

# 7 IDEAS FOR BUILDING YOUR DANCE COMMUNITY



Post Views 1,879

**A** couple of months ago I wrote [an article encouraging people to interact more honestly](http://socialdancecommunity.com/what-it-means-when-they-say-no/) (<http://socialdancecommunity.com/what-it-means-when-they-say-no/>), at a social dance: **to say “yes” only when you actually want to dance, and to understand the many reasons that someone might have for not wanting to dance at that particular moment.** While many people responded enthusiastically, there were some who had concerns. They complained about girls who waste their time, or proclaimed the virtue of always dancing with everyone. Others worried that we would never be able to grow our dance scenes if we adopted this practice.



([http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/IMG\\_0003-Cropped.jpg](http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/IMG_0003-Cropped.jpg))

I firmly believe that when we **engage with true enthusiasm** we will build a much better dance culture than if we interact in a **high-stakes environment ruled by obligation, fear of shame, and fear of rejection**. So, I would like to take the opportunity this month to consider how we can stay true to this idea AND build up our dance communities!

First, **let me start by describing a common approach to growing a scene**. There are various strategies for getting the word out about the dance. Let me name a few:

- visits by instructors or other experienced dancers to local venues to perform demos
- flash mobs in busy area
- paper flyers and Facebook pages advertising class series and special events
- promotions that offer newbies their first class or social free
- partnering with other established scenes

All of these are awesome ideas that I absolutely encourage!

Once people actually show up, the goal is to encourage them to keep coming back. There are financial incentives, like discounts for registering for an entire class series or punch cards that offer a free entry after so many dances attended. Most important, however, is making sure they feel included. The most popular approach to this is fostering the idea that **everyone should always dance with everybody else**. On the surface, this seems great! If we're all here to dance, shouldn't we be happy to do so with everyone? **Isn't that only fair?** That way everyone will have fun!

Unfortunately, **that's not how it turns out in practice.** The results include many effects we didn't intend: attitudes of disdain toward those who would dare to say no, shaming them for elitism, with no attempt to understand the many legitimate reasons they may not want to dance that song. There is also a deep hurt when you are refused, because it means that **you are the exception to everyone, so it must be personal.** We end up cultivating patently false interactions, in which people may dance with someone out of obligation and communicate resentment and other negative emotions, or others may wait for invitations and avoid asking because they don't want to create that obligation, or others walk with their heads facing down to avoid being asked, while still others fabricate excuses – “Well he asked when I was getting a drink and after that I just never got free to hunt for him.”



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/20-Torquay-cocktail.jpg>).

**Still, we've all been to at least one dance in which we felt like the outsider.** No one asked us for a dance. We were too intimidated by the level of other dancers to dare to ask. There were cliques from which we felt excluded. Clearly that's not the kind of scene we want – but that doesn't mean our only option is the coerced consent policy!

Check out some of these **ideas for fostering a healthy, welcoming dance community!**

### **1. Create an intentional community.**

This starts with the organizers, teachers, and founding members. We have to share a vision for community and make it central to our scene. We have to feel on a level with anybody who might attend our classes or events, rather than being on a pedestal. We have to be willing to invest in activities that will foster inclusion, even if it means less money coming in. People can feel the difference!



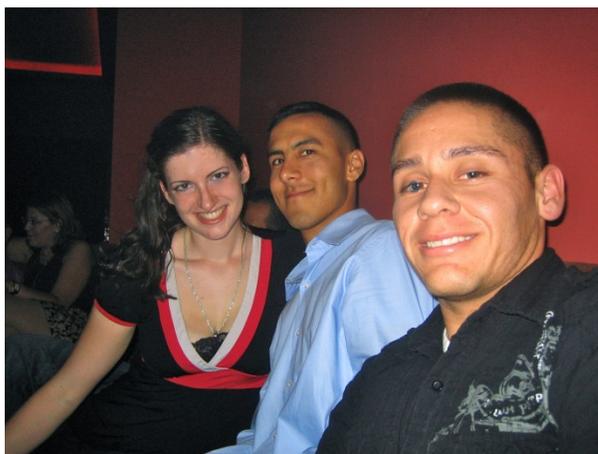
(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/AKF2015.jpg>).

## 2. Attract new members

I have already described a number of marketing strategies that are well-known and effective. Another idea that I have used myself and that I love is to make this more social. Make people invested in bringing their family, friends, or colleagues by rewarding them. “Bring a friend and the social is only \$5!” “Buddy pass 2 for 1: newbie + you!” “Free private lesson if you bring 5 new people to class this month!”

## 3. Start a welcome committee

For most people, all it takes is one or two friendly encounters to make them feel included. Appoint a rotating crew of local people whose job is simply to greet people at social dances and to seek out newbies to dance with. This could be two people who get in free that night, or a regular committee who take shifts. They should be friendly, outgoing people who are genuinely enthusiastic about new faces. They absolutely must not be stuck taking money at the door! They should be able to circulate freely, breaking the ice, making introductions, answering questions, and building confidence for new people to engage in the scene.



([http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/IMG\\_0099.jpg](http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/IMG_0099.jpg)).

## 4. Explain Etiquette

This should be part of every beginner dance class. Each dance scene has its own particular customs that need to be explained. How should you ask for a dance? I have a strong preference for verbal invitations to dance, except with my close friends. How many dances should you dance together? Lots of scenes stop after one song, but tango has tandas (sets of songs) and kizomba dances often featured mixed music without a set stopping point. Should you leave the floor together or go your separate ways immediately? I love to be escorted off the floor but it doesn't make sense in every venue. Where is it okay to hang out when you're not dancing? Some places have designated areas for talking and drinking, while others have less clearly defined boundaries. Lacking this information can create a lot of hesitancy among some newbies, or lead to embarrassing faux pas that will cause lingering discomfort.

## 5. Invite taxi dancers

Taxi dancers are responsible for dancing with everyone – not only saying “yes” to everyone, but seeking out wallflowers and livening up the party. They are usually higher level dancers that receive a free pass or even some compensation for their role. Unlike the welcome committee, they may not be locals and are not focused only on beginners. Rather, they give everyone the opportunity to look forward to an excellent dance with certainty. Taxi dancers may wear a special shirt, hat, button, or wristband to make them easy to find. Taxi dancers are more common in big cities or at large events, and they help fill in the gaps – whether by offsetting a gender/role imbalance, attracting other higher level dancers, or being where the organizers/teachers don't have time to be.



(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Yossef2.jpg>).

## 6. Mix it up

I'll admit it, sometimes these activities make me groan, but mixers are undeniably effective in making sure newbies, people from out of town, and those who don't attend as regularly get up and party with the rest. Maybe an hour or two after the social dance has started, call a break to make announcements about upcoming dance

opportunities, and then get people interacting with one another through a mixer. You could have a talking activity, something as simple as finding two people you don't know and swapping names and favorite musicians. You could have a silly game, like numbering people randomly 1-5 to mix them into 5 groups, then asking each group to create a new dance based on a superhero. "Snowball" is a common dancing mixer; you start with one couple dancing in the center and after several seconds the MC yells "Snowball!" and the two split to each find a new partner from the circle. The splits continue until there are no bystanders remaining. Get creative and you may be surprised by how well they are received!

## **7. Start social activities**

We may first meet because of our interest in a given dance, but that doesn't mean that's the only thing we can do together. Meeting up at times that give people an opportunity to get to know each other better, to talk at length and find other shared interests, is a great way to strengthen the bonds of your dance community. You can start with something as easy as choosing a restaurant close to your dance studio for people to have a drink together before the party, or to get food together after class. Look for live music events that may be of common interest and choose a show to attend as a group. In warm months, organize a hike, a beach trip or a picnic in a park – maybe you'll dance as well! Consider choosing one or two days a month for people to expect such things – you could make every 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday "Our club goes to \_\_\_\_" and pick a new place to check out. You might be surprised how many people will turn up!

Special thanks to David Hendershot for inspiring this post, and then providing feedback on the writing!

---