



SURVIVING AND THRIVING

You have a plan, now put it to work. Strive to develop a successful Chapter that is not only a great source of information about the insurance automation systems and a business network, but also fun and social.

So how do you keep it going?

Meeting Member's Needs

Providing tangible benefits to membership is the most important element to keeping your Chapter thriving. As you grow from a fledging Chapter into a more mature organization, staying on top of member needs should be a priority. Develop a Chapter mission, "We are people helping people, and we build long lasting relationships along the way."

General Meetings

Structure your meeting to fit the type of Chapter. Most Chapters usually include some or all of the following components in their general meetings: Question and answer can take many forms. At ALGA Local Users Group meetings, participants fax their questions in prior to the meeting so they can be addressed during the upcoming meeting. Everyone in this Chapter is asked to participate and share their experiences. Other Chapters just open up the floor for a "random access" question-and-answer session. Or, members might submit questions by fax or e-mail ahead of time to the Education Committee Chair or Chapter Vice President for discussion at the meeting.

New Member Orientation

It's important to make new members feel welcome. Many Chapters start the meeting with a new member orientation or beginner's session to encourage new arrivals to meet other group members, ask questions, and learn about the benefits of membership.

General Chapter Business

Administrative business is often addressed at general meetings. It is important that 15-30 minutes of every meeting be set aside to discuss general business of the Chapter. This is a good time to keep new and returning users informed on how the Chapter operates and who the executive and committee members are. However, most people come to the meetings to share and receive information about automation specifics, keeping business discussions to a minimum is wise. Many Chapters elect to have separate board meetings so that extensive planning and group business doesn't interfere with "the good stuff." If your group chooses to hold separate board meetings, remember to add this to your budget.

Special Interest Groups/ Breakout Groups for Different System Types

Some Chapters have breakout sessions within their general meetings to deal with special interest of specific system issues. Others choose to hold their SIG meetings at different times. The number and type of SIGs your Chapter has depends on the size of your Chapter and your members' interests.

Presentations

Panels, guest speakers, product demonstrations, and workshops are the "meat and potatoes" of many Chapter meetings. Speakers and their presentations can make or break your meetings. Determine what your Chapter is interested in and what's "hot," and seek out dynamic, interesting speakers.

Advice From the "Pros" on How to Make Chapter Meetings a Success

"Imagine yourself sitting in the audience. Ask yourself, 'What do I want to hear? What do I want to walk away with at the end of the meeting?' The answer to those questions is what you need to provide to your membership."

Several years ago, the INDI Local Users Group began evaluating its meetings to assess how they might be more effective. "We learned from a survey of our members that regularly scheduled meetings are one of the top reasons people join a Chapter. The Chapter looked back at previous year's speakers to see who was the most successful and why. Ideally, the Chapter strives to find good speakers, who aren't too technical, featuring presentations of interest to most of the members.

"The key is really looking closely at the people who are members of your Chapter," says Tony Martone, president of the Nor'Easters Local Users' Group. "For example, we've found in our Chapter that there tends to be a preponderance of high-end techie agencies. Our members tend to be people who keep up with the industry and buy the new toys, and they are interested in seeing new hardware and software products. The presentations that go over well are the ones that are presented by someone who knows the product."

"There are two kinds of information that are really important to present at a meeting," offers Karen Keifer, past president of the Sagitta Regional Local Users Group. "One is information that allows someone to learn something about the function of the computer that they can walk away with and use and be more productive the next day. For example, that means learning something about Windows™ that they didn't know before, a tip that will make their system work more efficiently. Show a user how CSRs can use Microsoft Office to speed up their production with integration with their system and you've done your duty." "The second is vendor demonstrations that save money. The feedback I get that I love the most is when someone gets the chance to spend thirty minutes watching a product demo and they discover it's just the product they've been looking for. Or, they realize it doesn't meet their needs so they don't buy it and they've saved big bucks and research time!"

How to Get Attendees to Your Meeting

Communication with your members is the key and it can take many forms:

- Announce the upcoming meeting topics, speakers, at the beginning and close of every meeting.
- Always do meeting evaluations for every meeting. Example evaluation forms are available through NetVU. Evaluation Forms should include a place for attendees' input for future programs and recommendations for speakers.

- Members and potential members need to receive a meeting notice 4-6 weeks in advance of the meeting date. Notices should include all the facts -What, Where, When, Why, and How. Don't forget to include a registration form and ask for their commitment and payment far enough in advance so you can make your budget commitments. Traditional mailings should include this information plus a copy of the last meetings minutes. To reduce costs and time it takes to produce mailings consider meeting notices by fax.
- Provide the National Office with a list of your meeting dates, topics and speakers, meeting location. This information is posted to the Calendar of Events that is listed in every Newsletter that all agencies across the country receive. Provide your national Chapter Relations Coordinator meeting information posting to the Internet.
- Create a fact sheet, or tri-fold brochure on your Chapter. Include your Chapter's Mission statement, officers, dates and topics of upcoming meetings, dues information and benefits of Chapter participation. Have this ready to mail to new prospects.
- Consider developing a newsletter to keep your local members informed on Chapter needs and happenings. Newsletters are a great way of promoting your Chapter, getting useful information to your members, and keeping them up to date on Chapter business.

Other Membership Benefits

Product support

You may have members in your Chapter who are willing to provide technical product support to other members either formally or informally.

Volunteers

Volunteers is NetVU's most precious resource. Volunteers not only provide the ideas for great services; they are essential to fulfillment. There are many people willing to teach others, write articles, and provide technical help.

This willingness of individuals to spend time and energy supporting the efforts of your Chapter and helping other members is what allows Chapters to exist. As a founder, you should recognize the importance of getting and sustaining volunteer help within your Chapter. Here are some pointers:

Recruiting Volunteers

Listen to what your members have to say. One of the most effective ways to get people involved has been to call each and every member once or twice a year. Let them know what your Chapter is doing and how much your officers want them to be involved; let them know which activities could use their help. As an officer of the Chapter, you'll find the feedback received from these one-on-one conversations helpful because you'll discover what is going right, what isn't, and what people are looking for. Plus, it lets people know they are not just a number, but someone the Chapter believes is important."

As you talk with your members and get to know them, you will find that many individuals have not only special skills or expertise, but also commitment to the Chapter or an extra availability of time. Ask these people if they would be willing to volunteer to handle a specific task. Just as in business, with volunteers it is crucial to "ask for the order." If you'd really like someone to help, ask them if they would be willing and be as specific as you can about the commitment and the time involved. If you're not

good at asking people, find someone in your Chapter who is. The most successful volunteer recruiters are usually individuals with sales and service backgrounds who are skilled at getting a commitment from people.

Volunteer Team

The more people you have in your Chapter, the larger your volunteer pool is to draw from. But strive for balance between quantity and quality. You should get enough volunteers to split the load, then allocate them according to their strengths.

Eager volunteers may end up getting overloaded. "You need to spread the tasks around so that the really committed people don't end up needing to be committed," says Lorraine Plezia, past president of the New England Local Users Group. "You don't want to allow one person to do everything. Get as many people involved as possible." And because people are giving up their free time to commit, "don't nit-pick," says Debbie Miller of the Georgia Local Users Group.

Recognizing Volunteers

What do you do if you have someone in your Chapter willing to spend 20 hours each month putting the newsletter together and getting it out? Or someone else who gladly spends two hours each week providing product knowledge and support and answering technical questions? Don't take them for granted! Recognize the efforts of your volunteers in meaningful ways. This might mean acknowledging them publicly, such as at a meeting or in the newsletter. You might want to reward them with a recognition gift, such as a software program, a desired peripheral item, or a book. Or, your Chapter might want to throw a volunteer recognition event!

NetVU recognizes the Local Chapter leaders every year during the National Conference. Local Chapter's are asked each year to select a MVP (Most Valuable Player) from their Chapter who they would like to recognize during the National Conference for the standout work they have done in their Local Chapter.

For some volunteers, the experience they gain through their volunteerism is reward enough. Still, it's important to get to know what their motivation is for volunteering. Perhaps you have a member spending time coordinating educational events/meetings so they learn more about logistics and needs management. Support this motivation and you'll have a better chance at keeping volunteers.