

## SQUAREUPB.C. Report

to the Board of Directors Meeting

of the B.C. Square & Round Dance Federation, Abbotsford -- April 6, 2013

For those who are unaware, SQUAREUPB.C. is a marketing initiative of the Federation, chaired by Brian Elmer of West Kelowna, who serves in an appointed position.

We've learned that we're on a steady decline in dance numbers and the square dance will become extinct in British Columbia unless changes are initiated now.

"8 per cent per year" is the attrition rate identified by the B.C. Federation's Treasurer at the organization's annual general meeting in Penticton on August 10, 2012. Unless our square dance product and other marketing elements (the dance place, the price and the promotion) are adapted now, we'll be gone in a few years.

The research is done—the results are out. The extensive, professional Callerlab research of 13 years ago (conducted by the Callerlab Foundation in the year 2000) appears to have been largely ignored. At our 2005 provincial Festival in Abbotsford, your Federation featured the head researcher at two seminars. It appears that the attitude taken away from that was "that's nice but we'll just keep doing the same old, same old" – the familiar. We continue to fade away at a rate of 8 per cent annually.

It's apparent that we've been in a state of paralysis, probably in fear of change from the traditional structure that served the recreation before the arrival of the Baby Boomers. In actual fact, the "change" is directed at what is to be offered the new dancers. It doesn't necessarily threaten the existing system familiar to those with 20, 30 or 40 years of involvement and experience. Clubs will, though, have to determine if the newcomers are to eventually meld with the experienced group or, alternatively, operate a fun, basic group preferably earlier on the same club dance occasion.

The research tells us the problem is that our customer has changed and that hasn't been recognized and the appropriate adaptations made. The most desirable customer for our activity is the non-retired Baby Boomer, born between 1946 and 1964. We need to attract the working Boomers because they won't be off to Arizona for six months although they may depart for a two-week vacation in a warm climate.

The research says that Boomers respect the quality of our square dance but desire to learn at least the basics in way fewer total lessons. They don't, at least initially, want to wear traditional dancewear and are willing to pay for a quality experience on the dance floor. To them, econo-pricing means low quality.

Furthermore, research says that the Boomer's self-image is that of a younger adult--as much as 20 years younger. We won't attract them to Seniors' Centre halls although they don't mind frequenting a "50+ Activity Centre." Australian research tells us the same and goes further to suggest that church halls are questionable due to an implication of church affiliation and faith-centered activity.

The time for discussion is gone; the time for action is now. A year ago the B.C. Federation's Delegates at the Victoria Board of Directors meeting participated in a seminar and workshop called "Square Dance Makeover: A New Menu for a New Customer." Again, the research is done—it's time for action.

Callers, our front line observers of the declining participation numbers, are speaking out through organizations like the American Callers Association with comments such as "we can no longer sell new people what we have been trying to sell for years."

That organization's newsletter has reflected many warnings that change is needed, such as: "Today's dancers... demand instant gratification. The playing field has changed but square dancing with its sacred cows (programs & levels) has not." (December 2008 "Viewpoint")

Regarding the extensive training that's been expected of newcomers to square dancing, even to achieve the Mainstream program of 68 calls and all their variations, another newsletter read: "People JUST WANT TO DANCE - stop trying to make experts (of them)!" (October-November-December 2010)

Also, it's not just about needing better promotion. It's about adapting our product (service) to appeal to the next generation, as identified in the Callerlab research of 2000: "If the dance community launches an active marketing program without first changing the things that need changing, it runs a risk of bringing new dancers in to discover the same old same old." (Focus Group Survey of 2000, closing comments.)

We need to confront head-on the challenge before us and act upon solutions. That challenge is most clear in the conclusions and recommendations seen at the close of the Focus Group Survey conducted for Callerlab in 2000. (Copies of those revealing pages accompany this report.)

We have in the extensive, professional research by the Callerlab Foundation a guideline for re-vamping our great recreation to make it more appealing to the next generation. The research was done in the year 2000, thirteen years ago, and an excellent seminar at our 2005 Festival in Abbotsford, conducted by the researcher himself, laid it before us. The time for action is overdue, at least with regard to designing our new dancer sessions and the promotion/publicity/advertising thereof to serve the needs and wants of the next generation--ideally the working Baby Boomers currently aged 49 to 67 years.

The time for discussion has long since passed. The square dance doomsday clock is ticking. Let's break the paralysis—let's act.

Turning to marketing activity by SQUAREUPB.C., our Federation's Facebook and Twitter pages have been reflecting happenings around the province, where available, and at the Federation level. Those include:

- Othello Tunnels Campout and Dance
- Colwood's Star Twirlers' Christmas Party profiled with photos in the Globe & Mail
- Promotion of the Mini-Festival in July
- An announcement with a copy of the Proclamation about September's Square and Round Dance Awareness Week
- The inventive, perhaps ingenious, efforts at Williams Lake to raise awareness and gain publicity through their Christmas "Squarolling" event and their "Snowshoe Shuffle" where they square danced in the snow wearing snowshoes
- various other successes with regard to gaining free publicity in the press
- The Federation's January newsletter can be viewed on our Facebook page as well as the Dance Connection web site.

See that material and more at:

[www.Facebook.com/BCSquareandRoundDanceFederation](http://www.Facebook.com/BCSquareandRoundDanceFederation)

and

[www.Twitter.com/BCFedDanceNews](http://www.Twitter.com/BCFedDanceNews)

The biggest effort by your SQUAREUPB.C. marketing initiative was the Summer/Fall 2012 paid advertising campaign on social media. It consumed an extraordinary number of volunteer hours.

In short, we advertised new square dancer sessions on Facebook, YouTube and on search and display pages for Google, called Google AdWords. The first ads appeared in mid-July and the last ran in mid-October.

A presentation in more detail will take place at the B.O.D. meeting in Abbotsford on April 6<sup>th</sup> but the general strategy was to tell of the benefits of square dancing through a targeted approach directed at three demographic groups:

Baby Boomers, young adults, preteens and teens.

The technological marvel of the internet, and these advertising vehicles in particular, allows for precise targeting through qualifiers such as city name and surrounding region, age, sex, lifestyle and more. If your city did not hold new square dancer sessions last Fall, the ad was blocked from appearing on your computer/mobile screens. There's no sense paying to advertise square dance lessons that aren't available locally.

The advertisements would “tease” or, hopefully, motivate the viewer to “click” on the ad for more information and be transferred to what are called “landing pages.” (We paid for each click received.) Each page related directly to the ad and furnished more information through text, photos, videos and links. Each was specialized to the demographic group reacting to the ad.

Each landing page concluded with a complete list of clubs in the province offering new square dancer sessions in the Fall, including all the pertinent contact information and some promotional lines where provided, such as “free parking.” The pre-teen and teen page only listed youth clubs in the province, of which we have five.

The landing pages created for the social media campaign and future uses are:

Baby Boomers – [www.TakeMeDancing.squaredance.bc.ca](http://www.TakeMeDancing.squaredance.bc.ca)

Young adults aged 30, 40 – [www.Dancing30Somethings.squaredance.bc.ca](http://www.Dancing30Somethings.squaredance.bc.ca)

Pre-teens and teens – [www.KidsLoveToDance.squaredance.bc.ca](http://www.KidsLoveToDance.squaredance.bc.ca)

Some of the advertisements directed those interested to even more specific pages, such as:

Federation’s printable (pdf) Health Brochure – [www.BetterHealth.squaredance.bc.ca](http://www.BetterHealth.squaredance.bc.ca)

Federation’s promo/recruitment video – [www.DancingKeepsYouYoung.ca](http://www.DancingKeepsYouYoung.ca) (over 3500 views)

Canadian Society’s 30 second video ad “If You Like To Walk... Square Dance:”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1Y2loTBKGw> (over 2300 views)

We did not have an evaluation procedure in place where clubs reported how many new square dancers saw the advertising (or simply thought they saw the advertising). We do know that the Country Cousins of Victoria reported that 4 couples stated they had come to lessons because of the “internet advertising.”

Fortunately, the social media avenues that we employed offer reports regarding the use of each given strategy or campaign. Overall, our campaigns appeared on computer and mobile device screens before over 7.8 million (7,865,281) pairs of eyes—a statistic called “impressions.”

A total of 2,670 persons were motivated enough by our various adds to click on them for more information.

The 30 second square dance ad on YouTube (produced for our Federation) had 2,256 actual views, even if only a portion of it was watched, although it was obviously captivating enough for a respectful 17 per cent of the people (383 of them) to view it to completion.

The social media advertising effort was leading-edge and particularly sensible to reach the tech-savvy Baby Boomers and, furthermore, the youngest of them (49 years +) who are turning in a revolutionary way to handheld mobile devices that can access the internet such as by phones, tablets and laptops.

If the Federation's B.O.D. Delegates and Alternates decide to build upon the momentum of last Fall and conduct another social media campaign, help will be needed to re-create the extensive list of club's presenting lessons. Also, clubs have to plan their lesson dates and location in enough time to submit their information by about July 1<sup>st</sup>.

Some time has been devoted over the Fall and Winter to learning about new opportunities to market our recreation. Participation in a webinar on "content marketing" taught how we can attract newcomers through stories and compositions that tell of our activity without directly pitching the benefits. In November, a seminar was attended in-person to learn about the virtual revolution toward the use of mobile devices over desktop computers.

That seminar revealed we have a problem with regard to how our square dance web pages display on the screen. Most of them are not "mobile-friendly" which can result in visitors to our pages losing patience with the process of accessing information. A technical advancement in web page production called "responsive design" can fix that but, for us, there are many challenges in adopting it. At this point, the best we can do to accommodate mobile devices is to center everything on a given web page.

If you'd like to actually see how a web page for your region or any web page displays on various mobile devices, call up the following web site that "emulates" a mobile unit, select a "for example" device and type in the web address that you want to test. You'll find the "mobile emulator" at: <http://www.brickandmobile.com/mobile-emulator>

"Square Dance Awareness Week" will be observed this year from September 15<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup>. As in past years, it is planned that we acquire, through the dedicated effort of Federation Secretary Ken Crisp, a Proclamation from the B.C. Government. Regional associations and their member clubs should be planning now what you'll be doing to make our activity stand out at that time and the Proclamation will be available as a publicity element.

Do remember that a couple of our most basic communications and marketing tools are the toll-free INFOLINE at 1-800-335-9433 and e-mail through [info@squaredance.bc.ca](mailto:info@squaredance.bc.ca)

In your promotions, remember to tell of the 10-minute promotional video, aimed at Baby Boomers, called "Dancing Keeps You Young." Send people to it online at: [www.DancingKeepsYouYoung.ca](http://www.DancingKeepsYouYoung.ca)

Also consider showing in your advertising/promotion/publicity our promotional “landing pages,” specifically telling the benefits of square dancing to select groups by demographic. Those were described here earlier.

SQUAREUPB.C. is available to assist regional promotion committees or even club promotion persons. Contact Brian Elmer by phone at 250-768-2694 or e-mail [brian@squaredance.bc.ca](mailto:brian@squaredance.bc.ca)

Assistance has been furnished to clubs in Penticton, West Kelowna, Vernon and Williams Lake, to name a few. Also, our efforts in B.C. are not going un-noticed outside the province. A representative from the newly-formed Promotion Committee of the Calgary and District Square and Round Dancers Association has placed inquiries before us.

This concludes the SQUAREUPB.C. report to the Board of Directors Meeting.

Respectfully submitted,  
Brian Elmer, West Kelowna  
SQUAREUPB.C. Chairperson

*(following is an excerpt from the Callerlab Foundation's Focus Group Survey, presenting conclusions, recommendations and observations from the researcher...)*

## SUPPLEMENT to SQUAREUPB.C. Report:

### The Callerlab Foundation's Focus Group Survey results (2000):

From the online pdf:

<http://www.callerlabfoundation.org/Portals/34/Foundation%20Documents/200201-FocusGroupSurveyRpt-Full.pdf>

SQUARE DANCE  
Image Research

Focus Group Surveys  
Conducted For

-  
The CALLERLAB  
Foundation For The  
Preservation  
and  
Promotion  
of  
Square Dancing

November 20, 2000  
(Revised March 27,2001)

*Excerpt of closing section, pages 17 to 23:*

#### CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above feedback from non-dancers, ex-dancers, and experience in working with square dance clubs to develop this research, the following conclusions may be drawn.

1. The context for promoting increased participation in the square dancing activity is definitely not hopeless, but there are many issues to be dealt with. Addressing these issues will require concerted efforts, collaboration, and good will on the part of all, we emphasize all, constituencies associated with square dancing.
2. The Baby Boomer empty nesters are pressed for time, stressed with work, and already heavily preoccupied with free time activities. They have many options to choose from for leisure entertainment, and are reluctant to get involved with any activity that requires a long term commitment. They prefer activities that flex with their needs, and permit spontaneity.
3. Square dancing has an image problem in the general public, particularly among those in the targeted empty nester Baby Boomer age group. This target population sees square dancing as out of date, country oriented, for hicks and hillbillies, using old fashioned music, and patronized by senior citizens in fluffy dresses, with big hair, big belts and Rvs.
4. Most people say they are familiar with square dancing, but their familiarity is with traditional square dancing, not with modern western square dancing. As a result, their image of square dancing is informed by the traditional square dancing and does not reflect the realities of modern western dance.
5. Square dancing makes high demands of its recruits with respect to time, commitment, clothing and general format. It presents the public with a relatively monolithic program, asking new recruits to conform to what it offers, rather than seeking to develop programs that flex to various interests and needs.
6. A notable sub-set of non-dancers might be attracted to the square dance activity, if the activity were structured to fit their interests. Unfortunately, square dancing does not currently offer a range of dance programs to meet the needs of a diverse market.

There is no natural sequence of on-going dance programs to accommodate dancers at different skill levels -particularly beginning dancers who do not wish to commit to the long class cycle. Single dancers are segregated into singles groups. People who would like to have intermittent and spontaneous involvement with square dancing have no place to go. There are few college or high school dance clubs. There is no program of couples-based dancing for churches to sponsor. And there are no groups with child care arrangements for couples with younger children.

7. Modern western square dance does not have a high profile, even in cities where there is an active dance community. Non-dancers in these cities do not know about the dance activity in their city, nor would they know how to get in touch with a program if they wanted to. Few had seen any notices about dance classes, or knew where it was done. Several claimed that square dancing was a rural activity - not done in an urban environment where people have many alternatives for entertainment. As a result, people who might be enticed into square dancing have no idea how to get involved.

8. Among those who have participated in square dancing and subsequently left, square dancing enjoys a very positive image. These people love the activity and most would return to it, if the circumstances that led to their departure were to change.

9. The club culture appears to have two faces. On the one hand, it is friendly and welcoming - like a second family. In some clubs it is customary to go out for snacks after dancing, to go on weekend activities together, and generally to socialize frequently. However, some ex-dancers experienced the club culture as inflexible, cliquish and exclusive. People mentioned getting bumped from squares, glares when they break down a square, and factions and politics among club members.

10. Clubs appear to be particularly unable to work with single members, whether they start out as singles or become singles after joining the club. There is a norm that couples will dance together. Singles are either ignored, or when a partner steps up to dance with them they feel guilty that that person's partner must sit out the dance.

11. There is an uneasy and awkward transition from training status into regular club membership. People feel as if they are thrown into the sea, in contrast to the friendly treatment they received during classes. There is no place for them to consolidate dance skills before joining the "pro's".

12. The social transition is also difficult for many. New members often do not know the regular club members when they complete their classes. Neither are they aware of the social benefits of club membership. This transition is the most vulnerable point for losing new recruits.

13. The unavailability of dance programs at different levels of expertise is a key reason for dropping out of the dance program. Some people would like the option to dance always at the Mainstream level; others would like a program that is below the Mainstream level. These ex-dancers like the activity, but would like a place to dance at the level they learned during the first class cycle. They want to consolidate skills, and just have fun.

14. The style of calling, whether singing or patter calls, does not affect people's decision to stay or leave. However, when callers do not stick with pre-announced calling levels (number of call moves to be used) or when they move too quickly in teaching, new dancers are uncomfortable. Poor integration of different dance levels is a problem; calling style is not.

15. Despite some truly negative experiences with square dancing, almost all ex-dancers think the activity is wonderful and definitely worth promoting. But, they believe that changes need to be made, or a promotion program will not succeed. This group represents a significant target for recruiting new membership.

16. The current club organizational structure is not oriented to marketing the square dance activity. It is difficult for the clubs in a city to collaborate on correcting some of the problems which ex-dancers identified. The research process revealed, among other things, that something so basic as retaining a mailing list of class participants frequently does not happen. Individual clubs appear to bear the whole responsibility for advertising their program rather than working together with other clubs in the city to promote a city-wide program.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. CALLERLAB must determine whether it has the will to pursue a revitalization of the square dance enterprise, or whether it will let the enterprise gradually die. If the answer to this question is YES, then there is much to be done. The following recommendations assume a positive answer to this first question.

2. CALLERLAB should reach out to all stakeholders in the square dance enterprise to create awareness of the findings from this research, and develop agreement regarding the issues and problems identified. There are many stakeholders to consider, including dancers, callers who are not part of CALLERLAB, round dancers and cue-ers, and traditional square dance callers. All stakeholders should be included in developing solutions to these problems. All factions need each other, and no one faction can create a solution by itself.
3. Once there is agreement regarding the problems, leaders in the square dance enterprise should work together to develop a shared vision of the future of square dancing -where it needs to go and what it will look like when it gets there.
4. Some components, which the leadership may wish to consider as it designs the future square dance enterprise:
  - A diverse set of program offerings to meet the needs and interests of a diverse audience.
  - Collaboration among dance clubs in a city or region, to reduce the onus of club management and spread out the costs of promotion, facilities, program offerings.
  - Collaboration among callers and dancer clubs to develop an integrated set of program offerings at different levels of complexity.
  - Relaxation of some dance club norms, to broaden the appeal of this activity. Active marketing and promotion of square dancing, including maintenance of class participant and ex-dancer mailing lists, publicity, etc. at the local level, and preparation of demonstrations to be shown in person or on video at the national level.

## APPENDIX ONE OBSERVATIONS FROM YOUR RESEARCHER

The following comments represent observations of the researcher on this project, and are based on her general experience with marketing and market research. The term “brand” is used to refer to the whole modern western square dance activity. We recognize that it may be hard for some to think of square dancing as a “product” that is associated with a “brand,” but there are many parallels between square dancing and what marketers typically think of as a product.

The term is useful in illustrating marketing principles which square dancing may need to use to regain popularity.

### 1. Brand Image:

It seems clear that the images which most non-dancers have of square dancing are based on their experiences with traditional square dancing, not on knowledge of the modern western square dance activity. Very few of our non-dancers had actually seen or experienced modern western dance. The “negative” images of square dance as rural, for hillbillies, old fashioned and country carry over from the traditional dance form, which has a very high profile in public awareness. They do not attach to modern western dance, except through the name “square dancing.”

To the extent that modern western square dancing has a high profile in public awareness, this comes from traditional square dancing. This situation is both a blessing and a curse for modern western dance. It gets to ride high in general recognition because of its country cousin, but it gets painted with its cousin’s bad image as well.

Modern western dance faces a choice with respect to modernizing its image. It can sever the connection to traditional square dancing by asserting itself as an entirely different dance form with a different name. This choice was recommended by several of the nondancer groups, when asked how to promote the activity. To sever the connection, however, would cause modern western dance to lose the high profile it has enjoyed from its association with traditional dance. Alternatively, it can stay under the umbrella of traditional square dance and attempt to differentiate itself as a “modern” sub-form of the traditional dance. This choice keeps the high profile of traditional dance, along with its country image. Either choice will require a considerable marketing effort. It will also require abandoning some of the practices that reinforce the country image.

By way of deciding how to approach this choice, modern western square dance needs to determine how much it gains from the association with traditional square dance, and what it would lose by severing the association. These gains and losses need to be compared to what it might gain from asserting a new image, and what it might lose.

### 2. Brand Loyalty:

Modern western square dance currently owns a degree of brand loyalty that most marketers would die for. People who do it, love it. People who have done it and stopped, also love it. Most would go back to square dancing in a heart beat, if the circumstances that led to their stopping were to change. Even when these ex-dancers admit that they stopped because of politics and unpleasant experiences within the square dance clubs, most still feel quite positive about it.

As the square dance community works toward new efforts to promote the activity, it needs to be aware of this fierce loyalty which participants feel toward the activity they knew. This means being considerate of the current loyal franchise, not insulting dancers' love of the activity by disparaging it and not changing it to a point where they no longer recognize it. We recall a well known car company that insulted its sizeable loyal franchise with an advertising campaign designed to update the image of the brand. The campaign was unfortunately very high profile. Most dancers may remember the campaign: "This is not your father's Oldsmobile, it's the new generation of Olds." The square dancing community should be mindful of this example, as it seeks to revise its image.

### 3. Readiness for Change:

Two of the Ex-dancer groups explicitly wondered whether the square dance community was open to making the sort of changes that would be needed to expand into a new market or to revive the program. To be clear, we quote from these groups:

Charlotte: "But a big question - do the square dance people want to change? They are the ones who are teaching others. Do they really want to change?"

Portland: "But you have an old guard in a lot of the clubs, and they don't let go of the reins. Until they expire, they're not going to let go of it" "Maybe if they were reminded of how many clubs have already closed down because of that, that might help to change their thinking a little bit. How many clubs have closed down?"

These groups focus on the local dance clubs as the sticky wicket, because that is their perspective on the square dance enterprise. But their comments apply equally to ALL constituencies in square dancing - to the callers in CALLERLAB, to the callers in the ACA, to the national organization of square dancers and local club leagues, even to the associated organizations of round dancers and round dance cuers.

We mention this issue because we believe that everyone associated with the square dance enterprise has to want to change, and has to be involved in making the change happen. We also believe that the issues uncovered in this research can not be resolved without a collaborative effort of everyone in square dancing.

Following on our illustration of the car company, the advertising program was such high profile that many of the new generation car buyers actually went to their Oldsmobile dealers to see what they had to offer. What they found there was their father's Oldsmobile, and the whole program bombed. Oldsmobile's 10% share of the car market has dropped to under 2% in the last 12 years. Square dancing should beware of the same impact. If it mounts an active marketing program without first changing the things that need changing, it runs a risk of bringing new dancers in to discover the same old same old.

- end -