

Hive Mind—Making New Dancers Feel Welcome, Safe and Eager to Return

a crowd-sourced column

Kristin Edwards, Charlotte Country Dancers, Charlotte, NC says:

We give new dancers a pass to come back in the future and dance again for free. That way we encourage them to try it a second time and hopefully get more comfortable. We also keep buttons at the admission desk to be picked up and worn during the dance to help identify your role. We encourage people to pick them up and return them at the end of the dance. We don't have a specific dance ambassador since we have identified them with the buttons and it can be a different person each week.

Alexandra Deis-Lauby, Country Dance New York, New York City says:

We offer first-timers a free admission pass to come back a second time. In that exchange, we collect their email and how they found out about us. One of our board members sends new dancers a welcome email with the info of our next dance. We also add them to our email list.

We don't have designated dance ambassadors, but our membership chair, who is at almost all the dances, is proactive in making sure the new dancers have experienced dance partners, especially if they come in after the lesson. And some regular dancers, who are particularly outgoing, make sure the new folks meet people at the break as well as invite them to the local diner to socialize with us after the dance.

In order to make all our dancers feel welcome, we ask that callers make it clear to new folks (and experienced folks) that contra has two dance roles and that these are not genders. We make it clear that anyone can dance whatever role they want and that they may ask anyone to dance. Callers are asked to remove gendered language such as gendered pronouns from their calling if possible and to remind dancers to "dance with who's coming at you." We have "I dance both roles" buttons that dancers can wear as well as colorful signs reminding people about dance etiquette. These signs include: "It's OK to decline a dance," "Ask people sitting out to dance," "Laugh at mistakes and move on," "Anyone can ask anyone to dance," "Dance safely!," and "Be encouraging: use gestures not words."

We also created a behavior policy, publicized it, and have taken steps to make our dance space safe for our dancers, both new and regulars.

Our English country dance is trying a "Bring a Friend" promotion in which both the regular dancer and the new dancer friends dance for free. This helps create an ideal ratio of new dancers to experienced dancers and helps the new folks learn faster. (In the past we have also had free dances which are successful at bringing in lots of new dancers, but which have a beginner-heavy crowd thus slowing the learning curve).



This is the last Hive Mind column. Our thanks to caller Scott Higgs, column coordinator, to Gaye Fifer and Dorcas Hand for their support, to the participants, and to our readers.

We continue to welcome letters about organizational and community topics that are common to dance and song groups. Send your success stories and cautionary tales to editor@cdss.org.