

They're in the door, now what?

You've done all your marketing. You've done your best to get dancers in the door, and you have a group of eager dancers ready to join our activity. What are you doing to keep them? What are you doing to make them want to continue being apart of your club? During her Chairman's speech at this year's CALLERLAB convention, Patty Greene said "It's what happens when we get them in the door that we don't do such a good job with." She was focused on the caller's responsibility to be open, welcoming, encouraging, respectful, and friendly. We as dancers and club leaders need to focus on those same attributes and qualities that embody our motto, "friendship set to music."

We have become so focused on the dance, the successful execution of the figures, and the quality of the callers, that we have forgotten one of the main reasons square dancing became so popular when it did. That reason is the sociability, the fun and friendship that made the activity so inviting. Sure, the music, the choreography, and the exercise with your partner are major factors, but you need the full package to remain a viable club. The clubs that are retaining their members, and growing, are those that have realized that the appeal of square dancing is more than just the dance.

How do we fix this? It really isn't that hard.

Personal contact:

Do you know their names? Do you know what they do or did for a living? Do you know if they have any children or grandchildren? Do you know where they live? Have a conversation with these people. Engage them. Now don't go badgering them with all these questions all at once, but say hello to them at each dance, talk to them for a little while, get to know them, BE FRIENDLY. Think back to when you started. Did this make a difference?

Treatment at the dance:

Did you invite them to square up with you? It doesn't have to be every tip, or even every dance or class, but at least every once in a while. If a number of the established club members are doing this, it creates a welcoming atmosphere that will make them want to come back. At the very least it will not make them not want to come back. Newer dancers are going to make mistakes. These are indirectly pointed out to them when they are corrected while dancing. This is negative reinforcement. Be sure to comment on all the things they did correct, how well they are doing. Say something like "*You should have seen us when we started.*" Always say something positive. At the end of the evening, they may not know exactly why, but they will have had a good time and will want to come back.

When you go square dancing, is it just to go to a club to execute some figures, hopefully listen to some good songs, and hope the other dancers don't mess up the squares? Or perhaps do you go to socialize with some friends who you probably met through square dancing and still share your fondness of the square dance activity?

A couple months ago I was at a Hunterdon Flutterwheels dance. This is a club that is growing and thriving. I was impressed with something I saw. There was a dancer who is no longer able to drive or dance. I believe his wife is in a nursing home and he is in an assisted living facility. One of the club members picked him up and brought him to the dance, so he could socialize with friends and enjoy the sights and sounds of the square dance. The disabled dancer just missed being around his square dance friends. I was impressed by this action and thought to myself, "This is why this club is so successful." Have you lost dancers because they no longer like to drive at night? How about offering to give them a ride to and from the dance?

We want our dancers to feel good when they leave a dance. Good calling and good dancing goes a long way towards achieving this, but other aspects of the dance will also affect this. For instance, have you ever had members of the club complain about this or that during the dance? Whether or not they are part of the discussion, this will affect other dancers. Maybe not directly, but negative vibes pile up, just as easily as positive ones. If you feel the need to complain, try to do it one on one, and quietly. On the other hand, if you feel really good about something, let lots of people know.

Does your club have any non-dancing activities? A lot of clubs have a summer picnic. Sometimes, you already have people interested in taking lessons in the fall. Why not invite them to the picnic? How about inviting some of your non-dancing friends to the picnic? You are exposing them to the square dance "community". It gets them into the conversation. Does your club do any other social activities, like a bowling outing, or going to a ballgame, or a movie night. If so, have you included your students?

Finally, after the dance, some of us sometimes go out to get a bite to eat. Sometimes some of us get together before the dance. Is it always with the same people, or have you invited the newest members of your club?

All I am really trying to say here, is that it's easy for us to fall into familiar patterns. We go to the dance, we talk to the same people, and we go home. We need to make a concerted effort to engage our newest members, to make them feel welcome, to make them want to come back. Not just because they like the dancing, but because they like the atmosphere, the sense of community, and most of all, the people.

Thanks for listening.