

Secrets of a Successful SAS® Users Group

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INTRODUCTION

Although it's a challenging task to get a users group up and running, an even greater challenge is to maintain the group and keep it strong. What are the secrets of a well-established users group? What do these groups do to retain current members while bringing in new members and new ideas?

There is no magic formula for a successful SAS users group. However, strong groups have certain elements in common. They have a mechanism for bringing in new leadership and talent. These groups offer strong programs that meet the needs and interests of a variety of users. They also look for ways to involve members in the group and to recognize them for their contributions. And many successful SAS users groups draw on the SAS users community at large for support and new ideas.

This paper presents four examples of successful SAS users groups. It shows that there is more than one way to achieve success with a users group. Take what appeals to you and adapt it to your own users group.

HARTFORD AREA SAS USERS GROUP

The Hartford Area SAS Users Group (HASUG) will celebrate its tenth anniversary in March 1993. The group was started to provide a forum for SAS users in Hartford, CT, to share information. The group currently has more than 300 members. Average attendance at quarterly general meetings ranges from 40 to 80.

Written bylaws govern the actions of the group. The bylaws document the purpose of the group, the functions of leadership, and the election of new leadership. HASUG's governing body is a steering committee to which members are elected.

The steering committee currently numbers 12 members but the size is not restricted by the bylaws. Members are appointed during the year to the steering committee to replace members who resign or change duties. Guests are welcome and often attend steering committee meetings.

The steering committee meets eight times a year — one month before each quarterly general meeting and during lunch on the day of the general meeting. According to Chairman Michael Davis, the role of the HASUG steering committee is to represent the wishes of the membership in selecting and implementing HASUG activities.

The steering committee handles all of the group's business matters. They determine the meeting site, the program for each meeting, the contents of the newsletter, consortium training, the group's involvement with regional (NorthEast SAS Users Group) and international (SAS Users Group International) users groups, and other miscellaneous business.

HASUG meets quarterly usually from 9:00 to 11:30 a.m. Meeting sites are rotated among the various organizations represented by the membership. The general format of the meeting begins with a welcome from the host organization who then turns it over to the chairperson. The chair introduces the first presentation. After the presentation there is a break, then the business meeting, then a sec-

ond presentation. If time permits, a problem-solving session will conclude the general meeting.

Where do presentation topics come from? Says Michael, "First, we try to get a feel for what the membership might be interested in. If we are interested in a subject, the other HASUG members probably share that interest. We have used a formal survey as well as informal discussion to determine topics of interest. We also look at news from SAS Institute to determine new and interesting topics."

One of the challenges for any users group is addressing the different levels of expertise among its membership. HASUG handles this by gearing one presentation to a beginner audience and a second presentation to an experienced audience. This helps to attract new members to the group while also providing worthwhile information to the more experienced membership.

HASUG uses several methods to locate speakers for their general meetings. "We make good use of the resources already available," notes Michael. "For more introductory presentations, a current member is often asked to make the presentation. We also contact SAS Institute to provide a speaker annually. The regional users group in this area, the NorthEast SAS Users Group (NESUG), operates a speaker-sharing program for affiliated local groups. Through this program, NESUG will reimburse a speaker's travel expenses once per calendar year." HASUG also taps authors, consultants, and SAS users who have made presentations at regional users group meetings or at SUGI.

Members do not have to pay dues to join HASUG. Member organizations donate meeting space, meeting refreshments, photocopying, and postage costs.

The group's newsletter, the *HASUG FLASH*, is produced four times each year. It contains the announcement and agenda for the upcoming general meeting, a brief recap of the last meeting, information about consortium training sponsored by HASUG, tips, names and phone numbers of the steering committee members, as well as a chairman's commentary and occasional book reviews.

The newsletter is a group effort. Several members author articles and features. Other members are responsible for layout, editing, reproduction, and distribution. Where several members work at a single company, copies of the newsletters are mailed to a volunteer who distributes individual copies through internal mail. HASUG members also receive an annual membership directory.

HASUG also offers its membership information about independent consultants, job openings, and people seeking jobs. The chairman posts the information received into looseleaf binders. These binders are set out at each general meeting. In between meetings, members may telephone the chair to learn what is currently posted.

According to Michael, the users group makes this information available in a low-key way in order not to jeopardize donations from member organizations or the ability of members to attend meetings. "It's just one of the many services we offer the membership," says Michael.

When asked about how to get the membership more involved with the group, Michael said, "It's simple. Just ask." He recommends

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asking specific people to do presentations. "Personal approaches work much better than broadcast appeals made at meetings or in the newsletter. With a little encouragement, your members can make a real contribution to the group," he adds.

HASUG also recognizes those members who do contribute to the group. For example, a thank you letter is always sent to speakers who address the group. The *FLASH*'s editor recently received an award certificate from the group in recognition and appreciation.

Mike also underscores the importance of interpersonal relationships within the group. "Our group works because people like the idea of sharing," he says. "They see if they share the responsibilities, they will share the benefits. Everyone has a sense of ownership and a desire to ensure HASUG's viability."

The users group is also an avenue for professional growth. "After a while, you can only learn so much from your own site," he says. "By participating in an intercompany users group, you can continue to grow. All members benefit from the cross-fertilization of ideas that the users group fosters."

NEW YORK AREA SAS USERS GROUP

The New York Area SAS Users' Group (NYASUG) began as a birds-of-a-feather session at SUGI 12 in 1987. The users attending that BOF organized the first general meeting and prior to that meeting conducted a survey of the potential membership. According to Ray Pass, one of the original organizers of the group, the survey was critical. "We didn't want to impose a structure that the members wouldn't want," he says. "From the survey results, we determined the format of our meetings, the frequency and time of day that people preferred, as well as other important information."

Like HASUG, NYASUG has written bylaws. Most questions that arise before the group can be answered with the bylaws. Says Ray, "If an issue is important enough, it usually gets into the group's bylaws."

NYASUG has more than 200 paid memberships with 90-100 attending each meeting. From the beginning, NYASUG has had quarterly meetings. The leadership is open; there are no elections. The group is governed by a steering committee of generally 12 people. Members volunteer to be on the steering committee. As individuals leave the steering committee to pursue other interests, new people come on. It's handled very informally.

The steering committee formally meets four times a year to handle user group business and to fold, stamp, and mail the newsletter. These meetings are in between the general meetings. The steering committee also generally meets for 15 to 20 minutes after each general meeting. Each steering committee member has responsibility for one or more of the following areas:

- location and arrangements for the general meetings
- special interest groups (SIGs)
- finances
- newsletter
- liaison with SAS Institute
- Random Access
- and the membership database.

The steering committee also discusses and procures presenters for each general meeting.

General meetings are held four times a year from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. Meeting space is donated by employers of group members. A continental breakfast is offered before each meeting. The format consists of a presentation followed by Random Access. Random Access is a 15 to 30 minute open forum for announcements and discussion of SAS software questions or problems. This is followed by a coffee break where members can continue discussions. After the coffee break, there's a second presentation.

NYASUG has dues of \$25 per year. Ray noted that the group had corporate dues at one time but had discontinued it due to logistic difficulties. Users can pay only \$15 for their first year's membership if they join after July 1 of that year. Dues pay for refreshments, postage for the quarterly newsletter, production and distribution of a membership directory, travel reimbursement, and lunch for guest speakers.

NYASUG draws from a variety of sources for the program at the general meetings. Each year, they request a speaker from SAS Institute. Since SAS Institute will mail the newsletter announcing a meeting with an Institute speaker to all users in the New York area, the meeting is usually combined with a membership drive. As an affiliated local group with the regional NorthEast SAS Users Group (NESUG), NYASUG also uses the NESUG speaker-sharing program. The NYASUG membership has proved fertile ground as well. NYASUG will also offer to pay travel expenses for a speaker within driving distance of the NY metropolitan area. A new project is to comb SAS L, the electronic discussion group for SAS users, for presentation ideas and potential speakers. Panel discussions have also worked well for this group. Two popular panels were on independent SAS consulting and a SUGI wrap-up.

PROC NYASUG;; the group's newsletter, is mailed four weeks before the general meeting. The newsletter consists of a meeting announcement, abstracts of upcoming presentations, minutes from the previous meeting, information on special interest groups (SIGs), a SAS Tips column, a membership form, and a map to the upcoming meeting. The newsletter staff includes an executive editor, production editor, and SAS Tips editor. Paper and photocopying costs are donated by member organizations. As mentioned earlier, the newsletter is folded and stamped at the steering committee meetings.

NYASUG also produces an annual, professionally printed membership directory. The yearly membership form includes a space to check if you want to be included in the directory. The directory also accepts paid advertisements, another way to raise money for the group.

Since NYASUG has more than 200 paid members, they have a large pool of potential talent to tap to help run the users group. When seeking support from within the group for speakers, steering committee membership, or other aid, Ray advises to ask the individual as well as the group. "A personal direct request may often be the most effective," he says. "It's harder to ignore, and people generally don't find it an intrusion. In fact, they're glad to be asked."

RESEARCH TRIANGLE SAS USERS GROUP

The Research Triangle SAS Users Group (RTSUG), located in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area of North Carolina, has been in existence since October 1984. The group has about 350 members and attendance at monthly meetings is between 40-50.

Like HASUG and NYASUG, the Research Triangle SAS Users Group has written bylaws. "They give us a starting point," says President Gerardette Furlow. "The bylaws specify the month for our elections, responsibilities of each officer, protocol for voting, and more."

The group has elected officers and holds an informal election each year. The job of the president is to conduct the group's business and make sure the meetings follow the agenda. The vice-president's role is to fill in for the president. The secretary keeps minutes for each meeting, distributes the group's newsletter, handles any correspondence, and maintains the membership database. The treasurer is responsible for handling the group's finances.

Gerri notes that the group successfully combined the role of secretary/treasurer for a long time but that the current secretary begged off from having to handle any finances. "Like most things about the group, you have to play it by ear. You just can't be so inflexible that people feel it is work or just another job to do," she says.

The officers meet whenever they feel it's necessary to discuss upcoming programs and meeting sites as well as to evaluate what is and what isn't working for the group. There are occasional meetings after general meetings as well.

Meetings are held monthly. The meeting site is hosted by two different member organizations: the Research Triangle Institute in the Research Triangle Park and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Both of these organizations offer computers and a projection system and do not charge for the use of the facilities. Says Gerri, "We polled our members about the time and place they wanted to meet, and we have tried to make our meeting place a central location."

The group usually meets the third Monday of each month from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. The format of the meeting begins with the president welcoming the attendees. The president makes announcements, discusses old business and brings up new business. The secretary and treasurer also provide a report. The presentation is next followed by a question and answer session.

According to Sally Muller, RTSUG secretary, the monthly meetings are arranged by the group's officers based on input from the membership. "One of our proudest accomplishments is sending a survey questionnaire asking members to tell us what they want to see. Another point of pride is keeping statistics on how many members attend each meeting. The statistics allow us to determine whether there is a correlation between the survey and attendance. Of course, we use SAS software to run our analysis."

Since the majority of the members are experienced SAS users from the university and business environment, most presentations are more advanced and technical. The officers have surveyed the membership four times in recent years about potential meeting topics. Popular topics for 1992 included downsizing, efficiency tips, moving from Release 5.18 to 6.07, and the SAS System under various windowing environments. Gerri says that members are often asked to give a presentation. She finds that a personal request works best. "Members benefit by getting more involved with the group and having the opportunity to share their expertise," says Gerri. "We have found panel discussions are a great way to involve our membership." A recent panel about moving to OS/2 or Windows was very well received. Since SAS Institute is in the area, the group is in an unusual position to draw upon Institute resources and expertise. The group has also had presentations from local hardware vendors.

Members of the group wanted to see SAS software running on different platforms to help clear up questions about various workstations. Vendors from IBM, Sun, and Hewlett-Packard demonstrated the SAS System on their hardware. Says Gerri, "By seeing one SAS software program run on various platforms we were able to find out which hardware platform performed the best in running a particular SAS program. Hopefully, this would help members determine whether one hardware platform was better in terms of efficiency and performance for their needs."

The group has also had joint meetings with an internal SAS users group in the area. The meeting was hosted by the internal Burroughs Wellcome SAS Users Group and included presentations on downsizing from both users groups.

Dues are \$5 for the year. Members only pay dues if they elect to receive a paper copy of the newsletter. Those who receive the newsletter electronically do not have to pay dues. The dues cover expenses for paper, photocopying, and postage.

The group has a monthly newsletter which is sent to members about one week before each general meeting. Members may receive the newsletter via electronic mail or have a hardcopy mailed to them. The newsletter is also posted to SUG-L, a newsgroup specific to the Triangle area. Says Sally, "The newsletter helps us recruit new members as well as inform our membership about the upcoming meeting. It's also a vehicle to share information with other SAS users groups. My problem is keeping it short enough. I allow myself more latitude with the electronic copy but limit the paper copy to two pages due to budget constraints."

The newsletter includes a meeting announcement with information on the speaker and topic. Posted positions are also included. Due to space limitations in the newsletter, the group only accepts a limited number of in-state openings. There are announcements and a map of the meeting site.

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION SAS USERS GROUP

Formed in 1989, the Florida Department of Transportation SAS Users Group serves DOT SAS users throughout the state of Florida. Since the group meets in Tallahassee, the state capital, the majority of attendees come from DOT's central office in Tallahassee, but members also attend from the seven districts throughout the state.

The group was formed by interested SAS users and the Office of Information Systems Information Center in order to encourage information sharing. There are about 120 to 130 active members; on average, 25 members attend the monthly meetings.

Since this is an in-house users group, the group meets at one of DOT's training facilities, which are equipped with computers, a projection system, and a VCR. Occasionally, the group chooses to meet at a conference room within the Department of Transportation.

A steering committee provides the leadership needed to run this users group. The committee consists of four elected members and the OIS Information Center SAS Support Representative. Members serve for one year. Two members serve from January to December while the other two serve from June to May. The steering committee is responsible for scheduling the meeting site, planning the agenda, promoting participation and attendance throughout the Department, and notifying the OIS SAS Support Representative of any problems. The duties of the chair and secretary are rotated with each steering committee meeting.

The group has written guidelines to describe the function of the steering committee, the distribution of the newsletter, and the format of the meeting.

Meetings are held on the first Thursday of the month and are scheduled for 2 hours with one 15 minute break. According to the SAS Support Representative Chris Laughlin, the atmosphere is informal and the floor is open to discussion at all times. Time is reserved at the end of the meeting for questions or trouble-shooting SAS prob-

lems. Since this is an internal users group there aren't any expenses so there are no dues.

In the past, Chris has distributed a survey to DOT users throughout the state. The results were tabulated and analyzed with the SAS System and then distributed to the membership. Based on the results of the survey, the steering committee got ideas of the needs of the group, and a demo or hands-on workshop was scheduled for the users group meeting. Since DOT also operates a help desk, an analysis of SAS calls suggested possible topics for presentation. Other state agencies have been invited to make presentations as well as local hardware vendors.

Locating presenters is one of the roles of the steering committee. However, Chris is there to help if support is needed. The steering committee encourages the participation of the membership. "This makes them feel more a part of the group," says Chris. "It can be a good learning experience to prepare a presentation about one of the features of SAS software." Sometimes, Chris sets up a demo and outline and asks one of the members to present it. The users group meeting tries to address both the new as well as the more experienced SAS user. The first part of the meeting is more introductory while the second part is more technical. SCL, graphics, performance, indexing, compressing, and SAS/AF software are important topics for this group.

The Florida DOT SAS Users Group uses electronic mail to distribute information about the group. About a week before each meeting, the agenda is sent out. A follow-up reminder message is e-mailed the day of the meeting. A broadcast message about the users group meeting appears on TSO and the SAS News Window. About a week after each meeting, the users group distributes a newsletter. Most are sent via electronic mail but a few hardcopies are sent to other state agencies. Chris feels that the newsletter offers some real advantages to users group members. He notes that the newsletter reinforces what went on in the meeting and is also a mechanism for distributing code. "The newsletter helps publicize the group," says Chris. "When employees and managers see it, they get interested in attending. The newsletter also lets management know that this meeting time is being used productively." Members themselves are a good form of publicity. Says Chris, "We have one users group member who travels a lot throughout the state. He promotes SAS and the users group wherever he goes." Other forms of publicity include posting meeting schedules on bulletin boards and including information about the group in the internal DOT newsletter.

In addition to providing benefits to SAS users throughout DOT, the users group has value to the Office of Information Systems. The users group can be a source of feedback for OIS. "They like to bounce ideas off the group," says Chris. The users group has also helped relieve some of the support responsibilities of OIS. The users group provides an avenue for SAS users to help support themselves.

For his role in organizing and supporting the Florida DOT SAS Users Group, Chris was recognized with a special achievement award from the Secretary of the Department of Transportation, the agency's highest ranking official. Says Chris, "A strong SAS users group helps me do a better job as our SAS Support Representative. Working with our internal SAS users group has become one of the duties of this position."

CONCLUSION

One of the strengths of SAS users groups is their incredible diversity. However, successful users groups do share certain characteristics. They have a mechanism for bringing in new leadership and talent. These groups are in touch with the interests of the membership and plan programs to meet those interests. Successful users groups look for ways to involve the membership and recognize contributions large and small. These users groups actively recruit support from the larger SAS community such as a regional group, SUGI, or SAS Institute.

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