

Revolving Doors

(The Product is the Problem)

By

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The American Callers' Association in its attempt to be of service to all callers, dancers, and associations has provided current, timely, and effective information on new dancer recruitment, winning ways to retain club dancers, and pitfalls that drive square dancers away. ACA really appreciates the positive comments, encouragement to continue, and contributions from callers and dancers all over North America and abroad to continue these initiatives. ACA will continue to provide information that will help the square dance community recruit, retain and retrieve square dancers as well as encourage the dancer organizations.

This month's article describes the electric revolving doors at the entrances of many square dance clubs and organizations. New Dancers go in, and New Dancers go out, as square dance organizations bemoan the declining membership. Despite the fact that ACA and other organizations have continued to publish examples of recruiting activities that are working here and now and have provided positive results to clubs that have tried

them. The real question is, in the long-term, how beneficial were they? In other words, what happened to the coveted new club dancers?

Perhaps, it is now time to realign our thinking. Look around your town as you drive through it. Do you see many 1940, 1950 and 1960 automobiles? The drivers of today's automobiles, pick-ups, and SUV's have updated their vehicles to stay with the changing life styles. The answer is that square dancing has gone from being empowered and fed by its cumbersome dance program to being starved and imprisoned by it.

We can look with reverence for the past, but we must adapt and plan for the future. In visiting with new dancers who had recently left square dancing, several of them stated that they believed that square dancing has no place for new and struggling dancers because of the lengthy and stressful programs nor would they recommend square dancing to anyone. One aspect of the problem is that some veteran square dancers will not dance with them or tell them to dance at the back of the hall with only new dancers in their squares to allow other dances to have their 'perfect pat or pet' squares. Some square dancers chided the new dancers and told them that they did not belong at the dance because they could not dance well enough. How can some veteran square dancers push them out of the activity knowing that square dancing is in nothing short of decline?

The complicated and cumbersome dance programs (levels) contribute to this tragic loss of new dancers. We have to remember that the revolving doors of square dancing continue to turn for those entering and

those exiting the activity. When it becomes easier to go out the door than stay, the new dancers leave, and square dancing is indeed a declining and aging activity.

Why not take the opposite approach? Veteran square dance members should bind together to teach and assist the new dancers. In square dancing, simply providing a club badge and a square dance diploma does not make the new dancer a happy dancer. Square dancing may be a great organization to promote “fun, friendship and fellowship,” but it pushes new dancers out the revolving door. Make new dancers happy to be there. Applaud them, encourage them, and dance with them. Then they will tell others. Activity creates activity. We can make the exit portion of the revolving doors revolve in not out.

Square dancing needs a dance program revitalized and simplified dance program, with about 60 maneuvers that can be taught in as little as 10-12 weeks. This is predicated that some new dancers are aging and that they can only retain around 60 maneuvers comfortably. Lessons could go on for years and dancers may never grasp it all and will quit. The marketing efforts of clubs around the country are producing some dancers but the long number of weeks is giving them reasons to leave. The retention rate of students who start and graduate is around 20%. If we create a dance program that the new dancers can be comfortable then and only then will square dancing cease to be in decline. The decline of the square dancing life cycle will not correct itself or bottom out and begin growing without

major shortenings in the dance program, and a commitment of all organizations to work together.

Throughout the years, I have heard that square dancing's decline is inevitable and that is based upon the Book Bowling Alone by Dr. Robert Putnam. After reading his discussions on Bowling, I spoke with Dr. Putnam several times. He stated that Square Dancing is not really applicable to the scope of his book Bowling Alone. The one thing he did say is that Bowling is recovering by shortening its leagues and having more of them. He stated that square dance leaders need to listen to the market and adapt the product to what the market wants. We can repackage the cumbersome dance programs, market their success but the numbers do not lie.

ACA is committed to simplifying square dancing lessons and programs to gain more dancers and reduce dancer withdrawals and pay the price for success not the price of failure.

Any individual, club, caller, or association who wishes to communicate his/her opinions on this subject is encouraged to contact the American Callers' Association Loulet@aol.com or Dr. Patrick Demerath at pdemerath@troy.edu. Please visit our website and newsletters @American Callers.com/news.

Until next time, happy dancing