

Comments on SUGI 25

Sacramento Valley SAS Users Group

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SUGI 25 did not see the announcement of a load of new products, as some previous SUGI's have done. I don't mean to imply that SAS Institute is not releasing new products - they are, but the method of announcing them has changed. New products and services are being announced through the traditional method of press releases. I read a number of computer industry newsletters, and SAS Institute seems to be getting much more press than in the past.

The emphasis at SUGI this year was on web enablement - the ways in which SAS Software can be used to create and maintain web sites and analyze the resulting data. There were also many enhancements to existing products (or the documentation for existing products). I'm happy with this - there is still a lot to learn about the existing product set, and there's room for incremental improvement in those products.

The new slogan, which you will see on the SAS web, is "The power to know™". The logo, which might be lines of latitude and longitude near the North Pole, is also relatively new. The slogan will be receiving much more publicity over the next year, I've heard.

LOGISTICS

This year, for the first time, SUGI was held in a convention center rather than a hotel. I thought this worked very well; the contrast between Indianapolis and the horrors of Nashville was so great you wouldn't think that both conferences were planned by the same people. The meeting rooms were near each other and easy to find, in contrast to the usual maze in hotels. They were also sufficiently large for the actual attendance at almost all of the sessions, and all the A/V equipment worked correctly. Just in terms of physical setup, this was by far the best SUGI I've attended.

Refreshments were also handled very well. They were plentiful and good. I didn't have to skip a session to get coffee; it wasn't put out for a few minutes and then removed (this might be another advantage of not using a hotel, which loses coffee bar revenue when free coffee is easy to find).

One new feature was Internet access for all delegates. PC's connected to the web were set up in the convention center lobby, and we could read our mail through a POP application someone had written, or go to external web pages. Web access was a great idea, but the mail reader was poorly designed, and using it resulted in my getting on several spam lists. Some people reported that messages were lost altogether.

I didn't see much of Indianapolis; it was too cold to venture out much (it snowed on Saturday morning, or so I was told by someone who was actually awake Saturday morning), and there didn't appear to be much to see in the downtown area anyway, other than the train station and the state Capitol, both of which were closed. There was a large mall nearby, which was very convenient. There were also several good

The winner of the 9th annual SAS Enterprise Computing Award for Academic Applications was Baylor University, for data mining and data warehousing (see <http://www.sas.com/new/preleases/041000/news5.html>).

The winner of the Enterprise Computing Award for Government Applications went to the Environment Protection Agency for its Aerometric Information Retrieval System (AIRS) Graphics application (see <http://www.sas.com/new/preleases/041000/news3.html> and <http://www.epa.gov/aqweb/>). You can create AIRS graphics on the web; for example, if you want to see daily air pollution levels for Sacramento over the past year, go to the web page above and click on "PSI Chart" at the bottom left of the page.

The winner of the Enterprise Computing Award for Commercial Applications was AutoTrader.com, whose snazzy commercials you may have seen on TV. They won for "an interactive management application to collect, process and analyze data and critical site metrics" (see <http://www.sas.com/new/preleases/041000/news4.html>). Dr. Goodnight showed some very interesting ways in which the current autotrader site (www.autotrader.com) could be enhanced using SAS software (it wasn't clear whether their current site uses SAS/Intrnet, or if their SAS applications are internal only).

The winners of the User Feedback award were Jeff Hiris at Brown University for many things over the years (<http://www.sas.com/new/preleases/041000/news6.html>) and Michael Benson of Equistar Chemicals for his testing of JMP version 4 (<http://www.sas.com/new/preleases/041000/news7.html>). This was the first time the User Feedback award has gone to the user of a product other than SAS.

The real attention-getter was the Palm VII wireless data demo. The Palm VII is a Palm Computing handheld device with a radio data unit that connects to the Internet through a cellular phone system (it covers most of the United States; I've heard that wireless Palms are popular in Europe, but I don't have any details). It's hard to explain exactly what this system does; saying that it's a miniature web browser doesn't do it justice. Two of the common uses are for stock quotes and airline flights, but you can write a Palm/server combination to do many different kinds of data retrieval. The example shown (if I recall correctly) was of a SAS executive looking at total sales by region, finding out which regions were doing well, who the new customers were. etc. - a drilldown app on a very small portable machine. I can see lots of potential uses for this by sales reps, or even doctors who want access to medical records (the PalmOS has several built-in security mechanisms, so data are as safe as they are anywhere else on the net). The Palm.Net network is already set up; what SAS Institute will add is the ability to easily write pages in the WAP format using SAS/Intrnet. This is, of course, something that can already be done, just as you can write HTML using the data step instead of ODS, but better tools are always welcome. Incidentally, although the demo at the opening session was faked (they were using cached pages rather than getting data from the wireless network - given all the possible problems with wireless networks, or even wired networks, I would have done the same thing), it should be pretty fast in real life - WAP (wireless application protocol) apps are designed to transfer as little data as possible as quickly as possible. See <http://www.sas.com/new/preleases/041000/news8.html>.

There was a real emphasis throughout the session on "E" - not entirely defined, but it seemed to cover web page creation and especially web data analysis and business applications. There's an interesting article about this at <http://www.news-observer.com/daily/2000/04/12/biz00.html>.

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FUTURES FORUM

Key initiatives are:

- Data warehousing
- Business Intelligence
- Applied Analysis
- Business Solutions
- E-Intelligence

It was mentioned that Sun has a 3 month development cycle for front ends, with 9 months for back ends. That's what SAS Institute wants to have, rather than its current much longer cycles.

Upcoming versions:- 8.1, 2nd quarter 2000; more support for "e".- 8.2, 4th quarter 2000; more support for "e", support for 64 bit systems (HP, IBM, Sun), support for Linux.

8e features (same as 8.1?):

- web ready output
- analysis of web data (Webhound?)
- transparent data access
- more analytics
- more support for information delivery via the web

Clients for the 21st century are Windows, the web, and WAP. We can expect desktop apps, GUI interfaces, and an emphasis on Windows.

Project Mercury is a multi-year, multi-release project which you might think of version 9 of SAS (except that Mercury spans versions). Its emphases are metadata, scalability, and security. The open metadata architecture has turned out to be very difficult (they have decided on XML as an interface).

SAS will be getting a new kernel architecture, and there will be native support for Java within SAS on those platforms whether a good Java compiler exists (apparently SAS Institute does not plan to write its own Java compiler).

Why Java? The message from customers is clear - use one language. Java is reasonably good and is what students are now learning in college. One example of "native support" is that SCL will be replaced by Java over time. This does not mean that the existing language will go away (legacy code will be supported), and it also does not mean that you will have to learn Java (there will be tools to help you create full-screen applications; you might not ever see Java code at all unless you want to).

There will be ODS drivers for RTF and XML fairly soon. LaTeX is on a backburner.

GUI's will have more host look and feel than they currently do, and use of the SAS Explorer will increase.

Questions&Answers&Statements&Responses

Statement: Users and administrators aren't happy with the setinit process.

Response: One thing they might consider is automatic updates through the web.

Statement: Many users would like to receive announcements telling us what the wave of the future will be. When should we stop learning AF, for example?

Statement: Many site reps would like a facility to track when an obsolescent feature is used (PROC MATRIX, for example). That would help in tracking down programs which need maintenance. Often the author has left and whoever is running the program doesn't know what it's doing underneath. It would be useful to have an info message telling you that a program is about to stop working, rather than an error message telling you that it has already stopped.

Response: They'll think about it. It's not an easy problem to solve.

Question (from me): When will SAS go IPO?

Statement: (from Barrett Joyner) SAS will go IPO in 12 to 18 months. It won't be a complete IPO; only part of the company will be sold.

(There was more discussion of this. There was speculation outside the session that the potential IPO was the reason for Dr. Goodnight revealing financial information at the opening session. SAS is having an increasingly difficult time attracting "e"-employees, who are offered stock options with the potential of vast wealth at other companies.)

Question: The "SAS brand" was mentioned a lot at the opening session. What does that mean?

Response: SAS covers a lot of territory and does a lot of stuff really well. The press doesn't know how to handle it. (So SAS is trying to help the press do its job, it appears. I agree that reporters don't quite seem to be able to believe that SAS does everything it does.)

(There was a separate mini-track for Japanese reporters at this SUGI. I hear it was set up more or less at the last minute, but they had separate rooms with translators. Several people were asked to repeat their regular papers for the reporters.)

Question: (from me) Microsoft is making things easier to do. SAS Institute seems to be making things harder to do. Why can't you be more like Microsoft?

Answer: The answer didn't come at the Futures Forum, but it became evident in the Demo Room. SAS *is* making things easy, they're just not letting us know that they're doing so. SAS's usual emphasis is on the complicated, complete solution, not the quick, easy, solves 80% of the problems solution. Take the problem of creating web pages with SAS/Intrnet: almost all of the examples I've seen involve a lot of

Answer: (from Barrett Joyner) It shouldn't be difficult. If a customer has an reasonable evaluation plan, their Sales force should not be an obstacle.

(This isn't quite what I wanted - I want to be able to try SAS products without knowing exactly what I'm going to use them for. SAS doesn't quite seem to "get" the concept of seed copies.)

ODDS AND ENDS

The big buzzwords from last year (Balanced Scorecard, Customer Relationship Management etc.) were not much in evidence this year. They were mentioned occasionally, but not nearly as much as last year. Similarly, what seemed to be an attempt last year to position SAS Institute in the consulting market was not mentioned this year.

Several people commented that SAS seems to be taking more of a big-bucks corporate approach, perhaps with an eye to their upcoming IPO. A highly-placed source said that SAS Institute is going to start courting top-level executives much more heavily than in the past. (I have not noticed any tendency for SAS Institute to ignore smaller customers, and I would be surprised if one develops.)

Lauren Haworth, who wrote an excellent book on PROC TABULATE, is signed up for a book on ODS. Lora D. Delwiche and Susan J. Slaughter, who wrote the well received "The Little SAS Book: A Primer", are also planning to write a book on ODS. The two books will have different emphases, and ODS is certainly a big enough topic to justify even more than two books.

IOM (Interface Object Module) will be supported under OpenVMS (and whatever Digital Unix is currently calling itself) sometime late this year. That means OpenVMS customers will be able to use Enterprise Guide and similar products.

Wireless Application Protocol support will be experimental in 8.1, and production sometime later. Methods for producing other kinds of custom XML are planned; they're discussing how to do it.

SAS Institute is opening an "e-intelligence" center in San Jose. It will "will focus on bringing SAS knowledge in data management and analytical abilities to dot-com and start-up companies, and to all companies involved in e-commerce."

Janus is a new product, still experimental, that provides a scaled-down version of the Display Manager in your web browser. It requires various licensed products to work (depends on your setup).

PAPERS

I took a different approach to attending sessions this year. Rather than seeing a lot of papers which would be in the proceedings anyway, I went to Hands On Workshops (actually, I was a session coordinator, so I didn't get the hands-on part, but I got to see everything).

The Hands On sessions seemed to work well. The rooms were huge, and there were enough seats for

There were a lot of good papers for beginners in the proceedings. If you are a new user of SAS, or are mentoring a new user of SAS, I highly recommend that you buy a copy of the proceedings in paper or on CD. SAS Institute has its own electronic commerce site where you can buy access to the proceedings for 90 days for \$15. This doesn't seem like a good deal to me, since the CD-ROM costs \$25 and is good forever.

SUGGESTIONS AND RESPONSES

I usually make a lot of suggestions for improvements to SAS during SUGI, but for various reasons I didn't this year. Here are my few:

Suggestion: Provide an interface to Java Beans from the data step.

Response: It's being considered.

Suggestion: Add a CASE=IGNORE option so I won't have to use the LOWCASE function every time I do a comparison against data which might not be single case.

Response: This would be difficult. (I guess that means "No").

Suggestion: Provide a way to use the regular expression functions in WHERE statements.

Response: It will be considered.

Suggestion: Add an OTHER= option to PROC FORMAT when a CNTLIN= dataset is specified. When creating a format from an existing data set, which I do fairly often, I almost always have to run the data set through a data step for the sole purpose of adding an HLO='O' entry. This seems like a waste.

Response: It will be considered.

THE DEMO ROOM

The demo room was organized differently this year. They had many small theaters with a large number of sessions during the day. The presentations I attended were good.

They also had the traditional tables with SAS employees from Tech Support and R&D. Any question about SAS could probably have been answered by someone in the demo room; the difficulty would be in finding that someone. It took a while (until Wednesday morning, in fact) to find answers to my questions about ODS and WAP, even though ODS is a major new feature and WAP was touted at the opening session.