

The Life and Times of a Local SAS® Users Group

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Abstract

The author of this paper along with two other people assumed the leadership of the Cleveland SAS Users Group in January of 1990.

The past five years have been a definite learning experience. This paper will discuss ways that one local group not only kept itself viable, but interesting as well.

How Did This Happen?

How does one become president of a local users group? I've often asked myself this question when August rolls around, because it's time to think about another year of meetings and that means lining up presentations and scheduling rooms and putting out newsletters. How did this happen? Well...I was just a member before. I was one of those people sitting out there in the audience. Oh, sure I'd given a few presentations. Yeah, I've been accused of liking the sound of my own voice, but at least I got up there. The current leadership of the group confessed to being tired, so they asked for volunteers. As I said I was one of those people out in the audience. I saw some things that I would like to have seen done differently, but I always subscribed to the philosophy that unless you were willing to do a better job, you should not complain about the job that someone else was doing. Well, here was my big chance to put up or shut up. I talked it over with my family and decided to put up. There were three officers: president, secretary/newsletter editor, and treasurer. If you're going to have an impact, go for the top. I volunteered for president. I was wondering if any one else would volunteer. I found out at a meeting

that was scheduled after work in October. If I remember correctly, four people had originally volunteered, but one withdrew. One person had volunteered for secretary, while the other person had expressed an interest in any of the three positions. The way I became president kind of went like this. One person had obviously volunteered for secretary/newsletter editor, no one had expressed an explicit interest in treasurer, so the person that was willing to do any of the three jobs got that one, leaving me unopposed for president. That should have been the tip off, but I was too preoccupied listening to the strains of Hail to the Chief that seemed to be coming from down the hall. The newsletter announcing the November meeting also announced the new slate of officers. We were unanimously elected at the November meeting. That was way too easy.

If You Thought That Was Easy ...

Definitely too easy. Now what do we do. Well, we did have some breathing space. Our terms did not begin until the following September. That gave us a little time to get organized and assess the situation. At that time I had a vague idea of the direction that I would like to see the users group take, but I knew that I couldn't possibly implement any changes without the cooperation of my fellow officers. Fortunately, I knew the secretary/newsletter editor. She was one of the users that I supported at the Perry Nuclear Power Plant. I knew that we could work together. The person, who had gotten the position of treasurer by default, was an unknown at the time. After talking to her and sharing a few ideas, I found that she felt the same way about the users group as I did. The fact

that the three of us were of a same mind and were willing to work together has probably been the key to running our users group.

If you're going to run it by committee, the committee better be able to cooperate and compromise to get it done.

I know there are probably groups out there that are run by a single individual. Our group was set up with three officers, so we didn't have much choice and frankly, I wouldn't want to do it by myself. We've all come to rely on each other and every August when it comes time to plan the next "fiscal year's" activities, one of us will always have an idea that will get the creative process started again.

Money's Always A Sore Subject.

One of the first things that we were interested in was the financial standing of the group. Although we had a modest amount in the treasury, the previous administration's treasurer informed us that there were some outstanding debts. Five meetings were held a year, one every other month starting in September and ending in May, taking the summer off for vacations. Each meeting was announced by a one page newsletter. Over 200 newsletters were mailed before each meeting. Private individuals had purchased stamps, expecting to be reimbursed. Paying for the postage would put the treasury in the red. We like so many other people had to face the fact that:

You're going to need money to run the group.

There are no two ways about it. Unless you can make local calls to the entire membership to announce a meeting, you're going to have to do some kind of mailing, because not every one has access to such things as E-mail or FAX machines. Some groups are able to find corporate sponsors to cover such costs. Dues had not been collected regularly for almost five years. We decided to reinstate the practice. Our dues structure is setup so as not to

burden an individual who must pay his own way, but is also structured to prevent people from signing up an unlimited number of people under a corporate membership. The old dues structure had provisions for a \$50 corporate membership with unlimited enrollment. We suspected that some of the 200 pieces of mail that went out before each meeting were going to people who were no longer interested. We decided on a \$10 individual membership fee. The new corporate rate was \$10 per individual up to 5, each individual after 5 was \$5. The majority of our members get their dues paid by their companies, who feel that belong to such an organization is worthwhile. There are, however, a few people who pay their own way.

Stop the Presses!

My first involvement with the users group was as a presenter. There followed several years of ignorant bliss. My next brush with the users group came when I was volunteered as the newsletter editor. At this point in time, the founding fathers had been running the Cleveland group since time immemorial. I had just started my present job and my team lead was the current Secretary/Newsletter Editor. My supervisor and my team lead thought that it would be an absolutely wonderful idea if I became involved (again) with the Cleveland SAS Users Group. My team lead thought that it would be even more wonderful if I relieved her of her duties as Secretary and Editor. (Ah, the advantages of being the new kid on the block and low man on the totem pole!) Despite the unusual circumstances under which I "volunteered" for this position, I attacked it with my usual enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is the operative word here. Reaching a level of quality requires not only devotion to duty, but a sense of pride and a level of enthusiasm.

Don't get burned out!

When the newsletter dwindles in size, when there's trouble filling one side of an 8 1/2 by 11 sheet of paper, when the lead and only article is the time for

the next meeting, Get Out! Pass the Baton! Volunteer someone else! If the editor is bored with the newsletter, imagine how the readers are feeling. The job of newsletter editor at first rotated around until it settled on one person. I usually write at least one article for the newsletter, but the bulk of the input is handled by the current editor who also desk top publishes it.

Put out a newsletter!

It is important to stay in touch with your membership. Short of calling our entire membership on the phone, it is the only way to communicate with them all. Yes, you do communicate to them at the meetings, but we have never had a meeting where our entire membership was there. Even getting 25% of them in the same room at the same time is a feat. We try to put it out on a regular basis, usually two weeks before a meeting. On rare occasions, a special issue may be put out to convey some important information. When we first took over the users group, over 200 newsletters were being mailed out. The postage alone was a real drain on the treasury. For larger companies, we instituted a policy of identifying corporate contacts. One copy of the newsletter is mailed to each of the contacts and it is their responsibility to distribute the newsletter to the other members within their companies. This cut the number of pieces mailed back to 60. The corporate contacts are identified when dues are paid and they are supplied with a list of the other members within their company.

What to talk about.

Our newsletter has gone through a number of changes over the years. It started as a one page flier and has grow into a multipage booklet. Although I made light of the next meeting time being the lead article earlier, this is one of the most important things that goes into the newsletter. The other important item is the content of the meeting. Our membership is scattered across 150 miles of northeast Ohio. People are committing large portions of their days to come to

the meetings, so its important to let them know what to expect. We've included programming tips and techniques in the newsletter from time to time. Right now this is being handled in a rather comical fashion in an article that the newsletter editor christened the Kominek-tary. (Hey, I think its funny!) We also try to keep our members aware of any training opportunities in the area. At the time of the writing of this article, we are in the midst of planing the 1995 MidWest SAS Users Group Conference in Cleveland. We are including updates on how we are progressing and asking for volunteers and papers. The newsletter is our line of communication with the membership. We try to keep it interesting and informative. We could not exist without it.

Let's Get Together.

Choosing a meeting site has always been a big deal for us. I don't really know why that is, it just is. Maybe it's the fact that we've got members in Youngstown and members in Toledo. I'm even tempted to think it's the old east side of Cleveland vs. the west side of Cleveland. The Sunday newspaper has been full of articles speculating on how the division arose between the east side and the west side. Some of them have traced it back to when Cleveland was first settled. Be that as it may finding a meeting site that is convenient to everyone has been a problem for one reason or another. Originally, the group had been meeting in downtown Cleveland at lunch time. This was working rather well, so not wanting to mess with a good thing, we kept it there. Attendance began to dwindle, then the person who was able to obtain the meeting room, left that company, and obtaining the room became a problem. The dwindling attendance seemed to signal that it was time to move on anyway. Other sites in downtown were tried, but attendance was not that great. Other times were tried, other locations, same results. Finally, we hit on a location convenient to the freeway on the east side. This location is working well, We're even drawing people from the far west side. Go figure. The old phrase from real estate: Location, Location, Location comes to mind. We

kept trying till we found the right one. We continue to hold meetings at lunch time. Lunchtime seems to be the best time for our members. We've always had better attendance at lunch time meetings. The fact that we supply pizza, pop, and cookies may have something to do with it. Got to spend that dues money on something. The lunchtime meetings last between an hour to an hour and a half. We generally conduct normal business and make announcements while everyone is settling in and eating their pizza. Then we have a presentation by one of our members or someone from another users group or from SAS Institute. We have not relied too heavily on the SAS Institute in the past, only because of logistics. It's a long way to Cary, NC. With the opening of an office in Pittsburgh and the future opening of an office in Cleveland, we hope to be able to tap their talents more frequently.

Getting people to give presentations has always been a chore. You can ask for volunteers, but it always ends up being the same people. The best approach is either to think of a topic and try to match a person with it or think of a person and a topic that you know that they will be comfortable with and then ask the person you have in mind. In the vast majority of cases, the person would never have volunteered, but will be more than happy to give a presentation if they're asked.

Get Their Attention!

Keeping it going is probably the toughest part of the job. It seems like you just finished wowing them and its time for another meeting and you're fresh out of ideas. Asking for suggestions from the membership sounds like a good idea, but in practice you find that there is a small, core group of people that always responds, so you're better off asking for suggestions from these people. Keep it varied. Have a little something for everyone. Have something for the beginner as well as for the expert. Be aware of the "demographics" of your group. Our group is very mainframe oriented. Every once in awhile we can get some interest in the PC end of things, but our users are traditionalists. They'd probably lose interest if

they had a steady diet of PC stuff.

If You Thought That Was Tough ...

Those of us running the Cleveland SAS Users Group wanted to do something that the group hadn't done before. We wanted to leave our mark in user group history. One evening, at an executive committee meeting at which only two of us showed up, one of us came up with the idea to host a regional conference. Sounded simple enough at the time. Unfortunately, we were not even sure what region that we belonged to. We were about 99% sure it was the MidWest and a quick consult of the last mailing from MWSUG showed that Ohio was included in the regional map. Now that we were sure of what region we belonged to, we had to figure out who we had to contact. Sally Roberson is a wealth of user group information and she put us in touch with the right people. Well, two years later here we are hosting our own conference. During that time we've had a chance to see both the 1993 MWSUG conference in Indianapolis and the 1994 MWSUG conference in Omaha, but not only as participants, but as volunteers. You get quite a different perspective of a conference when it is seen from the inside. You come away with at least a slight inkling of what it takes to put one on.

Going back to that fateful night when this whole thing started, after we got through congratulating ourselves for coming up with such a brilliant idea, we took a step back and seriously asked ourselves, "Can we do this?" I think at this point the two of us at the executive committee meeting were no longer thinking in terms of just the two of us, but all of the core members of the Cleveland SAS Users Group and the Canton Akron Massillon Users Group. We realized that it takes far more than two people to put on a conference. Realizing that we could count on the support of a number of people, we decided to pursue hosting the conference. Our first step was to draft a proposal that was submitted to the MWSUG Executive Committee at the conference in Indianapolis. After the proposal was accepted, we started about the business of organizing the conference, finding a hotel, putting together a

program, drafting the call for papers, getting registration materials together, and all the tons of details that go along with hosting a conference. This conference has been a focal point of the two users groups for the past two years and has stimulated new interest in the users groups. Our membership is looking forward to the conference. It has been quite an experience.

So What's It All Mean?

Ever since I've become involved with local and regional users groups, I've been fascinated by what

makes them tick. I've talked to my counterparts in a number of groups throughout the East. I've attended all the presentations at SUGI about users groups. I've come to the conclusion that because users groups are made up of people and people are all different, each users group is different. They each have their own personality. What works for one may not apply to another. The best that we can hope for out of sharing our ideas about what makes us tick is that we keep each other thinking.

As long as we're thinking about keeping it going, there's a good chance that it will.

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