

Dance Flurry 2019 – Dance Organizers Unite in Discussion!

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Session Description: Are you a dance organizer or are thinking of becoming one? Then take a wee break from dancing and get re-energized and learn lots during this great discussion workshop. Last year's focus was on upping attendance... this year's focus will be up to the group to decide!

About the participants and session: Approximately 20 organizers participated in the session which is about half the number who have attended in previous years. (Perhaps because the workshop was first thing Sunday morning?) The participant group included many long-time organizers in addition to a few new organizers and individuals who were interested in the topic. In addition to there being contra dance organizers, a number of participants noted that they organize family and community dances and a few mentioned ECD. We briefly introduced ourselves and identified topics of interest. Then, because we were a smaller group, we shared ideas together as one whole group rather than breaking into small interest groups.

The point-form notes from the session are below...

Organizers wanted to learn about or have challenges with:

Organizers/volunteers:

- Want defined volunteer roles so that they more easily hand off those roles to others (i.e., if someone has been doing a job for a long time, others don't know how the role involves).
- Tired of organizing.
- Fixed committee, can't seem to get people to sign up for anything... "dancers seem to think that we are here to entertain them".
- One participant was a new organizer to their board and wanted to learn more about organizing generally.

Attendance:

- Dancers leave; hadn't been bringing in new dancers so attendance dropped.
- Some communities have very few dancers under the age of 30.
- How to redirect dancers to community dance if they find contra too hard/too much?

Finances:

- At least for organizers said that they are losing money regularly, varying from "survival mode" to running out of money in 7yrs.
- One organizer noted that they want financial affordability for weekends/week-long events with no punishment for cancellation.

Belonging/community

- Want to talk about belonging and community.
- How to make our dance 'the place to be' (not necessarily in the cool hip way).

Organized shared the following ideas:

Finances:

- In some cases, dance weekends and festivals can generate enough revenue to cover the regular dance series.
- There was the suggestion that organizations (in particular weekends) could work on lowering costs in order to make events more affordable (e.g., talk to the venue owners; the Flurry wood floors costs a lot; longer sessions so less talent). Other organizers pointed out that their costs are fixed or already very low.
- Volunteer roles for dancers who want a discounted rate.
- For dance weekends, volunteering isn't an option for some local dancers because they are already working two jobs.
- Cheaper prices don't necessarily mean more dancers (e.g., a dance with a \$5 suggested price has fewer dancers the higher fixed price dance in the same town).
- Sponsorships? Grants?
- One organizer would like to work towards a sliding scale but their dance can't do it right now as they don't have the critical mass (e.g., 30-50 dancers doesn't seem enough to run sliding scale).
- One dance provides a discount into their contra dance if the dancers come to the family/community dance just before (Bangor).
- Food coop is a sponsor. They provide great snacks and the person working the door gets coop hours.
- Baby boomers are aging out and the middle class isn't getting bigger.
- CDSS is developing a resource on alternative sources of revenue. This will include ideas from organizations from throughout N America.

Attendance:

- **Overall comments:**
 - In terms of marketing "What is the dynamic difference of what you are offering"
 - Retention is unlikely if attendees don't have some kind of emotional bond to the experience (e.g., if attending the dance is just like going to a movie or mini golf).... ..Creating a feeling of belonging and community is important rather than viewing the experience as a consumer.
 - Lots of people are too busy and tired --- no matter how affordable you make the dance, they won't have enough energy at the end of the day. (e.g., at 8pm, ready to go to bed.... if wasn't committed, would stay home). Perhaps Sunday afternoons for community dances?
 - Make your dance be of the highest importance to your dancers as there are so many other options for spending leisure time.... .. Try to help people make the decision to participate in what we're doing. Give enough compelling reasons to come.
 - There is still the question: What is contra dance? What is community dance?
 - Surveyed their family dancers-- they love dances but their family is busy and the dances are not a priority. It seems as though there are too many other programmed activities to choose from.
 - As contra dancing gets more complex (faster; all active; etc.), it's harder for new people to feel confident (e.g., swing; being pushed around; don't know where to face) We may feel our dancing is accessible and natural but for a new person walking off the street, there is so much that is unusual... the physical closeness, the eye contact, all the touching people, following instructions, etc. It's important to remember how different the experience is.
- **Specific strategies:**
 - Talent can make a big difference (e.g., when Perpetual e-Motion was playing a lot in Bangor Maine, attendance jumped from 50 dances to 140 quite quickly)
 - Get RAs at local colleges to bring their residents.
 - MeetUp works – can get 15/20 more people. Welcome them specifically. These people actually have the time and want to do something.

- RE FACEBOOK: Have a Facebook group, page, and events for each dance. For the FB event, try to make other dancers co-hosts so that they can invite their circle of friends. Tag friends and say 'I'm going to this – we should go'.
- Reach out to home school families – they will share with one another.
- Scouts and Girl Guides?
- Bring a friend in February – both the regular dancer and the new dancer get in free.
- September is free for students.
- 2017? Study (University of Colorado? Illinois?) – researchers compared mid-brain using MRIs. Social dancers retained or had a slight increase in white matter VS aerobic walking and yoga instruction where there was an age-related decrease in white matter. It's really difficult to put that into a compelling marketing piece!
- CDSS → Partner with National Endowment for the Arts for a national ad. Get a spot on the Today Show. ... Raise the visibility of the dance form on a broader scale as that will lift all group.
- Moving halls dropped attendance in half.
- Get contact information from new people and follow up:
 - Some groups have had great success while one organizer pointed out that it can be really hard to get contact information from new folks.
 - Giving information is optional.
 - They need to feel welcome in order to provide the info.

Sense of belonging/community/special event/'the place to be':

- When people's lives are so busy, there needs to be other reasons to come to the dance other than the dancing.
- One session participant said that they don't dance at their dance. They greet everyone and check in with beginners throughout the evening.
- Have a group of regular dancers available before the dance so that when brand new people come in, they can be matched up with a regular dancer for a quick orientation even before the beginner lesson starts.
- It's important to get regular dancers dancing with beginners because even though it's natural that regulars will want to dance with their friends.
- Follow up with beginners after the dance via email (at least three groups have their main organizer do this). Thank you for coming, a big more information for experience, what experience like? What could improve for beginners? New people seem to like to have that connection.
- Annual cupcake bake-off: Easily 20 entries, 3 celebrity judges, cardboard crowns → make a big deal about it. Layering on some more fun. (Jonesborough)
- Jonesborough gives out Klondike bars for free. It's the official treat of the dance and gives them a bit of a marketing edge. Printed some shirts after wrangling with the law firm that represents Klondike.
- Try to make something special each dance (e.g., dessert potluck; ice cream; afternoon dance – got people who no longer driving at night; double dance with potluck; silent auction) ... not just a dance but more!
- Dancers love to dress up – Halloween, red & green for seasonal; New Years ball; St Patrick's in green. Medieval dress up (thought wouldn't work but it was so successful).
- At the end of the dance, have someone at the door saying thanks and remind about the next dance.
- Post dance social:
 - Going out to a pub after the dance works well in terms of connecting faces to actual people, building community.
 - Dinner out before the dance, someone organizes it.
 - Potlucks before the family/community dance which the families seem to really like as part of the social experience.
 - Can do a pizza order instead of a potluck.

Organizers/Volunteers:

- Create a volunteer pathway to bring people in slowly. Start by bringing snacks for the potluck, then ask them to take money at door, then perhaps dance manage an evening → join our board.
- “Our group does this poorly so trying to change that” – one group is currently making a list of what needs to happen for each dance. Once they have identified all the discrete tasks and placed them into natural grouping, they will then be able to ask dancers to help.
- Develop back-ups for all roles (e.g., have three sound volunteers).
- For the door have a “New to this? Here’s what you need to know” sheet.
- College internship? Someone has tried but the students want internships leading to work opportunities in business.
- Some high school students need volunteer hours. What about Scouts/Girl Guides?
- Success with journalism students writing articles or making videos.

Insurance:

- Many organizers noted that they secure insurance through CDSS
- A few in NY State organizers purchase insurance directly through a local insurance broker.

Talent:

- In the future – will it be more difficult to hire/be able to pay travelling talent (e.g., travel costs etc.)? Work on building up local talent as this type of dance is community dance at its core.
- The CDSS web chat on community bands was really helpful which has prompted their community to start one.
- Rochester launched a community band approximately 1.5yrs ago. Two musicians to hold the band down, all the tunes up on the website, and music teachers bring their students. All the tunes are traditional which adds an element of preserving the tradition; helps balance the new music.
- Ottawa had first open band a few weeks ago – 17 musicians and pretty much the same model as Rochester.
- Hartford ran jam sessions for a long time. Twice a year they would have the jam session musicians provide the music for the dance.