In 1988, SAS Institute made a number of organizational changes in order to bring us in greater contact with you, our users. As you know, the Institute established three regional offices in the United States and a subsidiary in Canada. In addition, the Institute implemented a formal support program for local, in-house, special-interest, and regional SAS users groups. The users group support program was a direct result of your requests for assistance in forming and maintaining users groups. SAS Institute also wanted to recognize the contribution made by SAS users groups at the local, regional, and international level. This paper will tell you more about our support program for SAS users groups — how we serve as a clearinghouse for information, help new groups form, provide meeting support for existing groups, and support regional users groups.

Clearinghouse for Information

The primary support the Institute provides all users groups is serving as a clearinghouse for information. We generally get several calls each business day from users asking for information on a users group in their area. The Institute maintains a database of all SAS users groups that choose to register with us. By consulting that database, we are able to refer users to the nearest group in their area. We also publicize new local, special-interest, and regional users groups by listing them in SAS Communications*, our news magazine for users. And once a year, a directory of all local, special-interest, and regional users groups is printed in SAS Communications.

For the first time last year, we organized several activities at SUGI to disseminate information on users groups. This year, there is a users group booth in the demo area. If you have any questions about users groups, please come by and see us. In addition, two papers are being presented on SAS users groups — the one you're attending now and a panel discussion by representatives from different types of SAS users groups. And if past years are any indication, there will be many birds-of-a-feather sessions on users groups, too.

Support for New Users Groups

An important component of our users group support program is support for new groups. If you are considering starting a users group, there are three different types of groups to consider. A local group is targeted to software users from different organizations within a specific geographic area such as a city, a county, or part or all of a state. An in-house group is composed of users within a single organization. Special-interest groups are aimed at users with similar tasks, operating environments, or industries. The Institute will provide support in helping you form whichever group best suits your needs.

We have developed a users group Starter's Guide which gives you step-by-step instructions for starting a SAS users group. The Guide also includes a list of contacts for SAS users groups in the US and Canada. These contacts are people who are involved in the day-to-day operations of users groups. They can be valuable sources of information on starting and maintaining a users group. They can tell you the best days of the week to meet, the ideal length of a meeting, topics that work, organizational tips, and more. You may also want to investigate exchanging meeting ideas and speakers with other users groups in your area.

After you have received the Starter's Guide and read it over, the first step in forming a users group is to get an idea of how many SAS users are in your area or organization. If you are forming an in-house group, contact the SAS Consultant at your organization for names of other SAS users. Internal communications channels such as company newsletters, electronic mail systems, or bulletin boards are a good way to reach potential members. If you are forming a local or special-interest users group, the Institute's users group liaison can give you an idea of how many users are in a particular area or share a common interest.

The next step is to survey your potential membership about needs and interests. There are several examples of surveys in the Starter's Guide. If you are forming a local or special-interest group, we recommend preparing a cover letter and survey to mail to SAS users in your area. The Institute will then copy and mail your letter and survey to our database of users. The response to your survey will help you determine if there is need and interest in a users group. You will probably need to hear from twice as many people as you would expect to attend regular meetings.

If there is enough interest in forming a group, you will want to arrange the first meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to bring interested users together to discuss the purpose of the group, elect officers or a steering committee, determine the frequency and location of meetings, and discuss types of programming, need for dues, and other organizational topics. You will also want to think about encouraging potential members to come back to future meetings. Keep in mind that a good program with interesting speakers always draws an audience.

Again, if you are forming an in-house group, use your organization's internal channels for communication. The Institute will help local and special-interest groups promote this meeting by mailing your announcement to users in the area. And don't forget to register your group with the Institute. Contact the users group liaison and ask to be added to our database of SAS users groups.

Support for Meetings

Once a new group has been formed, a key ingredient for success is to plan meetings tailored to your members' needs and interests. The initial survey that you sent out before forming the group can be invaluable in giving you ideas for what members want. Look to your membership as a resource in giving a presentation or demonstration.

The Institute is also prepared to help you plan lively and interesting meetings. Each issue of SAS Communications contains ideas on good meeting topics. A column called "Topics Toppers" details successful meeting ideas that have worked for other SAS users groups. The Institute also produces a quarterly users group news video that is sent free to all contacts on our users group database. Called SAS User News, the 25-minute video provides news from the Institute about our products and services, several feature stories, and a section on programming tips. We also regularly mail Institute news releases as well as a semi-annual mailing of examples of new brochures and technical inserts.
The Institute also has an active Speakers Bureau and takes requests for speakers from SAS users groups. Generally, we can send an Institute speaker to your users group once a year. And we'll be glad to promote this meeting with a special mailing of your newsletter or meeting announcement. You can find examples of newsletters in the Starter's Guide.

Our experience has shown that an Institute speaker combined with a special mailing generally doubles attendance at your meeting. It's a wonderful way for you to have an excellent meeting and boost attendance and membership in your group. In 1989, Institute representatives spoke at 45 different SAS users groups. Just contact the Institute's users group liaison to discuss your request. Please keep in mind that we require a minimum of 6 to 8 weeks to help you promote a meeting.

Support for Regional Users Groups

One of the most exciting areas of our users group support program is working with regional SAS users groups. Regional SAS users groups cover several states or Canadian provinces, have formal affiliation with our international group, SUGI, and offer support services to SAS users groups in their region. Again, the impetus for regional SAS users group came from you, the users.

The concept of regional SAS users groups was approved by the SUGI Executive Board at SUGI 13 in Orlando. Regions are based on a natural grouping of US states such as Northeast, Midwest, Southwest, and so on; Canada is considered its own region. Since regional SAS users groups are formally affiliated with SUGI, users interested in forming a regional group must apply to the SUGI Executive Board for a charter and agree to uphold the tenets of that charter. So far, the Executive Board has approved charters for regional groups in the Northeast and the Midwest.

The Institute supports regional groups by working closely with users who are interested in forming a regional group. This includes helping to determine the rationale for the group, supplying a list of SAS users groups in the region to contact for affiliation and assisting with the petition to charter. If a regional group decides to hold an annual conference, the Institute will coordinate support activities for that conference. This includes promoting the conference through mailings, the Online Customer Support Facility, SAS Communications, training courses, and sales seminars. We also provide a keynote speaker for the conference, print a conference proceedings, and provide exhibits and staff for a demonstration area.

In 1990, we will support the first annual Midwest SAS Users Group (MWSUG) conference in September and the third annual Northeast SAS Users Group (NESUG) conference in November. Regional conferences benefit the SAS user community by bringing a SUGI-like experience to users who may have never had the opportunity to attend our international conference.

Conclusion

The SAS user community has been very positive about the Institute's program for users group support. In 1988, the number of SAS users groups in the US and Canada grew from 70 to 135. As mentioned earlier, Institute representatives addressed 45 users groups. We also completed 28 promotional mailings for users groups, supported the 1989 Northeast SAS Users Group (NESUG) conference with almost 1000 attendees, and worked with users from the Midwest to charter a new regional SAS users group. And we'd like to hear your ideas about new services we can offer.

By serving as a clearinghouse for information, helping new groups to form, providing meeting support to existing groups, and supporting regional groups, the Institute is helping to strengthen the network of SAS users groups as well as demonstrating our continuing commitment to you. SAS users groups are an excellent way for you to learn about SAS software and services, share programming problems and techniques, and meet others in the SAS user community. We hope you'll support the users group in your area or give us a call if you'd like to start a new group. We're always glad to hear from you.

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