

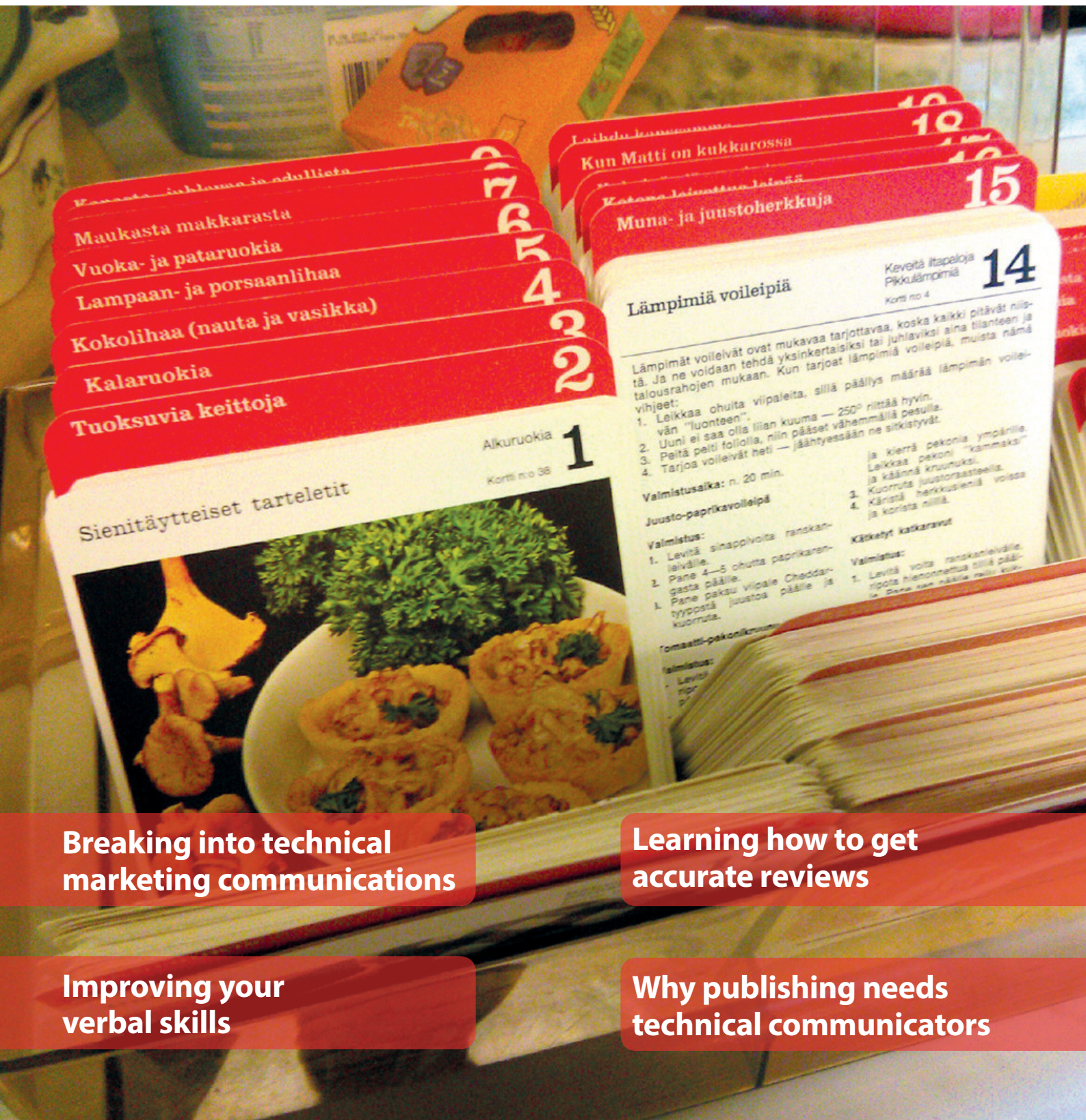
# Where are technical communicators?

## Finding the location of your colleagues



# Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators  
Autumn 2014



Breaking into technical  
marketing communications

Learning how to get  
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Why publishing needs  
technical communicators



# Breaking into technical marketing

The demand is high and so is the pay. **Cheryl Landes** describes more about technical marketing communications.

Are you a technical writer who enjoys telling stories and evangelising about products and services? Then technical marketing communications is an excellent niche for you.

With the growth of content strategy and social media, the demand for technical marketing communicators is increasing rapidly. Salaries for regular, full-time employees and hourly rates for contractors are often substantially higher than in most other areas of technical communication because of the demand.

If you are interested in this field, what is it? What types of work will you do? And, most importantly, how do you break in? All of these questions are answered in this article.

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## What is technical marketing communications?

Technical marketing communications is all about promoting a company's products or services of a technical nature. The goals of technical marketing are to:

- Sell a technical product or service to a target market.
- Promote the benefits of a technical product or service.
- Show how a technical product or service is better than the competition.
- Position a company as an expert in the target market.

## Where do technical marketing communicators work?

Where technical marketing communicators work usually depends on the size of the company. In small companies, technical marketing writing is often an extension of a technical writer's role, especially if the employee is a lone writer. When these companies are looking for candidates to fill a technical writing role, they usually seek someone with technical documentation and marketing writing experience.

In larger companies, marketing or sales departments hire full-time technical marketing communicators. The marketing and sales groups might be one department or separated but still work closely together. The marketing team focuses on promotion, while the sales team focuses on selling products and services.

Technical marketing communicators who are contractors are typically hired by a marketing department or, if the company is small, by the owner or vice president — someone who is involved in promotion and sales. Small companies tend to hire contract writers on independent arrangements, while larger companies request placements through contract agencies. Occasionally large companies

hire independent contractors if their internal policies allow.

Regardless of company size or employment status, the writers work closely with all departments involved in developing, promoting, and selling the products or services. The writers need to meet with engineers or other subject matter experts to gather information about the technical aspects of the products or services. They also need to work with the marketing and sales teams to learn about the target audience and understand the marketing and sales strategies. From there, the writers create communication materials for promoting the products and services, and to help generate sales.

## What types of materials do technical marketing communicators create?

As mentioned earlier, technical marketing communicators create any materials that help promote and sell products and services. These include:

- *Brochures.* These are glossy, four-colour print documents, ranging from one to four pages, or beautifully designed webpages that focus on either one product or service, or all of the company's products or services. Brochures contain information about the company's background or experience related to the product service, a description of the product or service, the product or service features and benefits, and a call to action. Sometimes brochures also contain a complete or partial client list.
- *Product data sheets.* These printed black-and-white sheets or webpages contain technical details about a product. This information includes a description about what the product is and what it does, its features, the technical specifications, how to main the product, and the company's contact information. For electrical products, wiring diagrams are also included.
- *Case studies.* These brief reports, usually no more than two printed pages or a webpage not exceeding 450 words, tell a story about how the company helped a customer solve a problem with its products and services. Case studies consist of four elements: a problem statement, the company's solution to the problem, the results, and the benefits of the solution. Often the benefits are repeated in a sidebar to attract readers' attention.
- *White papers.* Similar to a position paper, the white paper demonstrates that the company

is an expert on a particular topic. White papers may cover a company's position on a topic, reports on trends affecting the company's industry, or research results on an industry topic. Some examples of white papers I have written are: the differences between measuring and metering airflow, and the results of a series of tests conducted with different cleaning agents to determine which one was more effective in decontaminating research laboratories.

- *White papers* should not blatantly promote a company's products or services. White papers favour the company in a subtle way. However, since the early 2000s, more companies break this rule in creating white paper content and fully focus on their products and services.
- *Informational booklets*. The information booklets I have written are printed, either fully four-colour or with a four-colour cover and spot colour inside. (Spot colour highlights certain graphical elements, such as headings, sidebars, or objects in graphics, with one colour throughout the document.) Informational booklets provide details about a product or service application. For example, one of my projects focused on the different types of airflow system configurations that are used in a laboratory and the advantages and disadvantages of each.
- *Newsletters*. Most newsletters are now electronic, circulated as emails to customers and potential customers with updates about products and services. Other newsletter content includes company accomplishments and events the company sponsored or attended, and articles of interest related to the company's industry. Sometimes newsletters publish tips on how to use the company's products. An example of this is Kevin Siegel's *Skills and Drills* newsletter<sup>1</sup>, which contains a new tip every issue on how to develop e-learning in Adobe Captivate.
- *Press releases*. These are official statements companies issue to the media with information on a newsworthy topic. Some examples are shown here:
  - ♦ New products or services
  - ♦ Product upgrades
  - ♦ Company anniversaries
  - ♦ Changes in company leadership
  - ♦ Financial forecasts and results
  - ♦ Sponsorships
  - ♦ Corporate takeovers, buyouts, partnerships, or alliances
  - ♦ Response to public debate over an issue, such as an accident at the company or a food recall
- *Webpages*. These can be website content, blogs, or search engine optimised (SEO) content. The goal of SEO content is to increase

the company's ranking in search engine results.

- *Social media*. Tasks include setting up social media accounts and pages, monitoring and posting content, and responding to posts and comments. Marketing departments typically assign these roles to a regular employee instead of a contractor. Exceptions are when companies hire marketing firms specialising in social media to develop and maintain their presence online.
- *Other materials*. Examples are endless. Other projects in which technical marketing communicators might participate are:
  - ♦ Creating presentations for trade shows and sales meetings
  - ♦ Developing training materials for special customer workshops and events
  - ♦ Coordinating and hosting webinars
  - ♦ Writing scripts and recording videos and podcasts

This long list may seem daunting, and obviously you need a variety of skills to succeed in technical marketing communication.

### What skills do technical marketing communicators need?

The good news is, as technical communicators, most of us have the basic skills to become technical marketing communicators. The most important skills we need are transferable:

- Communicating clearly and concisely in writing and verbally
- Learning and understanding new information quickly
- Knowing where to find information
- Being flexible and willing to change in a fast-paced environment
- Knowing how to target information effectively to its intended audience

Some may argue that technical marketing communicators need more creativity than technical communicators, but in reality, technical marketing communicators are simply using creativity in a different way. All writing is creative, but the creativity methods we use will vary depending on the particular writing genre or even projects within a genre.

Now that you know you have the skills to become a technical marketing communicator, it is time to find some opportunities to use your skills.

### How do I break in?

Technical marketing communication opportunities are everywhere, unlimited by industry. If you do not have any experience in marketing and are a regular employee, offer to work on marketing related projects. Maybe the company is working on a special project that requires participation from cross-functional positions or teams. Look for these and offer to help.

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<sup>1</sup> Subscribe to this free newsletter at [www.iconlogic.com](http://www.iconlogic.com)

Another option for gaining experience as a regular employee is to offer to help your marketing department with low-priority projects that, because of other commitments, no one has time to finish.

If you cannot work on internal marketing projects, volunteer for a non-profit organisation that needs help with marketing projects. An example of a volunteer project I completed five years ago is editing website content for the Friends of Heybrook Ridge<sup>2</sup> in Index, Washington, USA. This organisation fought to stop developers from logging the ridge where the town's watershed is located. Volunteers raised enough money so that the organisation could buy the property, which is now a recreation area and educational centre. Although I had marketing experience before helping with this project, I believed in the cause and wanted to help. It also gave me some fresh experience in environmental writing, which is important to have for the green industry, one of my target markets as a consultant.


Bartering is another excellent method for gaining experience. In the Pacific Northwest, USA, bartering has grown in popularity during the past 10 years. I barter selectively, but the outcome benefits both parties. One of my ongoing examples is a barter with a guide service, where I maintain the mailing list and create newsletters and flyers for special events. In exchange, I receive free outdoor trips.

Your goal is to accumulate writing samples for your portfolio as proof of your capabilities. A nice advantage of creating technical marketing materials is that most of the information is released to the

public, so you do not need to worry about confidentiality issues during job interviews.

### What is the future of technical marketing communications?

Based on my observations, the demand for technical marketing communicators will continue to grow. On average, more than half of my projects are marketing related, and I expect that percentage to grow during the next five years. All of my marketing projects are virtual, which is another advantage when schedule flexibility is required. As long as I finish projects by the deadlines, my customers are happy.

I have also seen more job postings for regular full-time jobs that combine technical and technical marketing skills. With the growth of content strategy and social media, companies are looking for candidates with a broader range of skills. The more skills we have as technical communicators, the more employable we are. The future is full of opportunities, many of which we cannot yet anticipate, and technical marketing communications will be there to promote these. 

<sup>2</sup> [www.heybrookridge.org](http://www.heybrookridge.org)



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