



## SAS® Certification drives productivity and job satisfaction at the AA, a UK motoring and travel organization

### Industry

Travel, motoring, insurance, financial services

### Business Issue

To increase employee productivity and job satisfaction, to optimize marketing campaigns.

### Solution

SAS® Certified Professional Program

### Benefits

Improved employee recruitment and retention, more effective direct marketing activities.

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**Chris Lodge**  
Senior Analyst, Customer Insight

The AA offers a diverse product range to UK motorists, including membership and vehicle breakdown services, insurance and other financial services, driving schools and publications.

The AA has a very large membership portfolio – about 15 million in total – but some aspects of the business, such as the vehicle breakdown service, are fairly low-margin. The real value in using the portfolio of personal members lies in direct marketing: to cross-sell other, higher-margin products and services. Over the past five years, however, many other organizations, including new market entrants, have increased their own direct marketing activity.

As a result of this more competitive environment, the AA has worked to target customers through direct mail more effectively and has broadened multi-channel activity by contacting customers through other media such as the Web and telemarketing. More effective direct marketing depends on continuous improvement and refinement of the selection criteria based on a variety of factors, but most importantly the results of past campaigns, which is why advanced analysis with SAS is critical to the company's success.

#### Enhancing skills and training

Graeme McDermott, Head of Customer Insight within the Marketing Department, was specifically brought into the company to build up the Customer Insight team, which consists of six SAS specialists. The team uses information in the AA's central database to support reporting on customer segmentation, profitability,

lifetime value and other analytics across the organization's product range. “We were at an interesting point by 2003, because we had recruited some very good analysts, primarily on the basis of their SAS skills,” says McDermott. “We then had a training needs analysis with SAS personnel to identify any skills gap based on what we aimed to do with the software.

“Generally speaking, we found that our staff had the skills they needed. But the staff themselves felt they would like to acquire accreditation on the SAS® Certified Professional Program for their own professional development.” It wasn't simply a matter of taking an exam, though. The AA team had to do some studying to brush up their skills, which, though adequate for the tasks they had to perform, were perhaps a few years out of date.



“For some there was also a bit of peer pressure too. They wanted to demonstrate to their colleagues that they could take the exam and pass it,” says McDermott. “The qualification proves that they have attained a well-defined level of competence as a SAS analyst.” McDermott found that the SAS Certification was highly flexible and cost-effective, so he had no trouble in supporting the team members through



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the study and examination. “They could combine the revision with their jobs, doing the necessary study on the Web, either at the office or at home, during the quiet periods.”

### A unique opportunity

Three members of the Customer Insight team went forward for the basic certification, studying in the first half of 2004 and taking the exam in the summer. “It’s not compulsory but the experience was a good one, so we then suggested to the other three that they might also like to go for certification,” says McDermott.

Chris Lodge, Senior Insight Analyst, already had nearly 10 years’ experience when he pushed for, and then took, SAS Certification. He said, “It’s a unique opportunity to back-fill on all the tips and tricks that you missed by teaching yourself over the years, and as new releases and updates of the software have been brought in. For example, as a result of doing the online study guide my use of arrays in SAS is much better than it used to be. No matter how experienced you are, after certification you will be writing more efficient code with faster run times.” This kind of comment motivated the other members of the team to sign up and do the same. Meanwhile, Chris is now working toward a higher-level SAS Certified Professional accreditation.

McDermott says that there has been a noticeable improvement in staff productivity.

“Analysts have said, ‘I was able to do things better because of what I learned on the certification course.’ It’s often the case that the skills that are most frequently called upon get the most rusty, because people stay in the comfort zone of what they know, and what has worked before. But that is not always the best way of doing things.

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McDermott adds that the analysts who did Certification printed off a lot of the online revision material and continue to refer to it now and again while doing their jobs. “It is highly practical and oriented to solving real-life challenges,” he says.

### Underlining professionalism

From the employees’ point of view, achieving SAS Certification gave them some additional profile within the AA. “We had an awards ceremony at our monthly team meeting, and the analysts were named and awarded a bottle of champagne at the marketing meeting, giving them some well-deserved recognition within the 200-strong department.” Chris Lodge also wrote an article for the AA’s staff magazine, *Drive*, outlining why

he had done the SAS Certification exam. “It underlined our professionalism and the quality of the work we do in Customer Insight,” he says.

SAS skills are increasingly in demand in the marketplace, and based on his exposure to SAS Certification, McDermott appreciates its value as an objective measure of people’s capabilities. “SAS publishes a list of everybody who has attained certification if the candidate agrees, so it is very easy for a potential employer to verify. I would certainly be more impressed by a candidate who had basic SAS Certification than another who simply claimed to have been on an advanced course, where there is no proof of whether they attended or learned anything useful,” says McDermott. One of the reasons he cites is that SAS Certification tests people’s ability to do basics such as data extraction and preparation. “The quicker you can get these tasks accomplished, the more time you have to spend on the more exciting stuff like advanced modeling and analytics.

“Conversely, for talented individuals who apply to the AA, it is a bonus for them to know that they will be supported at work with relevant training such as SAS Certification. It is clear that this is the most relevant qualification for a SAS professional, the most important thing for an experienced SAS analyst to have on their CV,” concludes McDermott.



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SAS UK Headquarters +44 01628 486 933

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