

Beyond New Dancers

Upping your attendance by preaching to your converted

Emily Addison and Tara Bolker

In this session we'll identify three key elements that add up to a whole dance experience and examine factors that enhance or detract from that experience, as well as explore strategies to engage your community to create deeper buy-in for your dances.

Goals of the session

- Becoming aware of the “vibe” that will influence whether or not people come back:
$$\begin{array}{r} \text{dance experience} \\ \text{physical atmosphere} \\ + \quad \text{social tone} \\ \hline = \quad \text{vibe!} \end{array}$$
- Understanding that dancers come back because of how they feel when they're leaving the hall (i.e., did they have a really great time? do they feel that they really want to come back? ... if so they make the effort to return for the next dance).
- We often talk about “new dancers,” but people are only new for a short time. Based on this, our goal is to learn the strategies that keep regular dancers coming back.

Vibe

Each event has a different vibe. People are not necessarily aware of “vibe,” but it influences their experience. Becoming aware of your vibe allows you to take control of it. Factors involved in creating the vibe include:

The dance experience:

- Qualities of the dancing
 - Level of dancing skills
 - Focus on fun vs. execution
 - Style (courtly, sexy, etc.)
- The calling – how clear, how wordy; the personality of the caller (e.g., joking, party feel)
- The music – technical level, emotion, genre (e.g., various traditional forms, jazz or pop-influenced, etc.)
- The sound – which affects the clarity of the caller and the band's energy, as well as dancers' comfort

The physical atmosphere:

- Level/type of lighting
- Décor – including signage, quilts/backdrops
- The welcome table/cash table – how does it set up your vibe when people walk in?
 - Is there a person manning it?
 - What does it look like?

- Think of “community dance” vs. “urban dance” vs. “a coffee can and a sign to wipe your feet” – these might all be good dances, but they have different vibes
- The type of space and what messages it might carry (Grange hall, community. building, church, modern or old-fashioned)
- Acoustics
- Stage?
- Creature comforts: heat, toilets, etc.

The social tone/community culture:

- Do your numbers fill the hall? How many people?
- Age of dancers
- Gender balance
- Are there cliques, or will outsiders feel invited?
- Who are the people? Mainstream, organic farmers, government workers?
- Can you find an organizer?
- What are ways to engage socially? (other than dancing) Are these obvious?
- What happens during the break? (length? refreshments? who talks to whom?)

We did an exercise where we tried to describe the vibes of our own dances and consider aspects we might want to change. When you are looking at the vibe of your own dance...

- Ask, “What is our current vibe, and what would we like it to be? What (if anything) is wrong with our current vibe?”
- Brainstorm and *define* words you associate with the vibe. What do the words mean to you? To your dancers?
 - For example: “safe”, “tolerance”, “welcoming” ...what do you mean by these? (e.g., gender roles, acceptance or lack thereof)
 - For example: what does “fun” mean? How energetic? How much do you need to think while you’re dancing? Can you influence dancers’ perception of what is “fun” over time?

Creating buy-in

The most important way to move “beyond new dancers” is to increase the commitment level of the dancers who are already there.

“Buy-in” means:

- Sense of belonging – “This is part of who I am.” and/or “I have friends here.”
- Sense of commitment – is it a habit? Are you prioritizing dance over other activities?
- Sense of ownership – “I help make this dance successful.” “My voice is heard.”

Case study: Ottawa’s membership system:

- A \$30 membership gets you a reduced admission rate (a “\$2 off” button)
- OR you can purchase a “sustaining membership” at \$50
- OR you can purchase a season’s pass which includes membership (you pay for a full season ahead of time)
- Consider potential drawbacks: buttons could seem exclusionary by some (although positive in other ways); your dance needs to have a season for a “season’s pass” to work.

More thoughts and ideas

The workshop ended with further group discussion of how organizers can influence the vibe and buy-in at their dances. Some questions and ideas:

- Announcements – what language and tone do you use? When to do them, what to include, and how long they should last.
- Emails – How many do you send (e.g., one a week before + a reminder the day before the dance)? Are they informational or promotional? What’s the tone?
- Are there special events (e.g., costumes, workshops)?
- Are there opportunities to be social outside of the dance?
- Volunteering:
 - A good way for introverts to get integrated
 - Consider putting photos of volunteers on Facebook/your website (with their permission)
- Consider encouraging dancers to go outside their home community – though this can backfire, as the dance weekends are higher-level, so people may stop coming to the regular dances
- Music and calling:
 - What’s the range and technical level? What do people want?
 - Consistent quality is important.
 - Ottawa has a Tuesday night “local” dance where new callers and musicians can practice and develop.
- Learning/growth:
 - Do your dancers want an ongoing challenge? If so, how do you offer that?
 - Do you want a separate advanced dance? (Anecdotally, it may strengthen the regular community dance.)
 - Emotive musical experience may trump difficulty level – a simple dance, well done, may be very satisfying.
 - Consider offering a follow-up lesson at the break.
 - Teachers and teaching:
 - Bruce Hamilton (ECD caller) has good tips on helping experienced dancers to dance with new dancers – “teaching courtesy”
 - Workshops can teach such skills as non-verbal helping on the dance floor. Lisa Greenleaf, Gaye Fifer and others do such workshops. For example, half of the dancers can be taught a dance, and then the dance runs with no additional walkthrough, and talking is not allowed.