STC society for technical communication
Viewpoint

March Meeting Preview

The Future of Online Documentation

presenter Andrea L. Ames

Once nice-to-have, online information is becoming necessary, but going online is a moving target. The decisions you must make and the issues you must con-

Andrea L. Ames

sider are not so straightforward anymore—particularly given the plethora of Web-based technologies, many only partially implemented. Today is confusing and tangled, and tomorrow seems murky.

Andrea L. Ames will present a snapshot of what's happening today in online documentation and what we'll likely see in the future. She will discuss the technologies of today and the trends and technologies she sees emerging, as well as the infrastructure, skills, and knowledge necessary to support those trends.

The presentation is geared toward intermediate to advanced technical communicators experienced with designing and writing online documentation and interested in discussing what the future may hold.

About Andrea L. Ames
Andrea L. Ames, M.S., is an international speaker with more than 15 years of experience in all facets of print and online technical and scientific communication, information architecture and design, interaction design, instructional design, and technical marketing communication. She is Region 8 Director-Sponsor and a member of

the Board of Directors of the Society for Technical Communication, a Principal Technical Writer at Vertical Networks, and a Junior Fellow of the San Diego Supercomputer Center, where she studies and practices the use of new media—particularly online media—for communication. She teaches in three university technical communication programs, and she is a consultant and freelance author, the principal coauthor of two award-winning technical trade books: VRML Sourcebook and VRML 2.0 Sourcebook, second edition. As a *Web Techniques* magazine Contributing Editor, she writes articles about Web content development and Web technologies.

George Rimalower To Address June Meeting

George Rimalower, founder and president of ISI Translation and Localization Services, will address our chapter at the June meeting, tentatively scheduled for June 20. Though he was previously slated to make his presentation at the February meeting, a regrettable miscommunication prevented his appearance. George will speak on "Cultural and Linguistic Challenges to Technical Communication." He will describe methods for communicating with people who speak languages other than your own and offer suggestions for preparing material that will be submitted for subsequent translation.

Contents

March STC SFV Chapter Dinner Meeting

Date: March 21, 2000
Speaker: Andrea L. Ames
Topic: The Future of Online Documentation
Location: 94th Aerosquadron Restaurant, adjacent to Van Nuys Airport
Menu: Chicken Piccata, Top Sirloin, Vegetarian Pasta
Cost: $20.00 for members, $24.00 for non-members

Driving Directions: From Roscoe Blvd, go south of Woodley past the railroad crossing. Raymer is the first street on the right. The restaurant is at the end of the Raymer cul-de-sac. Freeway: 405 to Roscoe, go west. 118 exit Balboa, south to Roscoe, east to Woodley. 101 exit Balboa, north to Roscoe, east to Woodley.

RSVP to **Art Ringwalt** by Mar. 17 at (818) 840-9592 or via e-mail to *arthur122@earthlink.net*. (Indicate menu choice.)

SFV Chapter Contacts

Our STC Neighbors

Los Angeles chapter -- Amy Russell
(310) 798-5424
Voice Mail: (213) 896-2982
http://www.stc.org/region8/lac/www/
lahome.htm

San Gabriel Valley chapter -- Scott
Brown, (626) 355-1124,
az593@lafn.org
http://www.stc.org/region8/sgv/www/
index.htm

Santa Barbara chapter -- Yvonne
DeGraw, (805) 683-5784,
yvonne@silcom.com
http://www.stc.org/region8/snb/

Orange County chapter -- Bob
Courtney (714) 823-4222,
rmcourtney@aol.com
http://www.ocstc.org/main.htm

Inland Empire chapter -- Sharon
Burton-Hardin,
sharonburton@email.msn.com
http://www.iestc.org

About STC

The Society for Technical Communication
(STC) is the world's largest organization
for technical communicators. STC's al-
most 24,000 members include writers, edi-
tors, illustrators, printers, publishers, pho-
tographers, educators, and students. Dues
are $110 per year, plus a one-time enroll-
ment fee. Membership is open to anyone
engaged in some phase of technical com-
munication, or interested in the arts and
sciences of technical communication, or
in allied arts and sciences. You can reach
STC headquarters by writing or calling

Society for Technical
Communication
901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904
Arlington, VA 22203-4114
Tel (703) 522-4114
Fax (703) 522-2075
e-mail: stc@stc-va.org

Society Job Listings

The STC maintains job listings on the In-
ternet. You can download listings from
the Society's Web site at www.stc-va.org.

Viewpoint

SFV STC Membership Directory 2000 Now Available to SFV Chapter Members

SFV STC chapter members Dennis
Wilson and Janie McKinney have
completed production of the SFV STC
Membership Directory for 2000. This
year, for the first time, the directory is
being electronically distributed in Adobe
Acrobat format (.PDF). The file is
available in sequential order, for online
viewing, or arranged as a booklet, for
double-sided printing.

To request the directory file or a
correction to the directory, please send
an e-mail message to Janie McKinney
(**aquila@earthlink.net**). As changes
come in, she will revise the file and re-
distribute it to SFV STC members.

If you require a printed copy of the
directory, please send a request to Janie
McKinney, 673 Erbes Road, Thousand
Oaks, CA 91362.

To view and print .PDF files, you must
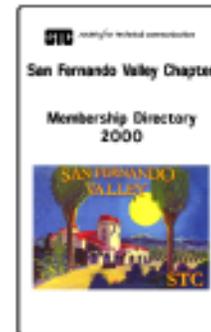
have installed on your computer the pro-
gram called Adobe Acrobat Reader. It
is available FREE at the following URL:

http://www.adobe.com/prodindex/
acrobat/readstep.html

**Please note that the membership
directory is only for the use of SFV
STC chapter members. It is not to be
used for commercial purposes or mass
e-mailings that are not STC business.**

Can Technical Writing and Technical Support Work Together?

by Will Schirmer, STC Member

*Reprinted from **Rough Draft**, the STC Phoenix Chapter newsletter. Originally published in **News & Views**, the newsletter of the Philadelphia Metro Chapter of STC.*

When you hear the term "Technical Support," you often think of the department down the hall. The phones are ringing, people are moving quickly to talk with one another, and there's usually a certain degree of noise.

The average technical writer would head in the opposite direction, where the phones aren't ringing, fingers are moving quickly across keyboards, and, for the most part, it's quiet.

Now picture yourself in this situation: You are being interviewed for a job as a technical writer. You look at the manuals that need updating, and you hear plans for future projects. The more you hear, the more interested you become. Then you hear something you don't expect: part of your time will be spent on telephone support.

That's exactly what happened to me last year. My first thoughts were: How do you combine these two areas? I had been in both roles at another company, and I saw them as different as night and day. It didn't seem to be a likely combination at first. However, the more I looked into it, the more I saw how the pieces would fit together, and I accepted the position.

Background

The company I work for, SofterWare, Inc., provides software for the day care and camping industries. Every employee is involved in client support in some capacity, all the way up to the president, Dr. Nathan Relles. All this has resulted in a consistently high satisfaction rate with the clients
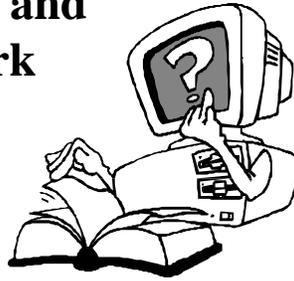
(so says our latest survey – our median rating was nine on a scale of one to ten).

Job Description

My job includes updating manuals, writing new manuals, desktop publishing of newsletters and marketing material, and developing an online Help system. It also includes answering calls from clients, dispatching calls, working the evening support shift, and various other projects.

Writing as a Support Rep

Many in our occupation believe that if you write a good manual, the clients won't call for support as often. Using this as a guiding principle, my goal is to write manuals that are appealing, as clear as possible, and easy to use:

Our installation guides are designed as a result of listening to clients during support calls. "How do I run this?" "How do I answer this prompt?" "How do I know my installation finished properly?" I answer all these questions in the document, so the next client can have the answers, eliminating their need to call in these questions.

A second principle that plagues writers is: no matter how well you write the documentation, some users never read it anyway. I receive calls from many people who have not read the documentation. When you ask them why not, they have dozens of excuses. So I do what a former manager used to call "paper-training a client." It goes like this:

"While I explain this module to you, please turn to page 24 in the manual and follow along. As you'll see, the prompts and responses are explained in that section. When we're done with this procedure, you'll know exactly where to find it in the manual. Put a sticky note on the top of the page and write the section name on the part that sticks out. After you use the manual a few times, you can easily do this on your own!'

What have I done here? Several things:

- I've satisfied the client by providing immediate answers.

- I've taught the client to use the appropriate section in the document.

- I've encouraged the client and strengthened the client's condence in finding information on his or her own.

- I've saved the support department at least two future calls.

Support Colleagues as a Writer

As a writer on the support team, I can:

- Convert people's notes on how to do tasks into internal training memos.

- Recycle excerpts from manuals, newsletters, and updates that haven't been released yet into support documents that we can fax to customers.

- Use e-mail attachments to get documentation to customers. For example, descriptions of product options that few clients use go out by e-mail only. By not printing the descriptions, we save money.

When doing technical writing for a software company, stay close to users, stay close to support, and keep a large recycle bin for rough drafts.

Membership News

by Sharon Stewart

We experienced an outstanding growth rate last year and it has not slowed any since we entered the new millennium! Congratulations to all of you members who shared the news to your friends and co-workers about STC and the San Fernando Valley chapter. We have seen attendance by members and guests increase at our monthly meetings.

We just received a new STC brochure, "10 Reasons to Join STC." This brochure is mailed out to each person who requests information about STC and the chapter.

Not only have we seen continued growth in our chapter, but the Society overall is having a very good year, with a current total of 23,460 members.

Please join me in welcoming our chapter's newest members.

NEW MEMBER WELCOME

Debra L. D'Amico joined us in November. She is currently employed at Hitachi Koki Imaging Solutions in Simi Valley as writer/editor.

Lorraine Millings also joined us in November. She is currently employed as a writer/editor.

Our third member to join us in November was **Shelly Schneider**. Shelly is currently employed at Accelerated Networks in Moorpark as a writer/editor.

Joining us in December was **Mary C. Ekholm** who resides in the Santa Clarita area.

Joining us in January were:

Juniko Moody. Juniko is currently working as a writer/editor and graphic artist. She resides in the Santa Clarita area.

Karen M. Price. Karen is also a writer/editor interested in Marketing Communications. She currently resides in the West Hills area.

Salma M. Sanwari. Salma is an independent contractor specializing in writing and editing. She resides in the Canoga Park area.

Barbara Yanez. Barbara currently works for Neasi-Weber International where she is a writer and editor. Her interests include information design and online information.

James T. Hiers. James is a writer/editor who resides in the Rosamond area.

We also had two members transfer into the chapter during January:

Julia M. Cope and **Brian C. Kindilien**.

If you know of anyone who would like to receive information about the San Fernando Valley Chapter, please let me know by e-mailing me at SSTEWA04@Harris.com or phoning me at 805-389-2421.

ADDRESS CHANGES

If you have an address change, please send it to STC International Headquarters in Arlington, VA. You can either send them a postcard or e-mail them at membership@stc-va.org.

Serious Branding is Serious Fun

by Mary Wise, President of STC

The Society for Technical Communication. STC. Who are we? What do we do?

We are many. We do lots.

I'd like a better definition.

Last May, I explained that one of my goals as President of STC was to better define who STC is and what STC does as a professional society of technical communicators. Now, I'd like to fill you in on our progress in that area: the STC Branding Project.

No, we're not burning the STC logo into our hides with a hot iron! We are going through a process to discover and develop the STC brand.

"So, Mary," I hear you cry, "what's a brand? Isn't it the logo?"

Actually, integrated branding is much more than just a logo, or mission statement, or public relations plan. According to *Integrated Branding*, by F. Joseph LePla and Lynn M. Parker: "integrated branding is an organizational strategy used to drive company and product direction – where all actions and messages are based on the value the company brings to its line of business." To put it more succinctly, integrated branding is the promise you keep.

So how do we go about figuring out this so-called brand?

First, I realized that this process was not going to be quick and easy. To do this right, we had to to involve the board and the membership during the whole process. Second, I knew that we could not do it by ourselves; we needed professional assistance. Finally, I decided that we needed to take this year to define the brand, and leave the rest of the work until next year. Believe me, that's hard for an STC president to do!

So what have we been doing?

Last summer, our Corporate Identity committee, headed by Donna Sakson, developed and released a Request for Proposals to several firms that we knew were experts at integrated branding. We were very pleased to receive a proposal from Parker LePla, and we selected them to help us uncover the STC brand.

Uncover the brand?

Believe it or not, our brand already exists. This process helps us discover that brand and explicitly define it. When we do that, we can then make decisions for the Society based on the brand.

During the fall, Parker LePla conducted a series of interviews with board members, STC members, non-renewing members, prospective members, and office. We also formed the brand team, a group of 12 STC members who are charged with defining our brand. At the winter board meeting, the board participated in a workshop so that we could learn what branding was about and to learn some of the early results of the interviews.

What's next?

In mid-March, the brand team will meet to analyze the data and define the brand: our mission, our values, our associations, and our personality. I'm confident that the result will be a stronger, more visible STC – a Society with a promise to its members; a Society that will keep that promise.

I welcome your comments and questions on this important project. Please feel free to write me; my email address is: mwise@manu.com

Believe me, it's some serious fun!

January Meeting Recap

"So, you have a web site …now what?" presented by Doug Klein, Xcentric.com

by Janie McKinney

The Internet Stampede

Doug Klein

The 1990s saw businesses stampeding to the Internet in the mistaken belief that all they had to do was acquire a URL, hastily construct a Web site, and wait for the money to roll in. For the vast majority of businesses, that optimistic scenario didn't happen. The stampede to the World Wide Web became a massive retreat, to the extent that presenter Doug Klein wryly commented, "The Internet is corporate America's next Vietnam. Businesses got in for the wrong reasons, then pulled out while still trying to look like winners."

Many businesses spent gobs of money to establish an Internet presence and then complained that they got no return on their investment. The general perception sprang up that "to be a leader you need a 50 million dollar ad budget." Moreover, the failure of online business was not confined to "no-name" or obscure companies: After a brief unsuccessful foray into selling products online, Levi-Strauss pulled its e-commerce site.

Yet, in spite of the hard-luck stories, the competition on the Internet is fierce—every 20 seconds, a new commercial Web site goes online. This huge influx dilutes the Internet prospects for every other business that has a Web presence.

To further complicate matters, the Internet environment is always changing. One recent major change is that several search engines (including Yahoo, AOL Search, Lycos, Hotbot, Netcenter, and Altavista) have all inserted the element of human judgment into their top-level results. All of these search engines now return their top results from human-generated indexes. In the past, search engine managers relied solely on indexes that were mechanically generated by their bots, or "spiders," that crawl through Web sites and report occurrences of words.

So, with all that corporate carnage lying around cyberspace, why should any business go online? Doug's answer was simple: "To generate qualified leads." A Web site, according to Doug, is a "glorified brochure"—no more and no less— and no amount of pyrotechnics or cute Java tricks can replace good solid content for effectiveness. But even if your company's Web site is brilliantly conceived and flawlessly executed, it still may not get noticed. For an explanation of that dilemma, you need to understand the "Second Greatest Enemy" of Web planners — Search Engines.

Search Engines

Search engines are a fact of Web life, so it's well worth your time and effort to make them work for you. According to Doug, search engines index 18% of all sites on the Web. The search engines account for between 57 to 85 per cent (depending on which study you believe) of a Web site's traffic. However, site traffic is not the only indicator of a site's success. Even though search engines can generate a lot of traffic, only 30% of the visitors are potential buyers — the rest are just "surfin' through."

Just what are potential customers and search-engine result evaluators looking for in a site? In a word, CONTENT. They want a site that is easy to read and navigate, is full of free information, and has links to other sites in case you don't have what they want. Doug's advice? "Give it to 'em. The generous approach works just as well on the Internet as it did in *A Miracle on 34th Street*."

Search Engine Optimization Weapons

CAUTION: *This list requires constant updating because of frequent rule changes.*

Gateway/Hallway pages – A gateway page is a Web page specifically written to the requirements of a particular search engine and submitted only for that search engine. In a recent change, however, search engines have begun accepting only the URL for the home page of each site. To work around that limitation, Web developers have started submitting hallway pages. A hallway page is the URL for a site's home page that has been seeded with invisible links to pages that are written specifically for certain search engines. To keep the spiders from reporting conflicting information for your site, metatags

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Your Web Marketing Toolbox

Marketing Activity	Doug's Bookmarks
Online Press Releases	*newsbureau.com*
Targeted Advertising	
Search Engine Optimization	*searchenginewatch.com*
Affiliate Programs	*clicktrade.com*
Strategic Alliance Building	
Opt-in Mail Campaigns	*postmasterdirect.com*
Discussion Group Marketing	*egroups.com*

January Meeting Recap

are written into the code to direct spiders to their intended target pages.

Metatags (in order of priority) – Metatags are particularly effective because only about 10% of all Webmasters bother to use them.

1. Title in Head – Titles have a maximum of 9 words. Choose the words most relevant to your site.

2. Description – This will be what potential customers see first when your Web site appears in a search engine's listing. It's your chance to make a good first impression.

3. Keywords – Make sure your site contains numerous, well chosen words that differentiate you from your competition (or at least put you into the same league). The keywords are those you hope people will be searching FOR when they find your Web site.

Look and Feel – A successful Web site will be well organized and easy to navigate. Too much clutter and complex navigation requirements will confuse, annoy, and drive away potential customers.

Valid HTML – Web sites submitted to search engines must have impeccable HTML code. To validate your code and get a listing of HTML errors that need to be fixed, consider buying a program called "Validator," which sells for around $300.

The Importance of Being a Portal – Provide links to alternate sites to provide assistance to customers who may be looking for something other than what you offer.

Frequent Submittal – To keep your site at the top of the search engine results, be sure to resubmit your Web site at the recommended intervals.

The frequency of submittal varies widely among search engines, from as often as daily to as infrequently as once or twice a month. As a minimum, resubmit your site to all search engines once each month.

Monitoring and Adjusting – Monitor your Web site's performance in the search engines and tweak it whenever performance lags. For example, you might try using different keywords to see if your scores improve. Excellent software is available to test your Web site, or you can check each search engine manually.

Caveats for Web Site Builders

Avoid using frames because spiders often cannot read inside the frame boxes.

Avoid overusing JavaScript on your Web site. The reason is simple: By default, JavaScript code occupies the first position of your Web page. Search engines read from the top of the page and stop after a certain number of words (for instance, 200) if no matches have been made. If you have so much JavaScript on your page that the spiders aren't able to read through it within their allotted word count, your site will never be judged significant by a search engine. Play it safe and omit the JavaScript, or manually move it downward on the html page. To see an example of good JavaScript placement, look at the source code on Doug's own Web page, www.webmarketingdept. com.

The Cheap Route ("To Free or Not to Free...")

You get what you pay for in accuracy and reliability — free site placement is worth exactly what you pay for it. Invest in the appropriate tools, such as HTML "Validator," to maintain and monitor your Web site. Perform the ongoing research required to keep your site well placed.

Allocate enough manpower to the task, which will most assuredly include a lot of time on the telephone with search engine tech support, doing troubleshooting. Web site setup and maintenance is dynamic, but time-consuming, and requires a unique set of skills comprising HTML expertise and well-developed marketing and sales knowledge. If you don't have the combination of skills in-house or frankly do not want to commit so many of your resources to Web site maintenance, consider hiring a professional to build and maintain it for you.

And what did Doug identify as the number one enemy on the World Wide Web? MISINFORMATION. Before you accept information, consider the source's reliability and verify the data against other sources.

Doug's Bookmarks

www.w3.org for comprehensive, official HTML rules
www.webtrends.com for keeping up with Web developments
www.webmarketingdept.com (Doug's Web site) for good examples of a site that is maximized for search engine success
www.thestandard.com for up-to-date news on developments that affect the Internet
www.cyberatlas.com for online research from the best data re-sources to provide a complete review of the latest surveys and technologies

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January 2000 – Region 8 and Other STC Web Sites: Changing at Web Speed!

by Michael Lewis

In case you haven't looked lately, the Region 8 Web site (http://stc.org/region8/www/) has a new look in honor of the new year! We all owe a huge "Thank you!" to Laura Wixted, our new Region 8 Webmaster.

Over the past few months, Laura redesigned and updated our site, resulting in the new look-and-feel you'll see when you check it out.

The new site features ten main areas, including

- Links to and contact information for each of the region's chapters

- Information about regional-level conferences and competitions

- Direct links to chapter resource pages covering education, employment, newsletters, special interest groups (SIGs), and Web resources

- Director-Sponsor information, including monthly articles for chapter newsletters, a list of Director-Sponsor presentations, biographical information, and a calendar of STC and other appearances

Both Laura and I would love for you to take a look at the new site and send us feedback. (There's a form on the site for that purpose.)

But Wait, There's More...

STC provides many resources for members and chapter leaders alike, and most of these are now available 24/7 on the Web. You've probably browsed (or maybe helped create) your chapter's Web site, and if you didn't before, you now know about the Region 8 Web site. Did you know that there are two more sites containing Society and regional information?

- The Society Web site (http://www.stc-va.org/), designed and managed by the STC Office in Virginia

- The Regional and Chapter Information Web site (http://stc.org/), designed and managed by STC volunteers

Both of these sites are continuously updated to change with members' and chapter leaders' needs. If you haven't visited these sites, lately (or ever), I encourage you to do so. There's a plethora of interesting and important information available to you on these sites. Here are just some of the highlights.

Web Resources for Members and Non-Members

Everything on the STC Web sites is freely available to members and non-members, alike. Some resources, however, are especially useful for non-members:

- All about STC. If you'd like to know more about the Society, such as its organizational structure, bylaws, strategic plan, mission, and history, your one-stop shop is a click away (the About STC button on the Society Web site).

- Membership information. Click the Membership button on the Society Web site, and you'll see membership applications in various on-line formats, the Society's brochure, and a succinct list of membership benefits with links to appropriate areas of the site for more information.

- Another viewpoint. The Regional and Chapter Information site provides links directly to Society-wide and non-Society conference, competition, and seminar pages; STC chapter and SIG pages; and an extensive list of educational and general technical communication resources.

If you want to enhance and develop your career by entering a competition, writing for an STC publication, or presenting at a chapter meeting or conference, you can find out more about the various chapter, regional, and Society activities by perusing the STC sites.

You'll find information about the Annual STC Conference, regional and local conferences (yes, some regions have more than one conference every year!); local and international publications, online, and art competitions; periodic chapter meetings; and Society and chapter publications.

You can find out more about STC's many awards programs by clicking the Honors and Awards button on the Society Web site. Who knows? You might be the next honoree at your chapter's recognition meeting.

Want to volunteer? Your chapter Web site lists contacts for your chapter's leaders. Contact one of them and get involved!

Web Resources for Chapter Leaders

Speaking of volunteering, if you're already a chapter, regional, or Society volunteer, the STC Web sites provide information to make your STC job easier and more enjoyable. For a start, you can begin referring members and non-members to the information described above. Link to this information from your chapter Web site, if applicable, to save your members and your volunteers time.

The Society Web site provides a wealth of information for STC leaders. On the Leader Resources page, you'll find:

Calendar

Mar. 7 - Administrative Council Meeting at Soup Exchange, Woodland Hills, Owensmouth at Victory, 6:30 p.m..

Mar. 21 - SFV Chapter Meeting, Andrea L. Ames, "The Future of Online Documentation" at 94th Aerosquadron Restaurant, Woodland Hills, 6:30 p.m. (see page 1).

Apr. 18 (tentative) - SFV Chapter Meeting, Mike Russo and Mark Dawson, "CBT Training vs Web-Based Training" at a place yet to be determined, 6:30 p.m.

May 21-24 - 47th Annual STC Conference, "Renaissance Communicators: A Vision of Our Future" (see conference web site at http://www.stc-va.org/47thConf/47conf.htm).

STC Web Site Changes

• Chapter membership counts. How many members do you have this month? You can find out here.

• Board of directors, chapter presidents, and office staff contact information.

• Financial report forms. Every chapter must complete financial reports. Here are the forms you need, so no excuses!

• Reference material, including STC's Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, the Society's strategic plan, and guidelines and policies.

• Everything you wanted to know about using the Society logo and logotype but were afraid to ask.

• A complete archive of *Tieline*, STC's newsletters for leaders, from1996 through the present. Selected articles dated prior to 1996 are also available.

• Contact information for related organizations.

• Guides/brochures for every STC award program, event, competition, etc.

• Information about grants and loans for which your chapter, competition, or conference can apply.

So check it out! And provide feedback! Is there something you'd like to see, some information you want or need, that these sites do not provide? Let us know, so we can determine whether it's appropriate, and if so, provide it in a way that makes most sense.

These sites improve only through your interest and comments.

San Fernando Valley Chapter
673 Erbes Road
Thousand Oaks, CA 91362-2607