

Starting, Leading, and Growing a Successful SAS® User Group Program

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Abstract

The number of SAS® user groups in the United States and Canada continues to grow each year. If you are interested in starting a group in your area, or if you are looking for some new ideas for an existing group, this presentation is for you. Get advice and recommendations from users who have been involved in successful SAS user groups. Hear new ideas on programs, membership drives, finances, leadership, and more. The discussion will include local, in-house, special-interest, and regional SAS user groups.

Introduction

Like most professional groups, SAS user groups are diverse. Most groups share common goals such as information sharing, problem solving, and networking, but they may have widely varying ways to achieve these goals. There really isn't one recipe for success with a SAS user group. While the direction is the same, the path to get there is different. This paper lists different suggestions that have worked for some of the most successful SAS user groups. If you like one, try it with your user group. If it works, use it again. If it doesn't, try another suggestion. When it comes to user groups, one size does not fit all.

Program

While many users will attend a user group meeting once just to see what it's all about, a strong program will keep them coming back. A good program can also help members get support from management for participation.

Meetings should have a dual purpose. The first

is to bring information to the membership. The second is to give users an opportunity to practice papers they will give at professional conferences.

It's important to focus the program on your users. Survey your members to make sure your program addresses their areas of interest and expertise. A survey can be formal, such as a written evaluation, or informal, such as a discussion among the members at the end of a meeting. Take some time occasionally to reevaluate the group -- where it has been, where it is now, and where it may go in the future.

Try and vary topics presented, even within the same meeting, and try to have at least one beginner type tutorial at each meeting. The beginner presentation is an important draw because many attendees are probably beginning level users of SAS software. Companies are probably more likely to send beginners to a local meeting and reserve out-of-town meeting slots for the more senior people.

Present several short topics rather than a few longer ones. If there are more topics, there are more potential reasons for people to attend the meeting. Consider a format that allows for breaks between the presentations also. You don't want users to get restless and lose interest.

A question and answer session gives members a chance to ask questions and let another member answer them. A Coder's Clinic gives the opportunity for users to give 5 to 10-minute 'tips' on coding. It's informal and the presentation is very short. Also consider showing a video or having a poster section for users who aren't as comfortable presenting a paper.

To consider strengthening your program, make a personal appeal for participation. People are often flattered if asked to present at a meeting. Tap into the expertise of your membership. Encourage members to use meetings as an opportunity to preview papers they will later present at regional user group conferences or SUGI. Practicing their presentations will let them fine tune their papers and give your group members the opportunity to hear presentations they may not otherwise be able to attend.

Consider drawing on resources outside your area also. Invited speakers from neighboring groups provide a fresh perspective for your group. Look for potential speakers at regional user groups and SUGI. Some experts in the wider SAS communities may be willing to present to your group for no charge; others may expect travel costs to be reimbursed. Local user groups may choose to build a fund to cover any costs involved. Some regional user groups will cover speaker travel costs for affiliated local groups.

SAS Institute supports groups by providing speakers once a year and also offers a BBU Speaker's Bureau for book authors to speak to local groups. Your User Group Liaison can provide more details for you.

Timing and Location

Consider your members' working schedules when planning your meetings. Some groups meet only three or four times a year to minimize members' time away from the office.

Make the user group meeting an attractive time out of the office. Many groups choose to meet for a morning or afternoon. If it's a full-day meeting, start so most can leave home at their usual time in the morning, and end so most can arrive home at their usual time in the evening.

Ask members' organizations to host meetings if possible. This will provide you with a free meeting site and will also help you to recruit members. Also, the work of your officers or steering committee is simplified because the site and security are provided. It may also be possible for the host site to donate or make arrangements for refreshments for the meeting.

It's also nice if you can meet at the same location each time. A site that is centrally located for your group, easy to get to, and has free, available parking is ideal. Participants, organizers, and facility staff will know what to expect at each meeting, and it's one last detail that doesn't need to be decided for each meeting.

Publicity

Communicating with your membership is vital to the success of your group. Publicize your user group. Make sure SAS Institute always has the name of your current group contact for referral of potential members. Hold birds-of-a-feather (BOF) meetings at regional user group conferences and SUGI. Place a community service announcement in your local newspaper or on your community TV cable access channel. Prepare a flyer or simple brochure that contains information about your group and includes a membership form. Display flyers about your group at the Institute's User Group Booth at regional conferences and SUGI.

Explore the possibilities of electronic mail for distributing meeting information. Post your meeting announcements on SAS-L, the worldwide electronic discussion group for SAS users. Consider sending announcements via electronic mail if your membership is interested in receiving them this way.

Or consider developing your own World Wide Web pages. The web is becoming a popular medium of choice for many users. You can even link your group's Web pages to the Institute's User Group page for additional exposure.

Newsletter

A newsletter is a reliable, consistent tool for communication. Members need to know the date of the next meeting as well as program details. Since not all members can attend each meeting, a summary of the past meeting may be helpful to keep membership informed and interested.

The primary audience that your newsletter addresses is the user group members. Another

equally important audience for the newsletter is management. A user group newsletter can help an employee justify participation to management.

A newsletter can show what will happen at the next meeting, it can help users get approval to attend if the meeting is held during business hours, and it gives the user group credibility.

A newsletter doesn't have to be fancy or too involved, but it does need to get information out to the membership. Consider a format that is easy to put together, using a word processing package such as WordPerfect. If possible, have members contribute information electronically so it doesn't have to be rekeyed. And use clip art if possible to make the newsletter more visually interesting.

Be accurate with your meeting notice. Meeting dates and locations should be checked and double-checked. Include both date and day of the week when using dates. Accurate information improves the credibility of the group and prevents unnecessary mix-ups.

Once final copy is completed, take the newsletter to a print shop for photocopying and collating. And ask different members to help -- one can be responsible for gathering materials and producing the newsletter, someone else can have it copied and collated, and another member can be responsible for folding, labeling, stamping, and mailing it.

Make sure your newsletter is mailed two to three weeks in advance of the meeting. If possible, use first class mail so that members will receive the notice promptly and to ensure that the piece will be forwarded, if there has been a change of address.

Encourage each member to get his or her own mailing. A single mail contact at a site may delay passing on information. He or she may be out of the office or casual about the responsibility of sharing mail.

Be careful to protect your membership list, however. Headhunters, job seekers, and vendors may ask to get a copy of your membership list. Once the list is out of your hands, you no longer control it. Your members

may be offended by unsolicited mail, and you may ultimately lose members and support.

Ask SAS Institute to help your group with a promotional mailing. As a service to user groups, the Institute will print and mail one mailing each year per group. This service allows your user group to reach additional users from the Institute corporate database and saves mailing costs for the group as well.

Leadership

Effective leadership is critical to every organization, but it's crucial to voluntary organizations like SAS user groups. The group's leadership should know the membership well, help determine a vision for the group, and work to guide the group in that direction.

It's important to create an environment where users want to volunteer and serve in leadership positions. Members have two costs in joining a user group: money (dues) and time. At every meeting, make a conscious effort to promote the benefits of being a member. When users see that benefits outweigh costs, they will become more committed to the group.

Consider a steering committee that meets after regular meetings. Team work and delegation are the keys. Individual contact is important. There needs to be a good camaraderie on the steering committee. If users attend, they usually become involved.

Have a large steering committee rather than a smaller one. A larger committee helps to share the workload and to ensure that no one individual is overburdened.

Ask for what you need. Try a broadcast appeal first. If necessary, make a direct appeal to select individuals. Many individuals are flattered when asked to give a presentation or to chair a committee.

Consider making one of the offices (like the committee chair or secretary) a paid position. Since you ask a lot of these positions, consider allocating funds from your membership dues to pay for someone to hold these jobs.

Elect officers or steering committee members annually to provide opportunities for new ideas and fresh energy. However, keep term limits informal to maintain some continuity, to prevent needless loss of experience, and to retain those who are willing and able to help. Suggest that those in leadership roles divide up the work so that no one is overburdened.

Consider having your steering committee write bylaws for your user group. Written bylaws provide consistent framework for the group. If you need help with this, there are sample bylaws available in the *SAS® User Group Starter's Guide*, a document available from SAS Institute.

Make sure that whoever is selected as the contact for your group is someone who is easily accessible and returns phone calls promptly. This person will probably be the first exposure a prospective member has with your group. Your contact person should also stay in touch with SAS Institute to make sure their name, address, email, and phone information is kept up-to-date. The Institute directs potential members to your group by providing this contact's information to those who inquire about activities in your area.

Finally, make a point to recognize and thank the leaders and volunteers in your user group. Let members who have given their time know that they are appreciated. You may want to recognize volunteers verbally at a meeting, send written thank-you notes, or acknowledge members' contributions in your newsletter.

Justification

Participation in a professional group has to be justified both on a personal and management level. Not only must individuals feel that the professional group has something to offer them, but employers also need to see benefits to their organization in order to support professional activities like SAS user groups.

User groups should continually promote the benefits of membership and individuals should continually promote the benefits to management. Benefits that user group members may derive include:

- increased productivity

- decreased training costs
- exposure to new coding and analysis techniques
- additional source of sample code
- local source of technical support
- opportunity to polish interpersonal, writing, presentation, and leadership skills
- enhanced reputation for company and self
- impartial critique of SAS products and features
- opportunity to provide feedback to SAS Institute
- opportunity to help others grow.

While the user group needs to make sure that the membership is deriving benefits from participation, it's equally important to make sure that a member's manager recognizes those benefits. Think of things that you've learned, how you've used them, and how it's saved your organization money.

Support From SAS Institute

Let SAS Institute help you make the most of your user group. The Institute provides a user group liaison for every region of the United States. Your liaison is your point of contact with regard to any user group need you may have. Liaisons can help you arrange to have a SAS Institute speaker come and talk at your user group meeting, coordinate a mailing to promote your group, and put you in touch with other user group leaders.

SAS Institute's quarterly news magazine, *SAS Communications®*, is free to all users of SAS software. In addition to providing announcements of new software products and services, *SAS Communications®* gives the latest user group news, including the formation of new user groups, SUGI news, regional conference dates, and international conference dates.

The Institute also provides a wealth of user group news from its homepage on the World Wide Web. Located at www.sas.com/usergroups, the web site gives information about groups and conference events across the US and throughout the world.

UGNEWS-L is SAS Institute's user group support electronic newsletter, and it's your way to get the very latest information electronically about SAS user groups. Users can subscribe free of charge.

Once your user group is established and registered with the Institute, you can obtain fee-waived SAS software for user group business only. Please note that the agreement is subject to an annual review and is limited to one copy per user group. You can request an extension of the software license each year through your User Group Liaison.

As mentioned before, the Institute offers a Speaker's Bureau for your group. Once a year, the Institute will pay the expenses for a SAS Institute speaker to attend and speak at your user group meeting. The Institute also supports a Books by Users Speaker's Bureau, which makes available authors who have written books for the Institute's Books by Users Program.

The Institute will also mail one meeting announcement or newsletter once a year, free of charge. Since the Institute is unable to share its users' names and address with you, due to confidentiality issues, we will send your mailing to our different databases to target a large area for you. User groups have told us that these assisted mailings work too -- meetings usually draw larger crowds thanks to the extended mailing lists.

The Publications Division at SAS Institute offers a number of incentives for user groups. Free books can be donated to user groups for door prizes at meetings during the year. There's a monthly electronic newsletter, *newdocnews-l*, that's sent to subscribed members about new book titles, online documentation, and discounts. And the Publications Booth at the regional conferences and SUGI offers a 15% discount on books ordered at the conferences.

Regional user groups also receive support from the Institute for their annual conferences. The Institute will assist with preconference publicity, provide a keynote speaker for the opening session and several other speakers, assist with the demonstration area, and print the conference *Proceedings*.

User groups are vital to SAS Institute. We recognize the importance of your activities for SAS software users and are always interested in new ways we can support you. Keep in contact with your User Group Liaison and help us help you make your group a continual success.

Conclusion

It's not unusual for professional organizations like SAS user groups to struggle to establish programs that draw a crowd, a newsletter that gets read, volunteers to serve in leadership positions, or support from management. As with many successful ventures, you need to be creative and flexible.

In summary, keep it simple. Find what works for your user group and go with it!

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