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SYSADMIN

GVSAGE VISITS THE LOCAL TECHNOLOGY SHOW

by Steven M. Tylock

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Steven Tylock has been managing infrastructures for the past 15 years in the Rochester, NY, area. He helped organize GVSAGE as a local SAGE for the region,and has promoted GVSAGE talks at the ITEC technology show.

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Need a boost for your local SAGE group? Try rounding up some local talent and using a regional technology show to gain support. While it isn't a miracle magnet that will draw all of the local sysadmins out of the woodwork, it will boost the support of existing members, and has a good chance at bringing in some new members.

GVSAGE is a local SAGE group based in the Genesee Valley region of upstate New York (i.e., Rochester and surroundings). We have existed for a little more than three years and are constantly looking to keep our core members interested and involved with the group, as well as trying to attract new members.

For the past three years, we have had a presence at the "Rochester ITEC" (Information Technology Expositions & Conferences) by presenting talks, and this year ITEC was gracious in offering the group booth space. Some of the benefits:

- Visibility to the local sysadmin crowd that comes to the show.
- Opportunity to give back to the local IT culture through educational seminars.
- Chance to improve presentation skills.
- Free publicity for sponsoring organizations.
- Highlight talents of local groups' members.

A Little Visibility Helps Membership

Having fulfilled my obligation to staff the booth and make the pitch to show attendees, I got the strange feeling that nobody knew who we were. If you can catch the badges of attendees to see their occupation, you can properly address them – my eyesight isn't that good (and badges are notoriously small) – so I made some educated guesses and offered: "You don't look like a system administrator, but I bet you know one" (which invariably has to be answered in the affirmative). I was then free to launch into the pitch that GVSAGE is a professional society for system administrators, that, no, we are not selling anything, and if they would pass my information on to the sysadmin back at the office, I would appreciate it.

For bona fide sysadmins, I continued by representing the goals and activities of both the local and national SAGE organizations. I described the technical aspects of the organization as well as the social and networking aspects – my one night out each month with peers is something I enjoy.

This visibility translates into membership in the local SAGE group – GVSAGE counts 60 members on our mailing list and we have grown by 5–10 members each year from the interest generated at the shows.

Don't Forget the Show-Trinkets

It's not what your profession can do for you . . .

Without starting a debate on philanthropy, I'd like you to accept for the moment that it is important to give back to our profession (and society in general). We accept the benefits of belonging without blinking, but sometimes close our eyes when it is our turn to step forward. This giving back takes many forms – distributing software under an open license, helping others, writing/presenting papers, and sending some of our wealth to a cause. (There are *many* ways in which people do this, and no slight is intended by neglecting to mention a specific one here.)

By partnering with the show and providing speakers, GVSAGE offers the knowledge and experiences of the members to show attendees. We have presented talks on security, Web servers, disaster planning, Linux, Perl, email abuse, and careers in system administration. The six presentations in the ITEC 2000 show drew an average of 20 people to the off-the-floor room provided, and the six presentations in the ITEC 2001 show drew an average of 30 people to the on-the-show-floor theater provided.

In addition to the knowledge offered in the presentations, we have tried to offer the slides and speaker contact information for those who would like to follow up on any of the material. We think this is an important service to our local IT community.

Call It the Junior Toastmaster's Club

Lots of organizations create "personal development plans" with their employees at the beginning of each year. Yours might say "present a paper at a conference in the next 12 months" or "learn to speak in public." This aspect of our partnership offers GVSAGE speakers a relaxed atmosphere to dip their toes in the water. (Never once have any attendees thrown objects at our speakers or booed them.) The entrance requirements are not difficult – come up with a topic and a catchy title phrase, commit to following through with a 20- to 25-slide talk that will take 45 minutes, and potentially gain permission to speak, if needed, from an employer.

GVSAGE has not had problems with an over-subscription of potential speakers. In both 2000 and 2001 we offered six talks on the first of two show days. In preparation for 2002, we are looking to provide five talks on each of the two days of the show.

Presentation preparation is up to the individual members, and we offer to read through and comment on slides presentations if prepared far enough in advance. One of the members brings their laptop to the show, and another vendor at the show supplies a screen and projector.

This year we had some new speakers. I'm certain the uneasiness they felt beforehand was much worse than the actual feeling of presenting. Afterward they had the glow of "whew, that's done," as well as the smile of accomplishment. When asked about their participation, all said they would do it again. If you need a boost to polish some speaking skills, consider this as a step on your path.

GVSAGE has been able to have a presence at the local show thanks to a number of organizations. SAGE has sponsored us with membership literature, sample publications, and show gadgets. The names of GVSAGE members' employers appear on presentations, and the one donor required got acknowledgment as well.

GVSAGE was able to staff and outfit a 10' x 10' booth on a minimal budget combined with sysadmin resourcefulness. The show organizers donated the booth itself as well as publicity in the show guide and marketing material. The tables and stools were borrowed. One table draping was donated by a member's company that had changed logos (the old logo was on the reverse side). Another table draping was a pair of "Coleman green" sheets donated by a member (they looked exactly right). SAGE sent us a sign and literature. A member borrowed a company backdrop, and another printed a large-format sign. The single expense was $80 for an 8' x 10' rug. We accepted an $80 donation from one member's consulting company for this expense and displayed a sign thanking them for their support.

Setting Up the "GVSAGE Theater"

The GVSAGE Booth

A couple of the "extras" were the GVSAGE pins done in "shrink-plastic" by a member's wife, and the donation of the funds to make an embroidered logo and sample shirts for supporters to wear and members to order at a later time.

You Never Know What You'll Get in a Box of Chocolates...

One aspect of GVSAGE's participation in the local tech show that didn't seem obvious beforehand is the increased dedication of participants. Members who have given a talk stay members, and if we need to get assistance for something in the future, they either volunteer or don't say no when asked nicely. In a very real sense, by helping the organization, they are drawn to it, and place it higher on their list of "worthwhile groups to be involved with."

You get to know the people who regularly come to monthly meetings, but you don't get to see what motivates them. After a member takes the time to write up a set of slides to talk about for the better part of an hour, you understand them a little better. I can't say that I am "shocked" by any of the abilities that I have seen, but I am heartily encouraged by the care, dedication, knowledge, and experience of those around me in the community.

Give It a Try, and Good Luck!

Whether you are just forming a local SAGE group or want to revitalize a local group that has been coasting for a while, consider taking your XYZ-SAGE to a local technology show – it's a win-all-around proposition. I'd be happy to help make any introductions into the ITEC line of shows (*http://www.goitec.com*), read your anecdotes, and hear any feedback you have. I can be reached at *tylock@gvsage.com*.