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How to Mess Up a User Group

(With significant contributions by Maurice Frank, Jack Gallagher, Harvey Johnson, Bob Kehoe, and many others.)

Boring Introduction

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Pardon the facetious title, but we had to get your attention. Besides, if you put NOT in front of every verb herein, you'll have a pretty good roadmap to doing so...

The purpose of this document is to put together a "manual" of How to Start and Maintain a Visual FoxPro User Group. I get asked on a pretty regular basis (and so do many of you) about this topic. Some of us have tossed around the idea of assembling our collective knowledge; I volunteered to do so when we met at the User Group breakfast at DevCon this year.

Following are some thoughts - some complete, others not - about various topics. Some of this was pulled from the User Group session at the Orlando DevCon where Maurice, Jack, Harvey and Bob sat on a panel. Other stuff has come from various threads between myself and others. And still more stuff is outright lies, inserted in this document just to make life interesting.

As you read through this, realize that this document is NOT intended to be a one-time shot - please feel free to send me your comments. I'll incorporate everything I get into future revisions. With proper attribution, of course, unless you send chocolate.

Your input is invited, encouraged, and needed! You can contact me at

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Sincerely,
Whil Hentzen

Starting and Maintaining a FoxPro User Group

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Whether you're in the throes of starting a FoxPro User Group, are taking over an existing group, or are just interested in noodling some new ideas, here are some issues and tips to think about.

Focus

Decide on your focus. Do you want to be a "user" group, a "developer" group, or a group that caters to both? Do you want to be a FoxPro group, or a Visual FoxPro group, both, or perhaps a database group? There are no right answers, but it is important to make a decision. If you are unfocused, you will please no one.

Realize, of course, that the broader your charter, the more difficult it will be to satisfy all members. On the other hand, you will have a larger and more diverse group from which to draw.

Reasons People Join

People join a user group for several reasons. Realize that they are your customers and you need to keep them happy. Keeping them happy means understanding why they are coming. Interesting presentations, information about jobs, and the chance to socialize with others of like mind. In particular, people are after three things: value, value and more value for their time and money spent.

Rookies vs. Pros

Many groups hold a "Jump Start" session before the main meeting. This session is geared towards a clear explanation of a relevant topic. These sessions will last from 30 - 45 minutes. Some groups just pick topics and hold "mini-sessions". Other groups will go through a popular book chapter by chapter. What's New in Visual FoxPro 7.0 (Granor/Hennig/McNeish), Object Orientation in Visual FoxPro (Brentnall), 1001 Things You Wanted to Know About Visual FoxPro (Akins/Kramek/Schummer) and Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (Rowling) are all popular books, but only the first three are about FoxPro.

Reasons People Start a Group

Likewise, realize the reasons people start a user group. And realize that the motivations of the group's leadership are often different than that of the audience. If you're one of the crew who is trying to organize a user group, your motivations are probably different than the person next to you.

Some typical reasons (ethics aside, for a minute) include meeting other people of a like mind (Now that's a scary thought), developing contacts, getting visibility in the community, being philanthropic in a knowledge-oriented way, looking for a job or clients, and so on.

If you or others are trying to start a group primarily as a cheap cover up to find business, you will surely fail. The world is littered with the charred remains of groups that were started with subterfuge and dishonest intentions. Don't let those who are so inclined get involved. There are plenty of benefits to reap without having to resort to slimeball marketing tactics. <grin>

Leadership

If you're contemplating the start of a group, the first thing you have to realize is that YOU can't do this alone. Learn to delegate.

First thing is to determine what needs to be done. Don't try to be over ambitious. Some groups tried to do it all at once - newsletter, web site, multiple meetings, seminars, and so on. It's very unlikely that this effort will succeed.

Pinpoint the two or three critical tasks that need to be done. You need a regular meeting, a way to contact members, and a method of tracking funds (if funds are to be collected). Find people who will live and breathe these tasks. "2002 is an exciting time to be the Visual FoxPro User Group membership chairman."

Some groups elect a general purpose board that then divvies up the tasks amongst themselves. I personally disagree with this approach quite vehemently. First, you will get much better (voluntary) performance from a volunteer who WANTED to be

Treasurer than from someone who "ended up" being Treasurer because no one else wanted the job. Second, you have better accountability from someone who knew what they were getting into and wanted to do it.

Meeting Dates

It's generally a good idea to hold your meetings on the same day each month - people get used to a schedule.

Opportunities for Members

What are benefits that other groups have offered their members? I mean besides the obvious - newsletter, meetings, opportunities for networking, job and consulting announcements, and so on?

Here is a short list: Training discounts, 3rd party discounts, raffles, access to presentation materials, discounts at local computer stores, and so on.

Members

A critical point is to continually build your mailing list! Your membership is your lifeblood. They are your customers!

Since every group has natural attrition (people move, die, decide to use Visual Basic...), you must continually market the group to get new members in the door.

It's important to keep computer stores and other consultants populated with your flyer or other information about the group. If the group has a web site (it should), be sure to post the information on the User Group Meeting Tracker on the Universal Thread (www.universalthread.com). I have a flyer that I use for new members - if you'd like a copy, let me know.

Another tactic to think about is extending the membership of current members when they bring in new members.

But don't get hung up on equating the worth of your user group with the number of members. Bigger isn't always better. If you've got 8 or 9 folk that regularly show up at meetings and get good value from their attendance, you've got a great user group!

Speakers - without paying \$2000

A good idea is to bring in a big name once or twice a year. This gets a lot of people in the door and you get their names. Piggyback their user group talk with a class that week and often the speaker will do the user group meeting for free.

Offer user group members a discount for the training. More value!

If a speaker is also selling a third party product and is willing to present it at the meeting, the speaker should be willing to cover almost all the expenses.

Speakers - without paying \$2000 - Reprise

Our community is remarkably giving and generous. Keep in touch with people on the

UniversalThread (the phone, too, I guess) about their travels. It might be pretty expensive to fly someone in from across the country. However, if you know that Frank FoxPro from Frisco is going to be in Atlanta for a week, he might be willing to drive up to Chattanooga for an evening meeting and fly back from there. Your expenses would be reduced to mileage, dinner, and perhaps a hotel room.

Topics

Don't just pick a topic. Sell it.

Once you've found a sucker, ^H^H^H^H^H^H volunteer willing to speak in front of the group, mentor them! Help them prepare - go over their outline on the phone - ask them to take you from A to Z so that they feel comfortable with what they're going to do.

When Microsoft asks to make a presentation, ask to see the beta - not a PowerPoint slideshow.

One suggested mix is 70% homegrown and 30% vendor presentations.

Locations

Entrepreneur centers are often willing to open up a facility so that they can show off their place to potential customers - and software folk are high on their list.

Don't make the meeting location dependent on any one person - if that person leaves, you're sunk.

Hotels, libraries and even shopping malls often have meeting rooms as well.

Volunteers

Several rules here. First, you have to ask. Despite the name, volunteers are usually RECRUITED! Second, realize this is a volunteer job, and volunteers will let you down. Depend on being let down - it's part of the game. Third, plan for succession. A lot of times, a group will get all fired up to start the group, and burn out 12 months later. One method used by some user groups is to have a Vice President who becomes President the following year - the group gains continuity. Another method is to have staggered two year terms. Fourth, you have to ask. People LOVE to be asked to help. What's the worst that can happen? They might say no.

Money

Dues that groups charge run the gamut of free all the way through \$50/year (or more). The more tightly focused on professional developers, the more likely people will be willing to pay more for the group.

Other Resources

Do not count on the Microsoft MindShare program to help you out. They might, but do not make your plans contingent on their support. Nearly every user group in the country has their own horror stories of repeated phone calls not being returned, promises being made and never kept, and so on.

To be fair, they've got far more work on their shoulders than they are physically able to do, but nonetheless, do not count on them for anything. They tend to commit to more than they can do, and their time schedules often differ from ours. Theirs is a job - ours is a volunteer position, and the two don't always jive. They've got meetings and corporate politics and bureaucracy to deal with - returning Joe's phone call from someplace they've never heard of isn't always high on the list of their priorities.

Be patient, and accept any help they can provide graciously.

The APCUG (Association of PC User Groups) is a general user group support organization funded by many software industry heavyweights. Contact them at APCUG, 1730 M Street NW, Suite 700, Washington D.C. 20036.

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