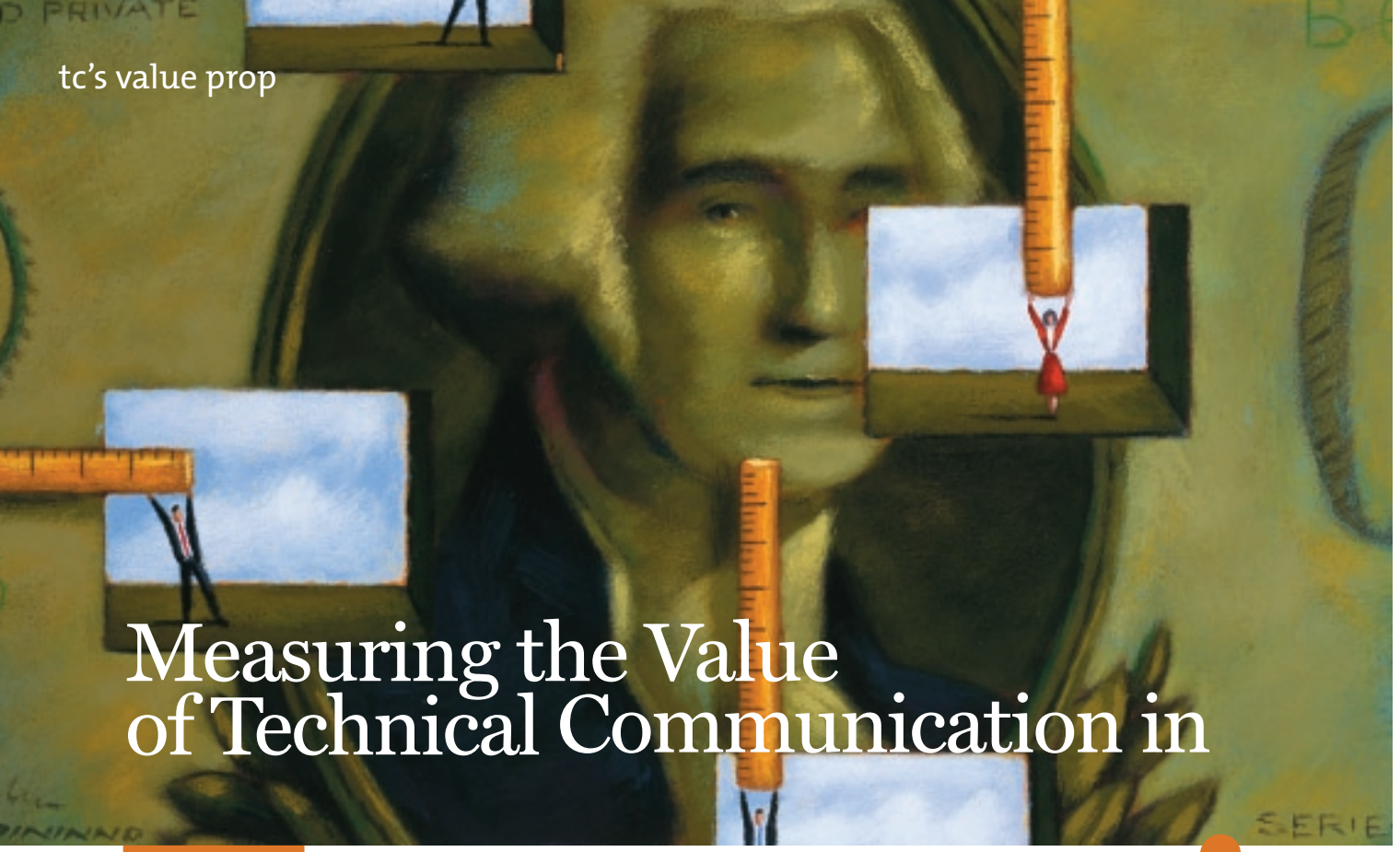

Measuring the Value of Technical Communication in Economic Terms

By George Slaughter, *Senior Member*

How might we measure the value of technical communication in economic terms? The question takes on a greater significance in these uncertain times, but it's difficult to answer for three reasons.

First, technical communication is not seen as a profit center. Technical documentation deliverables usually accompany a product or service, and in such cases are not the products themselves. (In other cases, however, writing and selling a book or podcast, by itself, qualifies because those items are themselves the products.)

Second, the quality of one's writing is subjective because it is judged through the eyes of the reader. We can all envision a quality technical document: user-focused information written in an accurate, clear, and crisp way, with appropriate graphics to illustrate key concepts and tasks. We have editorial checklists, reference materials, and style guides to help us achieve that vision with our writing. Yet economic metrics, such as how much time and money the information saves the user (or the organization that produces the information), don't seem to enter the equation.

Third, no standard methodology to measure the value in economic terms has been developed. This is not to say that the topic of measuring value has not been researched. It has, although the most notable articles appeared some years ago and did not focus on economic metrics. For example, *Technical Communication* has published articles by STC luminaries Janice "Ginny" Redish (see "Adding Value as a Professional Technical Communicator," February 1995) and Saul Carliner (see "A Process for Evaluating Technical Communication Products and Services," August 1997, and "A Key Tool for Demonstrating the Value of Technical Communication," August 1998). Jay

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Mead provides a solid review of the literature (see "Measuring the Value Added by Technical Documentation: A Review of Research and Practice," August 1998). Mark Edelman provides some good talking points in his article, "The Value Added by Technical Communicators" in the April 2000 *Intercom*.

Many business executives understand the importance of technical communication. After all, they must determine how to use technology and tools like everyone else. However, *understanding the importance* of effective technical communication is different from *quantifying its value* in economic terms. For technical communicators, discerning that difference and communicating it might go a long way when the budgets get written.

Leaders in the technical communication profession have said that technical communicators must become more assertive in demonstrating the value of their work. (To cite one recent discussion, see "Adapt or Die: Technical Communicators of the 21st Century" in the March 2009 *Intercom*.) This assertion of value can best be accomplished by quantifying deeds in the profit-and-loss language that executives use.

The Discipline of Market Leaders

To understand how we can measure the value of technical documentation, it might be instructive to first consider how organizations position themselves in the marketplace. In their book *The Discipline of Market Leaders* (1997), authors Michael Treacy and Fred Wiersema suggest that companies position themselves in one of the following three ways:

With the first discipline, *operational excellence*, companies focus on creating efficiency in the manufacture and delivery of products or services. Core processes on operational excellence include product delivery and basic service cycles that are built on standard, no-frills, fixed assets. Information technology centers on integrated, low-cost transaction systems, and mobile and remote technologies. Treacy and Wiersema cite Wal-Mart and Southwest Airlines as examples of these types of companies.

With the second discipline, *product leadership*, companies focus on creating cutting-edge products or services. Core processes on product leadership include invention and commercialization, market exploitation, and disjointed work procedures. Information technology centers on person-to-person communication systems, and technologies enabling cooperation and knowledge management. Treacy and Wiersema cite Microsoft and Sony as examples of these companies.

With the third discipline, *customer intimacy*, companies "personalize basic service and even customize products to meet unique consumer needs" (128). Core processes for companies focused on customer intimacy include client acquisition and development, solution development, and flexible and responsive work procedures. Information technology focuses on customer databases linking internal and external information, and knowledge bases built around expertise. Treacy and Wiersema cite Johnson Controls and Cott Corporation as examples of these companies. Another such example is my own company, The Integrity Group, which works to create long-term relationships with its clients for mutual advantage.

When we see how organizations position themselves in the marketplace, we can begin to identify how we might, as individuals, position our services in the same way.

Questions to Ask Going Forward

There is no single way to uniformly measure the economic value of one's technical communication work. Each organization has different personnel, practices, and priorities. Yet all organizations share the same basic goal: ensure customer satisfaction at the lowest risk (for the customer and the organization) while earning a profit (or, at least, not losing money). Michael Masterson suggests that the four most important job interview questions are:

- How will you increase our revenues?
- How will you reduce our costs?
- How will you expand our customer base?
- How will you increase our profits?

If these questions are not directly asked in an interview, they are implicit. These questions also make a good starting point for technical communicators to consider how they can help their company, their company's customers, and—ultimately—themselves, be successful.

Measuring Value in Terms of Expansion

Companies serve customers by providing products or services at minimal risk (for the customer and the company) while earning a profit. Technical communicators correctly focus their efforts on creating information products that present minimal risk for customers. But how can technical communicators also minimize risk and increase profit for the company? Here are some ways.

1. Product design and usability testing: Technical communicators apply non-engineering eyes to their tasks; they can serve as user advocates.

2. Product or service support: The technical communicator knows the product or service and can quickly get an enhanced feel for user concerns that will lead to improved documentation.

3. Marketing and sales: Technical communicators can help sell a product by writing trade articles, product news releases, and sales literature.

4. Training: Technical communicators can help build customer goodwill by training people on how to use the product or service. After all, the technical communicators created the documentation. One can measure value by looking at sales and customer satisfaction.

It has been said that technical communicators tend to be introverted and shy—traits that aren't necessarily helpful when trying to demonstrate the value of one's work. By volunteering for these additional roles where economic metrics are more common, technical communicators wear more than one hat. And as sports fans can attest, utility players remain on the roster the longest because they can play more than one position.

"Technical communicators tend to be introverted and shy—traits that aren't necessarily helpful when trying to demonstrate the value of one's work."

Measuring Value in Terms of Consolidation

Expanding the customer base and profit through sales and service is important. Yet many technical communicators not only work behind the scenes but also prefer to be there. What are some covert ways that technical communication can help consolidate costs?

1. Documentation creation: Single-sourcing, with the use of XML and DITA, is one example. Another example involving documentation concerns the use of images. Think of the safety cards found in front of every seat on a commercial aircraft. The images on those cards communicate the required information efficiently (and effectively), and it does not matter what language one speaks. Most instructions have been simplified by using graphics—thereby reducing translation costs and, possibly, printing costs.

2. Documentation delivery: One company I worked for delivered a complete set of printed documentation with its products. Eventually the company decided to deliver only printed installation guides or posters. Everything else—guides, support matrixes, and so on—is now delivered electronically. While I do not know how much money was saved because of that decision, one can assume that the savings were significant.

Exclusive electronic delivery cannot be counted as an end-all solution, though. Another company I worked for manufactures equipment used in a variety of industries, including small welding shops. Many of these users spend their time in the shop, not online, so it was more efficient and more effective to provide a printed user guide.

3. Reduction in support calls and their related costs: This is perhaps the most cited example. One can compare the numbers of support calls before and after a technical documentation deliverable is placed in circulation. For example, a company receives 400 support calls in March and, following the delivery of updated documentation in April, the company then receives 200 support calls a month—a decrease of 50 percent.

One can also take things a step further by estimating the cost of a typical support call and including it in the metrics. Using the preceding example, if a support call costs $50, the company has incurred $20,000 in support costs for March but only $10,000 in support costs for April, following the delivery of the updated documentation.

These examples occur throughout documentation creation, delivery, and feedback processes. Such cases illustrate the value of technical communication in economic terms.

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