redesigning Your Chapter Newsletter: Part 1

Introduction

Does your chapter newsletter need a facelift? Thinking of a redesign? When I volunteered to be editor of *Transcript*, the newsletter of the East Tennessee Chapter of STC, my first ambition was to redesign it. For years the newsletter was burdened with text, so my first thought was to design standing graphical elements—such as a masthead and column graphics—and institute a practice of including in each issue as many graphics and photographs as possible without in any way compromising the text they embellish. However, I soon discovered that redesigning a newsletter is no easy task. Based upon that experience, here are some suggestions for making your newsletter redesign a success.

Consult with Others

Even when your newsletter has a staff of one—as in my case—redesigning your chapter newsletter will require many dialogues. To start, you should discuss your ideas with the chapter president to reconcile the changes you want to make with the changes you can make. For example, changing the name of the newsletter is probably *verboten*. Yet while the newsletter name and certain column titles may not be altered in essence, their appearance can be. After all, *appearance* is the essence of a redesign. You should also consult the chapter officers about your ideas. No doubt they will appreciate at least a conceptual outline of your redesign plan. Finally, consult the wisdom found in your chapter handbook, especially the section for newsletter editors, and use the “Rules for the STC Newsletter Competition” as a checklist of compulsory elements.

Solicit Assistance

Enlist as many talented graphics people as you can. When I became editor of *Transcript*, I enlisted a graphic artist and two editors to help me with the redesign. However, one by one their roles in the redesign dwindled. One became too busy to attend the meetings; another, who expressed an interest in being an assistant editor, discovered that he really didn't have the time; and the third, a student in a technical communication program, didn't have the graphic skills required by the project. So, does this anecdote contain a shred of allegorical significance? Of course: Be prepared to do most, if not all, of the work yourself. However, you will still need to identify a few people to review and comment upon your progress. An objective viewpoint is essential.

Think Thoroughly

T. S. Eliot once said that “the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative,’” an object that evokes an intended subjective response from the viewer. Because newsletter design is art, the notion of the *objective correlative* should be taken seriously. To unify your newsletter and conform it to the theme you select or inherit, start your redesign with abstractions and move toward the objects that convey them. For example, the name *Transcript* conjured in me feelings of antiquity, the good old days of pens, manual typewriters, and parchment. I also wanted to convey in more muted terms a nostalgic celebration of the endurance of our chapter, which has been running strong for 23 years. Starting with the abstraction of the ghost of communication past leading our chapter into communication future, I played with the

objective correlative of the word *Transcript* typed upon parchment next to the modern logos of STC and our chapter, resulting in half of the masthead. Then, I thought about the purpose of the newsletter: to focus on information about technical communication for the benefit of chapter members. The resulting objective correlative was a photograph of a magnifying hemisphere placed upon the word *communication* in an Oxford English Dictionary. Figure 1 shows the entire masthead.

“Borrow” Ideas from Other Newsletters

After you compose your masthead to evoke the desired emotional responses from readers, then you can address the more mundane elements of a redesign—column graphics, a teaser box, and such. I suggest studying the newsletters you find excellent in appearance and borrowing design ideas from them. Use them as models. For example, the appearance of the teaser box on the front of *Transcript* was borrowed (and modified) from the IEEE Professional Communication Society newsletter. The *Transcript* information box was borrowed from the newsletter you are reading now.

Conclusion

A month into the redesign of *Transcript*, I began to feel that my ambitions were outstripping my resources, that I had gotten in over my head. I was never formally trained in graphic design, and having lost the members of my redesign team, I began to read my software manuals with fervor. Starting with an effect I wanted to achieve, I found that the manuals quickly led me to success (after all, they were written by technical communicators, probably members of STC to boot). I also discovered that I had

underestimated the spontaneous generosity of my peers and the officers of my chapter. They understood the difficulties of my task, never made demands, never uttered a negative word, always encouraged me. I linked via email via phone via fax to other STC members who helped me over the top. No doubt that a newsletter redesign requires a sober commitment and a substantial outlay of time. And perhaps yours will be a solo effort as well. But if you take only one thing from this article, let it be this: Talk to other newsletter editors, talk to your peers, talk to your chapter officers. The more you verbally convey your ideas to others, the better you will graphically convey them in your newsletter.

Redesigning Your Chapter Newsletter: Part 2

Introduction

In Part 1 of this article, I discussed strategies for a successful newsletter redesign. Now I want to talk about the more mundane considerations, namely equipment and budgets. For newsletter editors with lofty redesign ideas, overcoming equipment and budgetary limits can become a preoccupation, sapping creative energy. Here, then, are some suggestions for making the most of what you've got.

Access the Right Hardware and Software

Remember your high school daze when you helped lay out the school newspaper using mechanicals and wax? The only mechanicals used in a modern publication process are the plates on the printing press. The age of the all-digital composition is here, and with it is the requirement for computer equipment and software. Table 1 shows what you

will need to instill and maintain a prominent graphic quality in your newsletter. If you don't own the required hardware and software, your employer may allow you to use the company computer resources (in off hours, of course).

One hardware item that my employer allows me to use is a negative/slide scanner, which is indispensable for getting photographs into a newsletter cheaply. For example, for the redesign graphics, I took about six photographs, had them developed (just developed—not printed), and scanned in the negatives. Total cost was about twelve dollars for two rolls of film and processing.

Another good resource for graphics is a photograph catalog. Some purveyors of stock photographs allow people to scan and use catalog images. The catch is that when you scan in an image printed in a catalog, the resulting digital image has a moiré effect—something like herringbone. To get around this problem, you can apply a blurring filter such as Photoshop's gaussian blur to introduce just enough fuzz into the image to make the disturbing pattern disappear.

Table 1. Hardware and Software for a Successful Redesign

Must Haves

<i>Hardware</i>	<i>My System</i>
Computer	Macintosh 660AV
300dpi Printer	Texas Instruments 300dpi
Flatbed Scanner	Microtek ScanMaker IHR
Removable Storage	Iomega Zip Drive
<i>Software</i>	<i>Software</i>
Composition Application	Adobe PageMaker 6.0
Word Processor	Microsoft Word 6.0
Clip Art	Various

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<i>Hardware</i>	<i>My System</i>
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Negative/Slide Scanner	Polaroid SprintScan
35mm Camera	Nikon 6006
<i>Software</i>	<i>Software</i>
Image Processor	Adobe Photoshop 3.0
Illustration Application	Adobe FreeHand 5.0

Conform Your Design to the Budget

Whetted enthusiasms can be quickly dulled after you blunder into inevitable budgetary obstacles. That's why you should base your redesign decisions upon realistic estimates from trustworthy vendors. Make sure that you include all applicable printing considerations when you send your request for bids to printing vendors. Ask three vendors to bid on three or four newsletter configurations (one-color, eight-page; two-color, eight -page; two-color, four-page; and so on). The redesign decisions most consequential to your bottom line are the printing method, number of colors, number of pages, and quantity printed for each issue. Table 2 lists these budget busters. Other considerations, such as type of paper and binding method, will hardly affect your budget. I recommend specifying a good recycled paper and saddle stapling for each newsletter configuration sent to your three bidding vendors. If you find that you must make compromises to your preferred redesign because the printing estimates come in too high, consider some of the following money-saving suggestions:

- In multiple colors, print many signature blanks that include masthead, running headers, running footers, and other fixed standing elements. Then, print each issue on these blanks with one ink only.

- Use a dark-color ink—such as hunter green—for a one-color process. You add color to your chapter newsletter without paying for a two-color process.
- Print the front and back with two colors, but print the rest of the newsletter with only one color.
- Alternate between a four-page and an eight-page newsletter. Don't forget that the number of pages also affects the postage expense.
- Print only the copies you need for mass distribution. Because you will print relatively few copies (less than 500, I assume), economy of scale greatly affects the bottom line. If printing your newsletter costs two dollars per piece, then reducing the quantity by 50 saves one hundred dollars per issue. People who want extra copies of the newsletter can pay for photocopies and postage.
- Acquire a corporate sponsor to offset a budgetary shortfall.
- Include advertising to pay for the redesign elements that would otherwise be eliminated.
- Use Xerox DocuTech printing or photocopying instead of offset printing. The quality of your graphics, especially raster images such as photographs, will be significantly reduced, but you will take a big bite out of the reproduction cost. I recommend that this money-saving option be a last resort.

Table 2. Budget Busters

<i>Consideration</i>	<i>Options</i>
Printing Method	Photocopy, DocuTech, Offset
Ink	One or Two Colors, One Non-Black Color
Number of Pages	Multiples of Four
Quantity	Minimum, Surplus

Conclusion

Ah, expensive equipment, sophisticated software, and lavish budgets—they are the fancy of newsletter editors everywhere. And while these resources certainly lend themselves to products of the imagination, they are by no means a prerequisite for a quality newsletter. Consider the Best of Show winner at the 1996 STC Newsletter Competition, the *Quill*, produced by the Southwestern Ontario Chapter. The *Quill* was rewarded for superlative execution of content and design, not for extravagant processing. The newsletter is corner stapled, has only one color and few original graphics, and is reproduced by either photocopy or DocuTech. Yet this publication *does* have an original, clean design perfectly suited for the modest budget of a chapter with fewer than 75 members. For those editors of STC chapter newsletters thinking about a redesign, I wish you luck and hope that this article helps you to execute your design within your means.