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The Role of Technical Communication in Creating a Great Brand

Technical communication theories have a common theme of connecting people with information in a way that is accessible, understandable, and usable to them. This is similar to the idea of branding, which focuses on connecting people with a product or service that meets their needs and desires. In both situations, thoughtful design processes determine how a consumer will use the information or product and, therefore, how that information and product should be described so as to be immediately recognizable for its value. A great deal of articles I researched for this paper—such as those from User Vision, Steve Krug, Jared M. Spool, Kate Kiefer Lee, Sybil F. Stershic and Debra Semans—focused on the idea that usability is branding, that employees make an organization's brand effective or not, and that social media is a powerful branding platform. These common themes are an outcome of technology changes over the past 20+ years. As Spool discovered in 1996, "We're finding that a site's usability can dramatically affect branding."

This paper outlines branding concepts and how they connect to technical communications job roles and, therefore, how technical communicators can assume responsibility for driving quality and effective branding.

Branding connects a product or service with people.

A brand is an emotional association—the relationship—between a person and a product or service; it is their gut feeling. Effective branding creates a positive emotional association toward a logo and product or organization name. These associations are created through experiences.

Corporate brands are built by countless interactions between people—customers and clients, suppliers and distributors, shareholders and communities, and one another. (Riese, 1)

There are two basic marketing techniques used to create these experiences:

- **Indirect-experience** involves interacting with people through print, radio, television, and other advertising mediums. These mediums create an impression.

- **Direct-experience** involves direct contact and interaction with people. For example, when you test drive a car or drink a brand of soda you experience the product directly. Direct-experience is the king of marketing techniques; it is powerful enough to override indirect experience.

    The experiences you have with the brand will do more to shape your opinion of it than the consistency of any visual stimuli you experienced. (User Vision, 1)

These experiences and associated emotions are realized as external and internal branding:

- **External branding** represents the way people perceive you as a product or service first, and then relate that feeling back to the organization or company. People choose a product or service because the product is better as compared to others, the product or organization aligns with their values, the organization stands behind the product or service, and so on. The consumer choices people make reflect their relationship with an organization, product, or service—their choices reflect the external branding.

- **Internal branding** represents an organization's values and beliefs. The employees make up the internal branding by their attitudes and service. When an organization's core values align with employee values and sense of satisfaction, internal branding becomes a powerful driving force for positive direct-experiences. Effective branding reflects the core values of an organization and is realized through employees.

Branding techniques of creating a logo, slogan, or image to provide a strong mental key that allows the customer to make decisions quickly and feel good about their decisions were established as early as 1300 B.C., with improvements made by Italians in the 13th century. (Wikipedia). These techniques have been effective for companies like Nike, Coca Cola, Philip Morris, PepsiCo, Heinz, and many others. Most were developed by advertising companies or marketing firms appealing to the needs or values of the audience. Virginia Slims told the young women of America, "You've come a long way, baby" to let the young women know it was alright to smoke because it made you look sophisticated.

But with the development of new technologies that make it easy for anyone to advertise on the internet with very little impact to operational funds, organizations are looking within to provide branding. One reason organizations are making this choice is because of a shift in the way some marketing firms have been creating advertisements. Some of the most entertaining, trendy, and expensive commercials have left out the most important key element of advertising: the product and its distinct value. How many times have you watched an advertisement on the television set, and then as soon as it was over, you thought or even asked someone else, "What were they selling?" If it takes more than 20 times of repeating a slogan and showing a logo before people begin to remember a product, Schley and Nichols wonder what good a witty advertisement—minus the product—will be in driving consumers to associate themselves with the product.

> *On that January day, you could watch as company after company gleefully wasted $4.2 million per minute of their shareholder's money and opportunity under the tutelage of the world's most respectable advertising agencies. Entertainment wise it was an A+. We saw the famous sock puppet sing "If You Leave Me Now" by Chicago, mourning the fact that his master walked to the pet store instead of using the Web to order his Kibble. We saw cowboys herding cats on the open range for twenty-seven seconds while cowpoke after cowpoke tried to top the same cat-herding joke; until finally, in the last three seconds, the announcer revealed it was a commercial for EDS, who now should earn our business in integrated computing. Another appeal for our wallet share showed a dozen brides in white gowns start a fistfight at the stationary store because someone picked the same invitation. Best of all, we saw a dancing chimpanzee in an E*Trade T-shirt next to a couple of sad-sack investors who actually said, "Well, we just wasted our two million dollars. Now what?" Must have cast the client in that one. (Schley and Nichols, xiii-xiv)*

A second reason organizations are looking within to provide branding is that the cost of everything is rising, but the ability for the organization to brand their product or service is already at their fingertips at a fraction of the cost compared to the cost of paying an advertising agency. Another benefit an organization receives by branding in-house is that both the internal and external branding is built at the same time.

Effective branding reflects the core values of an organization and is realized through employees.

> *The best brand voices are true reflections of the people behind the companies. (Lee, 1)*

> *What is missing is the information explaining who they really are: nothing is known of the management, the staff, or a company's true particulars. (Javed, 2)*

> *This is where the intellectual meets tactile. If you can describe your project as if it were something tangible, like a person, it becomes easier to design and select colors based on personal or physical characteristics. (DeVeau, 2)*

Employees have a certain unique power to realize the potential of their organization as demonstrated through their job role. Technical communicators, being skilled in relating information in a

way that is digestible to any target audience, are particularly well-positioned to drive quality and effective branding through external-facing and operational job roles. Consider the influence of the following job roles technical communicators often play:

- Website and application designers, content writers, and graphic artists are responsible for representing the organization, its products and services, its values, and its accessibility to potential and existing customers.

- Persons responsible for customer and stakeholder interactions are responsible for corresponding and interacting in a way that reflects the core values of the organization.

- Project managers, task managers, and team leaders are responsible for executing work in a way that reflects the core values of the organization and produces high quality products and services.

- Supervisors, department managers, and human resources departments are responsible for the performance of individuals and departments in a way that aligns with organizational values and priorities.

- Communications leaders for the organization are responsible for instilling core values and priorities throughout the whole organization and for exporting those values and priorities through authentic marketing.

    A healthy internal brand has leaders and managers who "walk the talk" with their employees. (Covill, 2)

In the orientation of new employees to the organization's culture, supervisors, department managers, and human resources departments have opportunities to teach and demonstrate core values in order to perpetuate the realization of the organization's brand. In the peripheral stage in the organization socialization process, leaders provide training, mentoring, guidance, and encouragement to help new employees utilize and retain the organization's culture, branding values, and branding guidelines. Leaders show the new employee how they are the brand and, in fact, all the employees are the brand because they can make decisions based on those guidelines to create and strengthen their brand. Follow-up training to re-enforce existing or new guidelines or changes in work processes and operations can ensure the employee and organization are in alignment with the branding core values and organization's goals.

Communications leaders are like a pep squad. They might help rally employees to have a softball team, potluck dinner, fundraiser, or other activity to create relationships and friendships. They may send out flyers or e-mail messages about the organization's product or service and encourage the employees to take advantage of a discount or new item or feature. This helps the employee immerse in the organization's brand and values system. Communications can include messages about the organization's values and announcements about hot topics such as how the use of cells phone while driving is dangerous not only to the person(s) in the vehicle but also the lives of others on the road way.

Organizations need to have a good understanding of their values and beliefs and a purpose for their product or service. An internal branding strategy should be established to align operational priorities and employee experiences with the organization's promise to the market. Leaders and employees alike need to be actively immersed in the internal branding strategy of the organization so they can focus on delivering the brand promise. Leaders are responsible for ensuring the strategy is

continued by conducting internal brand audits, ensuring clarity of purpose, handling resistance, building

relationships, engaging the strategy, and putting it all together. Internal audits are designed to evaluate

different departments and their roles in the branding process; leaders meet and discuss what part of the

branding strategy each of them or their employees are working on and any issues they have with the

strategy. To face these issues, it is important to communicate within all levels of the organization

because leaders can sometimes become focused on operations so much that they may lose sight of the

purpose of their organization—to be user-driven. Receiving open feedback from employees who can

sometimes see an effort becoming the side-tracked can help keep all areas of an organization aligned.

Staff meetings can also be a time to reinforce the purpose of an organization. Above all, trust must be

the center of all communications and processes in order for the organization to thrive.

Relating to Real Workplace Experience

At my workplace we recently changed some processes that affected many people across all departments. Some people even changed job roles and titles. Some resisted the changes, but with good leadership that is actively engaged with the change, they were able to show the employees the value of the change and provide comfort for the employee's displacement. This builds strong relationships throughout the office, which in turns helps incorporate and strengthen the internal branding strategy.

Technical communicators from every departmental level of an organization have the opportunity to act as the organization's voice or conscience, so they have a major role in the positive or negative perception of their brand. Good branding strategy and the involvement from the entire organization can help build a culture that promotes the organization's goals. A good way to involve everyone is to use some helpful communication tools like webcasting and podcasting, blogs, video conferencing, and/or a corporate intranet. Webcasting and podcasting allows employees (and even customers, when appropriate) to view recordings when they have time. Blogs allow for feedback from employees (or customers). Video conferencing allows employees to discuss important issues in real time from different locations—there are many online applications (Skype, for example) to help accomplish this task. A corporate intranet allows employees to stay connected—Microsoft SharePoint is a common example. (Venkat)

Relating to Real Workplace Experience

I recently built an intranet. I integrated everything from our timesheet with leave notice, to our new Help Ticket system, and even our application tracking and renewal checklists which are applications used in daily work processes. Each department has a tab and the items they need to complete their role, including training and instant help.

Usability *is* branding.

> *We have some solid evidence that users consider a site "fun" if it lets then find what they're looking for. (Spool, 2)*

The role of website and application designers, content writers, and graphic artists—who as previously mentioned, are responsible for representing the organization, its products and services, its values, and its accessibility to potential and existing customers—cannot be underestimated. The direct-experience game has changed: the bulk of customer experience has shifted to the internet. Interactive websites, including social media sites, create direct experience because they are interactive, not passive. There is always a direct-experience. The experience can be powerful enough to cause the user to overlook or ignore indirect messaging, to literally cause advertising and visual branding elements to become a waste of money. Therefore, understanding what users are trying to accomplish and meeting those needs through thoughtfully informed usability design is paramount.

The internet is an interactive platform with an interface that provides a user to access the products, services, or information they need or desire. According to Internet World Stats, about one-third of the North American population was using the internet in December 31, 2000 and in June 30, 2012 about 79% of the population of North American was using the internet. Based on usability research gathered by Spool, User Vision and others, it is apparent that the bulk of customer experience has shifted to the internet.

> *…users consider a site "fun" if it lets them find what they're looking for. (Spool, 2)*

Users measure a successful web experience by how easily they can find what they're looking for. Finding information is the user's strongest correlation to success. Therefore, usability is branding on the

internet. One very good simple internet design model that Spool points out is eBay, which has grown

into a giant. The entire website is interactive and made up almost completely by user content. It is

merely a blog system with topics being sale items and the responses being bids. The information is user-

driven with small advertisements on the right-hand side of the screen. All the search features are on the

page the user is current on, so changing, narrowing, or expanding the results is fast and easy: it's a "fun"

site.

> *The eBay site provides an online auction. At first glance, it's not very sophisticated. In fact, it's effectively a modified message board, where each thread is an item for sale and each reply is a bid. Other than the site logo, it uses few decorative graphic and consists mostly of user-supplied text, often all in uppercase. What graphics are on the site are images of the items the users have provide—mostly amateur-taken snapshots. (Spool, 2)*

I went to eBay to look for any changes since Spool wrote his article 18 years ago. Surprisingly it

still has very little advertising using the indirect messages technique and the ones that are there are

along the right-hand side of the screen. I have used eBay several times but really never notice them. I

continue to return to the site along with millions of other users because I can find what I want to know

quickly. Sometimes I purchase items, but I mainly go there to see how much an item is selling for in

order to set a price on my items. The site is made up of a lot of links, but for those users who don't see

links as links there are images representing categories. This shows that the designers are adding

redundancies for usability sake. I have done the same at my job, but at first thought it was useless,

stupid, meaningless, and against design principles—now I understand that different users from different

cultures and geographical locations interpret and use the internet differently.

Colors, type-faces, imagines, and sounds are part of designing a brand, but "branding is usability

and usability is branding" (User Vision). Have you ever visited a website looking for something only to

find it a hour later on a different site? I have found myself in this situation. The first site may even be

the product maker. The following example given in a 1996 research article by Spool is so true because I discovered it when I was buying my Honda Civic in 2010. Spool suggests an experiment: Go to the Ford website (Ford.com) and then go to Edmunds (Edmunds.com). At each site look up the miles per gallon of a Ford Windstar van. Most people find the information on Edmunds faster than the Ford site. Their research states that the Edmunds site does a better job of branding the Ford name then Ford does. Why is this? The Ford site is full of large images and advertisements for their products, while Edmunds uses less flash images, advertising, and just list the facts clearly. Users like to visit a site and get the information they need in an instant.

So as a technical communicator, it is very important to know and understand how users will interpret and use your website in order to design a site with excellent usability so users will want to return again and again. Usability design tips offered by Spool, User Vision, Katre, Javed, and Lee include:

- Purposefully "…build a site that uses direct-experience branding…" (Spool)

- Keep the users' goals in mind when designing the site.

- Let your user inform your design more than corporate marketing. "It is improper to dismiss usability issues because of the constraints of branding guidelines." (User Vision)

- Keep the site streamlined and not crowded.

- Avoid big flashy images or advertisements.

- Only use widely-known icons that have been in existence for a significant amount of time. The icons should: be readily understood; communicate a precise message; and be easy to memorize and recall.

- Choose a hyperlink color that stands out from the other colors on the web page.

- Use secondary color to provide contrast to the web page.

- Choose a clear and easy to read type-face.

- Choose your website name and url carefully—"The complexities of e-commerce and the massive duplication of similar and identical names on the web have made naming a tactical exercise." (Javed)

- Pay attention to search engine guidelines such as Google's Webmaster Tools.

- Know the language and cultures of your audience. Study the cultures of your users so that you can appropriately relate to them.

- "Clear and friendly language helps readers feel at ease." (Lee)

Usability coupled with public relations makes a great brand.

> *The best brand voices are true reflections of the people behind the companies. (Lee, 1)*

Smart public relations help to positively affect people's perception of a product or service or organization—and it can be done cost effectively.

> *With a very limited budget, the [startup] company could not afford to launch a national advertising and marketing campaign. So they relied on the team to orchestrate a public relations program to build awareness and help drive interest…* (Gelfand, 1)

> *"…today public relations can be the driver in a campaign" for two key reasons: the relatively low cost and the credibility it delivers as compared to traditional advertising and marketing.* (Gelfand, 1)

"The job of public relations is to get your message out in ways that create layers of value for your target audience(s) while stretching your marketing dollars as far as possible. At its best, public relations is a strategic marketing and branding tool used to accomplish a stand business objective." (Gelfand, 1)

…today public relations can be the driver in a campaign (Gelfand, 1)

When it comes to public relations, a communicator should be honest and authentic, know their personal strengths and weakness, know where they belong in the organization, and embrace change to help lead others during the experience. A public relations department or team should collect information from each department in the organization and incorporate it with their branding elements before distribution. Giving each employee or manager of a department an external voice in the organization allows consumers and users a chance to see the product or service connected to a person. It is very import to give the organization a "face." That is the job of the public relations department, but they shouldn't do it alone—the communication design process should not be an isolated process for one person, but rather a collaborative venture between public relations journalists, marketing gurus, technical communicators and usability-focused web designers, CEO, managers, and any other appropriate stakeholders.

Usability-Focused Communication Strategies and Tools for Relating to Consumers and Users

Continuous Online Support: Many years ago the hours of business operations were typically 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, but today consumer expectations are different. People demand instant gratification, so organizations have changed to accommodate their needs by offering 24/7 online customer support. This is just one example how public relations have informed organization responsiveness to the needs of users.

Really Simple Syndication (RSS) Feeds: When compared to e-mail, RSS feeds have a clear advantage. Rok Hrastnik, author of <u>Unleash the Marketing and Publishing Power of RSS</u> and editor of <u>www.marketingstudies.net</u>, notes that "Lockergnome.com, one of the most popular tech sites on the web today, used to distribute more than 400,000 e-mail newsletters weekly. Today, they have five times more RSS subscribers than e-mail subscribers and their click-through rates (the percentage of people that clicked on a link in the message received) are 500 percent greater than their e-mail click-through rates, which means that now more people actually read their content and respond to it." (Falkow, 3)

> *People who read feeds are the ones you want to reach—they're opinion leaders and early adopters. (Falkow, 1)*
>
> *…introduces you to people and markets you wouldn't otherwise know existed. (Falkow, 3)*

Each RSS feed is a powerful branding tool. RSS offers no spam. RSS offers just the content your customer wants and for your company, the feeds offer greater search visibility—brand awareness. Falkaw offers an example of brand awareness about a company that was selling a service using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). A reporter was looking for content to add to their magazine when they came across the RSS feed telling about the company's services. The reporter quickly got in touch with the company and asked them about writing a story about the company. Not only did the RSS attract customers but the company even got a secondary indirect-message placed in a magazine for readers to notice and learn about their company. What is better than free advertising and a way to connect to customers by offering core values from the organization?

Social media: Social media offers organizations a strong online presence and supplies consumers with information. Websites like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, and organization sites such as the Project Management Institute's www.pmi.org can be powerful tools for connecting, disseminating information, and receiving feedback. *I'd Rather Be Writing* offers these tips for maximizing the benefits of direct-experience through social media:

- Put a face with your company by sharing (professional and tasteful) images and statements about employees especially leaders and managers so they become "real" to consumers.

- Review comments from consumers about your products or service.

- Collect data about your product or service.

- Spread the word out about your organization, values, product, service, and other announcements.

- Use interactive surveys and give away products or awards.

Conclusion

Throughout this semester I have been reading articles and theories to learn how to become a better technical communicator. As I started to read through the research for branding I started to realize I was just reviewing everything that we have been studying all semester—that branding and technical communication theory have everything in common. We have read several scholars' articles that suggested the role of a technical writer/communicator has been changing and that even the name is under controversy. Technology is changing everything when it comes to the world we live in, so naturally it has changed the way technical communicators carry out their tasks. We have read about the

styles and guidelines that are needed when you are designing and writing for the web or mobile device. We have read how technical communicators need to acquire different skills in order to keep up with the changing times. Some of these skills may be Dreamweaver, Weebly, Photoshop, Illustrator, Visual Studios, Fireworks and many more. These skills are necessary for the development of new media designs that are common on the web today.

Branding has also been changed by the fast pace of ever-evolving technology. The book Make It Happen! Live Out Your Personal Brand by Justin Honaman is a review of much of the technical communication theory. Honaman discusses how to brand yourself by discovering your "focus areas" such as work, family, community, and faith (those were his examples). Honaman encourages readers to develop personalized "focus areas" and then write them down. He describes this self-branding process in an image with your personal brand in the center, self (your outward appearance and personality) circumfusing the center in a ring, focus areas equally divided in the next ring out, and actions/behaviors in the outer ring. The last part of the image is the outer never-ending influences from all directions that consistently bombard the entire sphere. That is why Honaman says self-branding is a process you must work to improve every day.

Through our theory readings this semester we have learned that to be able to align with an organization's culture through the socialization process, we should take on a peripheral role with a small task as mentors and leaders demonstrate the organization's culture or branding values. We have read and discussed ethics and morals that technical communicators need to understand and apply in an organization's communication so that they gain respect and meet their goals. All of this theory is simply just being a good person—speaking the truth, accepting the blame, studying and understanding new cultures and laws, learning new languages, speaking in a friendly voice, etc. This is what Honaman's

book is all about. After you have your sphere developed you develop a list of values just like the

branding values of an organization. You can most likely list hundreds of good core values like patience,

teaching, quality, persistence, and learning. Honaman recommends choosing five and then ranking

them in importance. Then, live by them and occasionally reassess the core values and change them

accordingly. Honaman says just like in the workplace you need to have a mentor or friends that you

respect and look up to and learn from because they live the values you have written down in your self-

branding process. By understanding the self-branding process, you will drive quality and an effective

branding within an organization.

Based on all of the readings this semester, along with my workplace experiences, it seems that

being an informed technical communications professional is important in this era more than ever,

maybe even critically important.

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