

# **Redesigning the STC Houston Chapter Web Site: A Feasibility Study**

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for  
The STC Houston Chapter Administrative Council  
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This study examines the feasibility of redesigning the web site of the Houston Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC). This study considers the staff expertise and availability, along with technical issues and costs, required to implement and maintain a redesigned web site.

# Executive Summary

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**About this section**

This section provides the executive summary for this feasibility study by reviewing the current situation and the appropriate literature and web sites. It discusses the feasibility of a redesign and makes appropriate recommendations based upon our research. This section concludes with a table of contents for this study.

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**Situation**

Members of the STC Houston Administrative Council, among other STC Houston officials, have expressed interest in redesigning the chapter's web site. This interest has increased in recent months, as the Houston chapter will be hosting the Region 5 Conference in October 2001, and will use the web site as a primary communication tool.

The site was launched in 1996 and has remained essentially the same since then. During this time, the Internet has grown in size and scope, and web site owners have found that their audience expects more functionality from this technology. As Internet technology has evolved, this medium has become integral to the communication strategy of many organizations.

STC is no exception, and has established its web site as the organization's primary communication tool. Given this strategy, STC makes it easy for its member chapters to link from the society's main page. The STC Houston web site address is <http://www.stc.org/region5/hou>.

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**Literature and web site review**

A review of the literature on web sites and Internet technology, and a casual visit to the web sites of other STC chapters, suggest that web site owners have already shifted their focus from the initial web site setup towards increasing web site effectiveness. Sites visited as a part of this study include web design elements that facilitate the search for information and incorporate the web site into the operational functions of the chapter. These fundamental elements are missing from the STC Houston web site.

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## Executive Summary, Continued

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### **Feasibility discussion**

A web site redesign would be feasible only if the chapter has the people resources ready, willing, and able to work on this project at an acceptable cost and if there is no technical issues that prevent a redesign.

Several active members of the STC are web site developers by profession and collectively, have expertise in all relevant aspects of Internet technology. Many have already expressed an interest in volunteering their time and expertise to this project, which would be led by the chapter's web master. The availability of this expertise eliminates the cost of engaging the services of outside web site development consultants.

Furthermore, all web site design elements are within the technical scope of the chapter. The STC Houston web site is hosted on the STC main server. As a result, STC Houston does not need to incur the cost of an Internet service provider (ISP).

The expertise needed to redesign the web site is present and available among existing STC members. No technical obstacles have been identified. Furthermore, a redesign can be implemented at no cost to the chapter.

Given these factors, the redesign of the STC Houston web site is feasible at this time.

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### **Recommendations**

We recommend that the redesign proceed with the establishment of a web site task force consisting of members with the requisite Internet technology expertise. The STC Houston Web Master and Director of Communications would lead this task force. The task force will propose a redesign plan to the STC Houston Administrative Council within three months.

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## Executive Summary, Continued

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**In this study** This study includes the following sections:

<b>Topic</b>	<b>See Page</b>
Introduction Using the Internet in communication Survey of STC Houston Administrative Council Other reasons for a redesign Redesign requirements Problem statement	4
Web Site Review Overview of related STC chapter web sites Review of related STC chapter web sites Review of the STC Houston web site	7
Literature Review Review of related columns in the STC literature Review of related features in the STC literature Implications for the STC Houston web site	10
Criteria for Decision Making Staff Expertise Staff Availability Technical Issues Costs	13
Conclusions	15
Recommendations	16
Bibliography	17
Appendix A: STC Houston Web Site Survey	18
Appendix B: Selected STC Web Sites	23

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# Introduction

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## **About this section**

This section introduces the study by offering a brief review of using the Internet in communication and the wishes of the STC Houston Administrative Council for a web site redesign.

This section concludes with the problem statement that will be addressed in this study.

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## **Using the Internet in communication**

In recent years, the Internet has become an important element in the communication strategy of many organizations. STC is no exception. Visitors to the main STC web site (<http://www.stc.org>) can find general information about the organization, and can then link to the home pages of local chapters to learn more about specific local activities and events.

As Internet technology evolves and developers learn how to improve web site effectiveness, many organizations view web site development as an ongoing project rather than a single, finite project. In one column on web design, Theresa Wilkinson writes that reasons for redesigning a web site include “correct[ing] specific problems in navigation, professional image, or ease of use” (*Intercom*, September/October 1999, pg. 34).

The STC Houston web site has remained essentially the same since its creation in 1996. During these last four years, the Internet has evolved significantly. Organizations now face the challenge of determining the best way to meet the needs of an increasingly web-savvy audience. This sophisticated audience has raised the standard on what is required to capture their attention and establish the credibility of a web site. Organizations find that they need to differentiate themselves with an appealing graphical presence, and need to make available to their audience timely, comprehensive information. With the growing popularity of commercial transactions through the Internet – commonly referred to as “e-business” – Internet users increasingly expect web sites to serve as a two-way communication tool. The STC Houston web site currently falls short of the increased expectations of its audience.

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## Introduction, Continued

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### **Survey of STC Administrative Council**

The issue of redesigning the STC Houston web site has been under consideration for some time.

General consensus on the desire to redesign the site is evident among STC Houston Administrative Council members. This wish has been expressed in general discussion and in results of a survey conducted of STC Houston Administrative Council members in February 2000. The survey is provided in Appendix A.

Comments received support the perceived disconnect between the design elements of the four-year old Houston web site and the current demands and expectations of its audience. Specific comments received in this preliminary survey include the following:

- general dissatisfaction with the current navigation that makes it difficult to find information
  - limited ability to download this information from the site
  - limited opportunity to perform functional tasks directly on the site
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### **Other reasons for a redesign**

Interest in redesigning the web site is further heightened by the selection of Houston as the host for the STC Region 5 Conference in October 2001. This honor typically draws increased traffic to the hosting chapter's web site as a source of information on the conference.

Presenting this information professionally and efficiently is critical to the success of the conference.

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## Introduction, Continued

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### **Redesign requirements**

Organizations seem to implement their decision to create and maintain a web site according to two criteria: 1) the relative importance of the Internet to their overall communications strategy, and 2) available resources in terms of funding and staffing.

For example, a large company like Shell Oil Company has staff dedicated to this function. On the other hand, smaller companies and not-for-profit organizations may choose to contract the design and/or the maintenance of their web site to companies that specialize in providing this service.

The redesign of a web site would have essentially the same requirements as the initial design. What would be needed are people with the ability to take an existing site and make technical and graphical modifications. In turn, these people must be available for the duration of the project and people must then be available to maintain the newly redesigned site.

In addition, the redesign must be technically feasible with respect to the availability of a web server and the application of Internet technology. Costs underscore both technical and staffing considerations.

This study is concerned with the feasibility of redesigning the STC Houston web site, not the strategy needed to actually perform such work.

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### **Problem statement**

STC Houston recognizes that its web site does not adequately meet both the ongoing needs of its membership and the need for a professional information-sharing tool for the upcoming conference. The desire for a redesign is strong. However, the chapter does not know if a web site redesign is feasible considering the staff expertise and availability, technical issues, and costs involved.

This study will propose to evaluate these criteria in light of a review of web sites of other STC chapters, the direction of web site development gleaned from the literature and a survey of Houston STC Administrative Council members asking for their vision for the chapter's web site.

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# Web Site Review

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**About this section**

This section reviews comparable STC web sites, and the STC Houston web site itself.

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**Overview of related STC chapter web sites**

Assessing the feasibility of the STC Houston web site starts with a review of sites in other STC chapters. This review will help identify common features of other web sites that would need to be considered in an effort to redesign the Houston site. Identifying such features will, in turn, help identify the areas of expertise needed in the Houston chapter to incorporate minimal redesign elements into the site and will also help assess the extent of high-level changes that may be required.

Specific chapter sites used in this assessment are New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin.

The New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago sites were chosen for their representation of a large, diverse chapter constituency.

The Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin sites were chosen because they are in Region 5 along with Houston.

Screen prints of the home page of each STC chapter web site reviewed (including Houston) are included in Appendix B.

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## Web Site Review, Continued

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### **Review of related STC chapter web sites**

The web sites of the STC chapters selected for review share many features. Three features in particular should help STC Houston assess the feasibility of its redesign.

1. Most sites include a striking graphic on their home page that clearly represents the chapter's home city.

Thus, the New York site depicts that's city's skyline, Los Angeles emphasizes the city's sunshine, San Antonio includes its famous landmark, the Alamo, and the Dallas chapter uses red chili peppers as bullets. Each site incorporates these graphics in a unique manner.

2. A logically organized home page that leads the visitor to needed information with a minimal number of links.

This suggests that the web site was not only developed with expertise in basic web navigation tools but that this expertise is further applied to maintaining established links to ensure the integrity of the site. In addition, information on the site is kept current as is evident from the inclusion of current events on the home page.

For example, the Austin site lists dates for upcoming events, and the Los Angeles and Dallas sites both invite visitors to view "What's New" or "What's Hot," respectively. This emphasis on the currency of information suggests that each chapter has instituted a mechanism within their chapter operations to ensure that information on the web site remain not only evergreen but also relevant to the chapter's mission.

3. Inclusion of both downloadable chapter documentation and online forms used to capture visitor requests, data, and feedback.

Typical chapter documentation available in PDF format files is current and past issues of the chapter's newsletter. The chapters also make use of online forms to allow members to update member information online (Dallas), register for meetings (Dallas), and complete online member surveys (New York). While the availability of downloadable information does not presume unique web expertise or skill, the use of online forms in the course of routine chapter activity requires more specific web knowledge.

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## Web Site Review, Continued

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### **Review of the STC Houston web site**

Currently, the STC Houston web site does not include many of these web site elements, and the role of the site is not clear in the overall strategy of the Houston chapter. The web site review clearly show a gap between what exists now and the vision for the site as expressed by individual STC Houston Administrative Council members.

The STC Houston web site lacks up-front current information on chapter activities, emphasis on logical navigation, and easy availability of chapter documentation. It also fails to incorporate the chapter's daily membership operations into its design.

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# Literature Review

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## About this section

This section reviews STC literature pertaining to web site development.

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## Review of related columns in the STC literature

STC regularly publishes two items that address current issues of concern and interest in the academic and practicing field of technical communication – a quarterly journal, *Technical Communication*, and a monthly magazine, *Intercom*. A review of this literature will establish the position of STC’s constituency on the issue of web site redesign.

If the literature primarily addresses the building blocks of a web site, we can assume that the interests of the audience lie in the basic establishment of a web site. If the literature instead focuses on the incorporation of advances in internet technology, or helps its audience improve existing sites, we can presume that the audience is more interested in increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of established sites.

Evidence from the literature review suggests the latter. *Intercom* frequently includes a column, “The ABCs of Web Design,” by Theresa Wilkinson, an STC member who consults with organizations in the design or redesign of their web sites. The objective of this column is to explore “trends in Web design, describes techniques, and offers advice on how to design successful and valuable Web sites.”

To meet this objective, this column has recently addressed the following topics:

- the need for web site navigation (*Intercom*, June 1999, pg. 36)
- redesigning a web site (*Intercom*, September/October 1999, pg. 34)
- how to increase performance on a web site (*Intercom*, January 2000, pg. 38)

That this type of information would be communicated through a column instead of a main article attests to the fact that the need of the STC audience is less the establishment of a new site than the maintenance and improvement of existing sites.

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## Literature Review, Continued

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### **Review of related feature articles in the STC literature**

When this topic is given primary attention in an issue of the magazine, it is usually addressed at a high-level conceptual level. Thus, recent cover stories in *Intercom* include Web-based training design (*Intercom*, November 1999, pp. 6-12) and “Domain Names, Cybersquatting, and Meta Tags” (*Intercom*, February 2000, pp. 8-10).

Other examples of related articles discuss the following:

- copyright issues on the Internet (*Intercom*, June 1999, pg. 16-17)
- web design for international audiences (*Intercom*, December 1999, pp. 15-17)
- Internet technology and intellectual property (*Intercom*, January 2000, pp. 20-23)
- Critiquing a web site (*Intercom*, November 1999, pp. 21-23).

These articles presuppose that Internet technology is already a primary component of the communication strategy of its audience.

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## Literature Review, Continued

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### **Implications for the STC Houston web site**

Taken along with the review of other STC web sites, the review of the literature confirms that the current generation of professional web sites looks very different from the first generation of web sites. Given the rapid evolution of web development, the depiction of the Houston STC web site as a “first generation” web site by its web master appears right on point.

What has become the new standard for web sites has implications for requirements of a successful redesign of the STC Houston web site.

1. The information must be organized so visitors to the site can intuitively access desired information and use desired features, be they casual guests seeking a general view of the organization, or long-time members who actively use the site for functional reasons.

The goal is to encourage repeat visits. Hence, the site needs to pay close attention to navigation and facilitate user interaction through feedback mechanisms and supporting databases. This requires skills beyond mere HTML coding. It calls for the talents of those who can bring together the technical aspects of web page design with the art of effective page layout that applies usability concepts.

2. It is clear that close attention to the use of graphics has become a critical success factor in the appeal of any web site.

The articles stress the importance of creating a consistent look for the web site, and provide a lot of advice on the recommended size and color of graphics to minimize page-loading times. This suggests that an effective redesign requires the contributions of an individual with web graphics expertise.

An assessment of the present state of the Houston STC web site in light of the sites of comparable STC sites and recent literature on the subject geared towards the STC audience has identified the gaps that would need to be addressed in a redesign. These gaps also have implications for the resources that would be needed to effectively redesign the site. These will be examined in the next section in evaluating the feasibility of the redesign.

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# Criteria for Decision Making

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**About this section**

This section reviews and discusses the four criteria used in evaluating the feasibility of a web site redesign.

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**Staff Expertise**

We define *staff expertise* as the technical knowledge possessed by STC Houston leadership and volunteers to redesign the web site.

Gerri Huck, the chapter's web master, manages the STC Houston web site. She has successfully managed the web site for over a year, and has the expertise to lead any redesign efforts that STC Houston wishes to make.

STC Houston, being a large chapter, certainly includes others with the following web-related skills:

- web site design experience
- Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) experience
- web content development experience
- graphic design experience

STC Houston must make every effort to find those people and get them to lend their expertise to any redesign project.

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**Staff Availability**

We define *staff availability* as the availability of STC Houston leadership and volunteers to redesign the web site.

Given the new features, and new look, that would come about with a redesign, it is too much to ask that one person do all the work. Currently, Gerri maintains the site but has indicated that if STC Houston wants more features, the web site will need more staff to not just implement a redesign, but to keep sections current.

STC Houston has been fortunate in that several people – including two current Administrative Council members – have expressed their willingness to work on a redesign project. STC Houston must aggressively recruit experienced web designers to volunteer for this project, as Gerri does not have the time to train everyone herself in web site design.

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## Criteria for Decision Making, Continued

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### Technical Issues

We define *technical issues* as the language used in creating the web site, and concerns involving Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

The site itself is created in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML). Gerri says this is done to ensure simplicity in design and execution. Given that HTML is a common language used by web designers, STC Houston shouldn't concern itself with adding anything using any new languages at this time.

The STC Houston web site is hosted on the STC main server. This server hosts all STC chapter web sites. Because of this, STC Houston need not worry about paying for any ISP services.

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### Costs

We define *costs* as the financial considerations involved in a web site redesign.

STC Houston is a non-profit organization. Costs are a factor in everything the chapter does.

The STC Houston Web Site Committee has a budget of \$1.00. The only reason the Web Site Committee has a budget at all is because some sort of record needs to be included in the chapter books.

Cost will not be a factor in a web site redesign for the following reasons:

- The STC main headquarters serves as the Internet Service Provider for all STC chapters, thus eliminating that cost.
  - STC Houston has an experienced web master in place, thus eliminating the need to bring in outside consultants.
  - STC Houston has had several chapter members express interest in participating in a web site redesign, thus eliminating the need to bring in outside consultants.
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# Conclusions

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**About this section**

This section presents our conclusions based on our research.

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**Conclusions**

Our conclusions are as follows:

<b>Item</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
1.	STC Houston has an interest in a web site redesign, based on concerns about content design and the need to actively promote upcoming events, such as the STC Region 5 Conference.
2.	STC Houston has the staff expertise to perform a web site redesign.
3.	STC Houston has the staff availability, or volunteer interest, to perform a web site redesign.
4.	Technical considerations, in terms of ISP, are not an issue, and should not be a problem if those redesigning the site have web site design and experience.
5.	The financial cost involved in a web site redesign is negligible.

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# Recommendations

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**About this section**

This section presents our recommendations for what to do next.

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**Recommendations**

Our recommendations are as follows:

<b>Step</b>	<b>Action</b>
1.	<b>Create a web site task force</b> that will include the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• STC Houston Web Master</li><li>• STC Houston Director of Communications</li><li>• STC Houston members with previous web site development experience, who will each take a portion of the redesign project.</li></ul>
2.	<b>Staff the web site task force with STC Houston members</b> with the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prior web site development experience</li><li>• Prior web site content experience</li><li>• Prior HTML experience</li></ul>
3.	Under the leadership of the STC Web Master and Director of Communications, <b>create a web site redesign plan</b> , with a timetable for completion, for STC Houston Administrative Council approval.

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# Bibliography

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## Magazine Articles

Gillette, David. "Web Design for International Audiences." *Intercom*, December 1999.

Kagan, Elissa. "Domain Names, Cybersquatting, and Meta Tags." *Intercom*, February 2000.

Lyons, Chopeta C., and Clark, Ruth Colvin. "Web-Based Training Design: Past, Present, and Future." *Intercom*, November 1999.

Wilkinson, Theresa A. "The ABCs of Web Site Design: The Need for Web Site Navigation." *Intercom*, June 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The ABCs of Web Site Design: Redesigning a Web Site." *Intercom*, September/October 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The ABCs of Web Site Design: How to Increase Performance on a Web Site." *Intercom*, January 2000.

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## Web Sites

- STC Alamo Chapter Home Page (<http://www.stc.org/region5/asc/www/home.htm>)
  - STC Austin Chapter Home Page (<http://www.stc.org/region5/aus/www/>)
  - STC Chicago Chapter Home Page (<http://www.stc.org/region4/chi/www/>)
  - STC Houston Chapter Home Page (<http://www.stc.org/region5/hou>)
  - STC Lone Star Chapter Home Page (<http://www.stc.org/region5/lsc/>)
  - STC Los Angeles Chapter Home Page (<http://www.stc.org/region8/lac/www/lahome.htm>)
  - STC New York Metro Chapter Home Page (<http://www.stc.org/region1/nyc/www/index.html>)
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## Surveys

*STC Houston Web Site Survey*

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# Appendix A: STC Houston Web Site Survey

## Overview

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**Introduction** This survey solicits the web usage habits, and opinions of, the STC Houston Chapter Administrative Council members.

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**Intended audience** This survey is for members of the STC Houston Chapter Administrative Council and the STC Web Team. Information from this survey can be shared with any interested party and is considered public information.

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**Background** The STC Houston Chapter web site (<http://www.stc.org/region5/hou>) is expected to meet the needs of its users. Users include the chapter membership and those interested and/or involved with the technical writing profession.

However, while the existing content has been kept up to date, the site has not undergone any redesign over the past few years. The STC Houston Chapter Administrative Council does not know how the site is being used, or how often, or by whom. Because council members do not have this information, they do not know whether the site meets the needs of its users.

Results from this survey will give the Administrative Council a starting point from which it can explore the possibilities of redesigning the web site.

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**Instructions** Complete this survey and return it by e-mail to the following three people:

Name	Title	E-Mail Address
George Slaughter	Director of Communications	<a href="mailto:gslaughter@flex.net">gslaughter@flex.net</a>
Gerri Huck	Web Diva	<a href="mailto:huck@media2000.com">huck@media2000.com</a>
Joelle Hallowell	Newest ComGroup member	<a href="mailto:jlondes@shellus.com">jlondes@shellus.com</a>

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**Deadline** Deadline is 7 a.m. Saturday, February 12, 2000.

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## Overview, Continued

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**In this survey** This survey has three sections of questions.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>See Page</b>
Using Our Web Site	3
Using Other Web Sites	4
Soliciting Your Views	5

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## Using Our Web Site

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**Instructions**

Fill in your responses to the following questions.

<b>Number</b>	<b>Question</b>
1.	How often do you use the STC Houston Chapter web site?
Answer:	
2.	Why do you use the STC Houston Chapter web site?
Answer:	
3.	When do you use the STC Houston Chapter web site?
Answer:	

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## Using Other Web Sites

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**Instructions**

Fill in your responses to the following questions.

<b>Number</b>	<b>Question</b>
1.	What STC-related sites do you most frequently visit? How often do you visit them?
Answer:	
2.	What technical communication-related web sites do you most frequently visit? How often do you visit them?
Answer:	
3.	What general sites do you most frequently visit? How often do you visit them?
Answer:	

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# Soliciting Your Views

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**Instructions**

Fill in your responses to the following questions:

<b>Number</b>	<b>Description</b>
1.	In your view, what are the three most important roles the STC Houston Chapter web site should play?
Answer:	
2.	In your view, what are the three biggest weaknesses of the STC Houston Chapter web site?
Answer:	
3.	What image do you want the STC Houston Chapter web site to project?
Answer:	
4.	Have you any other thoughts or suggestions on the content and/or content design of the STC Houston Chapter web site? Please share them here, and be specific.
Answer:	

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## Appendix B: Home Pages of Selected Web Sites

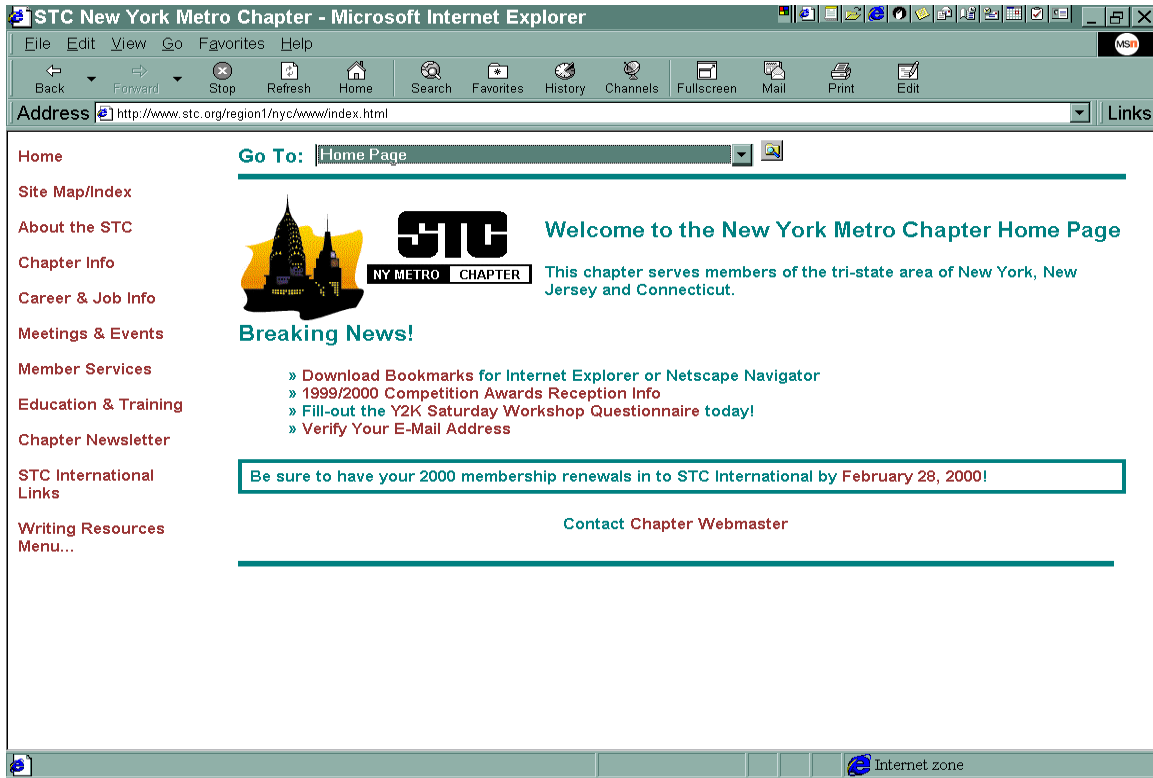


Figure 1 - New York STC Chapter home page



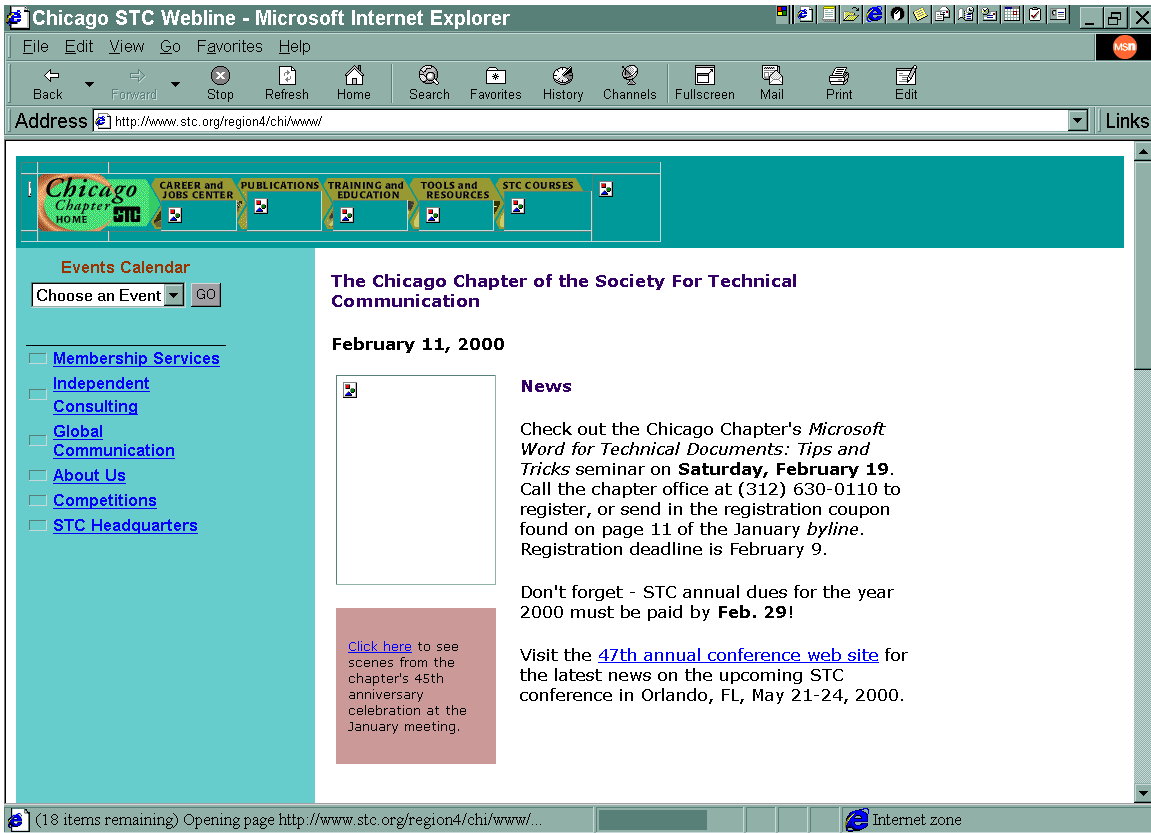


Figure 2 - Chicago STC Chapter home page

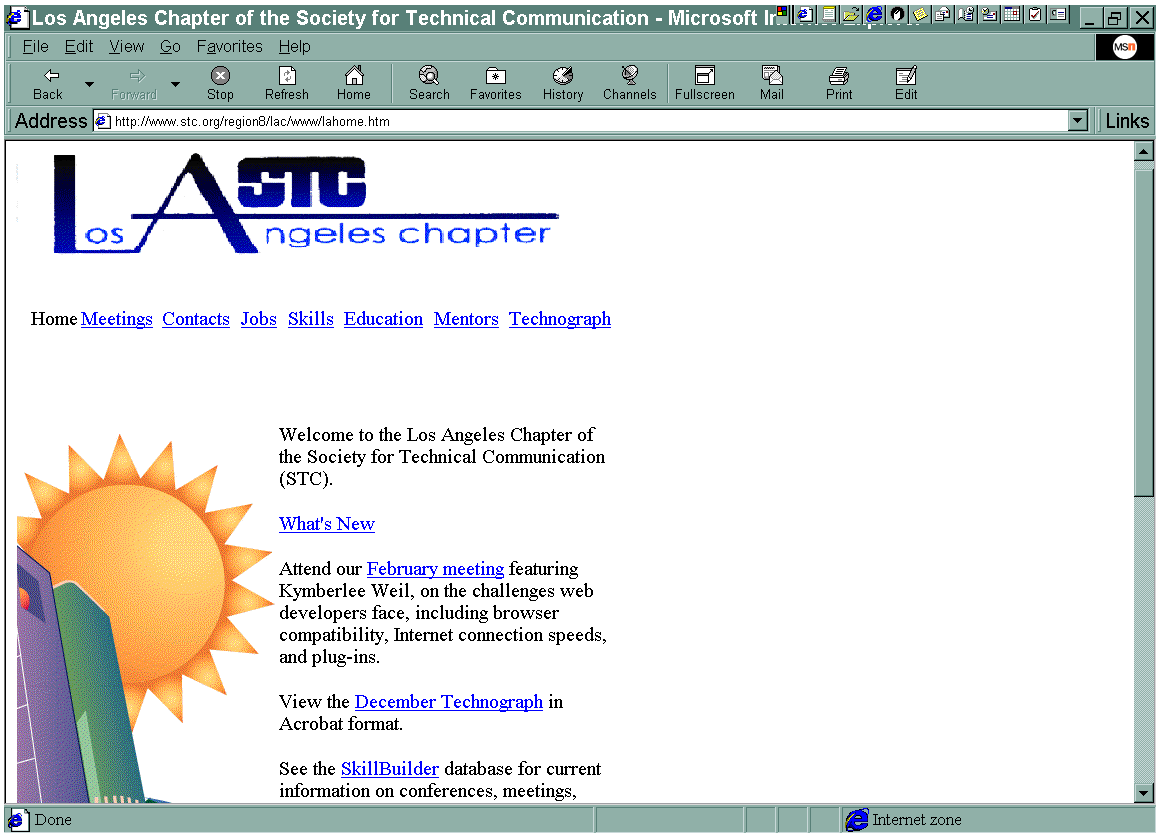


Figure 3 - Los Angeles STC Chapter home page

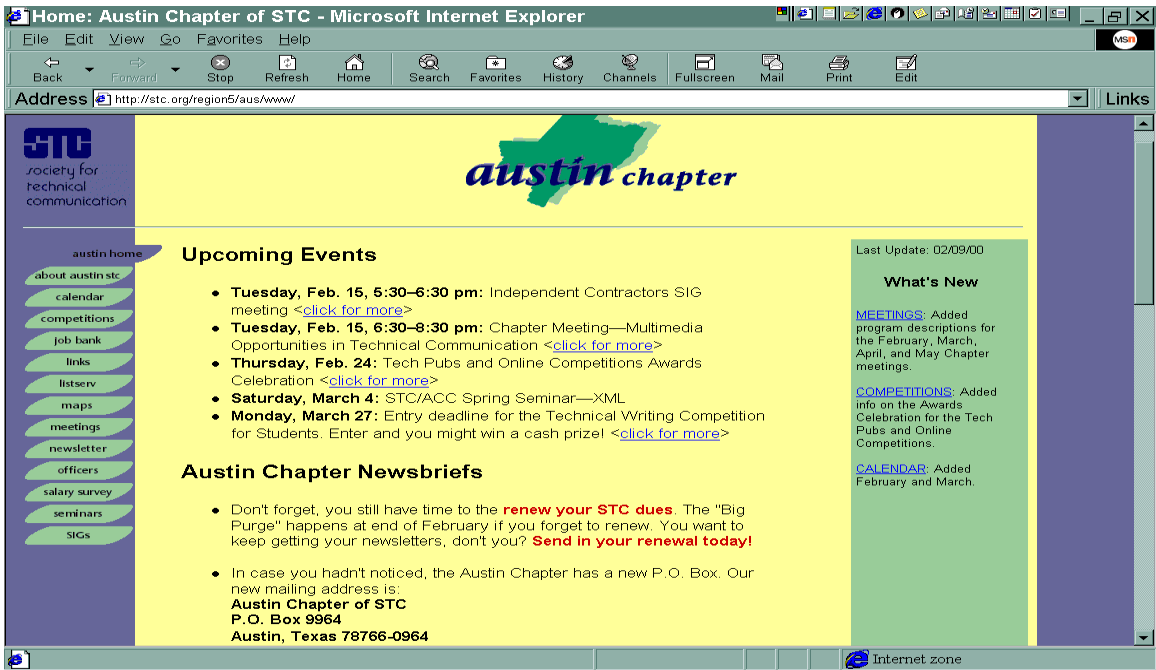


Figure 4 - Austin STC Chapter home page

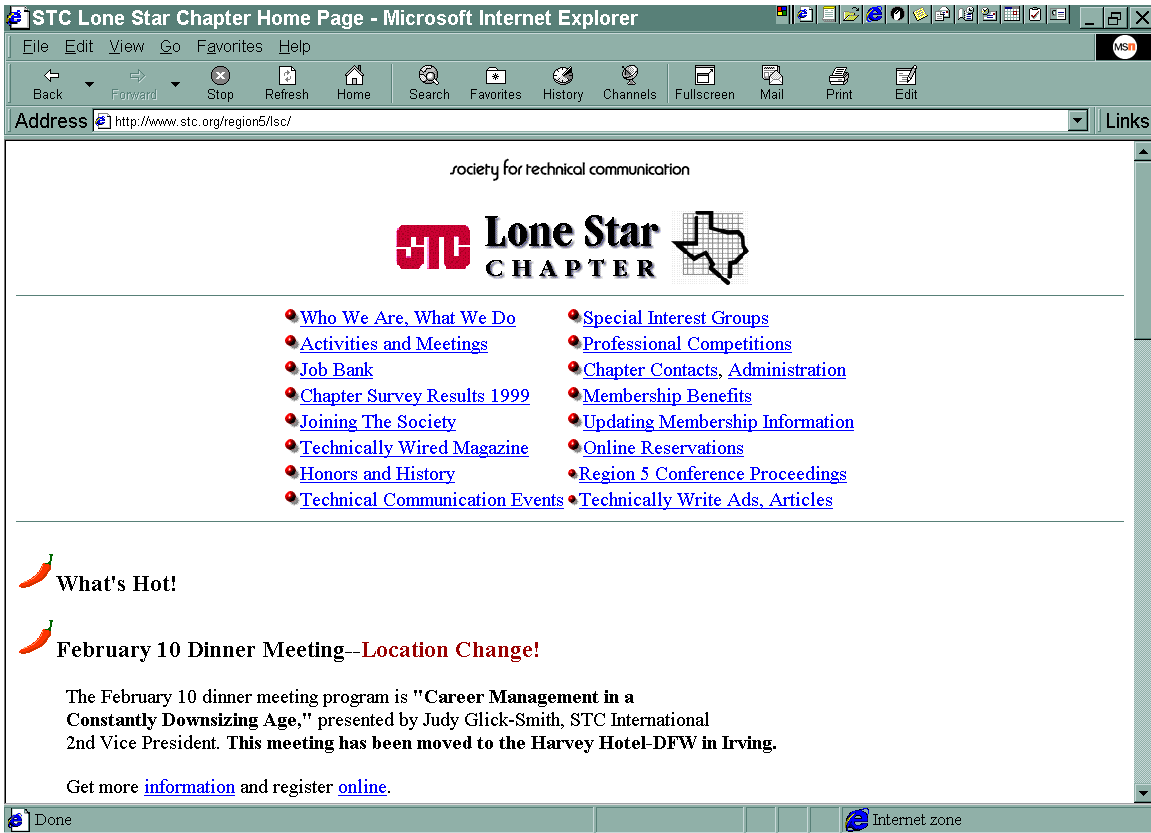


Figure 5 - Dallas STC Chapter home page

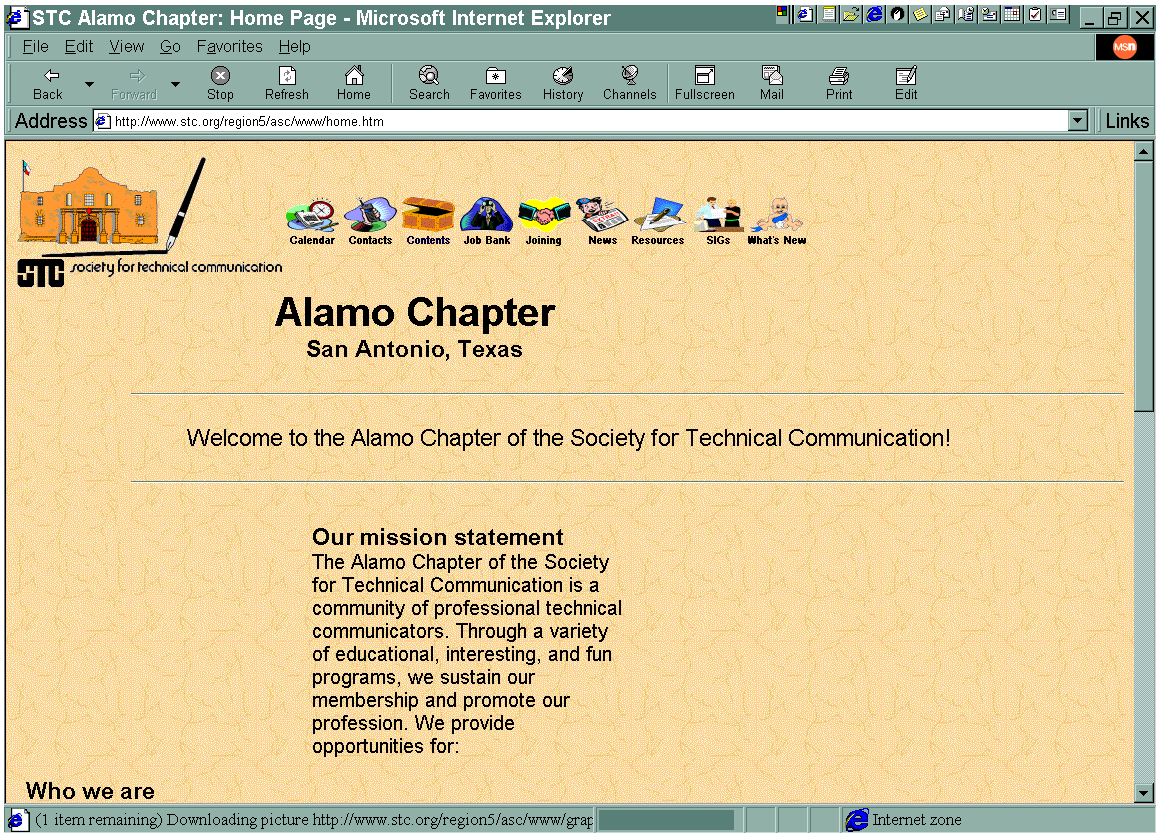


Figure 6 - San Antonio STC Chapter home page

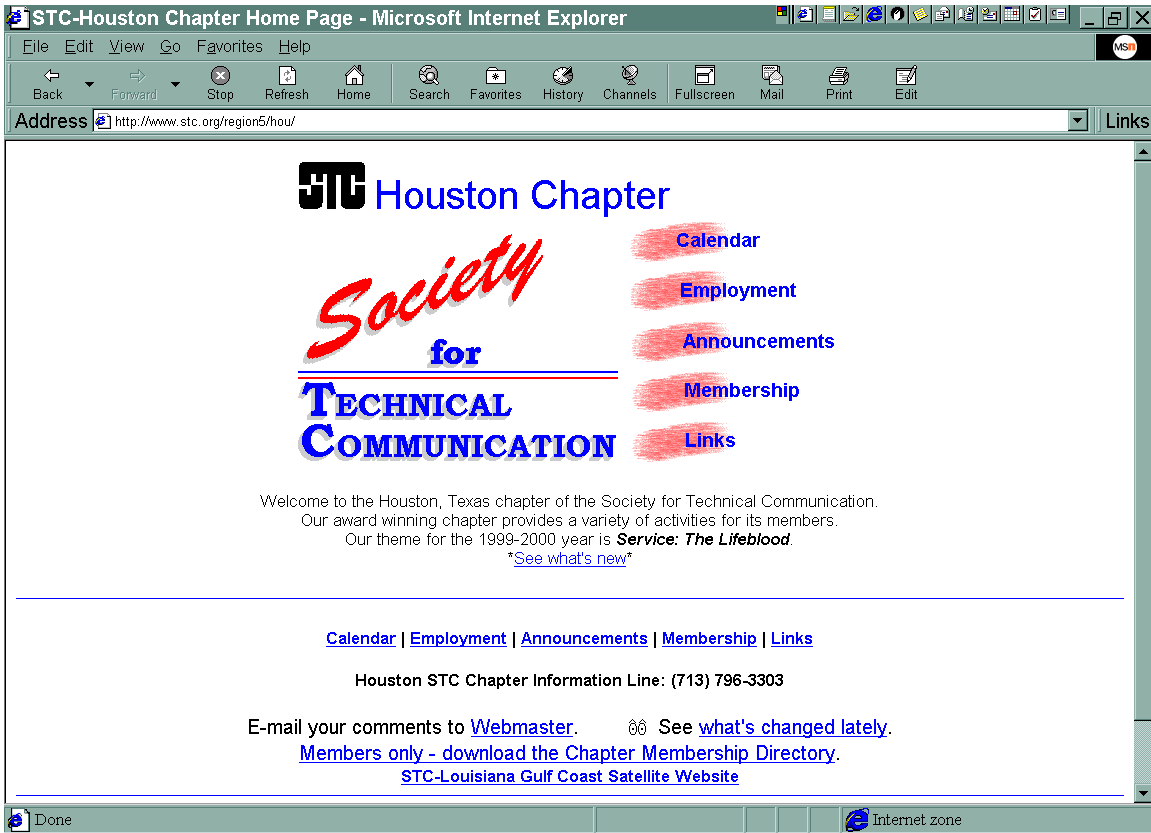


Figure 7 - Houston STC Chapter home page