

# 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
  - Roberta Callahan
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- SAS Institute people (partial list) . . . for participation and promotion

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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-regs, 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)

#### Notices

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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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