Has the popularity of Scottish dance passed its peak?

There are two branches that are associated with studies of the demise of SCD. One is from southern Australia where an undergraduate at the School of Marketing in New South Wales set out a project in 2004. The study likens the popularity of SCD as a product in the market place, available for use or sale. Products that do not perform well in their market are said to have low equity which can be due to factors such as low awareness, lack of demand and a poor structured marketing strategy. In the business world products can be revived. The question is can that happen to SCD?

The success for an activity is linked to its ability to remain flexible to the changes in society. The failure to attract dancers may be caused by other activities being superior in some way, or the changing tastes of the public, or people being less aware of SCD. All these factors may have contributed to the downturn in the interest in SCD by the younger generation. To understand how one can make dancing more popular there must first be some analysis of the current situation.

What were the perceptions of the existing dancers?

In the sample of active dancers the advantages of being a dancer (in percentages) were:

Exercise that can be adapted to individual capabilities	49
"Total" exercise – mind and body	51
Great music	52
Inexpensive	53
Social/Non competitive	46
Place to meet people	43
Community membership (can travel anywhere and connect to community)	27
In touch with heritage	31
Link to other activities (Cultural/travel etc)	28

And the reported disadvantages of the same group (in percentages) were:

Classes too small	48
Classes not easy to access (travel factor and too few classes)	37
Not enough young people	43
Not enough fun events	39
Not enough good teachers	28
Lack of beginners' classes	27
Not enough "extra curricula" events	29

Interestingly the average age of the sample group was 55/60. If this is the case, by 2015 it is likely there will be no activity in this part of Australia unless some process of rejuvenation is undertaken. Looking at the sample of non-dancers from Australia, many confused SCD with Highland dancing over swords or some sort of folk dancing. Their perceptions of SCD were:

Scottish people do it	77
Country people do it	63
More females do it	42
Likely to be middle aged/elderly	38
Like to be "Conservative"	53
Quiet, dull and unsophisticated people do it	12
Associated with religious people	24
Difficult to do (to learn)	57
Energetic	23
Boring/unexciting	57
Lets you meet people	47
Good exercise	6

While the first two perceptions are not likely to be evident in Scotland, one wonders if the "difficulty to learn" and "boring" features would score as high. For SCD to flourish two elements need to be managed: recruitment and retention. Making a change for the future does depend on knowing what consumers (actual and potential users) want and then trying to deliver it.

Changing an activity for the better is a complex and difficult task. However many products or activities require some modification at some stage in their life cycle. For example the game of cricket has been modified a number of times. "One day cricket" when introduced was resisted by many, but it has served to keep the game relevant. More modifications have been suggested. Not all followers and players of cricket welcome such changes, they take the view that it would be better for the game to maintain its integrity and accept the possible demise of the game. And so, might it be with SCD?

Moving SCD forward requires a look at the disadvantages expressed by the present dancers and recruits i.e. lack of good teachers, lack of fun, lack of extra-curricular activity, the obstacles of the elderly, boredom and difficulty in learning all of which affect recruitment and retention of potential young members.

Consider recruitment, the basic notion that "one size" fits all is not good enough. It is not good enough to think a general class will satisfy the beginner, the improver and the experienced dancer. There is a broad market place and obviously there is a need to recruit from active people and from a specific age range since the perception of the participants being elderly is quite marked. Although the lack of younger dancers is seen as a problem, the chance of recruiting from the under 40s is low. There is enormous competition for the time of the under 45s. For the 18-30 age group there are a vast number of possible

alternative activities. The 18-30 age group prefer to socialise with the 18-30s, whereas over 30's are not so age sensitive. However, the 30-45 year old group have heavy work and family commitments. Recruiting for the 50+ is therefore the most viable option, and the group can be reached through visiting the places the group frequents. To target younger age groups may only be viable in heavily populated urban area, where the small proportion of the population is a significant number of people. Again targeting those with similar activity is more likely to succeed. In Japan many of the new country dancers have found their way into SCD through a folk dance group. Teachers obviously have to address the situation of the difficulty of learning and the boring situation in SCD classes!

The features that might counteract the teacher's challenges are:
- Beginners' classes where only very simples dances are taught – early mastery of formations and the ability to enjoy doing the dances
- Welcoming teachers – teachers with the ability to engage and develop people
- Sympathetic assistance from a few more experienced hands
- Beginners' socials where the dances are simple and "called" during the dance
- Well managed socials – so that there is "holistic" enjoyment

Once a number of new dancers have been recruited the next problem is to retain them in the dancing scene.

There is a need to address the issues such as "lack of fun." Existing groups often tend to rely on the same few committee members to organise all the activity. Successful products/activities have produced "champions" – people who take on the task of managing and promoting a specific aspect of the activity. So in a SCD group, it would be wise to move away from the usual committee doing the actual work and expecting them to socialise, and find others to take on a small commitment in assisting the group. Committee members and experienced dancers within the group should oversee helpers from the new recruits.
- Someone to collect door money or organise the raffle
- An individual to manage new and inexperienced dancers
- An individual or small group to organise a social event with dancing

It is a process of making others feel involved and committed by making a small contribution to the whole.

Publicity via media advertisement can be expensive and is not usually effective. It only attracts those already interested. The two main communication links are dancers themselves (product users) and a website. The latter is a place where people are looking for products and activities. However, there is another long story to tell in making the website interesting to a non-dancer.

There is much to commend SCD. It would be interesting to see if a Scottish project came up with similar features and results- any branch interested?

A summary from Research project: Dr M Craig-Lees – School of Marketing University of New South Wales, Australia.

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