Local SAS Users Groups Remove Barriers to Information/Experience Exchange: The WISAS Model
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Abstract and Introduction

Local SAS users groups provide the most frequent, most accessible venues for exchanging user knowledge and experience. A local meeting or conference is easier to get to, easier to pay for, easier to schedule time out of the office for, and easier to run.

The Wisconsin Illinois SAS Users Group (WISAS) was founded in 1986 by Steven J. First in collaboration with several other people. Since then, numerous volunteers, speakers, and attendees have contributed to its quarterly activities and its persistent growth--now to approximately 1300 members in Wisconsin, Illinois, and northwestern Indiana.

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

There have been previous papers about users groups published by other authors in SUGI Proceedings over the years. SAS Institute Inc. provides its SAS Users Group Starter's Guide, and distributes (to users group contact-persons) a quarterly compilation of many users group newsletters and meeting notices.

But there are some organizational principles which are uncommon, if not unique to WISAS, and contribute to its effectiveness. Other of the principles may be deemed obvious, but nevertheless deserve emphasis. Though WISAS stakes no claims of originality, the author wants to present ideas that have made sense to him, and have worked well.

You may not agree with everything you read here. Some groups may prefer other models. Take what you want, and leave the rest.

My Thanks To

- WISAS Volunteers...for help
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- WISAS Speakers...without whom WISAS would have had little to share

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

- At every meeting, take a survey of who is willing to speak:
  Pass around a clipboard for Who, What, When; if initial response is low, pass it around again

- 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
  Prospect: "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"
- Consistently and widely appreciated user-speaker known to the author likes to do 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
- Ordinarily, limit number of site- or application-specific and very specialized or advanced topics
- However, a thematic meeting on the right topic may be extremely popular
- UG meeting is live action, not a movie theatre
  Videos are OK as program filler, but are not a magnet for attendees
- Communication should be more than one-way
  - 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
  Meeting proceedings is a tangible to use/show back at the office
- 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
Where Actual and/or Potential Members Are

• Create a UG Atlas
• To justify meeting location
• Use zipcodes from UG mailing list
  Compile zipcodes of past SUGI attendees
  Ask for SAS Communications* subscriber zipcodes
• Produce maps
distribution
  "center of gravity"
Use techniques of
Gary F. Plazyk, WISAS SAS/geoGRAPHer
See June 1990 issue of WISAS Proceedings

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

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 products 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-reg, 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
• Enough people to split the workload
• Different people have different strengths
• Get the best out of people with minimal burden
  on any one person

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
  product or services 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"

Help from SAS Institute
• What's available is documented by SAS Institute
• Annual presentation on the topic at SUGI
• Talk to
  SAS Institute Inc. Users Group Liaison:
  Sally Roberson, 919-677-8000 Ext. 7878
• Don't be afraid to ask for something new
  • Don't be surprised if you don't get it
    (Creates a precedent--impact multiplies)
  • If you do get it, let me know
• Work with
  local SAS Institute marketing/sales manager

Role of President or Chair
• Take phone calls
• Encourage/acknowledge volunteers
• Help recruit speakers
• Serve as liaison to SAS Institute
• Serve as liaison to other UGs
• Upon entry, innovate
• Thereafter, fine tune

UG Governing Committee Not a Private Club
• Elect officers annually
  • opening for new ideas
  • prevent volunteer "burn out"
• These "core" volunteers usually do work,
  rather than much decision-making
• Keep term limits informal
  • maintain some continuity
    (evolution, not annual upheaval)
  • prevent needless loss of help and experience
• Vice-president recruits nominees
  (esp. if she/he to eventually be President)

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SAS Users Group Inc., Waukesha, Wisconsin, USA.
I am always willing to talk to people about the SAS
user organizationism (and the SAS System). But the
current WISAS President--and official WISAS
spokesman--is Ray Paulin, whose telephone number
is 312-467-2154.

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