

IT Managers Connection

■ HOME ■ EMAIL ■ ABOUT ■ RSS 2.0 ■ ATOM 1.0

Recent Posts

[Interview] Part4: Barb Bowman - Top Five Tips in Wireless and Devices

[Interview] Part3: Barb Bowman - Top 6 Challenges with Wireless Technology

[Guest Blogger] Riding to the "Surface"

[Interview] Part2: Barb Bowman - Wireless Best Practices

[Interview] Part1: Barb Bowman - Critical Issues for Organizations; IT Professionals Making a Difference

Tags

Adam Cole Barnaby Jeans BizTalk Blaine Bey Career Tips **CC Blogged Down** CIPS Collaboration Community DavidCarbi DJ Dinkley Don Spencer **Downloads** Energize IT **Events** Graham Jones Guest **Bloggers** Industry Perspectives **Interviews** IT Alignment **IT Manager Interviews** IT Manager PodcastSeries Jacqueline Hutchinson Jing Chen Use Services Mitch Tulloch **MS News** NewsWire Partners Podcasts Ruth Morton Sea O'Driscoll Security **Stephen Ibaraki** Tools & Utilities **Training** Val Matson Wireless Technology

News

The upcoming case provided "A818" with no warrants, and confers no rights. You assume all risk for your use.

> Blogs that link here

Technorati

Do you want to receive this blog via email?

10 email readers

BY FEEDBLITZ



Canada's Association of Information Technology (IT) Professionals



Resident Bloggers
Stephen Ibaraki Industry Analyst
FCIPS, I.S.P., DFAPA, CMP, MVP



Ruth Morton IT Pro Advisor
Microsoft Canada



[Interview] Part 3: Teresa Hennig, International MS Access Authority

This is the next blog in the [continuing series](#) of interviews with leading professionals. In this series of blogs, I have an exclusive interview with Teresa Hennig. Teresa is an international authority on MS Access, a top user group leader, a best selling author and a recognized and profiled MVP.

Enjoy! Stephen Ibaraki, [FCIPS](#), [I.S.P.](#), [MVP](#)

Top Ten Tips for Forming a New User Group



Stephen: Tell us more about your user group activities and the top ten lessons for forming a user group and ensuring its success.

Teresa: I started attending a beginner's Access group shortly after becoming an independent consultant/developer. Sadly, the group had dwindled to 4 or 5 attendees. So, rather than lose this networking resource, I volunteered to lead the group. We soon revitalized and expanded our services to include a tutorial lab session before every meeting. My focus was to provide a welcoming environment for novices and beginners to network, ask questions, see what's possible and be assured that there are helpful people available who will happily provide mentoring and assistance.

Our group continued to expand until we outgrew our meeting room, (literally had people standing at the back of the room), and we no longer have the computer lab for hands-on sessions. But, we still have the pre-meeting tutorials. I've been the president of the Seattle Access Group (SAG) for about eight years. Our membership and attendance continues to fluctuate, but it never dwindles to the point of imploding. Our mission is too important to forsake - beginners need and deserve a place to ask questions and learn, (where they aren't intimidated by advanced concepts and acronyms).

The success of the SAG led to my being invited to become the presentation coordinator for the Pacific Northwest Access Developers Group. That was a stretch for me because I hadn't attended the meetings, did not know the members, the topics, or the presenter pool. But, Armen Stein was very persuasive, so I agreed. Little did I know that he'd call the day before my very first meeting and ask me to run the meeting in his absence. This meant, not only showing up as an unknown and running the meeting, but also running the Q&A session. This was so out of my league, but it seemed important and I do love a challenge. My approach is to leverage talents and resources. So, when I got to the meeting, I introduced myself to the speaker, who happened to be Michael Kaplan, and I explained the situation and asked him to please also field the questions during the Q&A session. Michael occasionally reminds me that I still owe him for that.

After that, Armen asked me to run the meetings with him. After 6 years, he was ready to retire from office and I was nominated as President. I will always cherish the memories of election night. It was standing room only, and three distinguished Access MVPs showed up just to support my election, they couldn't stay the entire evening, but they wanted to be there for me. I had no idea that I could make such a difference. But, my groups are a priority and I continue to put that kind of energy and passion into their meetings.

So, that's how I got to be president of the two groups. And it gives a pretty strong basis for tips and suggestions for starting, invigorating and maintaining a successful user group.

Attitude Attitude Attitude. The leader needs to infuse the room with positive energy and ensure that everyone feels welcome, appreciated and respected. There are many nuances to this, so maybe considering the antithesis will quickly illustrate just how important attitude or atmosphere can be.

Think about how uncomfortable or intimidating it can be to witness an altercation, even as minor as someone being rude. Or, consider how it can be to feel ignored or invisible. Remember when you were listening to someone drone on, even if they had valid ideas, your mind had shut down. To counter those possibilities, the leader's energy and positive attitude can foster a welcoming atmosphere that is energized so that people are receptive to learning and retaining and even creative thinking. Additionally, the leader needs to carefully monitor comments and actions to quickly and discreetly squelch negativity.

I want people to feel welcome, included and appreciated. We greet people as they arrive. I seek out guests and ask about their interests, expertise, what they are hoping to learn, and how they found out about the group.



John Osley Director Community Evangelism
Metrosoft Canada



Archives

June 2007 (12)

May 2007 (24)

April 2007 (20)

March 2007 (14)

February 2007 (21)

January 2007 (18)

December 2006 (4)

November 2006 (18)

October 2006 (16)

September 2006 (23)

August 2006 (26)

July 2006 (26)

June 2006 (36)

May 2006 (28)

April 2006 (30)

March 2006 (38)

February 2006 (41)

January 2006 (26)

December 2005 (26)

November 2005 (8)

October 2005 (8)

September 2005 (2)

August 2005 (7)

Focus on the audience. Find out what they are interested in, understand their skill levels, and anticipate what they may want to know about related programs, etc. Poll the group once or twice a year to find out what topics they want to see, ask for details, and ask for volunteer presenters. We hold an annual brainstorming session to come up with topic ideas for both main presentations and the Beginner's Corner. Building on each other's suggestions not only fosters fresh ideas, but it helps flush out topics so that presenters can tailor a talk for our group. Of course, we aren't limited to these topics and we can't cover them all, but it really helps to identify hot topics and even prospective presenters.

QUALITY presentation content. This can not be over emphasized. People are paying with their time, so be respectful and give them value through good technical content. The presentation style, level of difficulty, and even venue can vary but the presentation needs to be rehearsed and smooth - that doesn't mean flashy. There are exceptions, such as when there is a panel discussion, during Q&A, or if you are coaching a new presenter. But for the most part, there needs to be a standard for both the content and delivery of the presentation.

Have an agenda and stick to it. That also includes starting the meetings on time and taking scheduled breaks. Again, this goes back to respecting people's time. Agendas give the speaker parameters for timing their presentations and they also allow participants to prepare for the meeting. (ok - we all fudge on this, but keep it close.)

Facilitate networking. Don't just designate networking breaks, help people learn how to network. I remember times when we'd take a break and no one would even stand up. When that happens, I announce that it's networking time and encourage everyone to introduce themselves to someone that they haven't talked with. And then, I join in by talking briefly with people throughout the room.

It really helps to include beverages and light snacks. Hopefully, a sponsor will pay for this, but otherwise, consider pop, water, coffee and whatever snack food is convenient, appropriate for the time of day and within your budget. Our meetings start with pizza at 6 PM, beverages are available throughout and the meetings last until 9:30 with networking lingering later. So you can see why having food is important. (However, we did not have food and beverages the first few years of the SAG meetings and the group thrived based on the presentations.)

Send out a newsletter shortly before the meeting. It's great to have a website, but the email with the meeting information and other current issues seems to make a difference in attendance. For many people, the newsletter works better than just scheduling the meetings on their calendar. Plus, many people like to forward the newsletter to invite colleagues to the meeting. So, the newsletter helps to expand the reach of the group. My newsletters have a direct mailing of around 500 members. And, they are redistributed through some companies and agencies, such as Microsoft, Boeing, a couple of county and federal agencies, and two universities.

A group web site is a must. It should be easy to find, for members and non-members alike. Keep it updated with the current meeting topics, times, locations and any special information about driving, parking, restrictions, etc. The website is also a great place for sharing presentation content and tutorial sessions. These can be in a secured folder that only members can access or in a public folder for anyone to use. The site should also include links to current events, job opportunities, recommended resources and definitely sponsor sites. It could also have a download page for current and past newsletters.

Functionality is the key. The website should provide information, be up to date, and be easy to navigate. Beyond that, there are a myriad features that can be added to provide more benefits. But, keep in mind that someone needs to maintain the site and the information, so don't over-commit. It is better to be simple and effective than to never get it published or updated. Our group sites waver between those two states, but I try to always have the meeting topics published. (<http://www.PNWADG.org> and <http://www.SeattleAccess.org>).

Find out what they want for review items and drawings. It is great to have door prizes and big drawings, but sometimes it easier to get a review item from a sponsor. Find out what people want to review. After the drawing, give the winner a couple of months to prepare a short presentation for the group. The write-up would typically get published on the site and/or sent to the sponsor. Of course, it is also great to get sponsors to provide software and door prizes, but the reviews give members practice with public speaking and the sponsor gets valuable publicity.

Include variety, be open to new ideas and ask for members' opinions and support. Just being the leader doesn't mean that a person can or should do the presentations, do all the work, or always make unilateral decisions. However, leadership is afforded the latitude to incorporate variety and ad hoc presentations into the meetings. It is also incumbent upon leaders to help the groups see how they can benefit by being aware of related technology and programs. When pushing the envelope, however gently, it is important that you convey to the participants how they, individually and as a group, will benefit. You should solicit their feedback and support in a positive and encouraging manner.

Be appreciative and encourage volunteers. It is human nature to want to help, so encourage people to volunteer, give them small assignments, and express appreciation not only for completing the task but also for participating in the group. Offer to mentor people for future leadership roles. This is their group and these are their meetings. We wouldn't be there without the members. Thank members for coming to the meetings and say that you are looking forward to seeing them at the next one --- and give the date.

At the end of the day, the participant's perception of whether or not the meeting was valuable and beneficial will often hinge on the leader's attitude, demeanor and presence.

Look for more with Teresa in the next blog.

I also encourage you to share your thoughts here on these interviews or send me an e-mail at sibaraki@cips.ca.

Posted: Wednesday, May 16, 2007 8:05 AM by [odnitmgr](#)

Filed under: [Stephen Ibaraki](#), [Interviews](#)

Comments

[idnkr99](#) said:

In general I can only wholeheartedly agree with everything that Teresa has said. It's not difficult to see why she has been so successful. However, I would like to make some input in a few areas. Refinements are, in my opinion, way down the list as a nice to have if it can be sensibly afforded. I certainly don't see it as a networking "grease the wheels". Many UG's face the regular challenge of finding affordable meeting space. Without a place to meet there is no meeting and many meeting locations don't permit flexibility when it comes to bringing in outside catering anyway.

I regularly ask people about refinements because in order to balance the books VANTUG has had to substantially limit this and I am very conscious of how this can affect people especially coming directly from work I don't want them passing out halfway through a presentation. The vast majority of people, whilst greatly appreciating the convenience (not to mention saving them) immediately after work, attend the meetings for the networking and good quality presentation content that's the way it should be and many of our members have told me in person that's how I should feel about it despite my concerns.

I do have to give Microsoft Canada greater credit here because they provide terrific support to the UG's and we always provide refinements for the meetings hosted by them. Besides I have found that some of the presenters get kind of grumpy if they turn up and find there is no pizza :-).

I totally agree that solid and regular communication to members is vital for success. Sometimes I wonder if people think that I am "spamming" them. I would rather risk that than the alternative. Thankfully, so far nobody has complained. VANTUG used to send out a monthly newsletter which became something of a chore at times (nobody has complained that it has gone). I have now switched to using a President's blog with an RSS feed (we use DNN for our website) and, although we aren't even close to being there yet I am encouraging our members to get their routine 'news' that way. The challenge here is the one of filling people's inboxes versus their RSS (Really Simple Saturation) feed. The advantage of a blog is that you can spend a few minutes here and there to impart useful material and when it arrives without having to do an email blast.

I would never see a blog as a total replacement for email and I still use that for sending out vent registrations info (as well as putting the website) and reminders. Microsoft's ClickSend (<http://www.microsoft.com/throughpartnership/clicksend>) can be useful for this. To advertise events I also try and get them listed on various local technology sites and in their newsletters. For example, I-MET (<http://www.ihotology.com>), Bookbone (<http://www.bookbone.com/HomeIdeas/uk>) and TechVibe's (<http://www.techvibe.com>). I-MET has a newsletter that goes to 22,000+ a week. Wide spread advertising helps to drive up membership (especially if it's free) and in turn meeting attendance and attracts sponsors. Since dropping membership fees (a very modest \$20/yr) in July 2006, VANTUG membership has gone from ~460 registered members (not only ~120 paying members) to 1100+ members and has attracted more sponsors. Who knows, one day we may even be able to afford refinements at all of our meetings :-).

The other thing to bear in mind is that if you run a UG with a very narrow focus such as a particular application, eg. Access, then it is easier to cater to a wide range of needs and levels of expertise. If you cover a very wide range of Microsoft technologies then that's much more of a challenge. VANTUG couldn't possibly hold enough meetings, let alone afford it, to achieve that. We do have some SIG's and Study Groups which partly cater to people's more specific needs. For example, I would dearly love to be able to have a 'beginners corner' but for what technology? It would be impossible to keep everybody happy and to have the necessary equipment - desktops are not too bad, servers are another story.

Cheers

Graham J.

May 16, 2007 2:18 PM

Teresa said:

Thank you Graham,

There are excellent points. And, as you point out the style of meeting and opportunities to tailor topics for both skill level and technology are truly dependant on the type of UG. As the leader of an umbrella type organization, you are able to share an invaluable perspective.

— I'll have to recruit you as a presenter for an I-META webcast :-). There are hundreds of UG leaders and members that would appreciate your insights. Hearing from successful leaders helps to energize and encourage others.

You've helped to highlight some areas that user groups can really gain by pooling resources, creating and sharing successful models... Things like the group website; securing sponsorship; communication channels - email, blog, RSS - meeting space; and yes, even refinements.

I agree that refinements are not the draw to the meeting. But having a snack of some sort certainly helps - especially since people arrive at 6 PM and leave between 8:30 and 10. We changed the pizza delivery from 7 to 8 and VQCLA alone as many people now show up for the Intro session.

Graham, thank you for sharing your expertise. It would be great to hear from others.

I look forward to chatting.

Teresa

June 1, 2007 11:48 AM

New Comments to this post are disabled