50 Ways to Bolster Your SAS® Users Group

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ABSTRACT

The number of SAS users groups in the United States and Canada has grown from 70 to 280 in the last five years. If you are interested in organizing a group in your area, or you are looking for some new ideas for an existing group, this presentation is for you. Get advice and recommendations from users who have been involved in successful SAS users groups. Hear new ideas on programs, membership drives, finances, leadership, and more. The discussion will include local, in-house, and special-interest SAS users groups. The presentation will include a panel of experts from the user community.

INTRODUCTION

Like most professional groups, SAS users groups are diverse. Most groups share common goals such as information sharing, problem solving, and networking, but they may have widely varying ways to achieve these goals. There really isn't one recipe for success with a SAS users group. While the direction is the same, the path to get there is different. This paper lists 50 suggestions that have worked for some of the most successful SAS users groups. If you like one, try it with your users group. If it works, use it again. If it doesn't, try another suggestion. When it comes to users groups, one size does NOT fit all.

1. Have a larger steering committee rather than a smaller one. A larger committee helps to share the workload and to ensure that no one individual is overburdened. If running the organization becomes a burden, volunteers won't come forward.

2. Consider making one of the offices (committee chair or secretary, for example) a paid position. The Philadelphia SAS Users Group (PHILASUG) decided that the job of secretary was the most difficult. The secretary maintains the mailing list, prepares and mails the newsletter, and fields phone calls as contact for the group. PHILASUG decided to pay for the secretary and was able to hire a retired SAS programmer.

3. Keep your focus on the basics. Concentrate on good publicity and interesting meeting content. Make sure you have publicity via a flyer and/or newsletter and a meeting with paper and/or poster presentations. Activities such as writing articles for the newsletter, preparing a tips and techniques column, or arranging for consortium training are considered extra — nice to have, but not necessary to the success of the group.

4. Consider your members' working schedules when planning your meetings. Some groups meet only three to four times a year to minimize members' time away from the office.

5. Make the users group meeting an attractive time out of the office. Many groups choose to meet for a morning or afternoon. If it's a full-day meeting, start so most can leave home at their usual time in the morning, and end so most can arrive home at their usual time in the evening.

6. Make sure there is a mixture of topics presented at each meeting. A variety of topics will broaden the meeting's appeal to your membership.

7. Present several short topics at your meeting. Several short topics are better than a few longer ones. If there are more topics, there are more potential reasons for people to attend the meeting.

8. Tap into the expertise of your membership. Solicit presentations from your own members. In order to use membership expertise, you will need to know your members and their areas of interest and expertise. Consider using poster presentations from those members who might not be comfortable speaking.

9. Augment your program by inviting speakers from out of the area. Invited speakers provide a fresh perspective for your group. Look for potential speakers at regional users group conferences and at SUGI. Some experts in the wider SAS community may be willing to present to your group for no charge; others may expect travel costs to be reimbursed. Local users groups may choose to build up a fund to cover any costs involved. Some regional users groups will cover speaker travel costs for affiliated local groups.

10. Provide opportunities for the members to meet each other and enjoy refreshments. Some groups have scheduled breaks where the members have a chance to meet and talk with each other. Refreshments can be donated by the host site or paid for by the users group. Conversation over coffee is a good way to enhance networking and strengthen the social dynamics of the group.

11. Keep dues low. Most groups charge only enough to cover expenses such as mailing costs and refreshments.

12. Collect no dues. Charge only for each individual meeting. Consider accepting paid advertisements in your newsletter. These two strategies help you to eliminate the job of tracking membership expiration dates and renewals.

13. If you charge for each individual meeting, accept only mailed registration forms accompanied by a check or cash at the door. Do not publish the registrar's phone number. Do not accept partial payments or issue refunds. Require a substantial premium fee for walk-ins.

14. Keep job openings very low-key. Providing information on job openings is a service that many users groups offer to their memberships. However, this service needs to be done in a way that will not alienate the managers who are approving members to attend. Some groups will not accept advertisements for jobs or recruiters. They may have a notebook of job openings and of users seeking jobs. Another option is to create a job bank where one person serves as a repository of information about job openings. Users group members can call this person for current openings.
15. Ask members' organizations to host meetings. This strategy will provide you a free meeting site and will also help you to recruit members. You will probably have more SAS users from the host site attending the users group meeting. Also, the work of the officers or steering committee is simplified because the site and security are provided. It may also be possible for the host site to donate or make arrangements for refreshments.

16. Provide copies of paper presentations to attendees. If the speaker provides the paper and any handouts in advance, the users group organization makes copies. Handouts and/or a paper can help members justify attendance. As well, an informal proceedings can lend credibility to the speaker.

17. Meet at the same location each time. The site should be central to the area served by the group, be easy-to-get-to, and offer free, available parking. Participants, organizers, and facility staff will know what to expect every time.

The Wisconsin Illinois SAS Users Group holds their quarterly meetings at a community college on the outskirts of Chicago. Meeting space, audiovisuals, and food are contracted from the community college.

18. Rotate meeting locations. What may be convenient for some members may be too far away for others.

19. Make sure meeting notices are mailed two to three weeks in advance of the meeting. Use first class mail so that members will receive the notice promptly and to ensure that the piece will be forwarded, if there has been a change of address.

20. Encourage each member to get his or her own mailing. A single mail contact at a site may delay passing on information. He or she may be out of the office or casual about the responsibility of sharing mail.

21. Be accurate with your meeting notice or newsletter. Meeting dates and locations should be checked and double-checked. Include both date and day of the week when using dates. Accurate information improves the credibility of the group.

22. Offer membership forms at every meeting and in every mailing.

23. Protect your membership list. Headhunters, job seekers, and vendors may ask to get a copy of your membership list. Once the list is out of your hands, you no longer control it. Your members or their managers may be offended by unsolicited mail, and you may ultimately lose members and support.

24. Elect officers or steering committee members annually to provide opportunities for new ideas and fresh energy. However, keep term limits informal to maintain some continuity, to prevent needless loss of experience, and to retain those who are willing and able to help. Suggest that those in leadership roles divide up the work so that no one is overburdened.

25. Know your membership. Occasionally, survey members and determine interest and expertise.

26. Allow for open discussion time so that members can share problems and solutions and become acquainted with one another. The Tallahassee SAS Users Group has a "trouble shooting" section. The last 15 minutes of each meeting is devoted to problem solving among the attendees. The problem may have been posed spontaneously or included in the meeting announcement that precedes each meeting. The Valley of the Sun SAS Users Group has a "coder's corner" section at each meeting when users can present a problem and draw upon the knowledge of the other attendees.

27. Prepare for some meetings to fail. When failure happens, the group's leadership shouldn't take it personally. Learn from the experience.

28. Make sure your speakers have the audiovisual equipment that they need such as overhead projectors, slide projectors, LCD panels, and so on. Some groups may have access to facilities appropriate for workshops. Make sure all equipment is working.

29. Start out slowly. Keep in mind that it takes time to start a users group. For example, the Tallahassee SAS Users Group was several months in the making. Contacting potential members, tabulating survey responses, and setting up organizational meetings take time. Don't get discouraged!

30. Make sure members derive benefits from the group and enjoy participating. Members have different reasons for wanting to belong to a users group. Some enjoy establishing a network and then benefiting from the networking opportunities. Others are interested in problem solving, and some may be looking for jobs or leadership opportunities. If members don't enjoy and derive benefits from their participation in the group, they won't continue their membership.

31. Determine the interest of potential members in a SAS users group. You need to have sufficient interest on the part of others to be successful. Interest can best be determined by a written survey.

32. Encourage members to preview papers they will later present at conferences, such as SUGI or regional SAS users group conferences. Practicing their presentations will let them "fine-tune" their papers. Papers could also be presented after the conference. Provide a supportive and encouraging atmosphere.

33. Make decisions. The group's leadership should not sit on issues, but rather handle them in a timely and decisive manner.


35. Organize your meetings. Good organization will attract members to your group; poor organization will dissuade members as well as their managers.
36. Standardize the format for your meetings. As one experienced users group leader observed, "the best surprise is no surprise." If the meetings have a set format, members know what to expect. They can come late or leave early if they are interested in certain portions of the program. A standardized meeting format also simplifies the work of the group's leadership.

37. Delegate the responsibilities of running the users group. If it's a "one person organization," there is a greater chance of burnout for the leader. Share the work of running the group.

38. Keep any money from dues or advertising fees in a noninterest-bearing bank account. In order to avoid filing annual tax returns, it is imperative that no other interest or taxable income be earned by the organization. Also, complete an Application for Employer Identification Number (Form SS-4, Internal Revenue Service).

39. Locate actual and potential members. Compile zip codes from your users group mailing list and lists of past SUGI attendees in your area. Ask the Institute for SAS Communication subscriber zip codes in your area.

40. Publicize your users group. Make sure SAS Institute always has the name of your current group contact for referral of potential members. Hold birds-of-a-feather (BOF) meetings at regional conferences and SUGI. Place a community service announcement in your local newspaper or on your community TV cable access channel. Prepare a flyer or simple brochure that contains information about your group and includes a membership form. Display flyers about your group at the Users Group Booth at SUGI.

41. Make sure the contact for your users group is accessible and returns phone calls promptly. The contact may be the first exposure a prospective member has with your users group. First impressions are important! Make sure your group puts its best foot forward.

42. Write bylaws for your users group. Written bylaws provide a consistent framework for the group. Samples are available in the SAS® Users Group Starter's Guide, a document available from SAS Institute.

43. Promote the benefits of the users group to the membership. Users will continue to be involved when they derive a direct benefit from the membership. Whenever possible, highlight the benefits of membership to the users' sponsoring organizations. Remember, many users participate in the users group only with approval of their management. Help make managers aware of the value of the users group.

44. Recognize and thank the volunteers in your users group. Recognition is a powerful motivator. Let members who have given their time know they are appreciated! You may want to recognize volunteers verbally at a meeting, send written thank-you notes, or acknowledge members' contributions in a newsletter.

45. Ask for what you need. Try a broadcast appeal first. If necessary, make a direct appeal to select individuals. Many individuals are flattered to be asked to give a presentation or to chair a committee. One users group president observed, "If you don't ask, you won't get. When you do get, explain the benefits."

46. Ask SAS Institute to help your group with a promotional mailing. As a service to users groups, the Institute will conduct one mailing each year per group. This service allows your users group to reach users on the Institute corporate database and saves mailing costs for the group as well.

47. Contact your SAS Institute account manager for current sales and marketing videos. These videos discuss the latest products and services and are free for the asking.

48. Explore the possibilities of electronic mail. Post your meeting announcement on SAS-L, the worldwide electronic discussion group for SAS users. Consider sending announcements and job postings via electronic mail if your membership is interested in receiving them this way.

49. Evaluate your group from time to time. An evaluation can be formal, such as a written evaluation, or informal, such as a discussion among the group's leadership. Take some time to look at where the group has been, where it is now, and where it may go in the future.

50. Don't get "SUGled" out! Spend your time, energy, and resources wisely. Don't get so involved in local, regional, and national SAS users groups that you burn out.

CONCLUSION

In summary, keep it simple. Find what works for your users group and go with it.

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