

Warmware To Go Along With The SAS System The SAS Users Groups

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ABSTRACT

SAS Institute has supported the formation of SAS Users Groups at many different levels -- Special Interest Groups, In-House Groups, Local Groups, and Regional Groups. This is what we will be calling the warmware that goes with the SAS System.

This paper will highlight the following:

1. Purpose And Types Of Users Groups;
2. Starting Users Groups - A Step By Step Process;
3. Keeping The Group Going;
4. The Benefits; and
5. Support from SAS Institute.

PURPOSE AND TYPES OF USERS GROUPS

Users groups of any kind usually have one purpose in mind ... the gathering of persons with similar interests. This general statement can be broken down into several benefits:

- Connectivity between persons with experience and needs.
- The exchange of ideas and opportunity for involvement.
- Training and enhancement of present skills.
- To learn about SAS Institute updates and direction.
- To have some influence regarding SAS Institute direction.

More of the benefits will be addressed later in this paper.

SAS Institute has supported the formation of such groups at four different levels. They are:

The Special Interest Group

This group is formed of persons with the same vocation or interest in using the SAS System. One such example is the PharmSAS, a users group formed of persons in the pharmaceutical industry.

The In-House Group

This group is formed of persons within the same company. In Minnesota there are several companies with several persons using the SAS system. Some of these are the Minnesota State Employees SAS Users Group, Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Minnesota SAS Users Group, St. Paul Companies SAS Users Group, to name a few. This group also shares one additional benefit, the sharing of system-wide operations.

The Local Group

This group is formed of persons within a geographic area. This area may be a city, state, or two state area.

The Regional Group

This group is formed of persons within a large geographic area. SAS Institute foresees the formation of eight regional users groups in the United States. The MidWest SAS Users Group is the second such group.

Support for the different types of groups will also be detailed later in this paper.

STARTING A USER GROUP A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS

SAS Users Groups provide members and companies with knowledge, support, and solutions. To be able to achieve these benefits in your area or company a step-by-step process is provided to aid in the formation of a user group. To start a user group it takes time and energy but it is well worth the effort.

Initially someone or some group must have the interest and time to spend on developing and organizing a SAS user group. It will be less time consuming if a small group can be organized. For now let us call this group the executive committee. The people within this group need not be from the same company, city, or state but they must have the same interest and dedication to work on the organization. Certainly, it would be more convenient to have the group centrally located but is not a prerequisite. The executive committees' charge is to begin the work in organizing a user group.

The tasks the executive group must tackle are to:

1. Define the target group. Is the group to be a regional, local, in-house, or special interest? For more information on types of groups refer to the section on Purpose And Types Of Users Groups. This needs to be clearly defined so goals, structure,

and topics can be suitably selected for the group. To help aid in defining the target group call the SAS Institute's Users Group Liaison. The address is:

Corporate Communications
SAS Institute Inc.
SAS Circle Box 8000
Cary, NC 27512-8000
(919) 667-8000

They can identify established user groups in your area, groups that are currently being formed, and licensed users of SAS software within your target area. This will help in defining the group and size. They also have a publication called, SAS Users Group Starter's Guide and it will be referred to several times in this article.

2. Start comprising a mailing list of potential members. This list should include member name, company, address, and telephone number. When more information is obtained about the member or company you can include information such as the type of SAS software installed at a company site, areas of expertise, topics of interest, etc.
3. Establish the goals for the group. This may change several times in the life of the organization but it gives an initial purpose and direction to follow. You may find surveying the target members to be helpful in determining goals or interest of the members. This survey also provides input by potential members into the formation and scope of the group. This can prove to be very helpful in the groups success. Refer to SAS's publication SAS Users Group Starter's Guide for sample surveys and initial contact letters. From this feed back, make a definite statement of purpose to be used as a guideline for the initial start-up.
4. Establish a budget if needed. Depending on the focus of the group you may need to establish a budget. The budget may include fees for meeting facilities, newsletters, mailings, refreshments, speakers, etc. There are several ways to collect money such as annual dues, charging a fee at each meeting, or company supported. If dues or fees are collected a non-interest, non-profit bank account should be opened. A tax identification number can be obtained by filing form SS-4 to the Internal Revenue Service. You may also call the IRS to obtain a number immediately.
5. Define the duties of the executive committee. Each member should be given specific tasks or functions to perform. This will ensure all work is being completed

or addressed and that one person is not carrying the full responsibility of the group. Some suggestions for distribution of duties are:

- Chairperson
- Treasurer
- Secretary
- Communications (mailings and advertisements)
- Programming Scheduler (organizes the speaker and sites for each meeting)
- Members-at-large (to help out in all areas)

You are not limited to or need all of the above job divisions but it helps in defining specific tasks. Remember this group may be temporary until a formalized group is established. But it is needed to ensure all aspects of organizing the group is accomplished.

6. Prepare the first two meetings. The more preparation and organization you do up-front the more successful your first meeting will be. The first impressions are always the most important.

- If a survey was sent out summarize the results and distribute it at the first meeting. It will provide the user with an effective reference list of other members and companies and their software, hardware, and usage information. This can be very valuable for members when problems or questions arise. It also is useful to provide information on the make-up and scope of the group.
- Choose topics and speakers for the first two meetings. The first meeting may be informational with the second meeting having a defined speaker and topic.
- Establish a meeting location, date, and time. Try to pick a time and date that most people can attend. Generally, Mondays and Fridays do not draw many people for meetings.
- Set an agenda. An outline that has been successful is to:
 - Start with an opening discussion or welcome. Introduce yourself and describe the purpose and scope of the group.
 - Introduce the executive committee or hold an election to appoint the officers.
 - Distribute the surveys and mailing list.
 - Present the business news. Define the work that has been done thus far such as the discussion of the by-laws, the due structure, areas of topics, and how often to meet. This is where you see if the scope of the executive committee is in tune with the members. If it is not, determine a new goal or scope. Give all members a chance to comment. This will provide them with an opportunity to get involved and make it their group. You may find some members

wanting no active involvement in the group. If this is the case the executive committee will have more responsibilities in keeping the group going.

- Introduce the speaker and topic. At the end, allow time for questions and answers.
 - Make a closing statement by announcing the next meeting, the site, and topic.
 - Provide some time for the members to mingle and discuss issues.
7. Contact SAS Institutes Users Group Liaison, if you have not by now. They can help with an initial mailing or survey. They have many suggestions, ideas, and plenty of support to help organize your group. SAS will send your first mailing to all licensed users of SAS products within your designated area. They will also announce the formation of your user group in the SAS Communications magazine.
 8. Advertise the meeting. There are many ways to advertise your group and the first meeting.
 - Get an add in the local newspapers. Some newspapers have a section announcing area organizational meetings.
 - Advertise in the local computer trade magazines.
 - Announce it in electronic bulletin boards.
 - Contact local businesses within the area.
 - Approach other computer organizations to announce your meeting.
 9. Hold the first meeting.
 10. Develop the agendas, speakers, and sites for the upcoming meetings. This area can be time consuming depending on how often you meet. Some suggestions for obtaining speakers are:
 - Seek members from your group. They have a vast realm of knowledge and expertise.
 - Invite speakers from outside the group.There are different places to host the meetings, such as member company sites, restaurants, hotels, etc. Some places may charge for room rental.
 11. Establish by-laws. They can be useful guidelines for the group and the future executive committees. For samples of various group's by-laws refer to SAS's publication of SAS Users Group Starter's Guide.
 12. Send out a newsletter for each meeting. Newsletters will greatly help the momentum of the group. It will keep the members informed and up-to-date on changes, meetings, and special interest information. The newsletter can be as simple or as encompassing as you want. The vital information to include is:

- The announcement of the next meeting.
- Recap of the last meeting.
- Any special announcements or questions from the group.
- Technical tips or problems reported by the group.

Refer to SAS's publication of SAS Users Group Starter's Guide for examples. These newsletters should be mailed in plenty of time for your members to schedule and plan accordingly. Member companies may help with the publishing and mailing of the newsletter.

KEEPING THE GROUP GOING

The on-going task is to keep the participation going. Below are some tips for maintaining the momentum.

Most important the group or the executive committee must be willing to change to meet the needs of the members. Do not be too rigid. Try to be flexible.

Poll the members on a regular basis (at least once a year) to ensure topics are of value and interest to the group. Based on the polling, choose subjects that the members have expressed an interest in.

Provide a wide range of topics. Keep a record of who and how many members attend each meeting. This can prove to be very useful. Try obtaining speakers from outside the group. This can generate new interest and ideas.

Encourage and develop an active exchange and sharing of ideas between members. The discussions can be about problems, tips, or advice for SAS or SAS related issues. There are many benefits to this for both the member and the member company. The member becomes more informed and the member company has a pool of resources available to solve SAS problems.

The more worthwhile services the user group can provide the more valuable the group becomes. Some services are:

- A resource library of SAS related articles. This could include handouts from speakers, SAS publications, training material, etc.
- An inventory list of members with their areas of expertise.
- SAS class schedules from SAS Institute and other training companies.
- As an interface to SAS Institute on issues and problems.

Advertisement is a very useful source of on-going communication to the members or potential members. Providing newsletters and announcements in a timely manner is essential. This allows your members to be informed and able to plan accordingly to attend meetings.

Interact with other user groups to get new ideas, exchange speakers, or support. They are a valuable source of information.

THE BENEFITS

There are numerous benefits that a users group can provide to a company and member. Some of these benefits have already been described in the section, "Keeping The Group Going." Specific values of users groups are:

- Useful services provided. These services can include a resource library, inventory list of members with their areas of expertise, SAS class schedules, and as an interface to SAS Institute.
- A broader knowledge base of SAS software and products by the member. This enhances productivity and provides better solutions. The member also learns about new SAS products, software changes, and services as soon as they become available.
- The contacts with other SAS users.
- The exchanging of ideas, SAS tips, and solutions to known problems. When significant changes are occurring in the SAS software, the communication between members can be of great value in the implementation of new releases. It will cut down the learning curve.
- The SAS training or knowledge the member gains at each meeting. It is a cost effective training tool.

SUPPORT FROM SAS INSTITUTE

The following is a section from the publication SAS Users Group Starter's Guide. It highlights the support given from SAS Institute for the different levels of users groups.

SAS Communications

The quarterly newsmagazine of SAS Institute, SAS Communications, is free to all qualified users of SAS software. It provides announcements of new software products and

services, profiles of organizations with superior applications of the software, discussion of technical issues, and users group news.

The User News section includes announcements of the formation of new groups, SUGI news, Regional and International users group conference dates, and a column on hot ideas for meeting topics. Call the SAS Communication mailing list coordinator for subscription request forms.

User News Videotape

The Institute produces a free newsmagazine-format videotape to supplement your regular meeting programs. The 20- to 25-minute tapes feature interviews with Institute staff and ASS software users. Produced quarterly, the tapes discuss corporate directions and includes technical tips and announcements of new products and services. Copies are automatically mailed to users group contacts who have asked to be included in the Institute's users group database.

Speakers Bureau

Upon request, the Institute will provide a speaker for your meetings at least once a year. We like to coordinate these visits with other travel for Institute business so please make your request 3-4 months in advance.

In addition, the Institute users group liaison maintains a central database of users group members who would be willing to speak at your meetings, either in coordination with other travel or with expenses paid. These speakers do not charge an additional speaking fee.

Initial Mailings

When you decide to start a group, the Institute will reproduce your letter of invitation and will mail the letter and an optional survey to all SAS software users in the area your group will cover. You can develop your mailing list based on responses to the initial mailing.

Users Group Referrals

We often receive telephone calls from SAS software users who would like to join a users group in their area. The Institute maintains a central database of users group contacts with their phone numbers and addresses and refers the callers to the appropriate group contacts. For this reason, you should immediately contact the Institute's users group liaison when the contact name, phone number, or address changes.

News Releases

We do our best to ensure that users groups are first in the chain of news distribution. As soon as the Institute is prepared to make a formal announcement on the availability of product or service, we send news releases to users group contacts to share with group members.

Newsletter Library

The Institute users group liaison maintains a library of group newsletters. Copies are available to users groups upon request. This exchange may provide you with new ideas for meeting topics as well as for your groups newsletter. Be sure to include the Institute users group liaison on your newsletter mailing list in order to take part in this service.

Additional Support for regional SAS Users Groups

Regional users groups, which are chartered by SUGI, may choose to host an annual conference. SAS Institute will assist with preconference publicity, provide a speaker for the opening session, and staff to assist in the demonstration area. The Institute will print the conference Proceedings, one per attendee, up to 200 pages in length.

Corporate Literature

Upon request, the Institute will provide limited supplies of corporate, product, and applications brochures, user profiles, and product information sheets. We also send out semi-annual mailings of recently produced corporate literature.

SAS Users Group International (SUGI) Conference

The Institute maintains a users group booth at SUGI with general information on our users group support program. In addition, several papers on users groups are generally presented each year.

CONCLUSION

This paper is just a brief description of what is involved with users groups as we have experienced it. If you would like more information or if we can help you in any way, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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