NARROWING THE COMMUNICATION GAP:
EXPANDING THE INFORMATION CENTER <-> CLIENT CONNECTION

Dusty Teaf
Sandra Robinson
The University of New Mexico

Introduction
The 1980s have ushered in a new meaning and importance to the role of consulting and training in the information and consulting business. As the need for Information Centers expands, and the demand for our expertise and services as computing consultants explodes, often we fail to allot enough time for introspection concerning the roles we have designed for ourselves in relation to the computer user community. As we adjust to our roles as dispensers of information and solutions, many of us also become dependent on our clients' dependence on us. Some of us have become a bit too comfortable in our positions of "great information gurus" -- the keepers of the magic solutions, so to speak. As Naomi Karten (1987b) points out, sometimes it just becomes too tempting to keep all that magic for ourselves, to enjoy the rewards of indispensability. However, many of you more weathered and harried (or, if you prefer, experienced) consultants may be suffering from one of the not so positive side effects of indispensability, being everything to everybody. And you may be beginning to doubt the wisdom of holding all the cards.

The Consultant's Changing Role
Up to now, the microcomputer explosion has kept most of us busy putting out fires just to keep the users' heads above water. As Rawlings and Rawlings (1988) point out, we in the business of consulting and training must begin to realize that our real job is helping users solve their own problems. We are not like mechanics and doctors who both analyze and fix. We are in the business of helping users to help themselves do the fixing. Part of our mission is to instill confidence in our clients and customers, not to see how much knowledge we can secret away for ourselves. For most people, self-confidence is fostered by the feeling of being well informed. If the Information Center staff begin to unburden themselves of this heavy load of user dependency by providing more and better methods for disseminating information to clients, we will have taken giant steps toward developing user self-sufficiency and putting the client in the center of the action.

Perhaps it is time to look outside our own Information Center area for direction. The buzz word for the 1990s is "connectivity." In computing, "networking" is the way of the future. This will be true in all areas of computing including consulting and training.

A recent survey of senior information managers done by Dr. J. Daniel Couger (1989) of the University of Colorado found that one of the top five human resource issues of the 1990s is the transfer of more information systems tasks to the user, while adjusting traditional information systems roles toward that of facilitator. The new role of the Information Center consultant of the 1990s will be that of mentor and facilitator rather than guru. We also need to become networkers in the true sense of the word. We must make our users independent of us by connecting them to the people and materials they need, encouraging independence in finding their own solutions.

The 1990s will bring a new perspective to data control. The data processing professional will no longer be the sole catalyst in computing activities. The users are demanding control over their own computing destinies. Our new role of information flow facilitators is indeed an exciting one. The Information Center has the opportunity to become a gateway of knowledge for users in a whole new way. By enhancing the productivity of our users through connectivity and networking in all ways possible, we enhance the scope of our own positions as well.

The SAS® Connection
At The University of New Mexico Information Center we have begun to move into the nineties. With SAS software as our main connector, the statistical package consultants have begun to network the statistical software user community in many new ways and to explore other possibilities as well.
The first step in a process such as this is to analyze the status quo, the users and the avenues of communication available. At UNM we have, in the past, communicated with users mostly on a one-to-one basis, and in a general way through the Newsletter that our department publishes.

Communication skills are essential to Information Center professionals, and as Naomi Karten points out (1987a), building user confidence is an important part of communication skills. We are trying now to narrow the communication gap by becoming information brokers between parties with common concerns, in particular, our clients who use the SAS system. By expanding our traditional definition of consultant-client communication, we have greatly increased the number and quality of client interactions and have begun to more successfully get information into the hands of those who need it.

We began by analyzing available methods for communication with our SAS users. In addition to our traditional avenues of communication such as the CIRT Newsletter, short courses, documentation and personal phone calls, we identified some new, more efficient and focused ways of making contact with our SAS users and they with us and each other.

Online

Electronic Mail (on systems running SAS)
Short User Surveys
LISTSERV Discussion lists, SAS-L and STAT-L
SAS News
CONSULT TSR

Offline

Colloquiums
Executive Program Templates
User Surveys
Help Desk
Workshops
Campus News Media (not CIRT Newsletter)

ONLINE Methods

On introspection, one of our first admissions was that we were not effectively using our online resources to make connections with users. The people who use the SAS system on our mainframe IBM or the VAX/VMS® systems log on frequently. It's a simple matter for them to check mail or read news. Therefore, we chose some online areas to work on: (1) Electronic Mail on both the IBM and the VMS machines for online consulting, dissemination of information and user feedback, (2) LISTSERV discussion lists SAS-L and STAT-L and (3) SAS News. We have also implemented a TSR (Terminate and Stay Resident) application on our Help Desk to better track users and user problems.

Electronic Mail

First we established statistical consulting accounts on both systems which run the SAS system, the IBM and the VAX. (If your IBM and VAX systems can actually talk to one another you may only have to establish one account.) Accounts on both systems were given the logon id STAT to make them easy to remember. Second, we let our users know about this new service or avenue of information flow by (1) putting an article in our newsletter, (2) mailing a memo via campus mail to everyone on our statistical software users mailing list (compiled from our yearly surveys, Help Desk contact sheets and SAS PC® license information) and (3) placing a short notice in SAS News. In both the newsletter article and the memo we requested that anyone interested in being on our electronic mailing list send us their MUSIC® (IBM) id or their VMS logon id either through electronic mail or through campus mail. We also got e-mail addresses from all of our colloquium attendees. Third, we set up distribution lists on both MUSIC and on VMS.

We now use these distribution lists to:

1. Notify users of upgrades and zaps to SAS PC software. (Many of our SAS PC users do have mainframe accounts.)
2. Inform users about the topic, date and time of the next scheduled Statistical Software Users Colloquium.
3. Keep users up-to-date on new releases of the mainframe versions of the SAS system.
4. Survey users on a variety of issues including colloquium topics, new product purchases, product usage, etc.
5. Provide sample SAS jobs.

Through our distribution lists, we query users on campus about solutions to other users’ problems. We then either pass the solutions on to the users through e-mail or we put them in contact directly with each other. We become simply the conduit for information flow.

User Surveys

As mentioned above, we have been using electronic mail to send out very short user surveys on timely topics. Rather than sending out lengthy surveys, which consume a lot of the users’ time, we are trying out the theory that asking for a little information at a time will bring better results. We also use these surveys to solicit user input on colloquium topics. For example, the latest survey looked like this:
Our second colloquium of the Spring session is scheduled for March 20 from 11:30 to 1:00 in Room 142 of the CIRT building. The topic is statistical graphics. We are now deciding on the topic for our next colloquium (late April?). Here are some possible topics as well as some general questions about the colloquiums. Please save this survey as a file, edit it to mark your responses and send the file back to us. THANK YOU.

Colloquium Topics
- Enhancing the performance of SAS PC
- SPSS vs. SAS - How to Choose
- Using PROC TABULATE in SAS
- Using the Macro Facility in SAS
- Suggestion?

Colloq Time: Is Okay / I prefer _____________
Colloq Length: Is Okay / I prefer _____________
Colloq Format: Is Okay / I prefer _____________

After the initial startup period when novice e-mail users were learning how to use the mail system, we have had success with this approach. And there is the distinct advantage of rapid response time as opposed to the turnaround time to be expected when the surveys are mailed out through traditional mail.

Discussion Lists
In an attempt to help our users help themselves (as well as possibly take some of the consulting load off our shoulders), we have distributed information about how to subscribe to and use the SAS-L and STAT-L discussion lists maintained on LISTSERV on BITNET. These discussion lists put our users in contact with other SAS users and statisticians all over the world. The discourse which takes place on SAS-L is invaluable to heavy SAS users, particularly the more advanced user. By monitoring the discussions on a regular basis, you can accumulate a wealth of useful information. And there is a vast pool of knowledge to be tapped on SAS-L. The members of this list run the gamut from novice SAS user, to very technical hardware specialists, to ingenious programmer types and all flavors in between. The list has become a valuable resource to many of our users and to us as consultants as well.

SAS News
SAS News, the facility in the SAS system to provide short information messages to users when they access the SAS procedure, can be very useful for relaying important news to users. We have mostly been using it to notify users of software upgrades, new products and fixes.

Online Tracking System - CONSULT
Finally, in an attempt to better track users and user problems, we have recently converted our manual customer contact sheets for the Help Desk and for Senior Consultants, to an online record-keeping system, a TSR called CONSULT, which was written and provided to us by the University of Kansas. Data are collected daily in ASCII files which can then be analyzed by the SAS program supplied with CONSULT, which we modified for our site. This enables us to keep track of numbers and frequency of SAS users who are utilizing the Help Desk and our senior consulting staff, as well as keep a record of what department they are from, and what kinds of SAS problems they are having. The end result is more information for us on who our SAS users are and what they're doing. This also permits us to update our statistical software users mailing list more easily and more often.

These online methods have allowed us to develop a much more interactive relationship with our SAS system users. They now feel that they have (1) easy access to statistical package consultants, (2) a convenient avenue for inputting their views, needs and problems and (3) a source of up-to-date information and news on SAS events, upgrades and zaps.

OFFLINE Methods
Many strategies to improve the SAS client-consultant relationship are also being undertaken in offline mode. We continue to (1) provide many forms of documentation including hard copy IRC-written user guides, tutorials (online and offline), and How Tors, (2) offer regular classes on statistical software, (3) do a campus-wide survey of statistical software users every one to two years, depending on changes in software and user needs and (4) publish regular articles and notices in the CIRT Newsletter pertaining to SAS software issues. In addition, we have been using the student newspaper and the administrative newsletter as another means of communicating with SAS users, trying to connect with those we have previously missed.

Workshops
Another approach we have also tried is to offer our services in personnel department management workshops on computer resources at UNM. We have developed a presentation on computer statistical and graphics software that we have incorporated into the four-hour seminar entitled Computer Resources for Managers, which we hope will keep management more aware of what's available and better informed.
Executive Statistics

Very recently, we have been involved in developing an automated CIRT data collection system to keep track of and provide monthly statistics on all facets of CIRT computing activity for the Office of the Associate Vice President of Computing. The analysis and graphics programs are written in SAS. We are now developing hard copy data dictionaries and training materials for executives in our organization who will want to run the canned programs we produce, but who do not want to learn very much about how to use the SAS system. We are also developing online, thoroughly documented sample programs with comprehensive and easy-to-understand instructions. These jobs can be downloaded to PCs, enabling them to 'play with' the software and programs in the privacy of their own offices. It is only very recently that we have realized the importance of establishing this connection to our own executive staff (our newest and extremely important type of user). Once they are up and running, we will begin to network them to each other through the SAS connection.

Colloquiums

Finally, as mentioned, one of the most exciting new strategies we have undertaken is the STAT Users' Colloquium Series. These events are offered two to three times a semester. We at the IRC organize the event, provide computing and audio/video equipment and assist users in selecting a topic and choosing speakers. We also provide a room and offer refreshments.

The first 45 minutes of the Colloquium is devoted to formal presentations and demonstrations of practical applications for using the SAS system. The next 30 to 45 minutes is an open forum where participants ask questions, share sample programs, hash over shared problems and new tricks, and generally make the SAS user connection in a fun, enthusiastic and very beneficial environment.

Some topics recently covered in these gatherings have been the SAS PC/dBASE III interface; developing graduate student microcomputer labs for statistics use; SAS upload/download strategies; and statistical graphics, which included discussion and presentations on PROC GSLIDE and PROC TAG (a user-written procedure to interface the SAS system with Tellagraf), customizing device catalogs and getting SAS/GRAPH® to the IBM 3800 laser printer. Possible topics for the future include a comparison of the SAS and SPSS systems and discussions of the SAS system's MACRO facility and TABULATE procedure.

Users have responded very favorably to these forums for meeting one another and exchanging problems and solutions. It makes them feel less isolated to know that others in the same boat are just a few keystrokes or a phone call away.

Conclusion

Over this last year, especially since our introduction of online consulting and messaging, we feel we are finally really connecting and communicating with our users in a creative and progressive way. We are moving into the 1990s in a proactive mode and are feeling encouraged and positive about the type of people networking we are currently providing.

However, as always, we intend to continue to look for ways to expand the networking of the statistical software user community. For example, we would like to implement a bulletin board system so our SAS users could share programs and information. We would also like to be able to provide one easy to use mail and messaging system, so that our users on all machines will find communication between systems efficient. Our systems group is currently working on interfaces and networking equipment to make this possible in the near future.

Our strategies to date for reaching the SAS user and, in turn, putting our users in touch with each other have been successful. Not only do we feel that our clients are better informed, but there has been a weight lifted from us as SAS software consultants. We are no longer the "Keepers of the Great SAS Secrets." A certain freedom is gained by releasing those secrets (at least some of them) out into the light of day for all to see and know.

References


For More Information

Sallie (Dusty) Teaf
Sandra Robinson (St. George)
Information Resource Center
2701 Campus Blvd. NE
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM  87131

BITNET:  TEAF@UNMB
         SANDY@UNMB