

SQUARE DANCE GROUPS AND THE INTERNET

The internet. To some folks, it seems an intimidating monolith, not easily understood and way too daunting to attempt integration with. To the majority of people in developed countries, the internet is the most effective tool of communication and commerce ever known to man.

There are some in the square dance world who believe that decreasing numbers of dancers, beginner and experienced, is because our activity competes with the internet. Competing for people's interest during their downtime may have been a factor many years ago when the only way to access the internet was from a desktop computer, but with mobile "smart" devices, there is nothing tethering people to their homes. In fact, many of our existing dancers are quick to use mobile internet connections to find a dance location, discover start times, and even to research the definition of a call during the dance. In 2019, the internet is not a competitor to square dancing, it is an under-used tool that is key to our growth.

For starters, the internet should be a gateway for every existing dancer to get them to a dance. Every club, association, and festival should have a web presence. In it's simplest form a web site must provide:

- ✘ Name of the event or club. Examples, "Boots And Bustles Square Dance Club", "Back In The Sticks Square Dance Weekend", "Oxygen Required High Level Round Dance Getaway".
- ✘ Accurate dates including year. If the club is seasonal, this has to be put on the web page.
- ✘ Accurate location information, including city, state, and zip code. The better web sites, have the address which links to a third-party web page for maps, like Google Maps, etc. If the hall is hard to find, then descriptions like "on the left, just past the car junk yard" is helpful
- ✘ Accurate start times. If you have pre-rounds, then that should be clearly stated in the times. Be careful with this item since many clubs change their start times but fail to reflect that change on their web site. I've been the caller at a dance when a bunch of squares walk into the dance 30 minutes after we started and they are up-set that the times had changed but there was no-way for them to know. These are un-happy customers that are more likely not to return.
- ✘ A clean description of what your event or club is doing. Is this a Mainstream with Plus tips dance? Are there multiple halls for different levels of dancing or squares with rounds? Is it a fund-raiser and is the beneficiary clearly designated? Do you start in the afternoon or evening? The mistake many promoters make, is assuming that everyone knows all about their club or dance event, when in fact, the first timer is searching the internet for this information.
- ✘ Clear contact persons along with phone numbers. As someone who frequently searches for contact information, there is nothing more frustrating then having to search a web site for phone numbers or having to go to another web site because the promoters failed to put that information on their own site.
- ✘ Most important, keep the information up-to-date. Having stale information is actually worse than having no information on the web.

The internet should also be a gateway for non-dancers. While we are courting existing dancers on our web pages, there are a handful of clubs that also have information about their classes. These

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clubs will list accurate information like open enrollment dates, times, locations, and contact phone numbers.

Some clubs do an extraordinary job by listing the calls taught at the previous class night along with links to definitions, taminations, and in the case of the club that I teach for – videos of the teach from the class. The video idea allows for our class members to see the initial teach again and again. They hear the same verbiage and become comfortable with it. They see themselves and their friends demonstrating the new call. It is the Wrangler Square Dance Club and Buddy Weaver using the internet to help our beginners learn square dancing.

Finally a tool that every club and dance event should be using - email. Even if web sites are too much for you to wrap your arms around, you should be using email to communicate with existing members. If you have beginner classes, then you should be harvesting emails so that a SERIES of emails could be sent out inviting new dancers to class. One email won't cut it. When the class is in progress, weekly emails should be sent out that are encouraging and leave the reader with a sense of anticipation for the next class night.

In closing, it is this author's opinion that square dancing can benefit from the internet far more than we currently are. Next month, the topic will continue exploring Facebook and more.

FACEBOOK AND SQUARE DANCING

Lets talk social media, focusing in on the most popular platform in the square dance world – facebook. This is a website/app that allows people with similar interest to share information and network with each other. Users can post text, pictures, videos which are shared with other users they have "friended" or everyone in the general public, depending on your preference.. Many callers, clubs, and associations use facebook to share information about their up-coming dances, weekends, or group trips. Dancers and callers alike will often post pictures and videos from recent dances, some will even live stream a dance – broadcasting what you are experiencing with the whole world at the same moment that you are living it. Technology is cool.

Facebook offers the opportunity to create groups, collections of facebook users with a shared special interest. For example, you can find a group for square dance news that has its' members posting fliers of upcoming events, announcements of specials, etc. There is a group for square dance music where you will often find square dance music producers posting announcements of their newest releases. As any old-timer in calling will tell you, that is a huge departure from waiting for monthly releases on tape delivered through the mail. There are many groups specific to square dancing are on facebook and the number is growing.

For the non-user who is looking to join the facebook world, it is a simple process and having an account costs nothing. It is not uncommon for new users to do nothing more than collect "friends" so they can read what others have to say. Regardless, if you are active or lurking on facebook, every user should include their picture and minimal personal information, like the city and state in which they reside. From an active user's viewpoint, the lack of a photo or relevant information on a profile from someone asking to be a facebook "friend" is a red-flag warning of an imposter or a non-serious user. Either way, these get passed over for inclusion as a facebook friend.

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The following tips are included for new and experienced facebook users, to help you navigate this social media platform.

- ✘ Be clear in your purpose for creating a facebook presence. If you're building a social media page for your square dance club or association, be sure you are doing so with permission of the board. Your page **MUST HAVE** home city, state, website, and the group's logo. Be sure to write down the username and password information so it can be passed to the next person in charge of the club/association website.
- ✘ When posting information for the general public to view, **MAKE SURE IT'S ACCURATE**. Be certain of the dance time, location, level, caller, etc. Remember, many people use social media to get the most up-to-date information that may include last-minute changes. There can be no excuse for having incorrect information on a facebook page.
- ✘ Make sure the information that your post is written for an audience far outside of your neighborhood. Include city and state. Include the year when listing dates. There is no such thing as too many facts on a facebook post.
- ✘ Try to include pictures in your post. Convert your dance fliers to a jpg format for inclusion on your facebook page. Facebook was created for pictures so if you are not able to include photos then this may not be the right platform for you.
- ✘ When sharing your information to a group, try not to "cross post" the same write-up. This means that if you have posted a picture of your club's flier on "square dance news group", then don't put the same thing on "square dance events". You'll find many users participate in many groups, so repeating the same thing on multiple groups – cross posting – is overkill.
- ✘ In the facebook world, as in the real world, you will find some who are chronically negative or irascible in their posts. They may reply to your post by stating a contradicting opinion. They may share political or religious views in a manner that is insensitive to some. They are a part of square dancing through their profile and sadly, they are the down side to facebook. When deciding what to write on facebook, imagine you are giving an announcement at a dance. Would you state your view of politics or religion at this time? The answer should be no. Well, posting on facebook is like getting on the mic at a really big dance, except it is **MEMORIALIZED ON THE INTERNET FOREVER**.

In my opinion, anyone linked to square dancing that makes insensitive comments on social media is hurting our image. We want square dancing to be a positive and inclusive experience for anyone who would like to join, so our social media posts need to be along that line. If you are one who disagrees, simply remove your connection to this great activity from your facebook profile to save us the embarrassment of association with you.

- ✘ Finally, content is king. Facebook thrives on frequent posts so it is helpful to plan your future write-ups and execute them on schedule. For example, your club's facebook page would be well served with a post about an upcoming dance along with a jpg of the flier maybe a few months in advance. The following week (no later) is a post about the

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incredible caller and cuer team for the dance. Another week, is a post about how great the dance hall is along with directions on how to access the parking lot. Posts about how many were at the last dance along with pictures showing smiling faces, loaded food tables all help to “sell” your dance on social media. Put pictures of your callers on facebook and website information. Keep in mind, if you don't have content then you are missing the boat when it comes to social media. This is all about current, topical, accurate, and frequent.

- ✘ Post script, if your facebook page is full of stale information then take it down. If the club has folded, take down the fb page. In the world we live today, the only thing worse than no information is bad information. If you are the new club representative and user information is nowhere to be found, then contact facebook directly.

Please send your comments to buddy@buddyweaver.com. Find me on facebook on the following pages: Buddy Weaver, Blue Star Square Dance Music, New Hi Hat Square Dance Music, and Rawhide Square Dance Music.