

## **Beyond Publicity**

### **Getting new dancers to come and come back**

*Tara Bolker and Emily Addison*

In this session, in addition to presenting practical ideas for publicity, we'll examine your sell—what experience you're trying to sell and whether it matches the product you currently have, or what can you do to get it there. Take home effective publicity strategies for your community, specifically to reach potential new dancers and convert them to regulars.

Emily is an organizer with the Ottawa contra and has done publicity and outreach for 6 years, working on making the dance a welcoming environment. Tara is involved in English Country Dancing in Hamilton. Her group's attendance is on the rise.

### ***Why do we want new dancers?***

Start by thinking about why you want new dancers. This will help choose the right publicity approaches/tools. For example:

- To pay the rent
- To have a full hall
- To increase the number of younger dancers
- To have more money so we can get better bands
- To build a new dance
- We want to grow because if we don't we will die

### ***What is our "product" (what are we selling)?***

We live and breathe our dances, and many aspects of dance culture seem self-evident to us, but many people have no idea about what we do – they hear about this 'folk/traditional/square dance'-like activity. It's an option for recreation just like Netflix or going out to a play. Thus, it's important to think about the product that we are trying to "sell." We have to make sure that our advertisement is truthful, that we are not saying how we hope it will be, but how it really is while also being catchy to attract the right audience.

Our types of dancing are not part of the mainstream culture. Dancers touch many different people and look them in the eyes. This is not only unfamiliar for the initiated; it can actually be pretty hard for some. We have to remember that dancing might not be accessible or easy for everyone.

We should think about how welcoming we are to beginners. Do we have the right physical and emotional environment? Does our group include some impatient dancers that may discourage a first-time dancer from returning?

### ***Where are our new dancers? How can we target an audience?***

Market to *your* dancers. The audience you are targeting will drive the places where you should put your effort. A young and urban event should not result in the same kind of publicity as a family or barn dance.

For example, look at the name of your event/dance series to make sure it works with your target audiences. Keep things consistent across tools (fonts, logos, etc.).

It's a good idea to create elevator pitches to give to our regular dancers and to use in the flyers. Testimonials may work too.

Posters can be put in local businesses, community centers, etc.

Check out the ideas from Brian Gallaghers' and Julia Nickles' ["Next Generation" workshop](#) from NEFFA 2007 ("Ants? Pants? Contra Dance!"), published in the CDSS News, issue #201, March/April 2008.

It's good when you can have a very driven person on the committee!

### ***Implement your sell***

#### Considerations

There are oodles of tools out there: Twitter, Facebook, etc. We have to make sure we are consistent across all those tools.

Make sure your sell matches your product.

Make sure everything (flyers, posters, messages, etc.) is well done and follows best practices. If you decide to re-launch your publicity, decide if you want to do it all at once or but by bit when you are able to.

*Flyers:* Look at existing material from other dances – rather than reinvent the wheel, borrow from ones you like. We looked at some examples of flyers, and noticed:

- A couple on the flyer can suggest the message that you need to bring a partner.
- It's good to use a catchy font. Avoid Times New Roman for the "sell" part of a flyer/poster as it doesn't emote anything, even if it is easier to read.
- Put the emphasis on your type of dance; explain what it is you do.
- Think about using colors, images and maybe a "drawn on" look.

*Website:* Like your flyers, your website should also be catchy. It's good to use many photos and to have some pages targeted to beginners. It is good to pay attention to wording. For example, the Ottawa Contra used to have the Old Sod Society name attached, which it gave an old-timey

impression that they decided didn't characterize their dance well.

*YouTube videos:* It is better not to have one than to have a bad one. Make sure if you link one it represents you well.

*Facebook:* It's good to have a group where several people post regularly – keep it alive! Facebook events can help remind people to come dancing and can be shared with the dancers' friends. Although Facebook works well and events are useful, it is not a replacement for a webpage. Not having an external website makes it look like a group lacks legitimacy.

*Email:* Format of email depends on your audience. Some people prefer to make it more dynamic, but there are a number of our dancers who only have plain text, so it might be better to make sure it works well for those. Also plain text is more accessible for visually impaired people.

*Twitter:* If your dancers use Twitter, it can work to spread the word, because it's so easy to re-tweet messages. As always, consider your audience.

Implementation ideas from Ottawa Contra:

- Posting on online calendars
- Cross advertising
- Really clear and succinct message

Implementation ideas from Puttin' on the Dance 1:

- Maintain the branding across several things.
- Have easily reproducible publicity so it can be sent digitally to people who can then print and distribute it.
- Use a Facebook page that mirrors the website for announcements, and a Facebook group for the conversation.
- Keep the website event if Facebook works better, as there is no guarantee with Facebook that you won't lose your data.

### ***Incentives to Attract and Retain New Dancers***

Ottawa has business cards that offer a free first time for newbies under 30, so youth can invite their friends for free. The choice to have dances that are free for dancers under 30 (rather than under 25) was very intentional. The ones under 25 are often in Ottawa for studies and will leave after graduating. The "under 30" policy encourages attendance by dancers that are still relatively young, but out of the university and more likely to stick around.

In some places, it may be better to have a first time free system so new young dancers will come. But in others a second time free is better. Ottawa also has a second time free policy. During the time that they tracked it, 35% of first timers came back! Here's an idea: get the newbies' email to send them a welcome email and send them the second time free coupon by email.

### *Theories about why dancers come back:*

- They had a LOT of fun; they feel the time is worth it in their busy lives.
- They felt welcome; there was a positive atmosphere.
- They felt successful; they learned the dances or moves easily.
- Others made them feel “worthy” to be danced with.
- Their families were welcome.
- They feel like they belong, that they found their people.
- There was a critical mass of young people.
- There was a good beginner’s class (there was also a suggestion to offer a refresher of the beginner’s class during the break).

### *Reasons they don’t come back:*

- Dances felt too complicated.
- Trouble getting dance partners: “People looked past me when I asked them to dance.”
- Not enough young people/“people like me.”
- They got too dizzy when dancing.
- They feel they are too busy to come.
- During the break, no one talked to them.
- The calling was confusing, or the music was boring.
- The caller or other dancers seemed impatient or angry. This is experienced as very negative, even if it is unintentional. They felt “pushed” (physically), rather than guided.
- They were not taught community norms like eye contact, how to have good swings, etc.

### ***Miscellaneous Ideas and Success Stories***

The following list of ideas may or may not be useful for your dance community:

- Think about community first, versus dancing first. You may need to soften the message a little bit; don’t push it too hard.
- Some places start with a song circle.
- Have potluck suppers to foster the sense of community. This may encourage dancers to bring their families. Perhaps offer an afternoon dance or workshop, and then a potluck supper.
- Have snacks at the break.
- Invite the newbies to the pub after.
- Encourage your dancers to dance with the new ones waiting on the sides and milling at the end of the hall.
- An experienced couple can offer (not force!) to split a newbie couple so they can learn more.
- Have the experienced dancers show up early enough to participate in the beginner’s class. In some places they can get in for half-price in exchange for that.
- But don’t just encourage dance interaction with newcomers. Also have dance angels/ambassadors that commit to chatting up newcomers during the break.
- Some have a point person for carpool in colleges to go to the dances. They are part of a

club and can get the college van for free!

- At CDNY they did a double dance: afternoon dance was aimed at newbies and if an experienced dancers danced only with newcomers in the afternoon, they could get in the evening dance for free.