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SUG on a Shoestring: Supporting a SAS Users Group with Low-Cost Internet Tools

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ABSTRACT

Whether you are starting a new local SAS® users group (SUG) or updating the services offered by an existing group, there are many potentially useful tools available through the Internet. The good news is that some online services offer low- or no-cost options to conserve your group's financial resources. The bad news is that the Internet marketplace is in a state of constant transformation. With new categories of services being invented every day, finding and evaluating tools can become a full-time activity. Although it is impossible to catalog all the current choices, this paper suggests which categories of services may be useful to your SUG and discusses some of the pros and cons of implementing your group's e-business strategy on a shoestring budget.

INTRODUCTION

The process of starting and supporting a non-profit user group has some of the same challenges as starting a small business. You may need to get the new organization up and running before you begin receiving revenue. Even if you are lucky enough to have some start-up cash, you should quickly establish sound and affordable business processes. As a growing number of dot-com companies have shown, it is easy to burn through your start-up capital if you fail to manage your spending. The following types of low-cost tools available through the Internet can help you organize, promote and operate your SUG.

TOOLS FOR COMMUNICATING

The first order of business is to make sure the group's organizers can communicate effectively. Communication tools are also necessary for keeping in touch with the group's members.

E-MAIL

E-mail is a powerful, low-cost way to communicate with one person or a group. E-mail software packages commonly allow you to manage a mailing address list and to send a message to multiple recipients. The list might need to be maintained manually, and it can be difficult for more than one person to share administrative duties. Also, keep in mind that when you send a message to a group, the people receiving your e-mail might be able to see each other's addresses. If your group has a large mailing list, or if your members are concerned about keeping their e-mail addresses private, you may want to use an e-mail group service.

Services such as eGroups, Coollist and Topica offer the ability to create and manage your e-mail list online. With this type of service, your members can add and remove themselves from your group's mailing list. The service may also test for invalid e-mail addresses and automatically remove them from your list. Other features may include the ability to store the group's files online, select one or more list moderators, maintain a calendar of events, schedule private chat sessions, do online polling, and archive messages.

Look for a guarantee that members' e-mail addresses are kept private and that members can control how much of their personal information can be viewed by others. Another nice feature is the ability to place a "button" on your group's Web site so your members can sign themselves up for your e-mail list.

Sending an attachment to an e-mail message can be a convenient, low-cost way to distribute announcements to members. However, some of your members may not be able to

receive e-mail attachments. These people may prefer to access information that can be downloaded from a Web site or saved in your e-mail group's file space.

VOICEMAIL AND FAX

Members who do not have access to the Internet may prefer to stay in touch through voicemail and fax. But what if your group does not have a fax machine? Fax services such as eFax.com can enable your group to receive fax and voicemail messages. Members can dial one phone number to send a fax or record a voicemail message to the administrator. The message is then forwarded to the account administrator's e-mail address as an attachment. These messages can then be conveniently stored and shared.

ONLINE CHAT

Face-to-face meetings over coffee and doughnuts are a pleasant way to get to know the members of your organizing committee. But sometimes getting together in person just isn't practical. Then an online chat can be a useful alternative. This type of service may be available from the same company that provides your online e-mail group.

To set up an online chat, an administrator schedules a "chat room" for a certain time. Then at the meeting time, participants log into the e-mail group's Web site and enter a private "chat room". Keep in mind that participating in an online meeting can be challenging. Because there is a small delay between sending and receiving messages, the messages can get out of sync. One person may still be responding to a message after everyone else has moved on to another topic. Distributing an agenda in advance may help to keep the meeting on track.

TOOLS FOR PROMOTING YOUR GROUP**WEB HOSTING**

Even if your group's physical files are located in a stack on your kitchen table, you can give your SUG a nice virtual home on the Web. The lowest cost option for hosting your group's Web site may be to add your web pages to someone else's site. One of your group's sponsoring organizations may be able to provide free web hosting for your group. Or your Internet service provider may offer free space to build a non-profit Web site. Another alternative is to set up a Web site using a service like Pair.com, which hosts Web sites for a monthly fee.

DOMAIN NAME REGISTRY

If you decide it is important for your group to have a customized URL, such as <http://www.mySUG.org>, you can select and register a domain name through an accredited registrar. There will be an annual fee to set up and maintain your registration, so consider whether the benefit of a customized address is worth the additional cost. Information about accredited registrars is available from ICANN, The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers.

SEARCH ENGINES

Once you have created your group's Web site, you can help people find it by listing it with one or more search engines, such as Lycos or AltaVista. Then when someone uses the search engine to search for one of the key words that describe your site, the engine will display a link to your home page. The cost and procedures for listing a site vary by search engine, so make sure you understand the terms before you sign up.

LINKS

If your group is registered with SAS Institute, you may request a free link from its Web site to yours. Someone browsing the www.sas.com Web site will then be able to click on your group's link and find your home page. You may also want to contact other organizations, such as computer- or statistics-related groups in your area. You can offer to post a link to their home page on your Web site, and request a link from their Web site to yours.

TOOLS FOR MANAGING FINANCES

ONLINE BANKING

You may be able to find a low-cost checking account for your non-profit group at a local bank. If not, several online banks offer low-cost checking accounts. These banks do not have physical branches, but some of them allow you to access your account through the ATMs of other banks.

PAYMENT SERVICES

If your group collects membership dues or donations, and your members have asked to pay by credit card, an online payment service may be a solution. Services such as PayPal by x.com enable registered individuals and organizations to send each other payments through the Internet, by credit card or bank account transfer.

TOOLS FOR PLANNING MEETINGS

Many traditional companies now conduct business through the web. For example, you may be able to order refreshments for your next meeting through the Web site of your local pizza place. Need an LCD projector for your meeting? There are online services that will provide quotes from rental companies in your area. You may be able to find the best prices for office supplies and door prizes at a site like Bizrate.com, or find banquet facilities using one of many Internet "Yellow Pages" sites.

MAPS

Once you have planned your meeting, you can use a service like mapblast.com to provide your members with a custom map and driving directions to the meeting. This site also allows you to download the HTML code to add a "button" to your web page. When your members click on the button, they link to a Web site where they can create their own customized directions to the meeting.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

With so many free tools to choose from, you may be wondering, "What's the catch?" There are several important factors to consider as you plan your group's e-business strategy.

ADVERTISING

The most obvious catch is advertising. Many of the companies that offer free services make their money through advertising rather than usage fees. When you register your group to use one of these services, you may be offering your members' time and attention in exchange. For example, a banner advertisement may be appended to each message you e-mail, or to the pages on your Web site. Like commercials on television, these advertisements can be distracting. If this is a concern for your members, your group may want to pay for a "deluxe" version of a service that does not include advertisements.

RISK

The most important catch is the risk related to the evolving nature of doing business online. Before signing up with any service, you should evaluate its policies about unwanted e-mail, unauthorized transactions, confidentiality of personal information, passwords, liability, and any other issues that are important to your members. Of course, there are Internet services that can help you with this

task. Third party evaluators such as Gomez.com provide ratings of Web sites by category. Other services grant a "certificate" to Web sites that meet certain criteria.

ADMINISTRATION

A related catch is the need for ongoing maintenance. As Internet companies grow and consolidate, you may receive notifications about changes to fees and policies, or requests for you to update your registration agreement. If your SUG signs up with several different services, someone will need to keep track of all the different identification codes and passwords.

BACKUP PLAN

Common sense may be your only defense against hackers trying to post manifestos on your home page, recruiters trying to peek at your e-mailing list, and Internet services that are free today and gone tomorrow. Before you rely on an Internet tool, consider what could go wrong and what you can reasonably do to protect your group.

Create a backup plan in case a service has an outage, changes its policies or goes out of business. If you maintain your e-mail list online, save regular copies of it in a secure place. Also, keep backup copies of the HTML code for your web pages.

CONCLUSION

Internet tools can enable your SAS user group to provide its members with a choice of flexible, personalized services on a shoestring budget. If you decide to experiment with innovative new ways to accomplish your group's goals, remember to use your communication tools to ask your members about their preferences and priorities.

Most importantly, keep two things in mind before you do business with an Internet company: 1) Behind a Web site's sophisticated graphics there may be either a reputable company, or someone wearing pajamas, or both. 2) If you spend too much time administering services for your group, you might not have time to get dressed either.

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