

Square Dancing at a Crossroads: What Clubs Must Change to Grow Membership

A synthesis of interviews with Mike Seastrom, Hunter Keller, Justin Russell, Allan Hurst, Michael Sattler, and the Lang Family

Executive Summary

Across all interviews, a surprisingly consistent message emerged: square dancing does not have a product problem—it has a presentation and accessibility problem. Clubs already possess many of the qualities younger people actively seek: community, friendship, physical activity, mental engagement, fun, safety, and belonging. Yet many clubs continue emphasizing traditions, structures, and messaging that unintentionally create barriers for newcomers.

Interviewees repeatedly stated that people are not joining because of choreography or dance levels. They stay because they find connection. Mike Seastrom summarized it as: *the calls are the bricks, but social connection is the mortar.*

The challenge for clubs is not preserving the past exactly as it was; it is carrying the best parts of the activity into the future.

What Younger People Are Actually Looking For

The interviews strongly challenge assumptions many clubs make about younger generations.

Many club members believe younger people want technology, faster entertainment, or simply are not interested in square dancing. The interviews suggest otherwise.

Younger people repeatedly described wanting:

- Community and friendship
- Places to belong
- Fun experiences
- Low-pressure social activities
- Physical activity
- Multi-generational interaction
- Safe environments

- Reasonable commitments
- Authentic experiences

The Lang family repeatedly emphasized community as the major attraction. Their children described enjoying not only dancing with peers but also dancing with older members and becoming part of a larger family structure.

Several interviewees referenced broader social trends: increasing loneliness, isolation, and weakening community structures. Mike Seastrom noted discussion at CALLERLAB around loneliness becoming a major societal problem and square dancing being uniquely positioned to address it.

This may be square dancing's greatest untapped strength.

The Hidden Superpowers Clubs Already Have

The interviews consistently identified strengths clubs already possess:

1. Community

This was by far the most repeated theme.

People repeatedly described square dance groups as:

- Family
- Support systems
- Friend groups
- Safe places
- Social homes

Many clubs unknowingly market choreography when they should market belonging.

People do not usually say:

"I need more choreography in my life."

They say:

"I wish I had more friends."

"I wish I had something fun to do."

"I wish I knew people here."

2. Fun

Younger dancers repeatedly used almost the exact same phrase:

"It's actually fun."

Many potential dancers assume:

- old-fashioned music
- rigid rules
- boring lessons
- complicated instruction

Instead they discover:

- laughter
- teamwork
- movement
- music
- friendship

Many clubs are accidentally presenting square dancing as serious work rather than enjoyable recreation.

3. Multi-generational relationships

The Lang family strongly challenged assumptions that younger people only want peers.

Their children consistently described enjoying:

- dancing with older members
- learning from experienced dancers
- interacting with people across generations

What mattered was energy and inclusion—not age.

4. Safe, sober social activity

Allan Hurst and Mike Sattler highlighted an opportunity many clubs have barely explored: square dancing is a naturally sober social activity.

Many younger adults and people in recovery actively seek:

- social environments
- no alcohol pressure
- healthy interaction

Very few activities currently fill that need.

What Clubs Need to Change

1. Stop making newcomers feel like outsiders

Multiple interviewees discussed barriers such as:

- dress expectations
- partner expectations
- status distinctions
- long learning timelines
- "you're not a real dancer yet" messaging

Hunter Keller noted that beginners can unintentionally feel excluded when told:

"Wait until you become a square dancer."

New dancers should immediately feel:

- welcome
 - successful
 - included
 - like members
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2. Reduce unnecessary requirements

Several interviewees specifically mentioned:

- required clothing
- boots
- skirts
- strict traditions

Michael Sattler was direct:

- People should be able to come as they are.
- This does not mean abandoning tradition.

A repeated distinction emerged:

Celebrate traditions rather than require them.

3. Shorten the pathway to success

Traditional year-long learning structures received significant criticism.

Mike Seastrom discussed multiple-start programs producing dramatic growth. His club added more than 100 dancers in four years.

Hunter Keller and Justin Russell both emphasized:

- shorter learning paths
 - dancing immediately
 - less standing and instruction
 - early success
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4. Focus on fun before perfection

Many interviewees warned against placing dance accuracy above enjoyment.

Allan Hurst emphasized kindness and supportive correction instead of criticism.

The lesson:

People return because they feel good—not because they danced perfectly.

Marketing Changes Clubs Must Make

The interviews were nearly unanimous:

Traditional marketing approaches alone are failing.

Examples discussed:

- stacks of flyers
- newspaper ads
- one yearly lesson announcement

Instead, clubs need:

Strong online presence

- Updated website
- Google profile
- Facebook
- Instagram
- videos
- QR codes

Show modern images

Stop reinforcing outdated stereotypes:

- hay bales
- cowboy imagery
- only traditional outfits

Mike Seastrom stressed presenting a current image rather than a historical one.

Use real people

People respond strongly to:

- peer stories
- videos of actual dancers
- younger dancers speaking

Michael Sattler noted the importance of having peers tell their stories.

Word of mouth remains king

Every interview reinforced this point:

- Personal invitations outperform nearly everything else.
 - Recruitment cannot belong to one membership chair.
 - Everyone recruits.
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Differing Opinions

While agreement was remarkably strong, several differences emerged.

Age targeting

Allan Hurst discussed the "decade rule": Recruit roughly ten years younger than the club median age.

Others emphasized aggressively recruiting college students and families.

The likely answer may be both:

- recruit strategically by age
 - also create pathways for younger groups
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Music choices

Most interviewees strongly supported modern music.

However, nobody suggested abandoning traditional music entirely.

The consensus appears to be:

Keep variety, but broaden appeal.

Recommendations for Clubs

Immediate actions (next 3–6 months)

- Create welcoming hosts at every dance
 - Hold low-commitment community dances
 - Start collecting contact information
 - Create a Google profile
 - Update website and social media
 - Encourage every member to invite friends
 - Remove dress requirements
 - Increase beginner dancing time
 - Use newer music
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Medium-term actions (1–3 years)

- Add multiple lesson entry points yearly
 - Build relationships with:
 - colleges
 - libraries
 - recovery groups
 - community organizations
 - Develop younger leaders and callers
 - Create succession plans
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Long-term actions (5–10 years)

- Shift club culture from preserving tradition toward building community
- Recruit consistently into younger demographics
- Create a multi-generational environment

Final Conclusion

The interviews point toward one central reality:

- People are not looking for square dancing.
- They are looking for connection.
- Square dancing simply happens to be one of the strongest vehicles for creating it.
- Clubs that continue leading with tradition alone may struggle. Clubs that lead with fun, friendship, community, and belonging have an enormous opportunity.

The future may depend less on teaching better choreography and more on helping people walk into a room and think:

"These are my people."