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Learning rocks!

A review of MadWorld 2014 | Hard Rock Hotel | San Diego, CA | April 13–15.
Pam Coca shares her experience.

MadWorld is an annual technical communication event that rocks in more ways than one. Sponsored this year by GALA and the transportation app Uber, it included 40 learning sessions presented over two-plus days. Attendees took home best practices in technical communication, learned the latest technologies and trends, networked with peers, and were introduced to MadCap's newest product developments. This whirlwind event, filled with San Diego sunshine and rock music at the Hard Rock Hotel, was a conference unlike any you've ever seen!

Who's who

Attendees and presenters came from around the block and around the world, but the first day began with one of MadCap's own: Jennifer White. She welcomed us with a hilarious introduction to staff we'd be meeting throughout the conference. Jennifer took the mickey out of everyone portrayed on the big screen, including MadCap CEO Anthony Olivier. She and Paul Stoecklein (also of MadCap fame) created a very Photoshopped rendition of their peers.

Scott DeLoach mesmerising his audience on the subject of fonts

The beginning of the end…rockin' out with The Heroes on the last night of MadWorld

So many talks… so little time

Twenty different presenters involved in 40 unique talks, categorised into four separate tracks (beginner, intermediate and advanced Flare users, as well as a tools agnostic) is certainly more than we have space to mention, but suffice to say they were all fabulous. The ever-popular Ellis Pratt of Cherryleaf presented on metrics, DITA and content strategy. His British charm is undeniable and everyone loved that he brought British candies to share. Patrick Calnan's "Conditional Conundrum" (exploring conditions in Flare) was done in a game show format with prizes. Lynn Carrier really showcased Flare's versatility with her demo on how Illumina set-up their authoring environment to cater to their customers. Neil Perlin spoke on working with the code side of Flare and demystified content sensitive help. According to Neil, "*Responsive design is the most important thing to hit technical communication since HTML in 1997.*" For Neil's article, see page 52–55.

One team presentation was the Ride the Lightning (Talk). Guided and ever-so-critically timed by Madcap's Product Evangelist, Jennifer White, six of us had five minutes each to share information about MadCap software: I led a game of MadCap Jeopardy, tossing prizes to eager winners. Kai Weber of Frankfurt, Germany presented a tale about dentists who recommend Flare for more smiles than any other HAT. Mike Hamilton gave us elusive tips for success in the field of technical communication. Jose Sermeno talked about open-source applications. Scott DeLoach showed several ways to avoid inline formatting with the help of Chuck Norris (who was conspicuous by his absence). Neil Perlin helped us handle Flare project importing and Patrick Calnan explained why we should host our own help systems. At the end, Jennifer had everyone check beneath their chairs for a guitar pick to see who was going home with a bag full of MadCap/Hard Rock goodies.

Hospitality embodied

Nothing says MadCap better than their amazing technical support. In Madcap's inimitable style, they had a Hospitality Lounge setup with ever-available MadCap staff and support teams. It didn't matter if you needed five minutes or the whole day, they were there to help. Knowing that there is nothing quite like hands-on assistance from the experts, attendees from all over the world brought in their projects and questions.

No ordinary run-of-the-mill technical conference

The party started on Sunday evening with drinks and hors d' oeuvres for an intimate gathering of 200+ and talented musician/vocalist Joe Valeri, whose energy and enthusiasm give new meaning to the phrase one-man-band. Voted San Diego's best rooftop bar, Float is set atop the Hard Rock Hotel overlooking the Gaslamp Quarter and it was the perfect way to end a busy day of learning on Monday, as MadWorld attendees settled into comfy seats surrounding glowing fire-pits to discuss the day's events. By Tuesday evening, with that deer-in-the-headlights look in our eyes, we listened and danced to The Heroes, a seven-piece band that plays everything from big band swing to Motown to classic rock to today's hits.

I'll take mine to-go, please

Fortunately, for those who could not clone themselves to attend numerous talks all at the same time nor take prolific notes during the talks they did attend, MadCap provided thumb drives with presentations-to-go. We can re-live what we did, who we met and what we learned as we recuperate from the days and nights of a mad, mad world of learning and looniness. **C**

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Visually speaking...

The Content Twins

Cherryleaf (2013), free PDF, 14 pages, Reviewed by **Pam Coca**.
www.cherryleaf.com/useful-resources/download-our-free-illustrated-guide-to-content-strategy

"In a world with content strategy, everyone lives happily ever after!"

As technical communicators know, the world of writing user guides and manuals is dynamic. Not so long ago, we wrote tomes of information in isolated departments, and we were absolutely thrilled when Adobe Acrobat came along so we could print to PDF. As life got busier and readers' attention spans waned, we started chunking content for the Internet and acquiring development tools to create online help. Life was good. Technical communicators were prolific, and documentation departments flourished.

Then someone somewhere discovered that we might not be working/thinking strategically, that perhaps information could be shared across boundaries, and that maybe— just maybe—we could re-use and re-purpose our material to save time and money.

In come the *content twins*—Sam and Jo, the stars of a 14-page graphic novel by Cherryleaf. As heads of their London corporation's documentation and marketing team, they take an interdepartmental look at all of their content and decide that a new approach is needed. First they determine that content strategy equals substance, workflow, structure, and governance. After which, they assemble a team that understands their corporation' goals and values, perform a content inventory, and craft a strategy that will get them from where they are to where they want to be. Implementation, though a lot of work, is a great success. Everyone at the office lives happily ever after and so do their customers…because everyone gets exactly what they need when they need it.

I reached out to a few technical communication professionals to see what they thought of the graphic novel as a medium:

Vikki Herrera, VP of Corporate Marketing at Emotient (emotient.com) told me *The Content Twins* resonated well with her. As part of a small corporation of 20 or so individuals who had created silos across the business, she commented that at one time, they had used one style of communication to attract customers and a different style after-the-sale. Such silos created a danger of inaccurate information across the business. Following a content strategy has broadened their scope of language and terminology and helps them get the right information to the right people at the right time.

Documentation Manager and Content Strategist (also at Emotient) Andrya Feinberg added that the graphic novel is an innovative method of educating departments on the importance of inter-departmental communication. Their non-linear approach to communication moves us along to the end of the story— a true asset to the visual learner in us all. Also a fan of content strategy, she says it not only bridges the gap between corporate marketing and technical documentation, it enables technical communicators to collaborate and create consistent and accurate content that adheres to best practices and standards in our industry today.

Technical Communications Strategist, Nita Beck (beck-communications.com) mentioned the resurrection of the graphic novel, citing that many movies and TV shows today stem directly from the comic book genre. These minimalistic, 10-minute reads are a modern, creative method of communication that is highly connected to Generation X[i]. Compared to Twitter, a 14-page graphic novel is a tome.

Technical Communications Tool specialist Matt R Sullivan (mattrsullivan.com) believes that graphic novels, along with other visual forms of technical communications, are on the rise. He expects to see a dramatic increase in their use in the next few years in both technical and marketing communication.

Cherryleaf certainly has the right idea with their graphic novel series: *DITA Man* followed by *The Content Twins*. Visuals create a more emotional response and help readers quickly connect with the information. **C**

Rating: ★★★★☆

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i   Generation X, is the generation born after the Western Post–World War II baby boom.

References

The DITA Man book review, *Communicator* Winter 2013: 58

The teams work cohesively to map out a strategic plan

From problem to solution in 14 pages shows that graphic novels and content strategy can both reap success

About the authors:

Cherryleaf is a technical writing services company formed in 2002 by four people with passion for technical communication and learning development. Today, organisations throughout Europe use Cherryleaf's technical writing, recruitment and content strategy services to avoid high support costs and missed sales. Their team develops clear information that enables users and staff to complete tasks productively.