Regional SAS User Groups - the NESUG Experience

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Introduction

SUGI 12 provided much insight into the operation and future of SAS User Groups. Castell discussed her analysis of 15 nationwide SAS groups. She examined meetings (techniques, topics, and formats), starting a user group, and reasons for forming a user group. Shipp talked about corporate and area users groups and the lack of a liaison between the local user groups and the SAS Institute. Finally, German reviewed a model for established SAS Users Groups (that is, groups existing a year or more). He mentioned meeting and organization techniques, user group mission and relations with external groups. A major point of his talk was the potential productive relationship between the SAS Institute and user groups. To the Institute, user groups are a potential marketing tool and information resource. To user groups, communications with the SAS Institute allow them to serve as a lobbying force. It was from this environment that the idea of a regional users group was born to serve Northeast local SAS user groups.

This paper will address the following: 1) the weaknesses of local user groups, 2) the role of a regional user group as a way to overcome these weaknesses, and 3) the operation of NESUG to date.

A regional user group is defined as a second level group that directly represents 10-15 local user groups and coordinate joint local user group activities.

Local vs. Regional Groups

Local user groups focus nearly all of their activity on their general meetings. Because a small but dedicated nucleus of people run the meetings, any effort on external activities is time away from general meetings. Therefore, many external concerns are usually not addressed by local groups. These include consortium training, joint or regional meetings/conferences, publishing of local user groups papers, lobbying force to the SAS Institute, resource guide on local SAS user groups and SAS resources (training, consultants, vendors), and vendor demos.

This is where the regional user group can complement the local user group activities. By having the group manned by people not involved with running local user group events -- many regional/joint activities that were considered too time-consuming before become possible:

1. Members from various user groups have many other occasions to interact with each besides just once a year at SUGI.
2. A "regional identity" results through interaction with other user groups and publishing local user group activities.
3. Increased knowledge of what other user groups are doing through 1) publication of a regional resource guide, 2) publication of the best of local group papers, and a regional user group newsletter.
4. A means is provided to bring SUGI-quality talks down to a local level, information about all aspects of data processing (consulting, training, employment trends, and tools used with SAS software (PC DOS, CLISTS, ISPF) by a regional user group meeting. The meeting would be at a convenient time and location to attract the many SAS users that want to go to SUGI but can't (due to corporate travel budgets). Vendors would also be allowed to speak on data processing topics (but not sales pitches) and display their wares.
5. Provide consortium training by having SAS Institute staff or local user group members teach on topics which otherwise would be hard to justify locally because of too few students.
6. Provide centralized resources (shareware library of statistical programs, and an electronic bulletin board of home-grown SAS applications and tips.)
NESUG Activities and History

NESUG's activities to date have been 1) coordination of a regional user group, 2) development of a committee structure, 3) mailing and analyzing questionnaires sent to all member user groups (which will serve as input for the Northeast SAS Resource Guide), 4) endorsement of NESUG and regional groups by the SAS Institute and SUGI, 5) organizing a regional conference, and 6) providing a vendor demo (IBM) on OS/2. All of these activities will be discussed.

I originally meant for NESUG to represent 2-5 groups in New England only. But as I spoke to other user group representatives, there seemed enough interest to expand to the Northeast. I originally contacted 9 user groups that were listed in SAS Communications. All nine expressed a strong interest in joining. Two new groups joined later. The present member groups are Albany, Boston, Dartmouth, Hartford, M&M/Mars, New England VAX, New York, Pittsburgh, US Air, Washington, and Zayre. This provided a good mix of local, corporate, and special interest SAS groups. The member groups were in different phases of maturity -- some groups were disbanding or reorganizing and some were just starting. In short, these 11 groups had a wide variety of services and interests that could be helped by a strong regional users group. With an announcement in the November SAS Communications, NESUG was underway.

Organizational Structure

Currently, NESUG is run by an ad-hoc committee. However, as the group gets larger, I envision implementing the following committee structure:

1. Local User Group Communications - interacts with local user group in disseminating and receiving information. Responsibilities include publishing a bi-monthly newsletter (about local user groups, NESUG, SAS and SAS-related products) and proceedings of local user group talks.

2. Vendor/Consultant Relations - maintains good relations between NESUG/local user groups and vendors. Responsibilities are getting vendor support for regional and local events (e.g. advertising, vendor demos, speakers), coordinate consortium vendor demonstrations, and maintain a database on regional vendors and consultants.

3. Training and SAS Relations Committee - liaison between SAS Institute and NESUG/local user groups (also local trainers and NESUG/local user groups). Responsibilities are 1) act as lobbying force between SAS Institute and local user groups, 2) evaluate and coordinate consortium training in region, 3) improve the quality of support services and level of communications between the SAS Institute and member user groups, 4) maintain a database on local trainers and data processing training opportunities.

4. Regional Conference and Events Committee - to organize and run the NESUG regional conference and to assist in the operation of other regional/joint events. Other responsibilities include maintaining a database of possible meeting sites.

5. Steering Committee - oversees the operation of NESUG and provides assistance to NESUG chairpersons. Includes all officers, committee chairpersons and two at-large members. Responsibilities include 1) developing NESUG bylaws and operational procedures; 2) overuling chairperson and committees on a 2/3 vote; 3) assist all committees in performing their duties; and 4) assume all duties not assigned to NESUG officers and committees.

NESUG Survey and Results

If you are starting a regional group and do not have a lot of officers -- then a resource guide questionnaire is a little time / highly productive activity. The NESUG survey, as mentioned before, will be used to provide input to the Northeast SAS Resource Guide. Survey questions were similar to Castell's in part. Topics included starting a local user group, meeting techniques and formats, concerns about SAS Institute support and ranking of activities for NESUG, consortium training, and vendor demos.

The following are the survey's major results:

Starting a local user group:
- Most groups received little SAS Institute support since they were founded before support was given.
• Local groups were founded to share SAS software experiences and to learn about new SAS products.
• Organizing general meetings (i.e., finding speakers, meeting sites, scheduling) seemed to be the major problem that new user groups faced.

Meeting characteristics:
• Nearly all groups had quarterly meetings, mailing lists, and a member site hardware/software configuration. Most groups did not note in their mailing list if the member was a consultant, trainer, or vendor.
• Almost all groups had quarterly afternoon meetings.
• Common meeting components include tutorials, birds-of-a-feather sessions, and problem-solving sessions.

Other
• Many methods of training are used. The most popular were courses (both SAS Institute and in-house). The least popular method was SAS video training.
• Respondents most wanted the SAS Institute to improve their software support and documentation and were most satisfied with the SAS Institute's training and hardware support.
• NESUG's priorities should be serving as a lobbying force to the SAS Institute and consortium training. Least popular activity was vendor demos.

Regional Conference
Many SAS users cannot afford (both in cost and time) to attend SUGI – so there is a strong need for a SUGI-like conference closer to home. To make the conference a success, NESUG sought a college or university co-sponsor and found one in Pace University. The conference will be held at Pace's New York City campus on October 28th. Any surplus from the conference will be used to fund future NESUG activities. User interest for such a conference is extremely high. Tentative conference highlights include:

• 20 talks (5 rounds of 4 concurrent sessions)
• 10-15 vendor demos (non-SAS Institute competitors)
• Problem-solving boards
• Evening Mixer
• 5-10 BOFS

Please feel free to attend!

NESUG endorsement
Early on, I realized that the regional user group needed strong support from both the SAS Institute and SUGI in order to grow. To do this, I have submitted a proposal to the SUGI Executive Committee to do the following:

1. To obtain SUGI's permission and authorization for the formation of 4-6 regional groups and have them incorporated under SUGI. This would create three levels of user groups – local, regional, and national.
2. To obtain SUGI's endorsement as an official regional group.
3. That SUGI form an ad-hoc committee to further investigate problems with the present user group structure and propose solutions.

If passed, I have suggested that the following services be provided by the SAS Institute and SUGI to regional users groups:

SAS Institute
• Provide startup services (SAS Communications article, mail first notice, and creating a STARTING A REGIONAL USERS GROUP guide.)
• Provide speakers and demos to a regional SUGI-like meeting.
• Provide a regional user group coordinator.
• Provide timely answers to regional SAS requirements.
SUGI

- Serve as a governing body for all regional groups
- Provide resources for regional activities (e.g., SUGI expertise on organizing a conference, and any information resources).
- Endorse a group as an official regional group.

Vendor Demos and Consortium Training

By having a larger membership, a regional group can offer services that would not have enough interested people on the local level. Vendors are also more likely to give demos for a larger user group.

Conclusion

This paper describes one way to provide a user group structure that meets the needs of user groups for the 1980s and beyond—the regional user group. It has allowed representatives of local user groups to talk to each other and share their experiences. The future of this concept depends how the SUGI executive committee votes on the NESUG proposal. It has support from many SAS Institute employees and local user group officers and can succeed with little staff or budget. I hope that my efforts encourage other regional user groups to form.

For further information on NESUG or regional groups, contact:

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References:

Castell, Claire. "How to Start and Manage a User Group" SUGI 12 Birds-of-a-Feather Handout 1987


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