
Contracting Survival Tactics

Critical success factors

- **Networking.** The foundation of your network is most likely STC, but add to this former clients and co-workers, other professional organizations, school, church, friends, and family.
- **Reputation.** Reputation is based on ethics, professionalism, dependability, quality work, flexibility, and the ability to provide extra value to the project.
- **Value-added.** Your value-added is demonstrated by being pro-active and imaginative. As the expert on communication, you need to take the lead to identify your client's communication needs and the ways to solve those needs.

Client relations

- Build personal bonds with your clients.
- Buy them lunch while you're working with them: You can't buy someone with lunch, but lunch provides a relaxed environment to get to know each other better.
- Learn what interests them, what concerns them.
- Keep in touch after you've left. Every 6 months or so, send them an email or take them to lunch. If you're on a trip, send a post card to your best clients.
- Send them information that you think will be of interest to them.
- Make them look good on the job. Compliment the work of your SMEs to their bosses when appropriate.
- Be flexible in terms of accounting where appropriate.
- Be easy to work with.

Value-added

- Don't wait for assignments: Analyze the client situation and identify communication needs they may not have thought of yet.
- Make every document that you produce as professional as time permits. Make it *look* professional so that it projects the aura of quality.
- Give them more than promised if you can do it without charging more. Or, deliver early if possible.
- Keep current with what is happening in the profession through trade journals and think how the ideas and solutions presented in these magazines can be used by your client. Share the magazines with your client.
- Take courses and attend seminars to add to your skills; practice them through work with volunteer organizations or your business infrastructure (brochures, Web sites).

Indispensability

- Learn the company and the product quickly. Become the expert in one of the areas.
- Be the client's mentor. Help them with technical expertise they might not have—you'd be surprised how many people don't know how to use section breaks in Word.
- Be their sounding board. Demonstrate your ability to keep confidences.
- Have a visible presence. Make sure people with influence over your contracts know about the good work you do. Don't assume they will know.
- Be a problem solver, not just an assembly-line writer.
- Have a sense of humor to lighten the atmosphere. The client, too, is going through tough times.

Job search

- Use your network to find the jobs that don't get into the job listings. Ask your clients for references or suggestions.
- Tell everyone you know what you do. Colleagues, family, friends, your neighbors, etc. etc. etc.—you just don't know who knows whom.
- Remember that everyone you know or meet becomes part of your network. You've got to keep building it. Any type of sale is a numbers game.
- Join trade associations. STC is a great place to meet colleagues and hear about jobs. Check the job banks. Meet at least 3 people each time you go to a meeting.
- Join networking groups. There are breakfast, lunch, and dinner groups specifically for networking. Try different groups each time. Go to different parts of the city.
- Practice the 7-second teaser (AKA 7/15). Explain what you do in 7 seconds. Intrigue them, have them ask for more information. Do it in 15 words!
- Know what companies are hiring, even if they don't list a technical writer position.
- Look at industries that are doing better in general. For example, defense or medical equipment.
- Read the paper and trade magazines, listen to the radio. Be aware of what's going on. You just might see an opportunity there.
- Ask for referrals or names of others who may need your services. If you are not hired, the interviewer may know somewhere else where you would be a good fit. If you don't ask, they probably won't tell. It's up to you.

Tips!

- Yvonne Technical knowledge can make you a more valuable resource. During a downturn, companies may be willing to let the "niceties" of grammar and formatting slide. However, companies can see that technical communicators who require less support by SMEs can save them money. One of my clients got a mandate to cut back on contractors, but the developers pushed to keep me on when they realized how much extra time they themselves would need to spend on writing and basic explanations with the staff writers in a geographically remote group.
- Lance Be the only technical communicator. Stand out from the crowd. Join a trade association where you are the only technical communicator. For example, if you write about health services, attend a meeting of health services professionals. Offer to be a speaker.
- Gwaltney Cultivate programmers, analysts, and project managers. Educate them about the need to bring writers on board early in the project and demonstrate the value that adds. Then, keep track of them. They go on to other companies (or projects) and can remember you as that terrific writer at the last job. I've had at least five job leads because of programmers, analysts, or project managers from previous jobs, three of which have ended up in contracts. One of the project managers specifically stated that she was calling because she'd learned the "bring-the-writer-on-board-early" lesson from me three years earlier.

The Panel

Yvonne DeGraw

ydegrow@home.com

Yvonne has been a consulting technical writer for 6 years. Before that, she was an employee for far too many years. She focuses on software documentation and instructional design, primarily for technical audiences. Her clients have included Texas Instruments, Digital Instruments/Veeco, Asylum Research, America Online, and Cisco. She is an Associate Fellow of STC and currently manages STC's Instructional Design & Learning SIG. She co-founded the Santa Barbara chapter and managed the 1997 Region 8 Conference in Santa Barbara. She has spoken at many regional and international conferences.

Lance Gelein

gelein@ix.netcom.com

Lance Gelein, our society Past President, is an international speaker who has been a technical communicator for over 20 years. He is currently involved in technical and marketing communication, usability testing, Web site development, project management, and change management. His list of clients is a who's who in industry including Intel, Hewlett-Packard, Palm Inc., Kaiser-Permanente, Apple Computer, and Pacific Bell. His commitment to accurate and state-of-the-art communication is demonstrated through his work with the Society for Technical Communication. His involvement includes holding offices at the local and international levels. At the local level, he was President and Employment Manager; at the international level, he served on the STC International Board of Directors as Director-Sponsor, Second Vice President, First Vice President, and President.

Gwaltney Mountford

mgm@mountfordgroup.com

Gwaltney and her husband, Carl, own Mountford Group, Inc., a software development company. A technical communicator for 20 years and a contractor for 10, she focuses on end-user documentation, product development support, and project management support. Her clients have included Bank of America, Bechtel, Pacific Bell, PeopleSoft, and Kaiser Permanente, among others. An Associate Fellow of STC, she has held leadership positions in the East Bay chapter, managed the 1998 Region 8 Conference, spoken at many regional and international conferences, and served on the STC Nominating Committee. She teaches technical communication at UC Berkeley Extension.