DISCOVERING THE SECRETS TO A SUCCESSFUL SAS® USERS GROUP
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ABSTRACT
Are you involved in a local, in-house or special interest SAS users group? Here's your opportunity to hear how you can keep your group flourishing. Experts from various types of users groups share their secrets for running successful groups. This paper, presented in panel format, will cover such topics as programs, newsletters, leadership, and management support.

INTRODUCTION
Almost all mature volunteer groups face serious hurdles as they work to keep the organization growing and vibrant. SAS users groups, like other professional groups run by volunteers, may face challenges that can either make or break the group. What are some ways to deal with these challenges successfully that benefit both the individual member and the entire group?

This paper looks at four areas with which many users groups struggle. Based on experiences of users "in the trenches," it offers some ways to meet these challenges. If your users group is experiencing problems with any one of these, you will find suggestions and a fresh perspective on what to do.

PROGRAM
While many users will attend a users group meeting once just to see what it's all about, a strong program will keep them coming back. A good program can also help member get support from management for participation.

Here are some suggestions for quality programs from the the District of Columbia SAS Users Group (DCSUG). DCSUG schedules half-day meetings once a quarter. These are generally well-attended — averaging about 60 to 80 members at each meeting. Chair Andrew Parks has found that potential speakers usually contact him. "We have a lot of SAS users in the area," said Andy. "With the federal and state agencies as well as consultants, we have a good concentration of serious users. DCSUG has never been poor when it comes to looking for speakers."

DCSUG's meetings have a dual purpose. The first is to bring information to the membership. The second is to give users an opportunity to practice papers they will give at professional conferences.

The steering committee plans the programs, which are publicized through the group's newsletter and verbal announcements at the quarterly meetings.

When Andy became chair, the program consisted of three one-hour presentations. "I noticed that users were restless after a while and losing interest," said Andy. "I felt that we needed to have some breaks." The meeting format was changed to include three presentations separated by 15-minute breaks.

DCSUG has also experimented with some different types of programs. "We have begun to break out of the paper paradigm," said Andy. Steering committee members noticed that during afternoon meetings people left during the last paper. So, for the last time slot, a video such as a tutorial or SAS User News, a quarterly news video, was scheduled. "With a video, it didn't matter if people walked out. No-one would be offended," said Andy. "But I was surprised at how many members actually stuck around."

"We're not wed to one form of presentation. It's been fun to try new things," added Andy. DCSUG recently had a Coder's Comer section to the meeting. This is an opportunity for users to give 5 to 10-minute "tips" on coding. It's informal and the presentation is very short. "Although it wasn't perfect, Coder's Comer was well-received," said Andy. Panels have also been effective, and they provided a break from formal presentations. "User panels can temper a more marketing-oriented presentation," he observed. "The panel puts the focus of the meeting back on users and the users group."

Andy stressed the importance of focusing the programs on the users. "One thing our group has done, and I think any successful group should do, is focus on the users. Institute speakers or practice presentations by members aren't good if they don't meet the needs of the users."

A question and answer session is now a regular part of the meeting. Andy credits the New York Area SAS Users Group with the idea and found that it worked successfully with DCSUG, too. The Q&A session is a chance for members to ask questions and let another member answer them. DCSUG always makes sure that the steering committee is ready with some questions just in case.

DCSUG has also begun offering refreshments prior to the meeting. The cost is covered by the annual dues. Having time for refreshments provides a chance for informal interaction among the membership and for members to get to know each other.

Andy has three recommendations for users groups looking to strengthen their programs. First, make a personal appeal for participation. "People are often flattered," he said. "However, you need to know a little bit about the person in order to tap his or her area of expertise." Second, encourage members to be involved in other ways such as on a panel. Last, consider drawing on the resources of a neighboring group that's active or a regional users group. Added Andy, "You can borrow speakers, but you don't want to do it all the time. When it's your own users that are presenting, it's a good sign the group has reached a critical mass."

NEWSLETTER
Communicating with membership is vital to the success of the group. A newsletter is a reliable, consistent tool for communication. Members need to know the date of the next meeting as well as program details. Since not all members can attend each meeting, a summary of the past meeting may be helpful to keep membership informed and interested.

The Toronto Area SAS Society (TASS) was formed in 1985 by six to seven SAS users in the Toronto area. Enio Presutto, founding member and current newsletter editor, explained that the TASS newsletter has evolved over the last nine years. "Our newsletter began as a one-page meeting announcement. We needed a way to announce the meeting and provide information about the presentations," said Enio. "Over time, the TASS newsletter has come to include additional information such as meeting highlights, upcoming events, a listing of officers, information from
The TASS newsletter serves a number of functions. First, it allows members to stay in touch with the users group. Second, it reminds members that a meeting is coming up. Next, it helps a member determine if he or she wants to attend. Said Enio, "Most members won't show up unless they know what the meeting is about."

Know Your Audience

The primary audience that the newsletter addresses is the users group member. "Users spend money and time to join," said Enio. "One of the benefits of membership is a newsletter telling what is going to happen at the next meeting."

Another equally important audience for the newsletter is management. With many organizations facing uncertain economic times and potential streamlining of staff, a users group newsletter can help an employee justify participation to management. "A newsletter shows what will happen at the next meeting. It can help users get approval to attend. If the meeting is held during business hours, managers want to know what it's about and why an employee should attend. "A newsletter gives the users group credibility," said Enio.

Design and Produce the Newsletter

Enio encourages groups to stay simple when starting a newsletter. He suggests a one-page announcement using a popular word processing package such as WordPerfect. "It doesn't have to be fancy but it's important to get information out to the membership," said Enio. "It helps users get approval to attend meetings and be involved."

The TASS newsletter includes the following in each issue:

- names and phone numbers of executive committee members
- copyright information
- agenda for the next meeting
- summary of the past meeting
- upcoming events
- classified section.

The newsletter also includes regular columns. "It's hard to get people to contribute articles," admits Enio. One of the columns is called "User Exchange." This is based on a question and answer session by the same name that takes place at the meetings. A member then writes up the information for the newsletter. "Techie Corner" is a column of technical information from a variety of sources such as SAS-L, the electronic discussion group. As editor, Enio would like to see the newsletter continue to take on a more technical tone. Plans are to include a new column "Programming Segments." "This column would discuss new features of SAS software. It would focus on new information and how to use it," explained Enio.

How is the TASS newsletter actually put together? Enio uses PageMaker. He has set the format up to make it as easy and manageable as possible. All information is submitted electronically so it doesn't have to be rekeyed. Enio recommends using clip art to make the newsletter more visually interesting. "While you can use clip art in the public domain, I bought Presentation Taskforce which is a good collection of clip art."

Once the final copy is completed, TASS pays a print shop to photocopy and collate it. Another member is responsible for folding, labeling, and stamping the newsletter. "Right now we rely on paper copies," said Enio. "But we are looking at other ways to distribute. We have considered electronic distribution but it's not feasible at this point."

TASS also makes sure the Institute office in Toronto receives copies of each newsletter.

In addition to starting small, Enio advises users groups to listen to the membership and do what they want. He also recommends experimenting. "Try different things. See what works for you. Don't be afraid. Every group has a different chemistry. What works for one may not work for another," he said.

LEADERSHIP

Effective leadership is critical to every organization, but it's crucial to voluntary organizations like SAS users groups. The group's leadership should know the membership well, help determine a vision for the group, and work to guide the group in that direction.

The North Texas SAS Users Group, composed of SAS users in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, has experienced ups and downs in its history. Several years ago, the group's vigor was flagging with low membership and attendance at meetings. A reorganization spearheaded by a user new to the area revitalized the group. NOTSUG boasted more than 100 paid members in 1993.

Neil Fleming, NOTSUG chair, finds that volunteering is contagious. "When users see the benefits and enjoy the meetings, they want to volunteer. It's self-perpetuating."

Stress Member Benefits

Neil offers some pointers on creating an environment where users want to volunteer and serve in leadership positions. "It's important to continually market the value of the users groups to the members. Members have two costs in joining a users group: money (dues) and time. At every meeting, I make a conscious effort to promote the benefits of being a member," said Neil. When the users see that benefits outweigh costs, they will become more committed to the group.

Networking is a very important benefit offered by the users group. "Like most cities, business in the Dallas-Fort Worth area is going through a change. Through relocation or layoffs, users may be looking for new jobs," said Neil. "I can give several examples of users who have found new jobs through NOTSUG." Neil emphasizes the strengths and benefits of networking to the NOTSUG membership. "Networking contacts translate well into business contacts and new information," he said.

Another benefit is information exchange. This occurs through presentations at meetings and a quarterly newsletter. At meetings, there is often discussion on how to promote SAS software at an organization. "We fortify users on how to get SAS recognized. For example, what do you say when you're told that SAS is a resource hog? Or how do you handle turf wars?" said Neil.

The users group has also established a bulletin board service for its members. The BBS includes information on job openings, uploading and downloading capabilities, notes from SAS-L, and general communications.

Governing by Steering Committee

NOTSUG is governed by a steering committee that meets a few weeks after the quarterly meetings in Dallas and Fort Worth. An announcement about the meeting is made at the regular meeting and in the newsletter, the NOTSUG NEWS.
Neil Fleming credited former chair Neil Howard for helping to form the nucleus of NOTSUG’s steering committee. He also advised, “Team work and delegation are the keys. The key to any successful enterprise is team work. NOTSUG has now passed a critical mass, and we can delegate tasks.”

Neil also calls each steering committee member a few days before the meeting. “Individual contact is important. I can find out what’s going on with them as well as remind them of the meeting,” he said.

They meet over dinner at a central location. “There is good camaraderie on the steering committee. It’s the result of good team work,” said Neil. Steering committee meetings are open to anyone. “If users attend, they usually become involved,” he added.

Neil also makes a point to recognize the group’s leadership. Each steering committee member was formally thanked in a recent edition of the group’s newsletter.

Neil also noted that support from SAS Institute boosted a group’s success. “Anything that SAS Institute can do to support the users group is appreciated. My sense is that users perceive Institute support as important. When they see that commitment from the Institute, it usually leads to greater success.”

“What’s worked for us is that users who are involved speak to others. Don’t be shy. If you don’t ask, you won’t get. When you do ask, explain the benefits,” advised Neil. He finds that leadership is a democratic process, not autocratic. “Work with people. Don’t tell them what to do,” he said.

JUSTIFICATION

Participation in a professional group has to be justified both on a personal and management level. Not only must individuals feel that the professional group has something to offer them, but employers also need to see benefits to their organization in order to support professional activities like SAS users groups.

As already stated, SAS users groups should continually promote the benefits of membership. The individual member should continually promote the benefits of membership to management.

Neil Fleming listed some of the important benefits of membership: information sharing, learning opportunity, and networking. Michael Davis, former chair of the Hartford Area SAS Users Group (HASUG) and a section chair for SUGI 19, lists the following benefits that he has derived:

- increased productivity
- decreased training costs
- source of free publications
- exposure to new coding and analysis techniques
- additional source of sample code
- local source of technical support
- opportunity to polish inter-personal, writing, presentation, and leadership skills
- enhanced reputation for company and self
- impartial critique of SAS products and features
- better awareness of competitors
- more support from SAS Institute
- opportunity to provide feedback to SAS Institute
- change of pace
- opportunity to help others grow.

While the users group needs to make sure that the membership is deriving benefits from participation, it’s equally important to make sure that a member’s manager sees benefits, too. Said Michael, “It’s important to have management support. It’s important for management to know what you do, why you are doing it, and how it’s advancing the cause of the organization.” He noted that since management is measuring quantifiable issues, the employee needs to measure them also. Michael advised not to wait until your manager asks about your participation. “If your manager hasn’t asked, he or she is thinking about it. If he isn’t questioning you, then maybe his or her manager is. Anticipate. Give your boss the information he needs to go to bat for you.”

Michael stressed “thinking of things you’ve learned, how you’ve used them, and how it’s saved your organization money. Bring this up to management.” He related the following example. “I recently calculated the economic value to Blue Cross & Blue Shield of CT Health Plans gained by my membership in HASUG. When I priced the free or reduced-cost training (at group meetings, conferences, and consortium courses) as well as the value of the publications received, I derived an economic benefit between $10,000-$20,000. Another way to look at it is that my company received $60-$120 for each hour in cost savings through my efforts. The additional benefits are icing on the cake.”

Consider also how involvement with a users group may have repercussions beyond your own individual department. "In most organizations, interdepartmental cooperation is important. While users group activity may not have a direct benefit to your group, there may be a benefit to the company." Michael cites a situation where someone outside his department was having trouble with filerefs and llibrefs. Michael talked about the problem with fellow members of HASUG. He got some ideas that he used in a column for the users group newsletter, the HASUG FLASH. He then gave the column to the individuals at BCBSCHP who were having the original problem. "Because of my users group involvement, I had some extra incentive to find out this information," noted Michael.

Finally Michael advised, "Before you tell users what successful users groups do, please explain to them why they ought to spend the effort and how to bring their supervisors on board."

CONCLUSION

It’s not unusual for professional organizations like SAS users groups to struggle to establish programs that draw a crowd, a newsletter that gets read, volunteers to serve in leadership positions, or support from management. As with many successful ventures, you need to be creative and flexible. Observed DCSUG’s Andy Parks “The ability to roll with the punches is essential.”

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