Overview

This paper covers two distinct topics. The first is a "how-to" guide on running a user group and the second is a look at the past, present, and future activities of NESUG (Northeast SAS® Users Group).

I. The Gentle Art of Running a User Group.

Congratulations, you are or about to become a local or regional SAS user group officer. This paper gives some useful tips on how to survive this responsibility, and landmine to avoid along the way. It is based on the five years that the lead author has actively worked as chairperson of the Boston SAS Users Group and Northeast SAS Users Group.

Those interested in specific meeting techniques, and what a SAS regional group is, should refer to German’s SUGI 12 and 13 talks. The first half of this paper completes German’s SUGI "User Group Trilogy" by synthesizing the two previous talks.

Survival Techniques

It has been our observation that after 6 months to a year "on the job", many user group officers fall into one of five traps. Each trap is examined herein and suggestions on how to get past them are provided.

"Lone Eagle Trap"

This is the most common trap. Here is a typical scenario:

Janet has been a local officer at the Laissez-Faire Users Group for 18 months. Everyone is happy with the user group activities except Janet. She is tired of doing all the work alone and is "burned out." She contemplates quitting the group and opening her own bicycle shop.

Some user group officers reaching this point may leave data processing completely because another person didn’t offer to help. When the officer leaves, many groups just fall apart or spend years reorganizing. The key is to never let your group get ensnared in this trap. Some methods to avoid the trap include:

* have elections at least once a year
* form a steering committee for sharing responsibility and grooming future officers.
* seek support from your regional SAS group or sales office if available. Both can provide ideas, speakers, moral support, and much more.

If however, you are knee-deep in this trap – what do you do?

* call a special meeting of your group to discuss the present situation saying that the group will not continue to exist unless someone else helps to carry the load.
* take a step back and talk with other local or regional groups.
* if you decide to continue as a "lone eagle", set some doable goals for yourself so you can achieve self-rewards. Remember that energy attracts energy and enthusiasm brings enthusiasm.
"Tapping the Same Old Well Trap"

This a slight modification of the "lone eagle" trap:

The Seai-apathetic Users Group has the same 3-5 people providing meeting sites and talks. It is clear that they are running out of topics and their bosses do not want to continue to pay for coffee and provide a meeting site.

There are several things that can be done:

- Use outside speakers. These can be provided from various sources. NESUG has established a speaker exchange program where members of one affiliated local user group will speak at another local user group. Arrangements for travel reimbursement can be provided by NESUG if the local user group is unable to. Vendors will usually be willing to speak to your group regarding existing and new products. Also consider hosting a joint meeting with another local user group if geography permits.

- Have events that encourage new people to participate:
  - A first timers session where it understood that the person is not an expert on the SAS system but wants to contribute. Encourage the notion that no contribution is useless regardless of size or content, unless it is not contributed.
  - A group of people speak 5-15 minutes each on a topic (e.g. "My favorite SAS macro", etc.). These have been quite successful in some local user groups.

- Establish special interest groups
  A small group of people all with a common interest is almost a sure bet to succeed.

  * it may be time to change your meeting format from monthly or bi-monthly to quarterly. See past SUGI talks for further information on this subject.

  * look for "hidden gems" - people who

ask questions at meetings but are not actively participating in the group. If you ask these people one-on-one to participate, it is our experience that you are rarely refused.

"Difference of Opinion Trap"

We hope this has never happened to a SAS user group but it could:

Jane wants the local group to be more progressive and affiliate with other groups. She has some support on the steering committee but the chairperson Michael wants to be self-sufficient. The group has quietly broken into two camps and there is tension in the air. The problem is two-fold: a) lack of a mission statement or by-laws, and b) clashing personalities. Some ideas for resolution include:

- having a SIG or subgroup for persons of similar interests (New York, Boston, and Washington have done this. This group would set its own schedule and agenda. Having a SIG frees your general meetings from covering very specialized topics.

- A clear mission statement is not just a piece of paper but gives your group guidelines on what they will and will not do. It should be continually revised to reflect the reality of your situation. Not doing this leads to ambiguity and potential conflict. The success of any SAS user group is balancing the three areas of mission, meeting techniques, and relations with external groups (and not favoring any one of the three). Recent SUGI papers have examined this important area.

"Succession or Napoleon Trap"

This is a least common trap but can provide some tension:

Jack was a successful user group officer. He had the vision to expand the group's activities. Group morale is high. The problem is that no one wants to
shoulder the responsibility all alone. Jack is not burned out but it is clear that a transition should be made.

A solution to this is to have 1-4 people take over running the group with one person as the coordinator and the others each having one special assignment. In Boston, this was called "the gang of four" technique. It also grooms future user group officers. NESUG recently experienced this during my first retirement as a user group officer (HG) and made the transition with success.

"The Kiss of Death or Fatal Detraction Trap."

Tommy's user group was going fine until that meeting where the mailing notices were sent out too late, and both talks were long and boring (they were down to 10 people at the end of the second talk). Word of mouth spread fast about the meeting and membership was never the same again. (Did you ever notice that you will generally tell good news to 10 people but bad experiences to 10-15?)

Your group has been stigmatized, what can you do about it? a) send out a survey to see what it will take to get people back. Followup with interviews with a representative sample.
b) start once again doing little things right by getting good speaking, having prompt mailings, and coffee at break time.
c) perhaps a change of leadership is now in order. Once you make these changes, slowly the word will get out that things are looking up and people will return. After all, you are the only SAS users group in the neighborhood!

A Summary of All Three Papers

Maintain the proper balance of mission, meeting techniques, and relations with outside groups. That includes meeting diverse needs through subgroups, regular transition of officers, a clear mission statement, and keeping a healthy level of group participation.

Know and use the available resources

--a) the SAS Institute, regional sales office, and SUGI, b) your regional group (if available), c) other local groups, and d) third-party vendors.

Support your local and regional SAS groups. If you do not have one in your area -- form one. Move slowly with situations that are possible big winners and will increase awareness.

II. The NESUG Experience Continues...

At SUGI 13, the SUGI Executive Committee passed a proposal to recognize the formation of regional users' groups. Because of this, the future looks brighter for local user groups as well. Before passage, local user group officers were very much on their own once their group was started. It is clear that some groups suffered because of this. A means is now provided for a dialogue between the local groups and SUGI/SAS Institute via the regional group. Local groups in the Northeast have already seen that the existence of a regional group can help make a big difference.

It should be made clear that members of NESUG are affiliated local user groups and not individuals. However, NESUG's activities and services are always available to all SAS users throughout the Northeast.

Electronic Bulletin Board (NESUG-BBS)

With NESUG's local group affiliates being widespread, a centralized means of communication was needed. Since the summer of 1986, NESUG has had its own electronic bulletin board operating out of Boston. It includes an on-line NESUG newsletter, special interest groups, SAS training and employment opportunities, and local user group activities. SAS users welcome the ability to download SAS code to their personal computer as well as reading on-line messages from the BITNET-based SAS-L discussion group. Future plans include 1) starting additional independently-run NESUG boards in other cities and 2) retrieving information from the UNIX-based USENET and FIDONET systems. The board is open every Monday and Tuesday from 8 a.m. - 8 p.m. and can be reached at (508) 263-1469 at 1200 or 2400 baud. Our Sysop (system operator) is Mike Keohan.
Lobbying Force

NESUG serves its members as a lobbying force to the Institute. We were successful in clarifying or having implemented some important policies including 1) that SAS interfaces to third-party databases will be placed annually in the SAS Communications and 2) that video tapes are to be sent to user groups. In addition, NESUG proposed a policy statement on the relationship between local user groups and SAS marketing representatives. An important part of that policy that was implemented was having the Institute give special talks to user groups during sales seminars.

Consortium Training

NESUG is attempting to establish a pilot program to coordinate SAS training for the Northeast. The first phase will be to serve as an information clearinghouse when SAS training becomes available. The second phase will be organizing and administering SAS courses throughout the Northeast.

NESUG '88

On October 28th, 1988, over 800 SAS users (with 300 more on the waiting list) took part in the first regional SAS conference in the United States. The conference was cosponsored by Pace University and was held at the Pace Manhattan campus. Twenty talks, 16 BODS, demos by three major hardware vendors (showing PC SAS, SAS under Unix, and SAS under VMS) were featured. SAS Institute's support of NESUG '88 was noteworthy - a) providing two prominent speakers to give the keynote plus two other talks at the conference, b) printing the conference's proceedings which were given out at the conference, c) mailing our notice about the conference to more than 6000 SAS users throughout the Northeast, d) donating 50 SAS manuals to NESUG, and e) providing training booths and SAS videos. By providing this support, the SAS Institute has shown that local and regional SAS user groups are important to them.

User reaction to the conference was extremely positive. This was the first time that many of the participants had heard or met the Institute's staff face to face, or attended a SUGI-like conference.

NESUG '89 and Beyond

NESUG '89, WASHINGTON, D.C.

An expected 1200 attendees will participating in at NESUG '89 to be held at the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza in Rockville, Maryland on Oct 29-31. Planned activities include:

- An opening session with a keynote speaker from the Institute. A mixer will be held after the opening session.

- 2 days of 4 concurrent sessions on various SAS topics including PC SAS, SAS and various industries, tutorials, and tools used with SAS.

- 2 days of roundtable luncheons for 800 people.

- An evening of SAS birds-of-a-feather (BOF) sessions.

- A Version 6 demo and publications room from the SAS Institute.

- Vendor demos.

NESUG 90 is planned for October 1st and 2nd in a downtown Boston location. Watch for more details in SAS Communications.

Conclusions

The future looks bright for user groups and NESUG. NESUG '88 showed the SAS world that a regional group and an annual regional conference is an idea whose time has come. We hope that our activities for the over 15,000 SAS users in the Northeast will continue to expand and better serve their needs.

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