

Support for SAS® Users Groups: What's Available from SAS Institute

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ABSTRACT

For the past three years, SAS Institute has had a formal program for users group development and support. We actively support groups at the local, regional, and international level. While the Institute supports SAS® users groups worldwide, this presentation will look at our program for groups in North America.

INTRODUCTION

We are seeing tremendous interest in users groups. Over the past two years, the number of SAS users groups in the United States and Canada has grown from about 70 to more than 200. A users group is a great way to learn more about SAS software and services, discover more efficient and effective ways to use software and hardware, develop a network of professional contacts, and hone leadership and organizational skills.

How can SAS Institute help you with your users group? The Institute's users group support program offers a clearinghouse for information, helps new groups form or rejuvenates existing groups, provides meeting support for existing groups, supports regional users groups, and organizes an international conference.

CLEARINGHOUSE FOR INFORMATION

The primary support the Institute provides users groups of all kinds is serving as a clearinghouse for information. We generally get several calls each business day from users asking for information on a users group in their area. The Institute maintains a database of all SAS users groups that choose to register with us. By consulting that database, we are able to refer users to the nearest group in their area. We also have an up-to-date directory of users groups that we send to interested users and have on hand at trade shows, seminars, and conferences. The users group directory is now included in the installation package that a new site receives when licensing our software. New local, special-interest, and regional users groups are publicized in *SAS Communications*®, our news-magazine for users, and in "SAS User News," our quarterly news video for SAS users groups.

We also have a users group booth in the demo area of the SAS Users Group International conference (SUGI). At SUGI 16, the users group booth had a display of newsletters, flyers, and membership forms from SAS users groups available for pickup by attendees. SUGI 16 also had papers and Birds-of-a-Feather sessions on users groups.

SUPPORT FOR NEW USERS GROUPS

An important component of our users group support program is support for new groups. In 1990, United States and Canadian SAS users groups grew by 26%, and the Institute assisted 10 groups in getting started. If you are considering starting a users group, there are three different types of groups to consider. A local group is targeted to software users from different organizations within a specific geographic area such as a city, a county, or part or all of a state. An in-house group is composed of users within a single organization. Special-interest groups are aimed at users with similar tasks, operating environments, or industries. The Institute will pro-

vide support in helping you form whichever group best suits your needs.

We have recently updated the users group Starter's Guide, which gives you step-by-step instructions for starting a SAS users group. A users group directory is included in the Starter's Guide, and you may want to get in touch with some of the contacts for SAS users groups in the United States and Canada. These contacts are people who are involved in the day-to-day operations of users groups. They can be valuable sources of information on starting and maintaining a users group. They can tell you what has worked well for them in every area, from the best days of the week to meet to the ideal length of a meeting, topics that are well-received, organizational tips, and more. You may also want to investigate exchanging meeting ideas and speakers with other users groups in your area.

Getting Started

After you have received the Starter's Guide and read it over, the first step in forming a users group is to get an idea of how many SAS users are in your area or organization. If you are forming an in-house group, contact the SAS Consultant at your organization for names of other SAS users. Internal communications channels such as company newsletters, electronic mail systems, or bulletin boards are a good way to reach potential members. You will find "Reaping the Benefits of an In-house SAS Users Group," a case study based on a paper presented at SUGI 13 and included in the Starter's Guide, especially helpful (Habich 1989). If you are forming a local or special-interest users group, the Institute's users group liaison can give you an idea of how many users are in a particular area or share a common interest.

The next step is to survey your potential membership about needs and interests. There are several examples of surveys in the Starter's Guide. If you are forming a local or special-interest group, we recommend preparing a cover letter and survey to mail to SAS users in your area. The Institute will then copy and mail your letter and survey to our database of users. The response to your survey will help you determine if there is interest in a users group. You will probably need to hear from twice as many people as you would expect to attend regular meetings.

If there is enough interest in forming a group, you will want to arrange the first meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to bring interested users together to discuss the purpose of the group, elect officers or a steering committee, determine the frequency and location of meetings, and discuss types of programming, need for dues, and other organizational topics. You will also want to think about how to encourage potential members to come back to future meetings. Keep in mind that a good program with interesting speakers always draws an audience. Again, if you are forming an in-house group, use your organization's internal channels for communication. The Institute will help local and special-interest groups promote this meeting by mailing the announcement to users in the area. And don't forget to register your group with the Institute. Contact the users group liaison and ask to be added to our database of SAS users groups.

Group Logistics

Another important component of a successful group is to get as many people working for the group as possible. You may want to start with an informal structure like a steering committee for a while

and then move to electing officers. Limiting terms for elected officers ensures turnover and new blood for the group. By organizing a steering committee or electing officers, you make sure the work is spread around as well as offer ways for members to get involved. There are a lot of jobs to do in a users group. Don't forget to make the volunteers in your group feel appreciated. Recognition and appreciation go a long way in keeping members interested and involved.

What about a meeting location? This isn't a concern with in-house groups as they find space within their organization. For local groups, universities can be a good source of free space. Some groups like to rotate their meeting locations, depending upon members to volunteer their business, university or state agency. Businesses may also be willing to provide an in-kind donation to the group by donating meeting space and refreshments. Some groups, like the Pharmaceutical Industry SAS Users Group, hold semi-annual meetings at a hotel and share the cost among the members.

Many users groups decide to collect dues as a way to offset the costs of running the group. Your group may need money to pay for newsletters, mailing costs, refreshments at meetings, and so on. Whether or not to collect dues should be decided by the group's members. Should your group decide to ask members for dues, you need to register the group with the Internal Revenue Service. Make sure you open a non-interest-bearing checking account for the group's funds. Contact the Institute's users group liaison for additional information and the appropriate forms.

Meeting Ideas

Once a new group has been formed, a key ingredient for success is to plan meetings tailored to your members' needs and interests. The initial survey that you sent out before forming the group can be invaluable in giving you ideas for what members want. Look to your membership as a resource in giving a presentation or demonstration. Some regional SAS users groups offer a speaker exchange program for affiliated local groups. For example, the Northeast SAS Users Group (NESUG) will help locate a speaker as well as reimburse the speaker's travel expenses. Consultants are also an excellent resource for guest speakers. Local hardware vendors are usually willing to come to groups and give a demonstration on their latest offerings. Other program ideas are a panel discussion, a member's rehearsal of a paper for a SAS regional or international conference, or an all-BOF meeting. At one meeting, the Genesee Valley SAS Users Group gave a short presentation on BOFs and how they worked, then devoted the rest of the meeting to three different BOFs. Members could attend one group or spend time with each one. In-house groups can stage a SAS Software Day, an all day event consisting of presentations and tutorials by members. One of the keys to a successful users group is to have exciting and interesting programs that are worth attending and that keep members coming back.

SUPPORT FOR MEETINGS

The Institute is also prepared to help you plan lively and interesting meetings. Each issue of *SAS Communications* contains ideas on good meeting topics. A column called "Meeting Tips" details successful meeting ideas that have worked for other SAS users groups. The Institute also produces a quarterly users group news video that is sent free to all contacts on our users group database. Called "SAS User News," the 25-minute video provides news from the Institute about our products and services, several feature stories, and a section on programming tips. We also regularly mail Institute news releases; examples of new brochures and technical inserts are mailed semiannually. In addition, we send copies of users group newsletters to users group contacts on a quarterly basis.

The Institute also offers a speakers program for SAS users groups. If a speaker can be arranged for your group, we'll be glad to promote this meeting with a special mailing of your newsletter or meeting announcement. You can find examples of newsletters in the Starter's Guide. Our experience has shown that an Institute speaker combined with a special mailing generally doubles attendance at your meeting. It's a wonderful way for you to have an excellent meeting and boost attendance and membership in your group. In 1990, Institute representatives spoke at 60 different SAS users groups. Just contact the Institute's users group liaison to discuss your request. Please keep in mind that we require a minimum of 8 to 8 weeks to help you promote a meeting.

SUPPORT FOR REGIONAL USERS GROUPS

Over the last few years, there has been considerable interest in forming regional SAS users groups to provide support for local groups as well as stage an annual conference. Regional SAS users groups cover several states or Canadian provinces, have formal affiliation with our international group, SUGI, and offer support services to SAS users groups in their region. Regions are based on a natural grouping of states such as the Northeast group, the Midwest group, the South Central group, and so on. Since regional SAS users groups are formally affiliated with SUGI, users interested in forming a regional group must apply to the SUGI Executive Board for a charter and agree to uphold the tenets of that charter. To date, the Executive Board has approved charters for groups in the Northeast, Midwest, Pacific Northwest, and South Central regions.

The Institute supports regional groups by assisting users in forming the rationale for the group, supplying a list of SAS users groups in the region to contact for affiliation, and assisting with the petition to charter. If a regional group decides to hold an annual conference, the Institute will coordinate support activities for that conference. Support includes promoting the conference through mailings, the Institute's Online Customer Support Facility, *SAS Communications*, "SAS User News," training courses, and sales seminars. We also provide a keynote speaker for the conference, print a conference proceedings, and provide exhibits and staff for a demonstration area.

In 1991, the Institute has worked closely with users from the Pacific Northwest, the Midwest, the Northeast, and the South Central states to organize a conference for their regions. Regional conferences are patterned after SUGI, our international conference, and include a keynote address by an Institute representative, paper sessions, roundtable luncheons, a demonstration area, and more. Regional conferences provide a real service to the SAS user community by offering an affordable conference often within a few hours of travel. Statistics compiled by MWSUG show that 52% of MWSUG '90 attendees had never attended SUGI. Some statistics compiled by NESUG show that 77% of NESUG '89 attendees and 83% of NESUG '90 attendees had never attended SUGI. Regional SAS users conferences provide an excellent opportunity to attend a SAS users conference in one's own backyard.

SUPPORT FOR SAS' USERS GROUP INTERNATIONAL (SUGI)

Lastly, SAS Institute helps to stage the annual SAS Users Group International conference (SUGI). 1991 was our sixteenth annual conference. The conference has grown in attendance from 40 at what was called SAS.ONE to more than 3,000 who attended SUGI 16. While SAS Institute is responsible for hosting the Opening Session and handling administrative support, users have responsibility for organizing and running SUGI. SAS users can get involved by just

attending SUGI, giving a paper, or serving as one of SUGI's 150 conference leaders. Conference leaders serve as judges, roundtable luncheon leaders, session coordinators, or section chairs. If you are interested in volunteering to help with SUGI 17, you'll want to contact Jeff Hutchinson, SUGI 17 Conference Chair.

CONCLUSION

SAS users are very enthusiastic about SAS users groups at all levels. A users group is an excellent way for you to learn more about SAS software and services, share programming problems and techniques, and meet others in the SAS user community. SAS Institute is committed to supporting SAS users at the local, regional, and international level. If you have suggestions about new support services you'd like to see, please take a minute to talk with me after the session. We also hope you'll support the users group in your

area or give us a call if you'd like to start a new group. We're always glad to hear from you.

REFERENCES

Habich, C.R. (1989), "Reaping the Benefits of an In-house SAS User Group," *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual SAS* Users Group International Conference*, 14, 449-452.

Sun Microsystems, Inc. (1989), "Up and Running: A Guide to Starting a Sun Local User Group."

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