

Virtual Networking for Real Clients: Behind the Websites of Technical Communication Businesses

Killoran, J. (2009, March 11). Virtual Networking for Real Clients: Behind the Websites of Technical Communication Businesses. Paper presented at the ATTW Conference, San Francisco, CA. <<http://myweb.brooklyn.liu.edu/jkillora/research/2009attw.pdf>>

Strategy vs Tactics

Much of our field's web-related research has focused quite appropriately on issues of website rhetoric, design, and usability. These issues could be characterized as the *tactics* by which to communicate with audiences over the web, and could be distinguished from the *strategy* by which to communicate with audiences over the web. Strategic issues are raised in questions like, Should we even have a website? How should we use our site? What are we achieving with our site? As technical communicators take more managerial responsibility for their work, their web responsibilities often graduate from tactical questions to such strategic questions.

My research raises these kinds of strategic questions by focusing on the websites of technical communication companies, consultants, and independent contractors. These technical communicators, by virtue of their status, are managers, managers of their own businesses and their own careers, and managers who made the decisions to create and maintain websites for their businesses.

Literature Review: STC Surveys Asking about Marketing Methods

Previous research has only tangentially addressed technical communicators' own business websites. A 2003 STC survey of its consultant and contractor membership asked about their marketing methods and offered eight response options, none of which was devoted to websites, though the response option "advertisements" mentioned parenthetically both print and web advertising; yet that all-encompassing advertising method nevertheless ranked quite low, used by only one-sixth of American respondents and ranking well behind the top methods of referrals, reputation, and networking. (About a third of these respondents identified themselves as employees of temp agencies and may thereby have had less need for such advertising.)

A couple of years later, another survey of STC members, this a 2005 survey of members of

STC's Consulting and Independent Contracting Special Interest Group, did explicitly list websites among the 11 response options they offered to a survey question about marketing methods. Results showed that publishing a website was among the more valuable marketing methods, still ranking well behind referrals and networking but nevertheless rated as "very valuable" or "extremely valuable" by a slight majority of respondents (STC Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG, 2005a, p.7). Only 22% of respondents to that question indicated that it was not applicable to them, suggesting that more than three-quarters of consultants and independent contractors have indeed gone through the trouble of publishing a website for their business (STC Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG, 2005b, p.10).

So, these two surveys present two strikingly different impressions of the marketing value of tech comm. business websites. My research project has been aiming to better understand the marketing role and marketing value of such websites, and my presentation today aims to address the research question:

RQ: How are technical communication business websites useful?

METHODS

To systematically explore the communicative role of such websites, I collected, through various methods, an international sample of English-language sites of just over 1000 companies, consultants, and independent contractors that offer technical communication services. I examined the sites to gather the e-mail contact and the names of proprietors or other key people who would constitute my eventual sample pool. Because some sites were obviously abandoned, I culled the sample down by more than a third by removing sites that did not show evidence of having been updated in the previous year or so. For those remaining, solicitations were e-mailed requesting participation in a web-based survey, along with two rounds of follow-up solicitations for non-respondents. I received 240 completed and usable survey responses from 15 countries, more than 60% of which were from US-based businesses. Overall response rates, after accounting for undeliverable e-mails and responses that could not be matched with the sample pool, were approximately 40%.

The survey questions (see appendix) that I'm focusing on here inquired into . . .

- how helpful their websites were in getting clientele for their businesses, both directly and indirectly;
- how useful their websites were overall, and the reasons for that usefulness.

About half of the survey respondents also participated in brief follow-up interviews by e-mail, in which they were typically asked to elaborate on survey responses that were notable. For the sake of conciseness, I refer to all participants as running *businesses*, though some were no doubt unincorporated, because 87% of their sites feature their business names.

RESULTS

For results, I'll first present the quantitative responses for the three most pertinent survey questions here, and then a synthesis of some of the main themes emerging from both the one opened-ended survey question and the interview responses.

Survey Question 1: Website as Primary Marketing Tool

First, I asked participants to identify the percentage of their technical communication clientele who had originated *primarily* because of their business website (see table 1).

Table 1: Percentages of technical communication clientele originating primarily because of business websites

Percentage of website-originating clientele *	Percentage of businesses (n = 240)
0 %	20
1 – 9 %	32
10 – 19 %	18
20 – 100 %	25
Don't know	5

* Some response options are combined into broader percentage options.

These results show that, as expected, business prospects generated primarily through websites represent only a small portion of total business prospects, with about half the respondents getting single-digit percentages, less than 10%, of their clientele primarily through their websites. This is

broadly in line with the expectations suggested by the two STC surveys I mentioned earlier, where the person-to-person marketing methods of referrals and networking were shown to be much more dominant than the relatively impersonal web. Nevertheless, I was pleasantly surprised by the proportion reporting that their sites were a primary source for double-digit percentages of their clientele. Some of those responding in the 20%-plus categories appear to advertise heavily on other websites, such as on search engines, or to concentrate their businesses in niches such as editing, where communication services are arguably more quantifiable and commoditized (e.g., editing services priced per word) and hence more easily sold over the web.

Survey Question 2: Website as Secondary Marketing Tool

Both the results to this first question and the STC surveys I mentioned indicate that businesses' primary marketing methods are not websites but referrals and networking. Nevertheless, it's possible that, with clientele who originate primarily through these off-web means, websites may play a secondary, complementary or supplementary marketing role. So the subsequent survey question asked participants how much their website has helped them get such clientele (see table 2).

Table 2: Extent to which website has helped get clientele who did not originate through website, in percentages

Extent of website helpfulness	Percentage of businesses * (n = 240)
0 Not at all	8
1 A little	30
2 Moderately	32
3 A lot	25
Don't know	6
Average (0 - 3)	1.79

* Because of rounding, percentages do not add up to 100.

Table 3: Overall usefulness of website to business, in percentages

Level of usefulness	Percentage of businesses * (n = 240)
0 Not at all	5
1 Slightly	20
2 Moderately	34
3 Very	42
Average (0 - 3)	2.13

* Because of rounding, percentages do not add up to 100.

On a 0-to-3 scale, with 0 indicating that their site helped "not at all" and 3 indicating that their site helped "a lot," participants rated their site on average at a level of 1.79. This is above the midpoint of the scale, and close to the level defined as helping "moderately." Almost all reported that their

sites help them at least a little to support their other communication with prospective clients, and more than half report that their sites help them moderately to a lot in this way. So we should not assume, as we sometimes do with e-commerce sites, that a web presence and a bricks-and-mortar presence are mutually independent of each other. When marketing tech comm. services, a business website may be playing a meaningful marketing role complementing or supplementing the more traditional person-to-person marketing methods.

Interestingly, there's a very strong correlation between the responses to these first two survey questions. That is, in comparison with those getting single-digit percentages of their clientele primarily because of their sites, those getting double-digit percentages of clientele also found their sites significantly more helpful with clientele who originated through referrals, networking, and other means ($n = 118$ vs 101 respectively; $M = 1.47$ vs 2.10 respectively; $SD = 0.93$ vs 0.79 respectively; $t = 5.29$; $p < 0.001$). Such a correlation suggests that overall it's not the case that some businesses are using their websites mainly as a primary, impersonal point of contact whereas others are using their sites mainly as a secondary means of communication with prospects originating in more personal ways. Rather, the correlation suggests that some businesses are using their sites more, or more successfully, for their marketing communication with *all* their prospects, and other businesses are using their sites less, or less successfully, for their marketing communication with *all* their prospects.

Survey Question 6: Websites' Overall Usefulness

Finally, one of the last survey questions asked participants how useful their website been overall to their business (see table 3). On a 0-to-3 scale similar to the one used for the second question, participants rated their site on average at a level of 2.13. Compared with the relatively moderate responses to the other survey questions, this could be interpreted as a strong affirmation of the overall usefulness of their sites. Indeed, more than 40% rated their site as "very useful," the highest level. Not surprisingly, responses to this question were strongly correlated with responses to each of the first two questions about clientele; that is, the larger the role a website plays with prospects who originate by whatever means, the more useful the website.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS: HOW WEBSITES ARE USEFUL

To better understand how these sites are useful, I'll now present a quick synthesis and illustration of the qualitative data that came from responses to the one opened-ended survey question that asked participants to explain their site's usefulness, and also responses from the follow-up e-mail interviews. The two most prominent themes emerging from this qualitative data indicate that their sites provide what could be characterized, in classical rhetorical terms, as ethos and unartistic, or extrinsic, proofs.

Ethos

First, ethos. When explaining how their site is useful, participants frequently used such words as “credibility” and “trust”. Some participants indicated that merely having a web address was necessary these days for a credible tech comm. business. Some indicated that their site helped prove to prospects that they are a real, credible business, not just a fly-by-night operation. This seemed to be an important support function for converting prospects who did not originate directly through the site but through other means.

For instance, one of my participants owned a Michigan-based company with about 10 employees—among the larger companies in my sample—and with 16 years of experience as a tech comm. company. In addition to the more common forms of technical and business writing and editing services, their site calls attention to document validation, SOPs, process mapping, and training. In her survey responses, the owner indicated that only a token percentage of her clientele originated primarily through her site, but that her site did help moderately in marketing to prospects who originate through other means. She rated her site's overall usefulness for her business at a 2 on the 0-to-3 scale, and in the survey she explained: “Longevity and pictures of bricks and mortar locations provide a level of comfort—[that is,] “we'll be there for the long run”—for our clients.” In the follow-up interview, I asked her to explain this “comforting” function:

The facts that we've been in business for 16 years and have two physical offices that clients can visit indicate we are a successful small business. So much web content is untrustworthy, and our site shows that our company is not simply a one-person online endeavor, but a full-fledged brick-and-mortar operation. We assume clients don't know very much about the company when they visit our website, and we want them to learn right away about our

longevity and offices.

And indeed, very prominently on the left-hand side of their homepage, where many sites would feature a navigation column, they list instead their two office addresses in two Michigan towns plus a P.O. box in Indianapolis, all three with phone numbers.

Extrinsic Proofs

Along with ethos, these sites also provided what classical rhetoricians would characterize as extrinsic proofs. When mentioning specific site content, participants most often mentioned samples of their work, their portfolios. They would direct prospects to these portfolios, sometimes to specific samples that were related to a prospect's project. And their site thereby served significantly as a convenient means to transmit these samples rather than sending a bulky email attachment or traveling in person to the prospect's workplace.

For instance, one of my participants was a California-based consultant whose business, since the year 2000, specialized in white papers for technology companies. In his survey responses, the owner indicated that no clientele had originated primarily through his site, but that his site helped a lot in marketing to prospects who originate through other means. He also rated his site as very useful overall to his business, and in the survey he explained:

My web site is primarily a vehicle to show a portfolio of work that I have performed for clients. As such, it provides me with tremendous credibility when I reach out to new prospects. By featuring the names of clients that I know other web site visitors will recognize, along with the work I have done for them, prospects are able to overcome a significant barrier to doing business with me: the fact that I am otherwise unknown to them. I think my web site is able to achieve this better than I could ever convey through alternative communication channels.

In the follow-up interview, I asked him to describe how he typically directed prospective clients to his site:

When I reach out to new prospects, through email, I usually include a link to the portfolio section of my web site in the body of the email message. I have noticed that this does lead to more visits to my site - from analyzing web site logs kept by my ISP.

I also mention my web site when talking to prospects on the phone. The process usually goes something like this: I identify a new prospect and send one or two emails; I then follow up

with phone calls; once I get the prospect on the phone and tell them about the services I offer, their second request is usually for samples of work I've done for other clients and I direct them to the web site (first question is always about pricing).

Other participants similarly indicated that prospects' primary interests focus on pricing and especially portfolio samples, and so the website would come up when participants mentioned their portfolio page or specific samples in response to prospects' questions about samples or in anticipation of prospects' interest in samples. This participant also mentioned that he had tried advertising with Google Adwords for two years but the effort resulted in no new business. So whereas his site was never the point of origin for his new clientele, it was nevertheless very useful to him as a supportive, complementary communication channel by featuring his portfolio.

Contrasting Example

In the interests of a balanced presentation, let me finish with the contrasting explanation of a participant who did not use her site much at all for marketing her tech comm. services. This California-based participant had 10 years of experience as a technical communicator, and her site calls attention to single-sourcing, structuring techniques in digital documents, usability testing, and training and instructional design. She's also published a how-to book about video blogging with a trade press. In her survey responses, she indicated that only a token percentage of her clientele originated primarily through her site, and that her site helped her only a little in marketing to prospects who originate through other means. Interestingly, she rated her site's overall usefulness for her business at a surprisingly-high 2 on the 0-to-3 scale, but in the survey she explained: "I don't really use my web site to market my technical writing services. I use it to market my book. . . ." In the follow-up interview, I asked her to explain why she doesn't use her site to market her tech writing services and her response undermines, to some degree, websites' capacities to enhance ethos and to furnish relevant extrinsic proofs:

Because there is very little information I can put on my website that will sell me as a tech writer. When you hire a tech writer, you are looking for a few key things:

- * Can they understand the technical material my company has? That's so specific, unless I described in detail every project I've worked on (which would hinder my ability to get clients), I couldn't possibly address it.

- * Can they write a good document? To answer that question, I would need to put a

significant number of writing samples up, which would, again, hinder my ability to get clients. . . . Plus, I "close the deal" with my personality, in the in-person interview. If the potential employer can see my writing samples online, they have no reason to call me in for an interview.

* Can I work with them? Again, not something they can learn from my website. From my blog, they can learn what kind of sense of humor I have, what I think about, and what I ate for breakfast, but they can't learn my workflow by reading my website.

On the other hand, a tech writer who says she does a lot of web writing who doesn't have a website would be suspicious, no? So I have to have one, even if I don't feel it's useful for promotion.

I do, however, market my book via my website. I've just never seen a technical communication company's website that made me believe in them, and I think that is important to hiring a tech writer. You have to believe in me, or you won't hire me.

I find her contrasting marketing approaches to her book and her tech comm. services revealing. A product like a how-to book about video blogging is something that can readily be marketed through a website, whereas the services of writing technical documentation not unlike that how-to book cannot be marketed through a website. Her criteria of believing or trusting in one's technical communicator is presumably better communicated through the traditional marketing methods of referrals and networking, and that attitude or that reality, which I sensed throughout this research project is fairly widespread, may well limit the role that tech comm. business websites play overall in our field.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I'm finding that, with important qualifications and exceptions, tech comm. businesses perceive their websites to be quite useful, not just in the limited role these sites play as a primary marketing tool in attracting prospective clientele but also as a marketing tool to complement or supplement their other, more personal marketing communication.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire about the Business Web Sites of Technical Communication Companies, Consultants, and Independent Contractors

This questionnaire asks about the business Web sites of companies, consultants, and independent contractors who offer technical communication services, such as writing, editing, and designing technical documents. If your business site also offers other services or products, please focus your answers on your technical communication services only.

This questionnaire asks 9 questions, two with multiple parts.

- If your business Web site represents you as a solo consultant or independent contractor, these questions refer just to you and your site.
- If your business Web site represents an organization with two or more technical communication partners or employees, the “you” in these questions refers to your organization and its Web site.

Please answer all questions as directed.

Clientele

- 1 What percentage of your technical communication clientele has originated *primarily* because of your business Web site?

0%
1 - 4%
5 - 9%
10 - 19%
20 - 49%
50 - 100%
Don't know

- 2 For technical communication clientele who have not originated primarily because of your Web site (but primarily because of referrals, reputation, networking, etc.), how much has your Web site helped you get such clientele?

1. Not at all
2. A little
3. Moderately
4. A lot
Don't know

Web Site Promotion

- 3 How much have the following promotional methods helped in leading people to your business Web site? (For methods not used, answer “N/A”)

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	A lot	Don't know	Not applicable
WEB: Search engines	0	1	2	3	?	NA
WEB: Links from other Web sites, not including search engines	0	1	2	3	?	NA
INTERNET: Web address included with your Internet-based communication (examples: e-mail and attachments, listserv postings, submissions to job boards)	0	1	2	3	?	NA
PRINT: Web address imprinted on your public promotional materials (examples: business card, brochure, advertisements)	0	1	2	3	?	NA
PRINT: Web address included in your private print correspondence (examples: prospecting letters, resume, tenders)	0	1	2	3	?	NA
PRINT: Web address in print documents of other organizations (examples: business directories, associates' or clients' documents, professional journals, newsletters)	0	1	2	3	?	NA
SPEECH: Web site mentioned in your speech communication (examples: phone and face-to-face networking, professional presentations)	0	1	2	3	?	NA
REFERRALS: Web site mentioned by people outside your business	0	1	2	3	?	NA

Web Site Features

- 4 When constructing and revising your business Web site, how much did you consult the Web sites of similar companies, consultants, and independent contractors?
1. Not at all
 2. A little
 3. Moderately
 4. A lot
- Don't know

- 5 Listed below are some kinds of features on the business sites of many technical communication companies, consultants, and independent contractors. For those kinds of features on your site, how much have such features helped you market your technical communication services? (For features not on your site, answer “Not applicable”)

	Not at all	A little	Mod-erately	A lot	Don't know	Not applicable
Information about your business organization (examples: business name, organizational history)	0	1	2	3	?	NA
Information about you and other partners or employees	0	1	2	3	?	NA
Description of your services	0	1	2	3	?	NA
Portfolio or samples of your work	0	1	2	3	?	NA
List of your clients	0	1	2	3	?	NA
Testimonials from your clients	0	1	2	3	?	NA
Information about your business policies and work processes	0	1	2	3	?	NA
Periodic information (examples: newsletter, events, blog)	0	1	2	3	?	NA
Your Web site's design (examples: usability, aesthetic appeal, technical sophistication)	0	1	2	3	?	NA
Your Web address / URL (examples: a recognizable or memorable URL)	0	1	2	3	?	NA

Web Site Usefulness

6 Overall, how useful has your Web site been to your business?

1. Not at all useful
2. Slightly useful
3. Moderately useful
4. Very useful

7 Please explain your Web site's level of usefulness.

Further communication

8 What is the URL (the Web address) of your business Web site? _____

9 Further communication:

Do you want to receive an e-mail summary of the results of this survey?	Yes	No
Would you be willing to participate in a 5-minute <i>e-mail interview</i> about your Web site? The 3 to 6 questions will inquire into your site specifically and its role in helping you attract professional work.	Yes	No

Thank You

Thank you for completing this survey.

If you asked to receive a summary of the survey results, please allow 1 to 2 months for the data to be compiled and written up.

If you want to communicate with me with questions or comments about this survey, please contact me at [e-mail addresses].

[name and contact information]

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