

SQUARE DANCE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

By **Darryl L. McMillan**

In the 1960s, when someone started square dancing, they stayed in square dancing an average of 2.5 to 3.5 years (per Sets In Order, the leading national square dance magazine at the time). At that time most clubs had at least one class per year lasting 10 to 12 weeks. Many clubs had more than one class per year.

When the class graduated, they were automatically members of the club. These dancers were very enthusiastic while they were in class. They were learning something new every week. They were very enthusiastic the second year because they brought their friends to class. By the next year they were pretty efficient at square dancing. Every year, when the club graduated their class and the class people were now club members, the club dance had to be at the class level by necessity. This is when the more experienced dancers became dissatisfied with the dance and they would quit.

Most traveling callers (who were the callers normally hired to do the club or association festival each year) would teach something new or different at each dance. This was enjoyed by the dancers, but the dancers might never hear these calls again. In the 1970s, CALLERLAB developed the “Plus” list, which was comprised of some of the favorite calls the traveling callers used. The Plus classes gave the experienced dancers I mentioned in paragraph two, a place to go and enjoy square dancing just like they did when they were in beginner class. They were learning something new each week. These people now stayed in square dancing much longer. That’s the good part. This also had a down side.

Now that these dancers were more efficient at square dancing, many did not support their club like they did before. But the worse thing is, I think, is that they did not want new dancers at the dance because they were not able to dance the way they wanted to if they had new dancers in the square. I have had dancers tell me this to my face. Therefore, they had no enthusiasm for recruiting new people for square dance class. Consequently, over the years, the dancers have moved up the levels of dancing and left a lot fewer people to recruit for clubs.

In response to the situation above, I have heard callers say, “We need a shorter teaching program”. We have had a shorter teaching program since the late 50s or early 60s. This program is still active today. It is called the “Basic” Program. It has about 46 calls that can easily be taught in 10 weeks (standard position). One other point: if the dancers have a great time each week, they don’t care how many weeks the classes take.

In response to the low membership situation, I have heard clubs tell their callers, “We will teach the class in 10 to 12 weeks and then put them in the club.” In most cases, this is just not enough time. When you put dancers on the floor before they are ready, you will lose people. The new people think they make all the mistakes and they will become disappointed in themselves. The experienced dancers are quite disgusted because they came to a dance and now cannot dance because of the people that are not ready yet. No dancer should be on an open dance floor until they have graduated from a class. In most cases this means “Mainstream”.

If you would like to enhance your club and or your square dance class, please contact CALLERLAB. They literally have books of ideas and things that have worked to recruit and keep your dancers.

Attendance at Special Square Dances

The items listed below are suggestions that could enhance the attendance at your special dance.

1. If you want people to attend your special dance, attend their special dance first.
Organize at least a square to attend various dances in your area.
2. Put out fliers for other clubs' special dances as well as your own.
3. Check publications early to ensure your dance date does not conflict with another special in your area.
4. Always put out a professional looking flier to peak interest in your event.
5. Always list the level of the dance you are sponsoring. If you just advertise "a square dance", you will find that the more experienced dancers may not come because they know there will be people of all levels attending, including some that will not be able to dance well. The newer dancers may not come because they know the caller may call for some of the more experienced dancers and they may not feel confident enough yet to attend.
6. Do not encourage a class that has not graduated to attend. This will hurt your attendance and is not good for these class members.
7. Ask a committee, member, or volunteer to advertise by e-mail, U.S. mail, telephone, newspaper, or fliers.
8. List your dance with any publication in your area that lists upcoming special events or dances as early as possible to give your dance more exposure.

I would be interested in your opinion and response to what I have said.