Building the World's Largest Local SAS Users Group: An Organizationist Manifesto
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Abstract and Introduction

Communism has failed, but Organizationism--as it relates to SAS* users groups--is succeeding. Every issue of *SAS Communications* brings listings of new local users groups.

The Wisconsin Illinois SAS Users Group (WISAS) was founded in 1986 by Steven J. First in collaboration with several other people. Since then, many volunteers, speakers, and attendees have contributed to its quarterly activities and its persistent growth--now to nearly 1200 members in Wisconsin, Illinois, and northwestern Indiana.

The author, who was President of WISAS from 1989 to 1992, is--in the sharing spirit inherent to users groups--reporting on organizational policies, practices, and experiences at the Wisconsin Illinois SAS Users Group.

There have been previous papers about users groups published in *SUGI Proceedings* over the years; and SAS Institute Inc. not only provides its *SAS Users Group Starter's Guide*, but also now distributes (to users group contact-persons) a quarterly compilation of some of the local and regional users group newsletters and meeting notices.

But there are some organizational principles which the author thinks may be uncommon, if not unique to WISAS, and contribute to its effectiveness. Other of the principles may be deemed obvious, but nevertheless deserve emphasis.

In any case, WISAS stakes no claims of originality, but the author wants to present ideas that have made sense to him, and appear to have worked.

Why UG Can Get Speakers

"An eminent mathematician once remarked that he was never satisfied with his knowledge of a mathematical theory until he could explain it to the next man he met in the street."

Philip E. B. Jourdain
*The Nature of Mathematics*

How To Get Speakers

- Surveying members for what they want to hear is nice public relations, but anyone can draft a wish list for others to fulfill
- The topic the Program Chair should ask a potential speaker to talk about should be whatever the speaker is comfortable presenting
- Prospects: "What do you want to hear?"
- UG: "What do you want to talk about?"
- Encourage reuse (or preview) of a topic previously (or to be) presented elsewhere
- For prospects, check regional & SUGI proceedings, and meeting notices of other local users groups
- If anyone has wider/longer acquaintance, she/he can give leads to the Program Chair
- Past speakers most likely to speak again
- Maintain data base of past & potential speakers (Who, What, When, Summary Evaluation)
- Valuable repository as Program Chair changes
- Get out-of-territory speakers by paying, if possible, for transportation, lodging, & meals

Make It Easy for Speakers

- Keep it short, unless professional trainer
- Typically 15-25 minutes
  "No souls are saved after twenty minutes."
  William Sloan Coffin
- If good professional, or masterful amateur, limit to 50-60 minutes, then break, preferably end--
  UG meeting not a formal training seminar
- Most consistently and widely appreciated user-speaker known to the author does only 20-minute introductory tutorials
- End over/under/nonproduction handouts hassle: Offer speaker option of sending only one copy
  UG can produce sufficient copies (UG always knows pre-registered count) in a formally published meeting proceedings
- Waive meeting fee for speaker
Build the Program, and They Will Come

- Have 5-7 speakers, if possible:
  Not every topic will interest everybody; more topics make it easier to find reasons to come
- Introductory tutorials always well-received
- Timely or "critical-issue" topics are a draw
- Limit the number of site-specific, application-specific topics at a meeting
- Limit the number of very specialized/advanced topics at a meeting
- UG meeting is live action, not a movie theatre
  Videos are program filler, not a magnet for attendance at meeting
- UG meeting should be more than one-way communication
  - Provide a place (with beverages) to mingle during check-in, at breaks
  - Include a hot lunch
    Before breaking for lunch, let people stand up to identify topics they’d like to discuss—i.e., implement the roundtable discussion lunch concept extemporaneously for those who want it

Be Fair To De Facto Sponsors

- UG is not a job service
- Almost all UG participants are employees
- Employers give paid time out of office
- Employers pay meeting & travel expenses

Make It Easy for Members

- Assess no dues—get all money from meeting fees
- Use same location every meeting
  If a certain area of the UG territory rarely or never attends, either the program is too weak, or that area needs its own UG, or that area contains too few users to support serious UG activity
- Provide close, free parking
- Systematize the registration deadline
  e.g., always the Friday before the meeting
- Systematize the schedule
  same months out of every year
  same week of the month
  same day of the week
- Avoid start & end of month
  Avoid start & end of week
- Schedule a whole day out of the office:
  Afternoon outings too easily pre-empted
- Start so most can leave home usual time AM
  End so most can arrive home usual time PM
  E.g., 9 AM to 3 PM may accomplish that
- Provide meeting proceedings upon arrival
- Have pre-printed name tags waiting
- Have beverages during check-in and at breaks
- Have a hot lunch at meeting site

Location, Location, Location

- Central to the territory
  Yet maybe peripheral to major metropolitan area
  less congestion
  free parking
  cheaper facilities
  (room, audio-visual, food & beverage)
  E.g., conference facility at a community college, small college, etc.
- Small enough scale to provide ambience, but enough reserve capacity for growth or peak
  Use the same place every time—
    Participants know what to expect
    Organizers know what to expect
    Facility knows what to expect

Avoid False Economy in Mailing

- Mail is UG’s critical communication channel
- Don’t use bulk mail, go first class
  - Bulk mail is extremely slow, unpredictable
    Astounding as it may seem, some employers dump junk mail (as too time-consuming to distribute, and as a pre-judged waste of time for employee-recipients)
  - Encourage each user to get own entry on mailing list (avoid conservation/thrift ideology)
    Single mail contact
    reduces attendance
    reduces readership
  - Single contact a delay, if not a shut-off out of office
    casual about going through mail even a potential censor
  - Offer name & address forms
    at every meeting
    in every mailing

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Mailing Lists & Mailing Labels

- Headhunters, jobseekers, vendors, etc. will always be after UG mailing list or mailing labels
- Resist, no matter what the supplicant’s story is. Instead, offer an advertisement, for a fee, in newsletter or meeting notice

Advertising

- UG is nonprofit, but not a charitable organization dedicated to sellers of SAS goods or services, and not a job service
- Advertising fee should equal, at minimum, the total cost of printing and mailing (first class) the newsletter or meeting notice
- If more than one ad in the same issue, charge each advertiser the full fee (not a share)
- Any excess from advertising can defray other costs of the nonprofit effort

Paying for It All

- **UG need not be a shoestring operation**
  - A strong program is worth paying well for. A weak program is a waste of everyone’s time
  - Do not keep funds in interest-bearing account
  - Taxpayer ID number (needed for a bank account) is not a tax exempt number
  - Save money by getting tax exempt status, as a nonprofit educational organization, per Section 501(c)(3) of Internal Revenue Code
    - First must incorporate (not necessarily difficult or expensive)
  - Price the program to cover room, food & beverage, copying, mailing, and reserve
  - Pay for meeting with current registration fees, not pre-existing reserve fund
  - The bulk of the program should use local talent, but building up the treasury to afford paying travel expenses for one outstanding out-of-territory speaker for every (or some) meeting(s) can enhance the program

Preserve the Health of Registrar/Treasurer

- Provide a P.O. box, if he/she desires
- Do not accept telephone registrations
- Never publish registrar’s telephone number
  - Let UG president take calls about last-minute needs . . . the price of being the leader
- Define deadline as: “must be received by . . .”
- Minimize the burden of having/making change

Pre-registered meeting fees a multiple of $5
- Minimum at-door $20, $30, or more
- Require a substantial premium fee for walk-ins: Impossible to plan for, walk-ins can cause UG to run out of proceedings, lunches, etc.
- For pre-regs, have pre-printed receipt at door
  - Do not mail written confirmation
- Do not give refunds (keep pre-reg deadline late) Meeting fee is not “big bucks”:
  - and UG incurs expense in anticipation
  - If requested, mail a copy of the meeting proceedings to a no-show or canceller, but avoid turning UG into a mail-order information service (which would eliminate interpersonal interaction)
- Do not accept partial fees
  - Fee includes everything, desired or not--Decline to discount in response to:
    - “I’ll skip lunch”
    - “I only want to hear speaker X”
    - “I only want a copy of the proceedings”

Volunteers Are Precious Resources

- Vendors, consultants, and trainers are usually valuable catalysts/participants in establishing and sustaining a UG, but a “users” group ought not be too heavily dependent on people in the SAS business for its speakers, volunteers, etc.
- Recognize volunteers:
  - List them in every publication
  - Thank them often
  - Introduce them at meetings
- Defend volunteers from outrageous requests or frivolous complaints--UG has no paid staff
  - Losing a competent, conscientious, hardworking volunteer is worse than losing a “customer”

UG Governing Committee Not a Private Club

- Elect officers annually (opening for new ideas), but keep term limits informal (no needless loss of help)

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