

Recruitment and retention of new dancers at Johnsonville SCDC

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As part of this year's Dance Scottish initiative, RSCDS NZ Branch offered clubs a \$150 donation to assist in attracting new dancers. Johnsonville club was happy to take up this offer, and used this donation towards the costs of advertising a series of four beginners' classes run across the month of February. In particular, the extra funds encouraged us to trial a paid facebook ad for the first time.¹ Overall a total of 48 beginners attended some or all of these classes, and 18 of those 48 subsequently became paid members of Johnsonville club.

In writing this report, I have considered not just how we attract beginners, but also how we retain them, and what we need to do ongoing. I was motivated to write it as a useful document for Johnsonville club to reflect on what we are doing. It may be of interest to the Branch, and possibly of some use for other clubs. I should emphasise that each club has its own approach, philosophy, environment and style, and what works for us is not necessarily what will work for others, or how other clubs may wish to approach membership.

Background

Following a significant drop in membership in 2012, the Johnsonville SCD club committee made a decision to run a series of four beginners classes in February each year to increase dancer numbers. From 23 members in 2012, the club now has 64 members (including two life members).

Of course we never get the full membership at club on any given night, the average would be around 60% of membership, higher at the beginning of the year, lower in the winter. So a membership of 23 in 2012 meant quite low numbers at club at times.

Year	Beginners' class attendees	New members (incl non-beginners)	Total club membership
2012		7 (2)	23
2013	Not available	15 (0)	33
2014	Not available	19 (1)	46
2015	Not available	14 (4)	50
2016	31	14 (1)	57
2017	29	16 (1)	57
2018	48	18 (3)	64

You can see that the numbers don't add up from year to year. There is a lot of churn in membership as people's lives change. Each year we lose some of the previous year's members, either temporarily or permanently. We also lose some of our new dancers across the year or from one year to the next for any of a number of reasons.² Knowing that we can never be sure how many dancers will return each year, we actively recruit new members each year.

¹ For more information on our paid Facebook ad see the report on the club website by Lorelee Hyde <http://www.johnsonvillescld.org.nz/2018/04/23/facebook-advertising/>

² Due to our contacts at Victoria University, some years we draw quite a few new members from the visiting academic population who may only be here for a year.

Having such a large proportion of new dancers is a challenge for the tutor and for existing club members, and we have at times lost club members who find it too demanding or not to their liking being in a club with so many new dancers. However new members are the lifeblood of any club, and we continue to actively recruit each year.

Advertising philosophy

We work on the principle of exposing potential dancers to multiple forms of advertising over the period of a month. This approach is based on advice from a club member who works in the field of marketing and communications, and has proven to be very successful. It raises general public awareness, as well as providing specific details people need to know regarding time, venue and how to contact us to find out more.

This long timeframe and use of multiple advertising channels also gives people the opportunity to be exposed to more than one of our ads, and time to consider coming along. Anecdotally, quite a few members see our advertising in one or more places over the month, or over consecutive years and only make the decision to join after multiple exposures and due consideration.

We use photos wherever possible to promote dancing as being a fun activity for a wide demographic. The photo always shows people smiling and having fun. We try to choose a colourful photo with a party atmosphere which includes:

- dancers of all ages (Scottish dancing is for young people too)
- men and women (dancing is not just for women)
- a variety of ethnicities (Scottish dancing is not just for Scots)
- people in tartan (for those who love their tartan)
- people not in formal dress (for those who might worry they have to own a kilt)

Our text on posters, in ads, or any other form of advertising always focuses on fun, fitness, friendship and music. Any editorials or articles we publish have the same basic theme. In this way we hope to emphasise all that Scottish country dancing has to offer, and appeal to a wide range of potential dancers.

Advertising budget and channels

Our budget for paid advertising each year is set by the committee depending on our finances. It is primarily spent on newspaper advertising, with a small amount on printing of posters, and this year some facebook advertising. Thanks to prudent stewardship over many years by previous committees, the club is fortunate to be financially comfortable and can afford a reasonable expenditure. With increasing membership, we expect this to continue to be the case.

In 2018 we advertised in around 20 different forums, both paid and free:

Paid

- Local suburban newspaper – 4 insertions of 10 x 2 column ads
- Facebook – paid ad linking to our website, running for 7 days
- Printed colour A4 posters x 40, and mini flyers x 60
 - Targeted primarily at high traffic, high visibility locations eg libraries, supermarkets, community centres, plus cafes, garden centres, churches etc

Free

- Johnsonville club newsletter (goes to club members & extras)
- RSCDS Wellington Region newsletter *Harbour City Happenings*
 - beginners class listing
 - article by a new club member (“My year as a New Dancer”) with photo
- RSCDS Wellington Region website – Beginners Class listing
- Local suburban newspaper
 - long contributed editorial + photo (space was available in early January when not much advertising was received by the paper)
 - contributed article (edited version of “My Year as a New Dancer”) including photo of member with a new friend made at dancing
 - short contributed editorial
- Johnsonville SCD club website
 - calendar event listings
 - beginners class poster, basic information with links to venue map etc
 - link to article “My Year as a New Dancer” with photos
- Johnsonville SCD club facebook page – beginners’ class poster & link to website
- Johnsonville Community Noticeboard facebook page – beginners’ class photo, info, website link
- *Neighbourly* local community page – event listing
- Wellington Eventfinda listings – photo and details
- Email with beginners poster to lapsed beginners & club members from recent years
- Email with beginners poster to current club members
 - as reminder for those who may have lapsed
 - for members to email to friends, or include in work email newsletters
 - for members to print & put up in workplaces, churches etc
- Wellington City Council Community Finder listing – updated with beginners’ class details and contacts
- Newlands Paparangi Progressive Association electric billboard – a short rolling message of 60 words
- *The Breeze FM* – community noticeboard 50 word announcement

Advertising review

Each year we review feedback from beginners, and look for ways to extend our advertising impact. We try to gauge the effectiveness of our advertising by asking beginners where they heard about us. Which particular ads people report seeing most often, changes from year to year. This year newspaper ads and articles, and word of mouth were most reported, but people also came along as a result of our radio ad, electric signboard, website, facebook and posters.

It should be noted that beginner feedback isn’t entirely accurate and doesn’t necessarily reflect the whole picture. New club members will mention in passing, months after they’ve filled in their forms, something they didn’t mention when they joined. (In fact, we have even had people report seeing ads in publications where we didn’t advertise!)

For example in 2017 no-one reported seeing our posters, and it was suggested we might discontinue using posters. Instead we cut back our spend on poster printing, and targeted primarily high visibility locations. This year, 9 beginners reported seeing our posters, and 3 of those joined the club – definitely worth continuing with posters despite their apparent lack of impact the year before.

NOTE: the only forms of advertising we have found not to be worthwhile, especially given the effort involved, are letterbox drops and public demonstrations. We still participate in public demonstrations as a way of giving something to our community, but not with the expectation of gaining members.

Club support for beginners

At beginners' classes

We encourage existing club members to attend beginners' classes by giving them free entry. Having more experienced dancers on the dance floor:

- helps beginners by modelling (age, fitness, mobility, ethnicity, previous dance experience, varying ability to pick up new skills)
- enables dances to be completed successfully with experienced people in the set
- means that beginners get to know club members and make friends with them
- builds a bond with the club by the end of the series of four classes

Additionally this gives second year dancers the chance to review the basics with a year of dancing knowledge under their belts. We have had very favourable comments from some second year dancers about what they learn the second time round, that they missed picking up on the first time. They are also able to consolidate their knowledge, and have a chance to concentrate on basic footwork and formations.

Our beginners' classes run for two hours with a supper break in the middle, in approximately the same time slot as our club nights. Two hours is quite long, but the supper break allows people to rest and recover, and means the tutor can get through quite a lot of material across the four weeks of classes. The supper break is also an opportunity for beginners to chat with existing club members, and get to know them.

Many of our beginners comment on the friendliness and welcoming support of existing club members, and this is enhanced by socialising at supper time.

Ongoing

For those beginners who decide to join the club, we run an early session from 7-7.45pm before club night proper. This continues for the first couple of months, so long as we have tutor availability and sufficient numbers of new dancers. Some second year and more experienced dancers also join in this session, as for beginners' classes.

The remainder of our experienced members arrive and warm up ready to join in at 7.45pm. Everyone dances through until supper time around 8.45pm, with a briefing only dance just prior to supper for experienced dancers. New dancers can have their cup of tea, and sit and watch the more experienced. They get both an idea of what they can expect to achieve, and an understanding that experienced dancers also make mistakes!

After supper there is one more dance for all, and our new dancers go home, with the rest of the night devoted to dances for the more experienced, finishing with an advanced dance at the end of the night.

This is a long night for the tutor and for experienced dancers who dance from 7pm, but it means new dancers get time dedicated to them, there is a period where everyone gets to dance and then

socialise over supper together, and experienced dancers also get dedicated time. It supports social integration of new members, while still allowing experienced dancers to have opportunities to dance for themselves.

It should be noted that we have only one tutor and a hall with one room, so this model is also of necessity as we cannot run separate classes for new dancers once club nights start back.

Club support for dancing in the Region

At the end of our series of beginners' classes, we encourage anyone who is keen to continue dancing, to join the club. We also encourage new dancers to dance at more than one club to help reinforce their learning, build their confidence, and help them get to know more dancers in the region. At the same time we let new dancers know about other clubs which may be closer to where they live, so they can choose to join other clubs if that works better for them. This helps to build attendance at other clubs as well as our own.

This year I am aware of at least 2 dancers who attended Johnsonville's beginner classes, and now also dance at other clubs. Of last year's beginners, there are 3 also dancing at other clubs. Of our longer standing members, around 10 also dance at other clubs. We also encourage members to attend the series of beginners' classes which RSCDS Wellington Region offers early in the dancing year, and the Region New Dancers Celebration later in the year (which our more experienced dancers also support).

Club philosophy and committee approach

We welcome everyone through our doors, and the club's underlying philosophy is one of good humour, having fun, and increasing participation. Our goal is to build an inclusive community of dancers. Our club night structure includes everyone, encourages experienced dancers to give friendly support to new dancers, and discourages a hierarchical or elitist approach.

Committee members actively engage with and encourage club members. This means they can become aware of any issues sooner rather than later, offer assistance where possible, and share relevant information with other committee members. The tutor and committee try to be aware of any behaviour which may not support the club philosophy, and come up with approaches to actively manage it.

We have a large committee, with members across the range of dancing experience. This allows the committee to have insight into the attitudes of both newer and more experienced dancers. We use committee meetings to bridge gaps in knowledge of newer members, and to try to give some context regarding the club's history and how the RSCDS club, region and branch structures operate.

The committee tries to encourage as many people as possible to volunteer to help with the running of the club – be it supper help, setting up the hall, washing tablecloths, or distributing posters for our beginners' classes. In this way people feel they are a valuable and valued part of the club community, the club workload is distributed and everyone gets a better understanding of what it takes to operate the club. It's also a good way to discover new members' skills and interests.

The committee also makes an effort in small things like providing gluten free biscuits for supper, and gluten free baking for special occasions as we have a number of gluten-free members. For our social events we make sure everyone is catered for, with all dietary restrictions accommodated including vegans.

Finally, we do not have a differential door charge, club members and non-members pay the same to attend club nights. The club has always believed the most important thing is to have as many people as possible on the dance floor, and we have no financial imperative to charge a higher door fee for non-members.

Community building within the club

The club actively builds its community by a variety of methods:

Club newsletter

The club secretary sends out a weekly email newsletter to all members. Each year we ask our beginners to fill out a registration form when they arrive. This way we get their email addresses for immediate inclusion in our club communications, and for potential follow-up the next year if they don't join the club in the current year.

The newsletter varies in style and content depending on who is secretary at the time, but will generally include:

- a note from the tutor on
 - formations and dances done on the night
 - possibly dances to be done the next week
 - briefing only dance/dances
- YouTube links to videos of the dances
- a note from the president regarding upcoming club events or matters of interest
- listings for SCD events in the immediate region and farther afield
- mailouts of interest from the NZ Branch
- other items of interest – eg info on dancing shoes, Scottish history, member news, videos of local dances etc

Social events

We run a number of social events throughout the year to enable club members to get to know each other off the dance floor, with time to socialise. Within budgetary constraints, the club offers varying levels of subsidy to club members to attend these events.

In January, before we start beginners classes, we hold a summer ceilidh with potluck dinner at the local lawn bowls club, where people can also try their hand at bowling. Club members contribute items, we do simple ceilidh dances, and members' family and friends are encouraged to attend.

In the middle of the year we hold a themed mid-winter event with easy costuming options, mulled wine, a catered dinner with paid student kitchen help, and a programme of easy dances inspired by the theme. We generally also include a ceilidh or novelty dance – eg this year our dinner was in early May with a theme of *Spring into Autumn* so we tried our hand at a Morris dance, complete with bells and kerchiefs.

To add another night of fun and laughter, we introduced a Halloween Samhain event in 2016 which gives members an opportunity to dress up if desired and dance to an appropriately themed programme.

At the end of the year we gather at a local café for an extended pre-Christmas get-together where people can drop in for as long or as short a time as suits them, for coffee or a glass of wine or lunch. Members who attend both this and our January ceilidh are only out of touch with each other for a month.

Club Facebook page and website ³

The club is fortunate in having a savvy and dedicated website administrator as well as a number of photographers/videographers. The social side of the club is supported by the club's facebook page and website, particularly by the inclusion of photos of club events. Our administrator puts in a lot of time maintaining the website events calendar including dance programmes and maps to venues, and posting photos and articles. In so doing we are building a historical archive for the club. We also post items of dancing or general Scottish interest on the facebook page, to engage and serve members.

Links to the website are included wherever possible in club communications (newsletters, emails to members, and facebook) to encourage both members and others to visit the website.

Live music and tartan

The excitement of dancing to live music with tartan flying is another cornerstone of what we offer. As well as engaging a band for our annual dance, we also run three Tartan nights a year with live music at club, and invite dancers from other clubs to join us.

The first Tartan night is held in April, with a very simple programme suitable for new dancers, all dances taught prior. This reinforces the fun of Scottish country dancing, and introduces our new dancers to those from other clubs. The second is later in the year, between our Annual Saturday night dance and the end of the year. Our third Tartan night is our final night at the end of November.

We try to support existing musicians and also encourage the development of other local Scottish country dance musicians by inviting them to play at our club tartan nights. They are willing to accept a relatively small donation for these events, and are more fairly recompensed at our annual Saturday night dances.

Tutor approach

It's all about making learning fun, providing great music, and knowing that everyone has their own reason for being there – exercise, socialising, and enjoying the music are just as valid as achieving excellent footwork. The aim is to provide something for everyone, and while not everyone aims to be technically perfect, the information is there for those who wish to work on technique.

The tutor encourages an atmosphere where mistakes are part and parcel of learning. At times it may be necessary to discourage overly-helpful partners as new dancers need to make their own mistakes, learn from them, and learn how to keep going in the face of mistakes.

The tutor encourages experienced dancers to partner the less experienced. If newer dancers are inappropriately partnered for a particular dance, the tutor will split them up and find them suitable

³ See <https://www.facebook.com/JohnsonvilleDanceScottish/> and <http://www.johnsonvillescld.org.nz/>

partners to support successful completion of a dance. This is standard, and does not reflect on the value of a particular dancer, just their state of knowledge.

Given the high ratio of new dancers in the club, the tutor teaches a structured programme that gradually builds knowledge of formations throughout the year, and is generally based on teaching 'dancing' rather than 'dances'. Where dances from upcoming dance programmes fit into that structure, they will be taught. There is also the opportunity to teach specific dances at the end of the night when newer dancers have left. As many of our members also dance at other clubs with fewer beginners, they have other opportunities to learn particular dances.

The tutor builds the skill of dancing from a briefing only, by notifying a briefing dance or dances in the week prior. Members can then study the dance in advance. In response to member requests, the tutor also tries to advise the names of some other dances which may be included in the programme. This allows those who prefer to preview the dances to do so before they come to club. YouTube videos are very popular learning tools.

The tutor aims to build independence in the dancers by not standardly walking all couples through every position when teaching a dance. Dancers can learn by listening, and watching as well as walking. Dancers are asked if they need to walk a dance, and are expected to let the tutor know if they feel the need. They are also encouraged to ask questions if they don't understand or need clarification. Typically only one couple will be walked for an easier dance. This keeps the night moving, allowing us to get through more dances in a night – up to nine on a longer night.

The tutor gives individual feedback to those who are receptive, as it is often difficult to recognise and apply general feedback to one's own dancing. Where that doesn't suit a particular personality, it will not be given, although over time dancers can become more comfortable with receiving individual feedback.

Some final thoughts

- All our forms of advertising are part of an integrated campaign, using the same images, and promoting the same messages. We consider we have a club "brand" and everything that goes into the public arena should consistently support that brand.
- We find recruitment of new dancers needs to be continuous to ensure club membership remains high from year to year.
- Membership does not translate to a full complement of members on the floor. On any given club night there will be people away travelling, looking after children or grandchildren, or suffering from illness or injury. To reliably get a good number of dancers on the floor requires a big number of members.
- Within a club's budget, advertising spend can be seen as an investment in the club's future.
- Building club membership is a lot of work, the smaller the club the harder it is, but we found it a necessity when our numbers dropped.
- Everyone in the club needs to work within the same philosophical framework.
- We accept that our club structure and style will not suit everyone. We offer a product, and people who like it will stay.
- We seek feedback from members both formally and informally, especially when anything changes, to ensure we are continuing to meet their needs.