Top things to help you become a successful CUGC Leader – Part 1

The Group and Its Members -

- **Listen to your membership!** This cannot be stressed enough as your members are the core existence of your user group. Without them, you will have no group. Talk with them, handout or email surveys periodically; ask them what they think about everything. Now, there are some comments and suggestions that well, just don't fit or may be considered a one-off depending on the person saying it, but still, take that information, learn and grow from it.
- **Laydown some guidelines.** Every group should have a set of guidelines. They should not be "rules" or "policies", but rather unwritten guides for you and your leadership to follow when dealing with members, sponsors, and the like. They should be very flexible and not focused on just running a "tight ship". Relax, it's a user group, not Congress.
- **Solicit help.** Believe it or not, some of your members are willing to help you in your path to being a successful user group. That being said, some members may be overly helpful and you have to be careful about that. Take a few minutes at each meeting and describe what you do and how you could use some assistance. People will help you out, you just have to ask.
- Repetition is a good thing for certain things! Creating a general rhythm of things will keep your membership engaged and ease the flow of new members into the fold. Try to meet at the same venue's, and create an agenda cadence that is maintained for all meetings. These are just a few examples of how repetition can help your cause.
- Make sure the bills get paid. This is true for any organization, even user groups. Venue payments, good, supplies, etc., all these bills must be maintained and paid on time. Sponsorships will be paying for most, if not all of these, so keep the finances tight and keep a record of everything!
- Get members involved. Having members become an active part of your meetings is essential for your success. One such involvement is to ask users for their experiences, their questions, and their stories. Members could give presentations, or just open a Q&A or roundtable discussion to start the flow of participation.
- Members like free stuff! Here is where you need to get your schmooze on. Vendors have lots of swag and members love to get it. Ask vendors for their support, hit up the booths at the trade shows and ask for their contact that may be able to get you some free products or swag for your user group giveaways. Have contests, or gifts for best questions, or just general meeting giveaways. Just make sure you have some "guidelines" on how winner are selected, as you need to ensure that all members are given opportunity.

Venues –

- **Pick your location(s).** You will need to determine where the optimal places to meet are for your region or state. One area may bring more attendance (and sponsorships) than other areas. You could also adopt what we did which is a "revolving" location, in which we move between 3 parts of our state every other month in order to accommodate all our membership.
- **Scope out some spots.** In the beginning, you will probably only need a smaller space (if actually you need an auditorium early on to fit everyone, which would be awesome!). Check out local

(and hopefully free!) public spaces like libraries, schools, and community centers. As you grow, you should progress into larger venues, and sponsorships should be available then to have them paid for. One other suggestion – ask you membership if anyone has a space at their company that you could use. Many companies offer up their conference spaces to such groups without charge, and may even get free Audio & Visual equipment use.

- **Find out the logistics.** What about audio and visual equipment for presentations, roundtables, and Q&A? Food carry-in or prep? Parking? Maps and directions? These are just some things you need to consider when choosing and starting in your venues.

Marketing the Group –

- **Get your business cards.** Believe it or not, this is one of the most requested means of contact that we as leaders get today. From sponsors to members, they all want our User Group business cards. Go online and get some made for $25, It will be money well spent, trust me.
- **Create your social media.** Create your social groups, handles, and presence. LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram… all of these are essential for you to get the word out about your group, what is going on, and where it is going on. The audience for these avenues is huge, and you don't need to hire a marketing firm to get them off the ground.
- **Make friends with other groups.** Hopefully, there are other user groups in your area or state that you could connect with and share promotions, ideas, venues, sponsors, and most of all, people. Scope out all the others you can find and hit them up! 99% of them (with the exception of competitor groups of course) will be more than willing to help spread you word for a little help from you for their cause. A small price to pay, I assure you.

And Now a Word from our Sponsors –

- **The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly.** No surprise here, but some sponsors are involved in the user groups for their own marketing purposes, and probably because their marketing budgets pay for them to be there and sponsor you venue, or food, or whatever. You need to understand that and make yourself accustomed to dealing and negotiating with them. The group is about the users, not the sponsors, and providing the technical information that your users want should be priority one for you as a leader. Communicate with sponsors, let them know your purpose, review their presentations for marketing fodder and useful content, and most of all, work with them to provide the best experience possible.
- **Ask for Swag.** Techies love swag, and sponsors love to give it away. Now, most of the time, they want a contact in return, but sometimes not. There are several national sponsors out there that will gladly provide their branded swag to you to giveaway at your meeting, and all you have to do is ask. Try it, hit up a few and you may be surprised at what you can get!
- **Create a sponsorship agreement and guide.** In early stages of your groups' development, I would suggest that you start forming some type of sponsorship agreement that can be given to perspective and engaged sponsors so that you have a baseline for what you expect, what the costs are, and what they can and cannot do for your group and its meetings. Most sponsors are ok with these, while some have to go through legal hoops to approve them. If they won't sign, unless you have some other agreement in place (even a handshake will do), maybe they shouldn't be a sponsor. I've seen this work in most cases, but it does fail in some. Your mileage may vary.

And lastly, HAVE FUN! Take pride in what you have built! If being a leader ever becomes a huge burden on your professional and/or personal life, and you're just not having fun anymore, then stop doing it! Turn it over to someone who can devote the time and energy and keep the group successful and your members interested and motivated!

I certainly hope this helps you on your journey to becoming a great and successful leader. Again, this list is not meant to be all inclusive, but hopefully will get you started. Please don't hesitate to ask myself or any other User Group leader for help. After all, that is why we are here, to help you and the users, period.