

**News From
Dallas/Ft. Worth, TX
(Jim & Ann Short)
Growth Committee Chairman
(March 13, 2003)**

In May 2002, Jim & Ann asked to chair a “Growth Committee” for the North Texas Square and Round Dance Association. The primary direction was to try to figure out a way to turn around the declining membership in the association. They talked with callers and dancers from all over. They asked what had worked in other parts of the country. They also asked what hadn’t worked. They asked for ideas for might work. They “stole” ideas from everyone they could find. Their conclusion was that there were two basic problems: Recruiting and Lesson format.

Most recruiting had been done by advertising using flyers and placing advertisements or notices in periodicals. Often a club would put on a square dance demonstration in a mall or at a fair. Occasionally someone would ask a friend to take lessons. Whatever they has been doing hasn’t worked very well. In the past 20 years the number of square dancers has decreased by about two thirds.

One of the clubs in their area tried recruiting dancers one-on-one, face to face. It worked and it worked and it worked. The conclusion was that square dancers, like eagles, don’t flock, you have to find them one at a time. With this in mind they began to ask clubs if they could meet with them and talk about recruiting new dancers. They did not talk about students – they talked about new dancers. They think the new people need to perceive themselves as dancers from the very beginning.

The plan called for the club to start about seven months before lessons are scheduled to be held. They start by appointing a lesson coordinator and setting up a database of prospective new dancers. Two months before the lessons start, the club sends a letter to everyone in the database, introducing the club, describing the non-square dancing activities of the club and suggesting to the prospects that getting to know the club would be fun.

Two months before lessons start, the club sends an invitation to a “party night.” A party night takes on the personality of the club and can be a chili supper or salad supper or whatever. It is at this time that the prospects meet club members. The purpose of the party night is to “sell” the club, not square dancing. A month before the party night the recruiter who made the first contact calls to confirm the prospects attendance at the party. Two weeks before the party the club sends another follow-up invitation. Three days before the party the recruiter calls and offers a ride to the party.

At the party the prospects are seated with a club member who is selected because they are upbeat and positive about the club and square dancing. Ideally there are three prospective couples and one club member couple at each table – just the right number for a square. This provides for the newcomers to begin to make new friends. After eating and conversation the caller gets an experienced square up to show square dancing. Then get the new dancers up and teach them the beginning moves. In fifteen minutes they are having fun and square dancing. Sign them up for lessons before they leave.

They found that another of the problems with the way they had been recruiting was getting people to commit to taking lessons for 18 to 20 weeks. To overcome this objection we decided to offer lessons on three consecutive Saturdays.

The sessions began at 9:30 in the morning and ended at 3:30 in the afternoon. They provided lunch and also refreshments all day long. They had a different caller each Saturday and they used the CALLERLAB dance program teaching list. They determined that the callers could teach 55 to 60 Mainstream calls in the three Saturdays. They also found that, contrary to every thing they had been told, it does work and the new dancers can go for six hours. A great majority of new dancers in the Saturday lessons went to new dancer dances after the 2nd Saturday. To reinforce the lessons, clubs and callers were asked to hold workshops before their dances.

Clubs were asked to hold New Dancer dances with calls limited to the first 40 CALLERLAB Mainstream calls with a workshop before the dance and no more than one round between tips. The first club to hold a New Dancer dance in October 2002 had 8 squares and 12 new dancers. In February 2003 a New Dancer dance had 27 squares and 44 new dancers. The New Dancer dances focus completely on the new dancer dancing every tip – they are the guest of honor. They should be brought to these dances by the club by whom they were recruited. If new dancers are sent to New Dancer dances on their own, it is a bit like sending your girlfriend to the prom alone, she will probably go home with someone besides you. What does this mean? It means cater to your new dancers, take them to dances because if you don’t they are not being stolen, you are giving them to someone who is paying attention to them.

We give the New Dancers a “New Dancer” dangle so they can be identified and invited into squares by experienced dancers. When a New Dancer dangle is spotted, the dancers are asked to introduce themselves and ask if they are having a good time. The experienced dancers are also asked to tell the new dancers they are glad to have them at the dance and ask them to join their square? This helps reinforce the fun and feeling of acceptance for the new dancers. All of these things have helped the clubs to become more energized by the great attendance of new dancers, it is a win-win situation. These new dancers are our future in square dancing