

DEVELOPING A POWER USER GROUP
By Mario Nowogrodzki, CPA.CITP

An Educated User Is the Best Client

This was the premise upon which the nation's largest QuickBooks user group was built: the South Florida QuickBooks Meetup Group has evolved to almost 160 members. Educated users make more fun and profitable clients; they understand the likelihood for a positive return on investment when they know how to use technology better. While the user group does not produce a direct stream of clients, it is part of an effort by the organizers to grow awareness of their practice before the public.

The Intuit Club's History

After weeks of planning, in March 2006, the first official meeting of what was then called the "South Florida Intuit Club" was held. The uniqueness of this group is the diversity of the two co-organizers: an accountant with a traditional practice (Mike Block, CPA, owner of BlockTax in Fort Lauderdale, FL) and a QuickBooks consultant with a technology consulting practice (Mario Nowogrodzki, CPA.CITP, founder and principal of Mendelson Consulting of Pembroke Pines, FL). Both have a lot of time invested participating at Intuit conferences, training, and earning numerous QuickBooks designations.

The initial purpose of the club was to have a place for the Intuit community of South Florida to gather. That meant that those welcome included end-users of all levels, business owners, QuickBooks consultants (ProAdvisors), bookkeepers, accountants, software vendors, and anyone else with a connection to Intuit software. That premise remains the same today. Regular attendees vary from single-person businesses who perhaps just started to use QuickBooks and are looking to improve their software knowledge, all the way to power-users who may be looking to answer complex problems; regular participants also include accountants and consultants who can get the latest information about QuickBooks from two of the nation's top QuickBooks minds and influencers (the group's organizers); and there are even pre-beginner users, that is, those that have yet to use QuickBooks and are looking for guidance in their choice of software version. One of the joys has been to see users evolve from beginner to power-user, and see how their businesses have progressed through versions of QuickBooks.

Tremendous Mind-Share

The group is a great place for accountants and consultants to learn from each other, including the co-organizers. No one person can profess to know it all, so what each QuickBooks ProAdvisor brings, adds to the group's knowledge and power. Everyone benefits from the mind-share: end-users take what they learn back to their place of work; accountants and consultants take what they learn back to their clients.

Needless to say, because of the variety of background among participants, the group is also a great venue for business networking. New relationships evolve among participants that would otherwise perhaps not occur.

Quality of Content Is King

The typical format of the monthly two-hour meetings is to have some pre-determined agenda or topic for the first half and leave the second half for open question-and-answer. However, many times the pre-planned topic develops into other related or maybe unrelated topic that is of much greater interest to those present. The group quickly turns to that topic and engages sometimes for the entirety of the meeting. The main premise is that the meetings are about the participants, not the organizers—that is, the participants' specific interests, regardless of the organizers' plan.

One of the methods to develop a topic is to go around the room and have each participant do a very short self-introduction at the beginning of the meeting. That gives everyone in attendance a good feeling about others' backgrounds and level of knowledge. Many times this exercise alone provides material for discussion during meetings.

On occasion, a guest speaker is invited to educate participants on specific areas. For example, we have had an Intuit payroll representative speak about their offerings, third-party add-on software vendors present about their solutions, and a guest ProAdvisor expert on third-party integration.

It is worth repeating, the meetings are about the participants, not the organizers. It is a good idea to let the participants suggest topics for upcoming meetings.

Location, Location, Location

One key aspect about the meeting location is to select a destination that is geographically central to the area being served by the group. The actual meeting place can be dynamic (that is, rotate among different locations) or be the same month after month. Our group started by renting classroom space at local colleges, but with time found the most convenient place to be an eating establishment with a separate meeting room facility. This way, participants can purchase a meal at their choice and enjoy food for their brain as well as their stomachs.

Persistence Is Key to Success

At the first meeting in March 2006, we had a total of two people in attendance—that was including the two co-hosts, which means that no one showed up. Persistence made us not question the determination to move on with our next monthly meeting, at which eight participants showed up. Attendance then grew little by little over the following months, while we were building our own consistency. A few months later, in September 2006, we joined the Meetup.com website, which enables and facilitates the organizing and scheduling of interest group meetings with automated tools. After all, we are a technology users group, we should be using the best in technology.

Using the Latest in Technology

Recently we enabled the attendance of meetings for remote users, using GoToMeeting technology. We used that for the benefit of anyone who could not attend in person, and even more so, for those members from out of town that want to participate. In short, having remote technology enables the attendance and participation without geographic constraints.

Promotion, Getting the Word Out

To get the group started, email blasts were sent to everyone in the organizers' radar. The group was also mentioned at accounting and technology tradeshows. For example, at Intuit's accountant update seminars, the presenter made public announcements about the group (because of request by the group organizers). As to internet presence, we made www.intuitclub.org point automatically to the group's Meetup site.

At present, the Meetup site does the rest; with people joining Meetup every day, they can easily look for and find QuickBooks-related groups like this one. The Meetup automated reminders make it easier to advertise the monthly meetings and have positive feedback posted by users who sign up to be members of the group.

The Price is Right

There is nothing fancy or exclusive about the South Florida QuickBooks Meetup Group. It is simply a monthly gathering for anybody that has any relationship with QuickBooks. Typical attendance is 12 to 18 participants and there is a core following of at least about 6 to 10 "regulars". There is no cost to join the group or to attend meetings, other than what people want to spend on food, which they are not obligated to do.

Because of the independent nature of the co-organizers, the user group is a perfect venue for businesses that want to gain knowledge without the obligation of becoming clients. Despite the efforts of vendors like Intuit, many users don't know how to use the tools of the software nor the tools available for learning more about it. A power user group makes great strides towards bridging those gaps.

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