

Holding Successful User Group Meetings

Warner Orr

What makes a user group meeting successful? A large turnout? Active participation from the attendees? A presenter who doesn't put everyone to sleep? I recently reviewed each of the meetings the Phoenix NetWare User Group (PNUG) has held during 1999, and I identified several ways to help ensure a successful user group meeting:

- **Give Them What They Want.** The most important element in a successful user group meeting is ensuring that the topic of the meeting interests the group. Surveying your group members early in the year is a great way to find out what information they want presented at user group meetings. Planning meetings based on what your group members want to learn about will help promote high attendance.
- **Send Reminders.** No matter how organized and interesting you expect your meeting to be, you'll be disappointed with the turnout if you don't remind your members to come. Getting the word out—repeatedly—is essential for a well-attended user group meeting. To encourage attendance, you could send each member a fax reminding him or her about the upcoming meeting several weeks prior to the meeting. You could then follow up by sending an e-mail message to each member. In addition, you may want to post an enthusiastic description of the upcoming meeting on your group's web site.
- **Invite Other User Groups.** Occasionally, you may want to host other networking groups (such as Windows NT or Linux user groups) at your meetings. Inviting another user group to attend the meeting can increase attendance and may even result in increased membership for your own group.
- **Feed the Masses.** User group meeting attendance will increase if your group can provide a light dinner or some snacks prior to the meeting. Have you

ever seen a network administrator who could resist a good pizza or a dozen buffalo-style chicken wings? PNUG usually asks the vendor that is presenting at the meeting to also supply food for the attendees.

- **Award Prizes.** Giving away prizes, such as demonstration software, shirts, and hats, is a great way to reward people for attending the meeting and to send everyone home in a "winning" mood.

CASE IN POINT

In August, PNUG organized a user group meeting that implemented most of the elements I have just discussed, and the result was a successful meeting. Our topic was NetWare for Small Business. Even though most of our members are employed by larger companies, a survey taken earlier in the year showed that members were interested in learning about the efficient, easy-to-use tools Novell provides for small businesses. We began advertising the meeting in May. As August drew near, we sent a fax to each member, announcing the topic and details of the meeting. We followed the fax message with an e-mail message relating the same information.

On the day of the meeting, we had a great turnout. After a light dinner (provided by Novell), attendees enjoyed an excellent presentation about NetWare for Small Business. The Novell representatives who came to present were enthusiastic and knowledgeable. They encouraged attendees to ask questions and make comments, and attendees took advantage of the opportunity to discuss NetWare for Small Business with Novell professionals.

For example, one attendee observed that NetWare for Small Business automatically converts the company's hard drive into a giant SYS volume. This attendee then suggested that there should be a way to size the volume. Daniel Shelley, one of the representatives from Novell, promised to look into the matter and get back in touch with us.

Six working days later, we received an e-mail message from Daniel saying that he had discussed the issue with the development team, and they had decided to leave the creation of a giant SYS volume as the default option because NetWare for Small Business is designed for companies that don't have much experience installing NetWare. However, Daniel also included detailed instructions about how to manually size the SYS volume, enabling you to maintain multiple volumes when running NetWare for Small Business.

We were impressed! Not only did the Novell representatives provide an interesting and informative presentation at our user group meeting, they also followed up with the questions and concerns we raised.

After the presentation, discussion among attendees continued as we visited with one another and raffled off prizes.

CONCLUSION

With a little organization and foresight, you can hold user group meetings that educate, motivate, and unite the members in your group. Start planning now to make your user group meetings of the new millennium the most successful meetings your group has ever held.

Warner Orr is president of PNUG. ●

December on NUI's Web Site

Look for the following features this month on NUI's web site (<http://www.nuinet.com>).

- Find out if you are a winner in our Grand Opening Giveaways! Winners of two Compaq laptops and over 300 other prizes have been selected.
- Meet the Vancouver NetWare User Group, a group that in a very short time has learned what works for its members. ●