

Good Information Architecture Design – A Case Study

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The Society for Technical Communication's Web site provides an example of a well-designed information architecture. Its organization is appropriate and effective for the content and its audience, making it easy to find relevant information. And the site's navigation system is thorough and easy to use. I describe in detail the specific components that make the IA design a good one below.

Background

To begin assessing the structure of the IA design, its organization scheme, we have to know something about the entity the site represents (the "organization") and their users. The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is an individual membership organization dedicated to advancing the art and science of technical communication. There are local chapters and Special Interest Groups that meet regularly. They publish a monthly magazine, a quarterly journal, and a monthly column on the site. They hold an annual conference and frequent webinars to further education about technical communication. They honor both individuals and chapters through their award programs, and bestow elective, honorary ranks to recognize individual members' achievements in the field. And for members only, they maintain industry and career data, offer health insurance, and provide an online forum for communication between members, among other things.

A "good" IA design is one where the following users' questions are answered before they even become conscious to the user:

1. Where am I?
2. I know what I'm looking for; how do I search for it?
3. What's available here?
4. How do I get around this site?
5. What's important and unique about this organization?
6. What's happening there?
7. Do they want my opinion about their site?
8. How can I contact a human?
9. What's their address?

The attached screen shot of a selected page within the site, with numbered elements, will serve as a reference for my comments which follow.

Organization

The overarching organization scheme is, appropriately, by category, and the major sections of the site (See 2 on the figure below) are very well suited to STC's purpose and activities.

- About STC
- Our Story
- Membership
- Publications
- Education
- Competitions
- Recognition
- Members

Before I was a member, I was able to easily browse the site to learn about the Society and I was motivated by it to become a member. And as an experienced user of the site I still find the section definitions to be effective.

The one caveat I want to note is the “Our Story” section which is very new and, I think, poorly labeled. At first glance, I thought STC’s story (meaning “history”) probably belonged under “About STC”. But on review, the section is for members’ personal stories about the profession, their career paths and experiences, and is therefore appropriately its own separate section. Since the “our” refers to a group of people each with a different story, however, a better label would be “Our Stories”.

In addition to this high-level organizing scheme, the “What’s New” section on the Home page reflects content that has also been organized by freshness, providing regular site visitors a list of the new content. This is a critical feature for a membership site. Everyone knows that a stale site is not good. But if you can’t find what’s new, it might as well be a stale site. Users will drift away, which is death for a membership group. So the “What’s New” section is great for the “I don’t know what I’m looking for – I just want to see what’s new” user.

Navigation

The global, or site-wide, navigation scheme (See ②) is unerringly consistent which is very reassuring to a user. The links each have drop-down menus and, in many places, sub-menus that provide an in-depth view of what’s available at the site without having to go anywhere. By layering the menu, a user can see high-level sub-sections and won’t get overwhelmed with all of the available choices, but can see the next level of detail if desired. I especially appreciate this approach when I’m new to a site and learning my way around. The section labels alone can’t give that same depth.

The local navigation scheme (See ③) is neatly divided into three sections that very effectively help users understand where they are and where they can go within the major sections:

- a. Supporting Links – These vary by section, but are consistent within each one. They largely mirror both layers of the global menu options, reinforcing that structure and offering alternative paths to the same content.
- b. Supporting Files – Not all pages have supporting files but for the ones that do – having them listed separately off to the side, and always between 2 sections that are always present, makes them stand out. This separate area addresses the proven likelihood that some users

will miss the links embedded in the content area. The links are duplicated but aren't overdone.

- c. General Information – these links are also unerringly consistent across the site and provide links to request help with technical problems, provide site feedback, and email the Webmaster. A user doesn't have to “go” anywhere to give feedback or report a problem. This is excellent, user-focused navigation design.

The links in the upper-right hand corner (See ①) provide a navigation bar for the major tasks a user might perform other than browsing the site: contact | search | log in/log out | home.

I've left the best for last. There is one aspect to the site's navigation that is absolutely *dazzling!* One letter is underlined in each of the “Supporting Links” on all the pages (See ④). It's immediately reminiscent of the convention for using key strokes to “navigate” desktop software. Just the visual of the single-letter underlining let me know it was there. Subtle and sweet. ALT+ the letter moves the focus to that option, which is indicated visually by a dotted-line rectangle around the menu item; pressing enter takes you to the page. You can navigate inside the major sections without a mouse. *That's* good navigation design!

So in conclusion, the STC site is well-organized for its strategies, content, and users, and it provides effortless navigation through the content, reinforced with multiple paths to the same pages. It passes the “Stress Test” with flying colors by answering the users' questions superbly.

I highly recommend this site. It is a joy to visit.



Chapters & SIGs	
International	General Info
Student	Award Winners
Competition Managers	Forms & Files
Traveling Exhibits	Judging Exchange

TYPES OF MEMBERSHIP

There are several grades of STC membership.

General

Individual membership is open to all those interested

Senior Member

The grade of senior member is conferred automatically on each member after five years of Society membership.

Student Member

To be eligible for student membership, an applicant must be:

1. enrolled in an accredited university, college, community college, or technical school;
2. be considered a full-time student according to the criteria of the school he or she is attending; and
3. preparing for a career in technical communication.

Sustaining Organizations

Membership in STC is available only to individuals. However, the sustaining organization program is open to companies, corporations, institutions, and other organizations interested

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3a

- > SUPPORTING LINKS
 - renew today
 - discount program
 - corporate value
 - cyp members
 - info request form
 - join stc today!
 - membership benefits
 - membership types
 - sustaining orgs.

3b

- > SUPPORTING FILES
 - a career in...
 - stc can help

3c

- > GENERAL INFORMATION
 - feedback form
 - technical problems
 - web site disclaimer
 - stc's privacy policy
 - webmaster e-mail

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