

SPONSORING SAS TRAINING* THROUGH A LOCAL USERS GROUP

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Abstract

This paper describes the experiences of the South Florida SAS Users Group in sponsoring a SAS* Basics course and a SAS* Macro Language course. The users group organized and marketed the courses. The Education, Marketing and Sales Department of SAS Institute provided the speakers and course materials, collected course fees, and paid course expenses.

For the user community the courses allowed individuals to obtain training they otherwise would not have received. The two courses targeted different sections of the user community: the SAS Basics course for novice programmers; the SAS Macro Language for intermediate to advanced programmers.

For the users group the courses supplied the opportunity to provide members a visible, valuable product which they could use to justify participation in the users group. It also helped sell the benefits of SAS* software and to develop a constituency of SAS users within the attendees' companies. The courses helped the users group reach SAS users who had not known about or shown interest in the group previously.

The paper discusses the issues that the users group considered in organizing the courses and offers suggestions for the successful implementation of a SAS course.

Introduction:

One of the purposes for a users group is to provide educational opportunities for its members. Sponsoring SAS Training* fills the need for education. It increases the value of the group to the user community and strengthens an active group or sustains a weak one. For the leadership of the group training is among the most gratifying of services to offer.

The South Florida SAS Users Group has actively marketed SAS Training since the beginning of 1989. Beginning in February 1989 with SAS Basics and May

1989 with SAS Macro Language, it became the first users group to take advantage of the Consortium Training offered by the Institute. Training classes will continue with PC SAS to be offered in April 1990. The users group has also promoted courses in Base SAS* at the University of Miami and Florida International University in January 1990.

Benefits to Members

Training:

- Offers education otherwise unavailable to them
- Increases the abilities of attendees to program in SAS, thus making them more valuable to their companies
- Enlarges the number of SAS users at their companies, thus increasing the importance of SAS and gaining them political leverage
- Provides a justification for spending company time and resources supporting the users group
- Serves as a forum for networking and the exchange of ideas

Eighteen and twenty-two persons attended the SAS Basics course and the SAS Macro Language course. Several have expanded the scope of their positions. Many use SAS more extensively now than before.

Benefits to the Users Group

Training:

- Increases awareness of the group and the services it offers
- Enhances its reputation in the user community
- Adds a new dimension to the group
- Enlarges the user community, thus creating a pool of potential new members
- Increases the sophistication of the user community

- Promotes SAS software
- Sustains morale during difficult periods
- Provides a gratifying activity for knowledgeable members

During 1988 group meetings suffered from low attendance. Scheduling successful SAS Training helped group leaders persevere. Potential new members inquired about the group and learned about us through the marketing of the courses. Forty-five people attended the November 1989 meeting, our largest turnout so far. Many had either attended or been contacted about the courses.

What Courses to Offer

The training to offer depends on the needs and size of the group. Courses should relate to products which members use and the environment in which they work. Initial offerings should be on popular topics. Initial success makes later training in advanced topics easier to market.

The South Florida SAS Users Group is small, having a mailing list of one hundred. Most members work on IBM mainframes and use Base SAS. For these reasons the users group decided to start with mainframe courses relating to Base SAS. The number of courses we found marketable was small: SAS Basics; SAS Macro Language; SAS* Processing; SAS* Report Writing; and SAS* Basics II (Version 6).

Another object was to offer courses which targeted different segments of the user community. The SAS Basics course was appropriate for novice users and a good tool for enlarging the local community. The SAS Macro Language course targeted intermediate to advanced users.

A questionnaire can be helpful. We listed all the courses SAS Institute offers by product and asked users to indicate how many attendees were "very likely," "somewhat likely," or "possible" in the next year from their companies. Response was moderate, but informative.

Frequency of Courses

Frequency is also a function of the needs and size of the group. A small or homogenous group exhausts training

needs quickly. Budget restrictions constrain the number of courses which members can take per year.

The time and effort that members are willing to expend is a consideration. It is better to schedule limited training and be successful than to schedule extensive training and encounter problems due to a lack of organization or resources.

Since 1989 was the first year we sponsored training, we concentrated on getting the two courses to come off well. We hope to offer two to three courses per year and repeat popular courses every two years.

Coordination

Once the leaders of a group decide they want to sponsor SAS training, it is important to choose a person capable and willing to take responsibility for bringing the training to fruition. Coordinating training takes time. Concerns include the source of training, cost, invoicing of attendees, location, type of facility, site arrangements, and marketing. Others should assist the coordinator in managing these tasks.

If training is to be ongoing rather than one-time, the group should rotate coordination, which is too time consuming for one member to take on as a permanent responsibility.

Source of Training

SAS Institute offers a Consortium Training program, amenable to user groups. The Institute provides a professional lecturer. The group guarantees fifteen students. The Institute can invoice students and pay expenses, an administrative boon. For further information contact the Education, Marketing, and Sales Department.

Several other companies offer SAS Training. Similar arrangements can be made with them. Members of your group may wish to teach a course. Local universities are often willing to offer SAS Training, which the users group can market and announce to members.

Marketing

For a users group to market training,

a telephone campaign is crucial. Callers must convince potential attendees of the benefits of the training. Many users are unaware of the existence of SAS Training and thus need to be educated or sold. Callers should divide up the membership list and call other members, who can market the course at their companies. Several members will attend; others will refer attendees.

SAS Institute will send announcements to users on a group's mailing list and to SAS company representatives in a group's region. The announcements generate inquiries.

Other SAS users groups in your region can help send attendees. We asked the coordinators of the Tampa Bay SAS Users Group and the North Florida SAS Users Group, the other SAS users groups in Florida, to inform their members of our SAS Macro Language course. One person from the North Florida group attended; several people from the Tampa Bay group inquired.

Key selling points should be:

- the convenience of attending the courses locally
- the benefits of the training
- the quality of the instructor
- the low cost relative to courses taught at SAS Institute

At \$475 our courses were over \$100 cheaper than the same courses taught at the Institute. More importantly, there were no expenses for transportation and lodging. Holding the courses in Miami meant attendees would not sacrifice additional work days for transportation. Several members of the steering committee had attended SAS courses and could give first-hand testimonials to how the courses had helped them - a particularly effective sales pitch. Attendees responded to the argument that the course provided an overview which would expand upon their specific knowledge. The course instructor's affiliation with the Institute assured attendees of the quality of the instruction and the course materials.

Billing

If a group is not incorporated, it is better to have the organization providing the training pay expenses

and invoice students. Without incorporating, a group cannot open a bank account as a non-profit organization and has no way to bill attendees. An incorporated group might want to handle billing itself. Training offers an opportunity for revenue.

An alternative is to find a member's company with an information center set up as a profit center. The information center might be willing to coordinate the course if it can share the profits.

Type of Facility

Courses can be held either in a hotel or at a member company. The advantages to the hotel are that it may cater lunches and breaks more easily and that the users group does not need to deal with company politics and policies. The disadvantage of the hotel is that courses will be lecture only.

The main advantage to the member company is the ability to offer a hands-on course. Other advantages are that the member company may provide the meeting facility without charge, slightly lowering the cost, and that the course may help generate visibility for a member and for SAS in the company.

Security concerns may limit willingness to connect attendees to mainframe terminals. A PC network running PC SAS can be a partial solution. We initially planned to teach the mainframe SAS Macro Language course on a Novell network in the information center of a member company. The Institute cooperated with us in this.

A hands-on course is preferable. If it can be arranged, it should be. This is one reason for taking a course at the Institute. In the two courses we lost one attendee who decided to take the course in Cary.

Surveying Course Satisfaction

After each course it is a good idea to survey attendees on their satisfaction. A questionnaire and a follow-up telephone interview are ideal. At minimum members should conduct an informal survey of attendees.

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The author thanks Debbie Hoppe of John
Alden Life Insurance Company for her
editorial comments.