

A Brief History of SVNUI - Silicon Valley NUI

Allan Hurst

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Some time late in August 1994, I received a call from the president of an NUI chapter. The local Novell Sales Region in Santa Clara had lost contact with their local NUI chapter, which had disbanded. Novell's district manager was trying desperately to find someone who could start a new user group. Would I be interested in the task? At first, I was hesitant - I was the owner of a small startup Novell VAR. I talked with the regional Novell manager (Dave Trotter), who assured me that not only would I be starting up a new NUI group with his approval, but with the region's full support, including a couple of Novell-paid mailings to everyone in the Novell sales database in the Bay Area. Brent Sharpe and other NUI headquarters staff members were similarly supportive and encouraging. Somewhat reluctantly, I agreed.

Our first meeting in mid-September, 1994, drew a total of five people. I refused to allow myself to become depressed over the turnout, especially as it was our first meeting, and completely unadvertised. All five people in the room were there from word-of-mouth from Novell account representatives. Emotions ranged from guarded optimism to jubilation that a new user group was starting up. Novell was kind enough to provide sandwiches and soft drinks, and this loosened people up considerably.

I don't remember precisely what we discussed, other than the generalities of starting up a new chapter. What I DO remember is as we talked, everyone expressed a hunger for a place they could go on a monthly basis to obtain peer support and advice. Even more importantly, they needed to be able to talk with manufacturers and software publishers directly, including Novell. This became one of our chapter's primary missions: "To improve communication and understanding between Novell, its industry partners, and SBNUG's members."

Our second meeting drew 15 people. By then, I had worked with other regional NUI chapter presidents to figure out a meeting schedule that wouldn't conflict with any other NUI (or related industry) group in the area. It's mostly due to the early emotional support and practical advice I received from other NUI chapter presidents at our regional meeting that I kept pressing on, even though I felt uncertain. After that meeting, Novell sent out flyers to their entire Bay Area mailing list announcing the South Bay NetWare Users Group, meeting on the second Thursday of each month at Novell's facility in Santa Clara. Response to the flyer was electric. We were besieged with phone calls from people looking for not just our NUI chapter, but THEIR local NUI chapters, in San Francisco, the East Bay, and Marin! (I quickly grew to know the other chapter presidents in our region as a result.)

Our third meeting drew 25 people. Our fourth meeting drew around 40 people. And the numbers kept growing. By the end of 1995 (our first full calendar year), the South Bay NetWare Users Group had become the largest paid membership chapter in Region II, with over 180 paid members.

All of our group mailings are electronic in nature, which saves time, money, and especially paper. Each month, one week before our meeting, I send out an E-mail announcement telling members what our meeting topic will be, and giving any other chapter news and information necessary. Nonmembers are encouraged to join our E-mail distribution list, and most end up becoming members after a month or two of reading about the presentations we're having.

At first, before we were "big" enough to attract vendors, I gave all of our presentations. We started off with backup/restore issues, moved on to proactive network management, and always made a point of reserving the last half hour of every meeting for "User Round Table" issues, where anyone needing or wanting technical help could ask the group, all of whom would work together to suggest solutions and approaches. (Early on, I made a policy of only answering technical questions presented in front of the group.)

A Brief History of SBNUG - The South Bay NetWare Users Group

January 8, 1996

Page -2-

Before every meeting, on the white board at the front of the room, I write up a list of all of the outstanding issues and items and presentations for the evening. I erase each item as we go through it, giving people a sense of purpose and a visual indicator that the meeting is progressing.

Each meeting, we provide a buffet dinner for our members. The dinner is usually paid for out of the vendor speaker fee. A number of our members have told me one of the reason they attend SBNUG meetings over other local (non-NUI) group meetings is because we provide dinner, relieving them of the strain of having to dash out of work, eat on the run, and arrive breathlessly at the meeting.

All of our vendor presentations are technical in nature. I strongly discourage "product oriented" presentations. Instead of talking about Ethernet network interface cards, for example, vendors are encouraged to talk about Ethernet technology. Each vendor is allowed 15 minutes (maximum) at the END of their presentation to talk about how their specific product(s) apply to the technology just discussed. This is one of the most popular features of SBNUG, and I receive compliments every month on how technical we've kept our presentations. All members are strongly encouraged to ask questions.

We have no "typical" member profile. The only common thread among SBNUG members is an intense desire to learn more about networking, and to better communicate with Novell and its industry partners to ensure that the end-user community's needs are filled. Building SBNUG has been a long, strange journey, but it's been a fun one, and I look forward to many more such future journeys with SBNUG.

In February of 1997, we found that we needed a more unique name to differentiate us from other user groups. "South Bay" was too generic. We settled on "Silicon Valley NUI", emphasizing both our unique cultural advantage and our ties to Novell. It took us nearly two full years to "migrate" to the new name. This was done slowly, deliberately, in order to provide continuity and reduce confusion for old and new members during a time of multiple rapid and dramatic changes within Novell and NUI.

We've always met at a Novell facility. During Novell's "lean" years from 1996 to 1998, we moved from building to building as Novell consolidated, split off, and reconsolidated facilities. In 1999, we moved with Novell into their beautiful new corporate campus at 2211 North First Street in San Jose. This facility is easily the nicest room we've ever met in, and includes an intergrated multimedia console with twin rear-projection systems, CD player, VCR, and three live connections to the Novell corporate backbone network .