

Recipe for a Successful User Group

by
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Having been involved with user groups for computer industry professionals for many years, I'd like to offer some recommendations. If you're thinking of starting a user group for computer industry professionals or are running one now, please contemplate these lessons, drawn from my experience. You might want to consider reviewing the list from time to time to keep you true to your mission.

1. You need a Web page.

Keep it simple, and clean. This will allow members and potential members to find the information they are looking for quickly, and for people with slow connections, the page will load quickly. Let your members and potential members know when and where meetings are located in the middle of the home page. Make it obvious.

2. Your own web server or a web hosting service?

Use a web hosting service, here's why. Web hosting service can be had for \$5-\$10 a month. You can't even power a server for that much a month. Think about it. Your volunteer web server maintainer has to provide, 24 by 7 up-time, server monitoring, back-ups, software updates and hardware upgrades. Using a web hosting company, they are responsible, not one of your volunteers, and issues over hardware ownership are non-existent.

You might consider finding a company offering to donate web hosting. I would strongly advise against it. While may appear appealing, in the long run it's not worth the trouble. I have tried it, and these are the issues I have run in to. You are a low priority, if a priority at all. If the company ever retracts the offer, you will have the hassle of moving the web site, and then making sure all the pages and links work on the new site. You will then have to changing the DNS and wait for the new DNS info to be updates while your site is unavailable.

For less that \$100 you are better off focusing on other issues than your web site.

3. Your Web page needs a reasonable URL.

The usual <http://www.some-isp.com/~username/UGname/> URL isn't any good. You want people who know no more than the group's name to find you easily. For that, <http://www.our-group.org> is ideal in the USA -- and similar names for groups elsewhere, such as <http://www.our-group.org.de>

You should choose a user group name whose Internet domain isn't taken. You can check at <http://www.internic.net/whois.html> Do not type the potential name into your browser, as some companies will immediately place a 30 day hold on the name and then offer to sell it to you.

4. You need a regular meeting location.

Changing meeting locations will cause your group to lose attendees. Why? It's too hard for people to remember where the meeting is from month to month. You can tell them, email them, and they'll still wind up at the wrong location. Once that happens the word will get out that the group has folded, and then it's too late. The other reason is because it's a strain on people. They have to find out how to get there, where to park, whether the neighborhood's OK to walk in, etc.

The location doesn't have to be impressive: conference rooms, college cafeteria, a coffee shop, pizza parlor or community center are a few ideas. See what's available.

5. You need a regular meeting time.

"Regular" usually means same day of the week or month, and keep it that way. Most groups meet once a month; first Wednesday at 6:00 or third Tuesday at 7:00. Make it easy to remember and easy to enter in people's Pocket PC, calendars, and PalmPilots. Don't get fancy with things like "every other Thursday": Make it so anyone with a calendar can easily figure out when the next meeting will be.

6. You need to avoid meeting-time conflicts.

Check out the schedules for nearby events: other user groups, sporting events or other events your audience is likely to attend. Mid-week days are best, you avoid having meetings on 3 day weekends.

7. You need to make sure that meetings happen as advertised, without fail.

Show up to have a meeting rain or shine, locked meeting room or not. Have a few members show up early to avoid potential problems. If there is a problem, let people know by posting a sign or flyers apologizing and letting them know when the next meeting will be occurring.

If you need to cancel or reschedule an event that you've already been advertising as "upcoming", don't simply remove the original listing on your Web pages: Continue to list it, prominently marked as cancelled/rescheduled.

8. You need a core of several experts.

You will need a couple of experts who are energetic and willing to share their knowledge with your members. A users group should be neutral territory; they should not be allowed to sell their services during a meeting.

9. Your core volunteers need out-of-band methods of communication.

By that, I mean outside your user group's regular electronic means of communication. Use a list server or email groups.

10. Place your meeting time and location prominently near the top of your Home page.

Make it overly obviously when and where you meetings are. If you don't, people will find your email address and ask.

11. Include a maps and directions to your meetings.

Be helpful to your members, include a map and clear step by step directions. Offer suggestions for parking, and public transit if available. Give as much detail as you can.

12. Emphasize on your main page what your group is all about, and the dues or fees or if meeting are free of charge and open to the public.

Make it clear before people arrive. If there is a fee let people know in advance.

13. Use a list server or mailing list program to send out info to your group.

I have found a closed list server is the way to go. It's easier to maintain than a mail group, and you will not receive all of the "I'm out of the Office" or bounced message replies.

Some commercial services let you set up "free" mailing lists on their servers, where their gain lies in revenues from mandatory ads auto-appended to all posts, plus of course the ability to sell your subscription list to other advertisers. Beware that you may find yourself not the "owner" of your own list, in the event of a dispute over its management. In my opinion, this is a bad idea.

You should own your mailing list and keep it private. Make every message you send out important, so members will read them. If not, your mail will quickly be linked to spam.

14. You don't need to be in the Internet Service Provider business.

Leave the ISP business to the professionals. Some groups have tried to offer this as a service to their members. Don't! Same goes for email accounts. You are a users group, not an ISP. Leave it up to the professionals.

15. Don't go into any other business, either.

Some user groups get sucked into the strangest, business schemes. Don't! You are not a Web design firm, a technical support firm, a network design consulting firm, or a LAN cabling contractor or any other business. Not even if you're told it's for a wonderful charitable cause.

Along the same lines, remember that you are not a convenience for job recruiters: If allowed, they will spam your mailing lists and abuse every possible means of communication with your members. Nor are you a source of computers for the underprivileged, a repair service for random people's broken PCs, or a help desk. I have been pestered by all of the above. As much as you would like to help, leave it for the professional in you group.

The following checklist may be useful for your group, once established.

1. Web page:

a. Meetings:

- Current meeting info? Is it prominent?
- Day of the week? Beginning time? Ending time?
- Double-checked day/date matches against a calendar and conflicting events. (E.g., is the "Friday, March 28" you listed an error, because the 28th is a Thursday?)
- Location?
- Include a link to a map
- Directions (car, public transit)? Parking tips?
- Information on upcoming meetings
- Is an RSVP mail required to attend meetings?
- Note that meetings are free and open to the public (if they are)?
- If there's a special fee, is it disclosed next to the event listing?
- If location / time / date formula has changed recently, is this noted prominently?
- Have you checked for event conflicts with other nearby groups, or with holidays?

b. General:

- Includes event date-formulas (e.g., 4th Tuesdays)? Prominently?

c. Periodically (maybe every quarter):

- Checked all links on your site for dead links?
- Checked your Web server's logs for pages requested but not found? (You'll want to put a referral page at that URL.)
- Read all your Web content attentively for outdated content?

2. Other, periodical:

- Reviewed/updated all user group lists that have entries concerning your group. Are they correct and up to date?
- Reviewed all sites that link to yours? Advised their webmasters of needed corrections?