ABSTRACT

Our Information Centre has a large number of users who range in experience from the novice to the advanced user. It is a very considerable task to support, train, and keep informed this variety of users.

After attending SUGI 12, we decided that a USER DAY approach would allow us to inform our SAS® user community of current and new facilities in SAS® as well as pass on information gained at SUGI 12.

We will describe how we created "SAS USER DAYS at AGT" by putting together a mini SUGI. The benefits and some of the problems we encountered will be presented.

INTRODUCTION

At Alberta Government Telephones (AGT), we support approximately 500 users across the province of Alberta. Our SAS® users can be classified into two groups. The first group, which comprises 30% of all the SAS® users, are those people who use SAS® to access their own data or data generated from other applications, and to analyze and produce reports comprised of text or graphics. This group is distinguished by the fact that one individual looks after all aspects of the application, is quite knowledgeable in SAS®, and uses many of the advanced features of SAS®.

The second group, comprised of 70% of the SAS® users, are those forming clusters that are related by application. A few individuals in the cluster are knowledgeable in SAS® and they create and maintain the SAS® application. The remaining individuals in the cluster are the end-users of the application and for the most part have very little knowledge of SAS®. Source data, in general, is created within the application with very little acquisition of data generated from other applications.

The types of applications that have been created vary considerably. They range from the very simple to the very complex, and from the very small to the very large. The most common application, comprising 80% of the SAS® usage, is for the gathering of local data, processing it in some manner, and producing a printed report.

GOALS

1. To refresh and enhance users' knowledge of the many SAS® procedures, since it was noted that some of our users had not had any training for over 6 years.

2. To pass on information gained at SUGI 12 to all of our users in the quickest and most efficient method possible.

3. To show procedures that exist in the SAS® system, user application systems, and sample programs to other SAS® users.

With the variety of users and the variety of backgrounds, we felt that we had to come up with some method that would suit all needs.

ALTERNATIVES

1. The first alternative we looked at was offering a course. The major drawback of this was the amount of time required to develop a course and the limited number of topics that would be covered. Since we have such a large user base, training would be long and drawn out. Because users have different levels of experience, different backgrounds and different requirements, each course would have a variety of different requirements. An advantage to a course would be that students would spend considerable time with a topic and in workshops.

2. Secondly we investigated producing technical papers and newsletters. The amount of time needed to write each of the papers would be considerable since no-one in the Information Centre is a technical writer. The disadvantage of written material alone would be the lack of any interaction between the user and the writer, although the user would have quality notes to refer to.
3. The third alternative, our ultimate choice, was holding something similar to the SUGI conferences. By doing this we could get the involvement of the user community, increase interaction between the users and ourselves, and we could accommodate a number of users who wished to attend discussions suited to their requirements and backgrounds. The amount of time required to prepare a 20 minute presentation on a topic one is knowledgeable about would be manageable.

INITIAL STAGES

We determined who had been accessing the SAS* system in our installation. Then a note was sent to these people to find out how many would be interested in attending seminars, what topics they would like to see presented, and if anyone would be interested in helping or presenting. The response was very positive.

Next, we invited knowledgeable SAS* users to give the presentations. We approached other users whom we knew to be proficient in a particular SAS* procedure or technique, and asked them if they would present a topic for us. Remaining topics were divided among the Information Center Staff. In the end, we had 16 speakers covering 34 different topics.

Once all the topics and presentations had been decided upon, we asked the presenters for a short description of their papers. Using the descriptions, we categorized the seminars into 3 different areas:

- Introductory - These were for Beginners, Managers, or those interested in learning about the topic in general.
- Advanced - These were for anyone who had used other SAS* features and had done some programming in SAS*. These topics were covered in more detail as some knowledge of SAS* was assumed.
- Technical - These seminars were for those who were familiar with the subject matter as well as SAS*. One of the presentations given was on forecasting. For this the prerequisites were some knowledge of statistics, as well as SAS* procedures. This presentation described using SAS* procedures as a forecasting tool and how to interpret the results.

LOGISTICS OF THE CONFERENCE

Once the dates of the conference (April 27 & 28, 1987) had been confirmed, we sent out a schedule listing the presentations and the times and dates they would be delivered. Since this was our first conference and we did not know how many people would be attending, we asked the users to pre-register. In this way, we could estimate how many users would be attending and the size of conference rooms to book. Our company has a large number of conference rooms available for use, and ultimately we reserved four of the largest ones. We also booked overhead projectors as many of the presenters wanted to use foils. We were able to give live demonstrations using an overhead projection screen. This was used to demonstrate SAS* Display Manager, SAS/AF* and some user application systems.

The presentations that were in high demand were offered twice. We left some time slots available at the end of the last day of the conference to accommodate requests for popular presentations. Even though we asked for pre-registration, we did not turn away anyone who was able to come to SAS USER DAYS at AGT.

KICKOFF TIME

We wanted to do something different to welcome our users and attract their attention, so we put together a slide show and skit. I will describe this briefly.

As eighty users gathered for "SAS USER DAYS at AGT", the grand opening slide show started out with a North Carolina moon slowly drifting into view as the SAS* procedures prepared for their journey to AGT in a rocket ship. As the rocket ship got closer to earth we saw a map of Alberta. A comment was made about Alberta being bigger than Texas and with all that space PROC SORT should be happy. As the ship grazed over the land, the procedures intercepted some of the communication lines (since we are a telecommunications company), locked on to our signal and connected to our SAS* system. We then looked back at how the SAS* procedures tried to organize the day's
program. PROC SORT (played by a fellow colleague), a little too conceited for his own good, started out thinking he could do it all. At this point the focus shifted from slides to actors. The skit consisted of some SAS* Procedures coming to life.

The purpose of the kick off was to relax our visitors and prepare them for the next two days of seminars which were going to be very intensive. Preparing the slide show and skit was a lot of extra work and most of it was done outside working hours. However, it demonstrated the extra effort we had put into "SAS USER DAYS at AGT". Our users appreciated this and seemed very eager for SAS USER DAYS at AGT to begin!

OTHER THINGS WE DID

The SUGI 12 tape from the SAS Institute was obtained and made available in a general meeting area. This was to give confidence to the users that the Institute has an awareness of the future and is a stable company.

Since we were in the process of installing SAS/AF* at our site at this time, we introduced SAS/AF* to our users by showing live demonstrations. SAS/AF* received a very good response with all presentations having full attendance.

For those who were not able to attend we tried to videotape each of the presentations for viewing later. Due to our lack of experience this was not successful. We were not able to determine what was on the viewgraphs from the tape. Another problem was that not all the machines were turned on in time and/or the tapes ran out, since we had no one running the video cameras.

We asked the users to fill out critique forms to provide us with feedback on each of the presentations and how well received they were. On a scale of 1-5 the average was 3.5. We were very pleased with the quality of the presentations and the users response. Following the conference, a book similar to the SUGI manual was put together and given to one hundred users. It would have been preferable to have had this book available ahead of time for use at the conference.

For a memento of the conference, we produced bookmarks which were handed out at the conference.

END RESULTS

How did our users benefit from attending "SAS USER DAYS at AGT"? The most important benefit they obtained was an introduction to many features in SAS* and an explanation of ways to use them efficiently. There was a great deal of information made available in a short time. The material that was given out was usable immediately with very little modification.

How did the Information Centre staff benefit? A large amount of training was done on a high level basis, therefore, the courses we will be offering in the future will only need to be on topics that need more than an introduction, eg. Macros. We shared experiences with the users over those two days. We also found out which areas in SAS* caused end users problems and what we should most concentrate on.

NEXT YEAR

With the support of the Information Centre staff, our SAS* users, and the SAS Institute, we plan to have an even more successful SAS USER DAYS at AGT 1988.

We hope that this paper will give you some ideas on how you can communicate with your SAS* End-users with some effort and little cost.

* SAS, SAS/AF are registered trademark of SAS Institute Inc., Cary,NC,USA.

For further information, contact: Loretta Golby at (403) 425-7147 or John Chenier at (403) 425-7147.