

Anne & Sandie's Guide to Staging IAGSDC Conventions

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Introduction - "Yes, we're sisters."

The two of us met many years ago. The exact number of years that each of us reports, like a good fishing story, varies widely with each passing year.

<Sandie> *I've watched Anne's son Todd grow up into a fine young man.*

<Anne> *I've watched Sandie's daughter Alex grow into a lovely young woman.*

We both treasure the annoyed words, "Oh, MOM...!"

Beyond our biological families, however, we both have an adopted extended family.

We have become part of the IAGSDC lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender square dance family. For over twenty years, our adopted and biological families have watched each other grow up.

There isn't always a great deal of difference in dealing with the children in each family. For our adopted "children", we only have to replace one word ("Mom!") in the exasperated phrase our biological children use with our names. "Oh, SANDIE...!" "Oh, ANNE..." The tone, phrasing, volume and intent of the protests remains the same, even if the content differs.

Who are we? We're a pair of professional square dance callers.

This is the job we carry out, full-time, to put bread on our respective families' tables. Square dance calling has paid our mortgages, purchased our cars, and is putting our growing children through school.

This is *all* we do, professionally. It's not all or who we *are*, but it's what we *do*. We are *callers*.

Like any professional, we each have our own opinions. Curiously, most of our opinions mirror each other more often than not. You'll often hear one of us talk about "my sister," and that's really how we feel...and most of the time if you ask one of us a question, you'll get an answer that could easily have come from the other one's mouth.

One of the more interesting aspects of being professional callers is the frequency with which future IAGSDC convention committees approach us, asking various questions.

You might think all we get asked is, "Can you call for us in ___?" ... but you'd be wrong.

We also get asked about everything from scheduling (pronounced "s-h-e-d-u-l-i-n-g" in Canadian, or "s-k-e-d-u-l-i-n-g" in American) to customary fees to ... well, pretty much everything about running a convention.

What frustrates us both is that most of these questions show up late. In fact, they show up way too late to do anybody any earthly good whatsoever.

This guide is a collection of *proactive* advice to IAGSDC© convention committees everywhere..

<Anne> We both love you all dearly, kids ...

<Sandie> ,, but we also wish to heck that y'all would ask this stuff before you make your convention bids, book your hotels, and send out caller contracts, OK?!

Please note that this document has not been officially reviewed or approved by the IAGSDSC©, who licenses the convention

Who Wrote This Guide?

This guide was written by three people.

- **Anne**, because she arguably has the longest list of convention horror stories the other two of us have ever heard.
- **Sandie**, because she quite possibly has the second longest list of war stories after Anne. (For the record, Sandie won our contest for most horrifying caller tale with her "*There I was, just doin' my business...*" story. You'll find it under the section entitled "Caller Breaks".)
- Both of us are too busy calling to actually sit down and write and edit this ourselves. So we dictated, orated, and emailed our disjointed thoughts to Allan, who patiently (and usually with a big grin on his face) took all of our material and created...this.

We both asked Allan because we liked his dancer's guide to the IAGSDC convention, and because we *really* liked his private notes to us on what did and didn't work at several past IAGSDC conventions. (No, you can't see his notes; that's why they're private.)

It's worth noting that after committing to writing this document for us, Allan spent *four years* chasing our butts all over North America, just to gather the raw content that eventually turned into what you're reading.

If he couldn't find us at Convention, he buttonholed us at home in Chicago and Vancouver until he got what we told him we wanted. He also very patiently poked and whined at us to make sure we read his transcriptions, and approved of the content. He also sought us out at fly-ins, and called, emailed, and relayed messages through other people. And we're both pretty sure we're glad he was so persistent.

This guide was originally completed in 2004, and was published on Allan Hurst's personal square dance articles website until around 2010, when he removed it for reasons he honestly can't remember.

A stub to the guide was left in the IAGSDC History Wiki, but never pointed to this article.

This article has been re-introduced to Allan's website and the IAGSDC History Wiki as of March 7th, 2021.

Why change a good thing?

<Anne> *We've been through a lot of conventions, and we've noticed a peculiar thing they all have in common.*

<Sandie> *The very first thing almost every single brand-new convention committee does is decide that they don't need advice from anyone else on how to run their convention, nosirree.*

<Anne> *Oddly enough, after their conventions, most of these committee chairs end up joining the IAGSDC convention advisory committee. By that point, they're always eager to prevent future conventions from having the same problems they did, and - well, you get the picture.*

Each new "generation" spends a lot of time making and learning the same mistakes as the last few generations.

Since we know most new committees won't listen to the Convention Advisory Committee, we're hoping they'll listen to *us*.

Why do so many committees experience problems? We think it's because most convention committees don't know what it's like to be a caller, so they plan everything out from a dancer's perspective.

But the dancer's point of view is only half the equation. The full equation is:

Happy Dancers + Happy Callers + Informed Hotel = Successful Convention

<Anne> *OK, let's define a "good" convention as one which results in pleased dancers & pleased callers, in about that order.*

<Sandie> *The dancers pay for the callers' time, and the callers are the temporary employees¹ of the dancers.*

<Anne> It doesn't take a lot of brainwork to figure out that a happy calling crew pretty much automatically produces a happy floor of dancers.

<Sandie> *The majority of the actual "good convention equation" has to do with balancing the needs of the dancers and callers. That's where most committees don't do a good job, and things fall out of balance.*

Frequently, conventions lose their balance because nobody thought to ask certain things of the hotel ... or, in too many cases, people were too timid to *tell* the hotel what was needed.

This is another reason we asked Allan for his help with this guide ... he was raised in the hotel business (literally, in a luxury convention hotel on Chicago's Near North Side), and knows exactly what is and isn't viable to ask a hotel catering staff to handle.

In this guide, we'll take you through some specific (mostly easy) ways to provide your dancers with a much more pleasant convention experience, and ways to more appropriately manage your host hotel's expectations.

A lot of convention committees do things that tick off callers, just because nobody's ever bothered to tell the committees what the usual, customary, and reasonable thing was to do in thus-and-such a circumstance.

This is *not* a guide for dancers. Allan already wrote one of those. It's available on the IAGSDC History Wiki, at https://www.iagsdchistory.org/historywiki/index.php/Guide_To_IAGSDC_Convention.

(Or just go to <https://www.iagsdchistory.org>, and you'll find a link to the Guide on the main page.)

This is a guide for *convention committees*, to better manage their expectations, and help them manage their callers' and dancers' expectations.

¹ Allan notes: These were Sandie's exact words. However, it would be more appropriate and closer to a legal definition to say: *"the callers are the hired contract staff to entertain the dancers"*.

Convention Bids

There are a number of factors to keep in mind when preparing your convention bid:

Dates: When should you hold your convention? Most conventions are held 4th of July weekend, but using that date is more of a recent tradition than a requirement. Memorial Day weekend has been popular in recent years, and we've seen conventions held over other spring holidays such as Easter weekend.

If you're planning a fun badge tour at the beach, and your local coastal areas are jammed on 4th of July, you need to re-evaluate either the convention date or the fun badge tour locations. For example, a recently announced Washington DC convention decided to pick a non-4th-of-July weekend because the city's a total zoo during 4th of July.

Room Rates: We believe a lot of convention bids are rejected because the bidding committee hasn't provided for a low enough room rate. While LGBTQ square dancers tend to be slightly more well-off than many straight square dancers, there's a large number of IAGSDC square dancers who won't attend a convention due to cost issues. Try to keep your room rate as close to \$100 (or under!) as possible. The lower the room rate, the higher your attendance.

Sufficient Rooms: One of the less-pleasant recent "traditions" of the IAGSDC is running out of rooms, especially for people arriving before the main festivities begin. You need rooms three to five days *before your* convention. These rooms are needed for not only any local volunteers, but also for: GCA Caller Coaches, GCA Caller School Attendees, Staff callers traveling long distances who may need an extra day to fight jet lag (hint, hint)², and for a number of attendees who enjoy heading into a new city for a few days before the convention starts.

Airline Connections: Cities with more than one airport tend to have more competitive airline fares. Also consider contracting with a travel agent experienced in handling conventions and obtaining group discounts. If the airport in your bid's host city is a flight hub for one or more airlines, ask your travel agent to get a discount with that airline. (For example, in Dallas, this would be American Airlines; in Atlanta, Delta; in Chicago, United.)

Registration Pricing & Discounts: We believe conventions could increase attendance if heavily discounted registrations were made available to first-time attendees, recent Mainstream or Plus graduations, or volunteers (including out-of-towners who are willing to work on the convention in exchange for a registration discount).

Availability of a buffet "meal deal": (e.g., Portland '98) We think this is highly desirable, unless the host hotel is in the middle of a mall/area with many convenient dining choices. Even then, many dancers will happily take advantage of this, just to be able to swoop in, grab a quick bite, and swoop out to dancing again.

² Any time you're flying a caller within North America from West to East, if it's more than a one hour time difference, they're going to need an extra night's sleep to adjust so they can call your event feeling their best. And if you're bringing someone East to West, they still would appreciate the extra night's sleep to let their internal clock become acclimated.

If you're flying in a caller from outside of North America—because there are many fabulous European callers who would love to call for an IAGSDC convention!—it is respectfully but firmly suggested to consider giving them *two* days to acclimate to the time zone change.

Potential Host Hotels

We could write an entire article just on how to pick a host hotel. There are so many considerations. For example:

Hotel Size. It's difficult to find suitable host hotels for IAGSDC conventions because we use a *lot* of function space, but book a (comparatively) small block of 500 or 600 rooms. Would an ideal host hotel have just enough rooms to allow us to book the entire hotel, and therefore all of their function space? We don't know, and neither does Allan. A lot of this depends upon the hotel and how far ahead of time you're booking.

Function space. The IAGSDC Convention Advisory Committee has fairly specific guidelines about how much dance floor space a typical convention will need. We suggest you use those guidelines to make your first-round selections of potential host hotels.

Auxiliary space. Don't forget that you're not just going to need dance hall space. You're also going to need places to put: the brunch, the banquet, the opening & closing ceremonies, the grand march, a caller "green room", a GCA Caller School, vendor area, possibly a piano bar, women's lounge (and possibly a childcare area) and your Convention's office.

Common areas. Dancers need space to congregate and chat in the lobby, between dance sessions, and before and after parties, banquets, and brunches. It would be nice to have plenty of comfy chairs for people to sit on for this purpose.

Catering. A host hotel needs to have the ability to feed 1000+ isolated people. This is required because most conventions are held on holiday weekends, when local businesses tend to be closed, or special events such as fireworks make traversing the area around the hotel difficult or dangerous.

Affordable Rooms. As our dancer population has aged, many have retired and now exist on fixed incomes. You'll stand a better chance of getting maximum registrations for hotels with lower room rates. Anything over \$190 or so is going to be tough for a lot of people...and even that's too high for many. Lower rates are better. Ask your hotel's catering folks how you can best keep the rate low. There will be compensating factors, primarily centered around food & beverage commitments, but this negotiation is worth enduring to get more dancers in the door.

Cheap food. Many hotels have provided light fare (sandwiches, salad) at reasonable prices at temporary stands set up in the middle of the lobby with lots of nearby seating. We like this, because it's cheaper than the hotel restaurant, and it encourages people to gather and socialize.

The hotel should be smart enough to like this too, because the hotel only has to provide one or two people to stock and sell food and clean up. A smart hotel catering manager will quickly figure out that he or she can clear a much higher profit on food sold this way than in one of the hotel restaurants.

Even nicer, the hotel doesn't have to charge outrageous prices for the concession to make oodles of money. If the prices are kept moderate, dancers will stay in the hotel rather than scouting around outside for food & beverage...which increases the likelihood of the hotel bars doing a higher business. (Liquor is the #1 most profitable item for any hotel.)

Ask the people from Vancouver 2001 or Santa Clara 2005 how they arranged for an inexpensive food concession in their hotel lobbies. Ask someone from Portland 1998 about their "Meal Deal", which dancers are *still* talking about favorably.

LGBTQ-friendly or at least not LGBTQ-hostile hotel & catering staff. We believe it's better to have full disclosure up front of what type of convention you're intending to run. If you have a hotel with many employees who wouldn't be comfortable serving a primarily LGBTQ populated convention ... maybe it's not a good hotel to patronize.

The IAGSDC's attributes are: Loud, Fun, Outrageous (drag at times). A friendly, very large family reunion, but NOT: drunken, druggy, or destructive (the "three D's" that hotel management hates the most).

References. One of the reasons for the IAGSDC Convention Advisory Committee is to leverage the goodwill our group has built up at previous host hotels. Don't be afraid to go to the CAC and ask if anyone has any hotel references that you can provide to a potential host hotel you're in negotiations with. It sounds dumb, but if you're negotiating with, say, a Westin hotel, and you can give them the name of the catering manager at the Westin Bayshore in Vancouver who still wants to host another IAGSDC convention six years after the first one ... it can make your negotiating process much easier. *Hotels prefer to book business with groups that are well-behaved and easy to work with.*

Transportation. Is there adequate public transit *on weekends and holidays* (when the convention will be held) to get

attendees to and from the hotel? What about airport transfers? Rail transportation from the airport into downtown is easiest for most attendees.

Publish airport transportation options early and often, because it's frequently the most stress inducing portion of trip planning for some attendees.

Location. A hotel in the middle of nowhere without transportation to local restaurants and shopping isn't going to be terribly popular when it comes time for the IAGSDC to consider bids.

Advance Notice. We're all three rather impressed with the Denver 2007 convention committee, who booked space and room blocks with a hotel that *wasn't even built yet*.

A hotel still under construction is going to be ~~desperate~~ very nervous about whether or not it has enough reservations prior to opening. Such a hotel is more likely to be willing to make better deals with an IAGSDC group than an established hotel which has a two-year waiting list to book large groups.

Attitude: This seems like a silly thing to put into a section on building a convention bid, but ... the attitude of the hotel catering staff you're dealing with can make or break a good convention. Are they eager to work with you? Restrained? Warm? Chilly?

We like the concept of trying to do business primarily with businesses who *want* to do business with us. Such properties will be easier to negotiate with, and easier to obtain concessions from on critical issues such as banquet hall turnover, dance hall air-conditioning, and auxiliary function space.

Convention Caller Lineups

The first thing to think about is *how many callers do you need?* Too many callers, and dancers may be frustrated at not getting in enough floor time with favorite callers. (And callers may be frustrated by having not enough mic time.) Too few callers, and you have a bunch of tired callers who start to make mistakes and/or lose their enthusiasm.

Using your club's local regular callers is fine, and is often expected. If you have a local caller who's done right by your club for many years, it's perfectly logical to book that caller for your convention.

However, be careful when booking other local or regional callers *who haven't called for LGBTQ groups before*.

From our viewpoint, if a convention books a caller who's inexperienced in calling to LGBTQ groups, we'd love to see a caller booked who knows the first caller, and who's experienced with LGBTQ groups, so the inexperienced caller has someone to mentor them through their first LGBTQ convention. Kind of a like a buddy system.

If you have convention-inexperienced callers, think about pairing them up on the first day with more experienced callers for "buddy tips".

Balance your callers. There are many factors to consider when selecting potential callers for your convention. Here are some of them:

What levels do they call? If you book a caller who doesn't go any higher than A2, you may want to compensate by booking another caller that's well known for handling C1 and higher levels.

How well-known are they? It may seem illogical, but we've heard many dancers debate whether or not to go to a convention based on how many of the callers are familiar names. Try to have at least half of your calling staff be names that most dancers will be familiar with.

Gender: Since both of us are women, and reasonably popular to boot, we'd like to be able to ignore this issue ... but Allan suggested that we address this. A lot of IAGSDC club members are female, and they like dancing to female callers. Try not to end up with an all-male or all-female staff. As with everything else we're talking about here, balance is the key.

Newer callers: It's possible that you may have club callers who aren't known nationally, but who've done a bang-up job for your club over the years as "associate" callers.

One neat trick we've seen at a few conventions: Take one or two full-time staff positions, and split each position into two half-time positions for newer callers who you feel are deserving of the exposure.

If you have more than a couple of newer callers, rather than putting them on staff, consider building 30 or 60 minute "showcase" spots for them into the schedule, as "guest" callers. Cleveland did this in 2008, with great success. (We shouldn't have to say this, but they should paid the same hourly rate as the staff callers.)

How much will their travel cost? Another gotcha in creating caller lineups: geographic availability. If you're making a bid for a convention on the East Coast, for example, you probably will want to limit the number of callers you decide to invite from the West Coast. There are some callers who live outside of North America that you may want to invite – from Japan, Europe, or Australia, for example.

We're not saying "don't invite out of town callers"; instead, we're saying please budget for their higher travel costs up-front when you're preparing your bid.

Convention Caller Booking

When asking a caller if they'll be available for your convention, be aware that you're asking them to create a tentative booking in their calendar.

This means that until they hear from you, they will turn down business from other people who call them to work the same dates.

<Sandie> Now, when a professional firm hires a new employee, they contact both the successful and unsuccessful applicants to let them know the result. So, why can't conventions do the same for us callers?

- When you ask a caller if they can call at your convention...give them not only the dates you want them to call, but decide on a "contact-by" date, as in, "we'll contact you by aa/bb/cc to let you know the final caller lineup."
- As soon as you decide on "yes" or "no" for a given caller *contact them to let them know!*

Clubs (and convention committees) that don't bother telling callers when they *didn't* get a job will eventually find that callers won't be terribly willing to commit to future dates without a signed contract.

Also...don't just put out a general call for who's available, as you'll likely get a limited response. This isn't a "cattle call" audition.

False Advertising

Please *don't* advertise that you've booked a caller until you are holding a signed contract from that caller in your hand. *There are NO exceptions to this rule.*

Advertising or announcing callers that haven't yet signed a contract with you is a risky business for all parties concerned.

We've seen more than one professional, full-time caller accused of double-booking when really what happened is a given convention or fly-in committee jumped the gun and announced they'd hired that caller before getting a contract. This type of incident damages everyone's credibility, and leaves no winners.

Announcing a caller before they're signed can also have the unintended effect of losing income for that caller; what if an event on the same weekend as yours sees your announcement that you've booked a given caller, so they withdraw their offer to that caller? (This is another good reason to get a signed contract before announcing a caller's participation.)

Callers Are Hired Independent Contractors.

This is a short chapter, but it's so important to us that we made Allan put this on a standalone page, just to catch your eye.

When you hire a caller, you are hiring a professional entertainer who is there to make your event a success.

You need to treat callers the same way you'd treat any contract employee [in a regular business].

That means establishing terms up front, providing (and sticking to) a written contract, and paying the employee on a timely basis and with adequate details of payment.

Payment for Callers

Callers expect to be paid promptly upon the conclusion of their duties at your Convention.

This specifically doesn't mean sending them a check "next week."

This means placing either a signed check or a pile of cash in the caller's hand within one hour of their completing their final duties for the Convention.

If a caller is leaving Convention early (hopefully, by mutual prearrangement), you should have their payment ready for them within an hour of their completing their final tip or public function for you.

How should you pay callers? Cash? Check? It may be a huge hassle for international callers to deposit a U.S.- or Canada-based check/cheque into their bank account on the other side of the border.

<Sandie & Anne, together> *Ask the caller how they want to be paid. Put it in their contract.*

If you require that callers receive a formal check, and you know that they want to be paid cash...why not offer to cash their check for them if they endorse it? Check with your convention's legal counsel to find ways to pay cash to those callers who request it. (You *did* retain legal counsel to help with your Convention, right?)

Pay Stubs

Like any business with employees and contractors, your convention should issue pay stubs with its pay checks (or with its cash salary payments). The pay stub should show the following, as a minimum:

- Date
- Hours Worked
- Venues Worked (e.g., "C1 Hall", "Opening Ceremonies", "Fun Badge Tour", etcetera)
- Payment per Hour
- Total Payment for the Event

We suggest that for a typical convention with a dozen or so callers, it makes perfect sense to invest some money in an accounting program of some sort that will allow you enter time for each caller, and track and print 1099 information later, if needed under whatever the current tax guidelines require.

(If you're running a convention outside of the U.S.A., 1099 information and reporting probably isn't needed; check with your event's accountant to be certain.)

How Many Hours Is A...?

Many callers are upset by what they perceive as illogical time calculations when conventions pay callers. Some specific examples:

- A Fun Badge Tour with two callers is *not* a “twofer” deal. You are paying *two* callers for their *entire* time spent on the FBT.
- This means their clock starts ticking as soon as you pick them up at ohdarkhundred in the hotel lobby, and the clock keeps ticking until you drop them off back at the lobby.
- If you pick up a caller at 6:30 AM for a 7:00 AM Fun Badge Tour, and the tour runs until 11:30 AM, and you drop them off in the lobby at noon ... you should pay them for the period from 0630-1200 (5.5 hours).
- If you actually *require* a caller to attend a one-hour banquet, and the banquet takes two hours to get through ... then the caller should be paid for two hours. The same goes for brunch.
- Opening & Closing Ceremonies are two of our biggest pet peeves. See the next section for more details.

How Many Callers Should You Pay At Once?

Whenever you expect exclusive use of a caller's time ... you should consider *paying* that caller. If an event is optional, you should state that up-front in the contract.

This includes not only calling in dance halls, but also *any events that you require the caller to attend and/or perform at*, such as:

- Opening Ceremonies
- Memorial Tip
- Closing Ceremonies
- Grand March
- Specialty Tips
- Fun Badge Tour

Some Convention committees figure that if you gather a bunch of callers into the same room, you can get "twofer" deals, as in "two for the price of one". Professional callers don't work that way. They each expect to be paid for their time.

For example, if you schedule 10 callers to work the same hour-long opening ceremonies, each caller rightfully expects to be paid for one hour of time, meaning you would pay 10 callers x 1 hour each.

“Required Donation” Is An Oxymoron

It's against the law in most countries for an employer to require employees to donate money to any cause, charitable or not. Can someone explain to us why Convention committees so often expect callers to donate their time for special ceremonies?

Remember, callers are hourly contractors of a convention committee.

Do you *require* your callers attend the banquet, brunch or special events? If so, then you should expect to *pay* them for their time for each of those events. That's the only moral, ethical, and legal way to ensure a caller's attendance at any given Convention function...including calling in dance halls.

<Sandie> If you'd like to encourage callers to attend an event by giving them banquet or brunch tickets and/or seats of honor, that's perfectly fine. But don't penalize them or make them feel bad if they choose not to attend, either.

<Anne> If we're required to attend an hour-long ceremony in which we only call for 3 minutes ... we expect to be paid for 1 hour.

<Sandie> This became an issue for me when one convention required us to attend opening ceremonies for nearly two hours, and didn't compensate the callers for that time.

Caller Work Schedules & Pay Rates: "Callers Talk."

One of the funniest things we've ever heard a convention chair say is "Oh, callers don't talk to each other about stuff like salary and work schedules."

Let's get this straight right now: If you take only one thing away from this document, it's this:

Callers talk. To each other. All the time.

<Anne> The quickest way to upset professional callers is to hire two or more callers, and pay them different amounts of money for the same amount of work. Or expect them to work different amounts of time for the same amount of money.

If you're scheduling caller "A" to work 16 hours for \$1600, then you'd better offer caller "B" the same deal.

What if you want caller "C" to work for only 8 hours during your convention? Then following the example above, you'd offer them \$800...giving them the same per-hour pay rate that you gave callers "A" and "B".

(Note: These figures are used for purposes of example only. They are NOT meant to be accurate representations of "real" convention salary amounts. Ask the last three conventions what they paid to get a better of idea of the range in which you should expect to pay your calling staff.)

<Sandie> This doesn't mean that every caller has to have the exact same number of hours every time. For example, if you need a caller who can call Mainstream through C4, and a given caller doesn't go any higher than Plus, then it would be perfectly reasonable to offer that caller a smaller number of hours ... at the same per-hour rate that all of the other callers are being paid.

<Anne> The other quick way to tick off your entire calling staff is to put clauses in their contracts which say they're not allowed to disclose or discuss their pay rates or scheduling to or with other callers. We'll tell you right now, kids – it doesn't matter what it says in the contract, we're all gonna talk about it with each other anyway before we sign anything.

Caller Travel Expenses

If you were a corporation with an employee or hired contractor who traveled on business, you'd pay for their airfare, hotels, airport transfers, and a per-diem meal allowance.

Here's a list of items you should either include or consider when negotiating your callers' contracted compensations:

- Caller's airfare
- Airport transfers (at *both* ends of the trip and in-transit)
- Airport parking or a taxi/limo/shuttle service (in the caller's home city)
- A per-diem meal allowance (this generally runs from \$50 to \$100, depending upon the area of the country)

Our personal opinion: please *don't* take a per-diem meal allowance and subtract Convention meals (such as banquets or brunches) from it.

Caller Travel Arrangements

Professional callers are also professional travelers. This means we're more capable than the average person at booking and executing our own travel plans.

- *Give callers the option of booking their own air travel.* We already know how to find the best fares, we know the flights in/out of our home airports, and we know how to work the air travel system. This is especially important when callers need to travel with a spouse, partner, or significant other. (See below.)
- Remember that many callers have spouses/partners/significant others ... and they want to travel *together*. On the same *aircraft*. On the same *day*. In seats *next to each other*. (Can you tell that we've both been burned by this problem?)
- Ask each caller if they have any other bookings immediately before or after your convention. It may be cheaper, faster and easier to book a caller's travel arrangements to and from places other than the caller's home city. (For example, the iPAC convention in Germany is often held within a few days of the IAGSDC convention each year ... and many of the IAGSDC convention callers also call at iPAC.)
- Tell your callers how early they need to arrive on the first day, and how late they need to stay on the last day. They need to plan their transfer time to the airport for the last day.

Partner Needs

Many events will include a staff caller's spouse/partner/significant other for some of the expenses, but here's a list of spousal needs for your caller committee to consider:

- same hotel room (and ask for their bedding choice)
- convention registration packet
- meal deal (or access to whatever lunches or dinners you may be providing in the Callers' Lounge, such as boxed lunches)
- tickets for banquets & brunches
- fun badge tour

We shouldn't *need* to say this, but ... it's also important to ensure that *all* staff callers are offered the *same* arrangement for spousal travel expenses.

If *one* caller's spouse gets a free air ticket or other courtesy, then *all* callers' spouses should. (Remember, all callers talk to each other...and their spouses talk to each other, too.)

Long-Distance Travel Arrangements

We both know a caller who lives outside of North America. This caller is very popular, and is a sure-fire draw for almost any audience in any situation.

Sadly, this caller often finds it hard to get hired, because convention committees insist on booking his travel ... even after being told he can get to the convention cheaper by booking flights himself.

At one convention this caller was hired for, the airfare the convention booked was well over \$1,500 ... even though the caller was able to find fares under \$700.

The caller groused to us both that now future conventions would look at that travel bill and decide that he was too expensive to hire.

If you're hiring a caller from overseas, ask them how long they'll need to rest and prepare to call after getting off a transoceanic flight. We suggest you may want to give them a couple of extra days before the convention to help them get over their jet lag so they can be at their best when calling for you.

Don't expect overseas callers to walk off of an airplane and start calling two hours later. It's not fair to the caller or the dancers.

Caller Housing Arrangements

This was possibly the easiest section to write, because our needs are very straightforward. We don't care about how big or luxurious our rooms are. We have a few basic needs.

- Give callers rooms *near the dancing*. We need to be able to dash back to our rooms quickly to pee in private (we'll tell you why a little later), take a quick nap, change clothes, or grab a forgotten record or piece of equipment.
- Put callers' rooms *near each other* (again preferably *near the dancing*).
- We wouldn't complain if callers' rooms were on a "concierge" floor, which tends to be quieter and more private than standard floors, BUT...

If we had to choose between a private floor and being close to dancing ... *we'd rather be close to the dancing, thank you.*

Size Isn't Everything

We'll say it again. We don't care about the size or luxury of the room ... *we just like having somewhere private and close by to retreat to when we're "offstage."*

Location, Location, Location

If you're planning on using "comp" hotel rooms to house callers ... tell the hotel that *you need the caller rooms to be all together, near the dancing*. If you don't insist on this, they'll give you whatever rooms they have at the opposite end of the hotel from the function space.

Remember, your convention committee is paying to use the hotel's facilities. That means you probably have a block of somewhere between 500 and 700 rooms which your convention is buying. In all but the largest hotels, that's a substantial bargaining chip, meaning, you *do* get to demand what kind of rooms are comped in the final contract.

Duties of a Caller Liaison

Most convention committees assign a committee chairperson to be the caller liaison. That person is responsible for all caller contacts, contracts, questions, and general troubleshooting when things go wrong for a caller.

This person should have a cell phone or pager, and be available during reasonable hours. 24x7 is nice, but we'd be perfectly happy with having the liaison available from one hour before the first dance session to one hour after the last dance session.

Other things we think the Caller Liaison should be responsible for:

- Compiling a list of all callers' arriving and departing flight information
- Arranging for caller airport transfers
- Notifying the callers when the caller orientation meeting will be held
- Arranging for caller meals during the orientation meeting
- Arranging for snacks and/or meals (e.g., box lunches) in the caller lounge
- Ensuring that our spouses/partners/significant others have their registration packets, and all of the badges, tickets, and other stuff they need to enjoy convention

Caller Orientation Meeting

It would be *great* if your convention held a caller orientation meeting to review the schedule with us, and let us know details such as:

- Which events are we expected to attend?
- What are the procedures for an injured dancer?
- Are there any announcements we need to make before and after each tip?
- Are we expected to announce and/or thank the GCA caller preceding/following us? (Hint: We think it would be an awfully polite thing to do, and suggest this would be a good precedent to set for future conventions.)
- Are there any special tips such as WFH, Don't-Stop-Don't-Slow-Down, Workshops, Intros to Next Level, etcetera? How do you want those tips to be run?
- Are there any special rules about calling we should know about?
- For example, is workshopping OK when a floor appears to have problems with a specific call? (Note that the answer should probably be "yes", to encourage newer dancers to stay on the floor.)
- Are there any special calls or call sound effects that were made up for the convention?
- Where are the dance halls?
- Where is the caller lounge?
- What happens if the sound equipment is bad in a given dance hall?
- Where are the bathrooms? (As you now know, callers have a slightly unnatural fixation on where the nearest bathroom is at all times.)

<Sandie> *Ahem. One more minor point. It would really help us if you'd tell us all **when and where the orientation meeting will be held, and tell us before we arrive at the hotel.***

Dance Hall Setup

A couple of years ago, we were amazed when Allan told us that the Phoenix convention hotel's catering manager was wandering around the San Diego convention, taking copious notes.

<Anne> *This, we thought, held much promise.*

The Phoenix catering manager saw, first-hand, all of the things that went well and badly.

When the Phoenix convention rolled around, we were delighted to find that all of the dance halls actually had powerful enough air conditioning.

We don't know if that's because of the catering manager's little San Diego junket, but it was wonderful for *us* to be the reason dancers were wearing out, rather than heat prostration.

What the hotel needs to know:

- Dancers and callers need approximately twice as much air conditioning as any other type of group.
- If your hotel catering department just looks at you says "yeah, yeah, yeah, we'll have A/C"...*before* you sign your contract, write in a clause that they're going to have to send a person (at their own expense) to the next IAGSDC convention to observe first-hand the thermal load on each of the function rooms.
- Put in another clause that says they will run the air conditioning at full-tilt to maintain a pleasant (no warmer than 70 degrees Fahrenheit) environment for your dancers...and if they can't do it, then they're responsible for bearing the cost of bringing in additional portable air conditioning and/or fans to fix the problem.
- Dancers need water...preferably in sanitary, covered containers.
- Callers need water too, and *it should be room-temperature, not iced*. Cold liquids tighten up the vocal cords, and shuts down vocal airflow. (This is why asthmatics in cold climates have asthma attacks in winter.) We suggest placing a pitcher of room-temperature water on each calling table. *No ice*, please.

What your committee needs to know:

- Plastic or paper cups are fine, as long as you put out permanent felt-tip markers so that people can write their name on their own cup.
- Please provide a separate mic (and mic cord) for announcements in each room. Callers *hate* sharing their mics.
- Callers need a stable platform to call from, with stable steps to get up there. Some callers (mostly women) like to perform in skirts or dresses. Don't make them ask for help climbing up a 3-foot platform.

Dance Flooring

There are many different types of dance flooring. One of our favorites is the old-fashioned wooden dance floor. If that's not available, consider some alternatives such as:

- Smooth Masonite (we know that's not the right word, but we don't remember the brand name of the wood paneling that was used in San Francisco 1996 & Portland 1998) sheets held together with wrestling-mat tape. Lay the paneling in a "brick" or "checkerboard" the sheets, and double-stack them in an opposing checkerboard pattern. Countersink short screws into the top layer if possible, to hold it to the bottom layer. If you want to know more about using Masonite, find someone from the San Francisco 1996 or Portland 1998 convention committees. (There are horror stories from both conventions, and they can tell you very specifically what did and didn't work.) Be sure to secure your floors to the carpeting using *plenty* of wrestling mat tape. We never want to see a floor moving across the room by itself during dancing again. (We're not kidding.)
- Plastic dance flooring can be great, but *new plastic* flooring may generate static electricity. If you're using plastic flooring, consider laying in a few cases of anti-static spray, and go over each floor before the dance halls open each day. One of us nearly killed the other when one of the dancers touched us and set off a *huge* static charge that nearly electrocuted us both. We shudder to think what would have happened to our computers if we'd been touching them at that point.
- *Never* use chalk, sawdust, talc, or similar powdered materials to make a floor slipperier. These agents can cause severe breathing problems for dancers and callers.
- We advocate *not* using plywood floors; they're difficult for lower level dancers to swing on, which translates to twisted ankles and knees, and possible legal action.
- For higher-level (C1 or higher) dancing, carpeting works just fine. For any level where a singing call might be used (generally speaking, A2 or lower), wood, Masonite, or plastic flooring should be the rule.

Sadly, as of 2021, many of the companies that used to rent flooring to square dance conventions have gone out of business. One alternative:

- Ask the hotel about putting in all of their wooden or plastic dance flooring as they can into the Mainstream and Plus halls. Those dance levels have singing calls, which require swinging. That's who needs the dance flooring the most.
- For Advanced through C4, use carpeted halls.
- Some recent fly-in and convention committees have also discussed putting "dance socks" into each registration bag/envelope, to give dancers the option if any of the halls are carpeted.

Sounding The Halls

There's enough material to cover in this section to justify a dedicated article (if not an entire book) to how to sound a hall. If you want to know more than this, go find an expert. Even better, *hire* an expert. There are four basic components that need to work well in any convention: Hotel, Caller, Sound, and Flooring. Sound is the most frequently overlooked item.

<Sandie> *Actually, we wish more conventions would talk with³ professional sound folks more often. They and their associates know more about square dance sound and acoustics than any several callers put together.*

<Anne> *If you're on a convention sound committee, and you haven't talked with any of these wonderful people, then you're cheating yourself and your dancers out of a wonderful time.*

Some high points to keep in mind about sound:

- Don't sound your hall until *after* the flooring has been laid. *Flooring affects hall acoustics.*
- When sounding a hall, use the same turntable/amplifier and speakers that the caller will be using.
- *Dancers change hall acoustics, too.* Gather volunteers together to stand around each hall in squares while you test the sound. That will give you an idea of how dancers will hear the music.
- If you don't have a large number of dancers available, try to have four people available who can at least stand in each quadrant of the hall and verify that the sound is good.
- Get someone to plug a microphone in and put on a record, and call "*Testing, 1-2-3, testing...*"
- *Ask one of your local callers to help you sound out the hall.* Alternately, if any of the staff callers are going to be arriving early (such as for GCA School), ask them if they'd be willing to do this for you.
- Consider paying a staff caller for the hour or so it'll take them to help you test the sound in each of your halls...or try offering to buy them a really nice dinner when they're done. (You'll find that you have much-improved sound in each hall if you take this advice.)
- Good sound is clear, loud enough to be heard but not so loud as to be painful, and allows dancers to hear both the music and the caller's voice.

³ And by this, we mean, "hire". As in, "pay them good money for good work."

Room Allocation & Placement

Something we've never been able to figure out is why convention committees bother asking people what level they'll be dancing...and then they don't pay any attention to that data when allocating dance hall space.

Some of this is simply common sense. If, for example, your convention has a lot of preregistered attendees whose dance level is skewed towards Plus and A2...those are the levels you'll put in the larger rooms.

Many early convention dance levels skewed heavily towards Mainstream and Plus. As the IAGSDC dancer population has aged, the average dance level has moved up towards the Advanced and Challenge end of the scale.

OK, Sometimes It's Not Just About Size

Some of this, however, is not immediately apparent. Room size isn't only a function of dance level, but also of event popularity.

Many activities require larger rooms, such as:

- "Move On", also known as "Progressive Squares", needs a large room with a solid dance floor in which to do it. (Although we both recall Mike DeSisto having a great deal of fun at the 1996 San Francisco convention, where he called "Move On" in a very long, very narrow room.)
- Hexagon tips need at least twice the space-per-square of a regular tip.
- Women's, Bear, and Leather specialty tips are always heavily attended by their respective populations.
- Some specialty tips require smaller rooms. To use an extreme example...a Left-Handed Dancers With Red Or Blonde Hair Who Speak French Tip, probably won't have more than one square.

By the Light of the Silvery Moon

Moonshine tips require a room which *can be made complete private*.

- This means you need to secure a commitment in advance from the hotel that they won't disturb or try to service the room during the moonshine tip.
- You also need to have extra people on hand to act as outside door guards.
- Many convention committees buy a few extra rolls of *opaque* extra-wide adhesive tape to use to seal any cracks or peepholes in all doors once everyone's inside. This will prevent hotel employees or passers-by from accidentally catching a glimpse. Blue painters' tape works well for this purpose since it's designed to leave no residue.
- Conversely, putting a one-square or two-square tip into a gigantic room feels awkward for both the caller and the dancers. (We doubt this would ever happen; most moonshine tips are *very well-attended*.)

Room Placement

<Sandie> *Please don't move your dance halls around from day to day. It annoys both the dancers and callers.*

For example, if you're going to put Plus dancing somewhere else during the Leather tip, don't swap your Plus & Mainstream Hall signs. Instead, leave the Plus sign on the Plus hall, and advertise the Leather Tip as being danced at Mainstream Level, but *"taking place in the Plus hall"*.

<Anne> *Remember that you don't generally need a solid dance floor for C1 and higher...many Challenge dancers are more comfortable on carpeting, which provides better traction for calls with lots of abrupt changes of direction.*

<Sandie> *You'll probably want to keep Advanced dancing in a hall with a solid dance floor, 'cause those folks still want singing calls.*

Vendor Placement...and Vendors In General

<Anne> *Please place vendors where people can find them, reasonably close to the dancing. If they're put somewhere out of the way, it hurts their sales, and many dancers will complain that they couldn't find the vendors.*

<Sandie> *While we're on the subject of vendors...it's nice for the dancers to have a variety of vendors. Just the Fials (badge makers)⁴ and six different square dance dress shops does not qualify as a "diverse" set of vendors, OK?*

In addition to "the usual suspects", why not also bring in some local LGBTQ friendly stores? Leather and "toy" stores, local LGBT-friendly bookstores (such as "A Different Light" or "Little Sisters"), maybe even a local candy store...

Signage

<Anne> *Good convention signage is important. We can't emphasize this enough.*

<Sandie> *And all of these signs with little-itty-bitty fancy fonts we can't read just don't cut it anymore.*

<Anne> *Some of us [clears throat] are getting older, and it would be nice to be able to find a hall without having to use our reading glasses.*

All signage should be printed in a large, easy-to-read font. Copy shops such as FedEx Office will make up large signs and placards.

Each room needs a *large* sign immediately outside, with the dance level printed in a *large, plain, easy-to-read font*.

The dance schedule can be part of the sign, but since schedules change frequently, we suggest having your room signs made up on posterboard, and use pushpins or plastic page protectors to attach current printed schedules to each sign.

<Sandie> *You mean, "...current schedules printed in a font large enough to read without reaching for our glasses, right? You make sure to put that in there.*

⁴ Alas, the Fials' badge business is no more as of the 2021 revision of this article. Other badge makers have stepped up to provide for our dancers' needs.

Gay Callers Association

<Anne> *People don't understand that the GCA is where their next generation of callers is going to come from.*

<Sandie> *Yeah. 'Cause we won't be around forever, y'know?*

GCA Caller School Needs

<Anne> *We've both taught so many GCA Caller Schools, and we always see the same logistical problems...*

<Sandie> *Too often, the caller school is planned as an afterthought.*

The requirements for GCA Caller School are pretty straightforward.

GCA Space Planning

- The school needs three conference rooms, each preferably with a dance floor, each able to hold at least one square. While it's not unknown for a caller school to have two squares, frequently not enough dancers arrive early to make up a second square for the students to call to.
- The conference rooms must either be lockable, or there must be a secure storage space for calling equipment.
- At the conclusion of the school, the day before convention starts, there is usually a GCA "Graduation Dance" open to the public. This will need a larger conference room, again preferably with a dance floor. We suggest designating one of the mid-sized halls such as Advanced for this purpose.
- The GCA is used to providing its own equipment (Hiltons, speakers) for the caller school, but we're both sure they wouldn't object if a convention offered to share some of its rented equipment early.

GCA Room Blocking

- A sufficient number of rooms needs to be blocked out for GCA Caller School attendees *for at least the four days prior to Convention*. Your convention can get the specific number of people attending from your GCA liaison.
- *Make this a separate room block from the main convention block*, to avoid Caller School staff and attendees from being unable to book rooms. "Separate block" also means a separate reservation code, which should only be given to the GCA for distribution to staff and attendees.
- The GCA Caller Coaches (generally selected from your convention calling staff) will need rooms for those four days, too.
- The GCA Vice-President who runs the caller school will need a room for those four days, too.
- There should be a specific Convention liaison available to work with the GCA Vice President (who runs the Caller School) at all times during the caller school dates.

GCA/Guest/Featured Calling Spots

<Anne> *OK, here's something that's bugged both of us for years. GCA calling slots are always identified on the program as simply "GCA Caller". Well, I'm a GCA caller.*

<Sandie> *So am I.*

<Anne> *We both believe this practice is disrespectful to GCA callers, and we both find it rather...distasteful.*

<Sandie> *These are not nameless calling resources we are talking about here. These are people, and they are callers, and they are your community's future calling & teaching resources, OK?*

<Allan> *Well, what should people name the GCA calling slots, then?*

<Sandie> Consider calling them "Guest Calling Spots", "Guest Caller", "Featured Caller", "Up & Coming Callers" instead of "GCA Callers". This is needed to combat the negative image of GCA callers. Staff callers aren't listed as CALLERLAB callers. Or just put the damn names on the program, without an identifier.

<Anne> Or when you say "Guest" or "Featured" caller, put a small note that says something like "Our guest caller spots are filled by callers from the Gay Callers Association."

We suggest that ALL callers who are scheduled to call should have their names printed in the main schedule. *It's a matter of basic respect.*

- Rather than taking the time to create a separate GCA Caller Schedule, we'd like to see that time spent inserting GCA callers' names into their slots on the "real" schedule, please. (This presumes that you get the names in time. Encourage your GCA liaison to get you the names early enough to make your printing deadline.)
- By putting each caller's name onto the main schedule sheet, each caller will have the opportunity to make or break their own calling reputation under their own name...and that's what being a professional square dance caller is all about. It also allows us to introduce the upcoming caller without having to look over on the sideline and ask, "Are you up next?" (or worse, "What's your name, again?")
- We also think that by giving staff callers a full 15 minutes (maybe even a little more) of pee-and-dash time would provide a more workable time slot for (GCA and other) guest callers, and far less frenetic caller teardown and setup. This whole only-10-minute thing doesn't make a lot of sense to us.

Caller Lounge

It's often customary for a convention to provide a private meeting room for callers to use as a combination lounge, ready-room, and rest area.

- Many conventions provide caller lounges with water, soft-drinks, coffee, tea, and snacks. This is something to consider when negotiating with the hotel regarding space requirements. Some hotels forbid outside food and drink being brought in, so keep that in mind during negotiations, also.
- *Callers especially appreciate a caller lounge stocked with box lunches* so we can grab a quick bite without having to talk to half the convention to make our way to the coffee shop. (That, and we really want to be able to eat in peace between tips.)
- An alternative suggested by Ed Zeigler for this 2021 revision: If it will be cost-prohibitive to provide hotel-made box lunches, consider having a take-out menu from a local sandwich shop or similar where you can have a convention "gofer" pick up and deliver an order directly to each caller for their meal break. This is especially important if they're calling right before or after lunch.
- Please tell your callers where the caller lounge is. A map showing the location would be lovely.
- Caller partners should have the same access to the caller lounge as the callers.

Scheduling Callers

Convention caller scheduling isn't an easy task. There are a lot of factors that need to be balanced out against each other. Here are our specific observations on convention scheduling:

- **Most callers like calling ALL levels.** Don't segregate callers at just the upper or lower end of the calling spectrum, unless they specifically request it. Give staff callers at least one (preferably two) dance sessions at each level they call.
- **Consider the number of callers you have,** and what levels each of them calls, and how many dance levels you're planning to offer. This will help you determine whether you schedule 30 or 60 minute (or longer) slots to make it possible for callers to have more than one or two slots at each particular level.
- There's been a trend for conventions to have larger and larger staffs. As stated earlier, most of us like to call *all* levels. **Consider booking fewer callers, each of whom enjoys calling all levels.** (There will be some callers who prefer to call only lower or upper levels, and that's fine. Try to book a mix of *callers who enjoy all levels* vs. only *some* levels.) This gives dancers a chance to get in more floor time to each caller.
- **Ask each staff caller if there's anyone they'd like to call a session with.** You might be surprised at the answers you receive, and the dancers will probably be delighted with the result.
- **Don't schedule multiple pairs of popular callers against each other.** (Also called "duet" or "combo" tips.) If you're scheduling a "showstopper" combination of calling talent, be sensitive to how other callers would feel "competing" for time against your showstopper. (Some of them may want to go and dance themselves to your wonderful showstopper combo!)
- **Consider scheduling "duet" tips against non-dancing events when you can.** Many of your dancers will want to attend as many of the "combo" tips as possible, since this is an event they can't normally witness at home.
- **Don't schedule dance sessions opposite fireworks or similar special events.** It's a waste of the caller's time and your calling budget. When some big event is happening, most people want to participate, or watch it, or do something else entirely ... meaning that your dance halls will be relatively EMPTY for that period.
- **Give the callers reasonably-sized breaks, so they can plan out their days.** If one of us has an hour break ... by the time we make it through the crowds of people all wanting us to stop and say hi, we may have only 20 or 30 minutes left to dash into our room, then reverse the process to get back to the dance halls. (NOTE: If you've managed to arrange back-of-house access routes for callers, this may not be as big a deal. If this is the case, then callers will only need a single long break for meals.)
- Something we'd like to see...what if you scheduled the convention to have **an all-skate meal break?** Don't keep dancing running continuously. Make *everybody* stop for lunch at the same time. (Hint: Callers like eating lunch together, too.) We think this will give your dancers more unified, concentrated energy...which makes them easier for your callers to manage.
- Please **don't schedule GCA callers call to an empty hall** during meal breaks. It's rude at best.

Scheduling Events

Unfortunately, scheduling is probably the hardest job in a convention, because you have to take not only callers, but also special events into account. Such as...

- **There shouldn't be a huge gap between dancing and the moonshine tip.** People don't like waiting around for several hours, and will find something (someone?) else to do if the gap between the last dance session or activity and the first moonship tip is too long.
- **Plan for at least a 15 minute break** between the end of the last tip and the start of each meal, and the end of each meal and the start of the next tip. Dancers may want to change clothes, and your callers will want time to *pee*.
- **Please don't schedule dancing against the Honky-Tonk Queen contest.** Usually, we end up acting as HTQ judges, and we enjoy being there! (Well, most of the time.)
- **Please don't schedule staff callers to call when their clubs are having photos taken.** We *really* hate it, and it causes ill will on everybody's part. The clubs get mad at the callers for not being there, the callers get mad at the convention for the scheduling error, and the convention gets mad at everyone for wanting to mess with their finely-tuned photo schedule.

To prevent this from happening, establish the photo schedule VERY early on, and compare the final dance schedule against the photo schedule. It should be a relatively easy thing to move callers around to give them calling breaks during their club's photo session.

- **Please acknowledge your local callers.** Hint: If your club has a proficient local caller who teaches your classes and calls your dance, perhaps you should consider schedule them for *something* during convention? If you don't want to provide a staff calling position, consider a trail-in dance, special evening event, or specialty tips.
- **When choosing callers, don't overlook your local experienced GCA callers.** Many GCA callers are just as professional as other non-LGBTQ local callers...and GCA callers will know how to work your audience.
- **Using a non-LGBTQ local caller is just fine...if they're used to calling for LGBTQ groups.** Don't make calling at your convention their first exposure to an LGBTQ audience. Try them out at local dances and fly-ins first. Gay dancers are used to moving quickly. Many callers who only call to straight audiences are used to calling for senior citizens who need extra beats between each call. Also, make sure that your straight callers understand that certain types of humor (racial, etcetera) aren't acceptable.
- **Calling a Convention is different from calling a dance or a fly-in.** If your local callers haven't done a Convention before, you need to give them other exposure first. Calling an entire Convention is exhausting. Consider scheduling newer callers for *half* a convention, instead of the whole thing. That'll let them ease into a full calling schedule. *Calling a Convention is not a three-hour dance*; you must learn to pace yourself.
- **Our ideal schedule?** We both prefer two large blocks of time, with a 3 hour gap in-between to rest up, eat lunch or dinner, etcetera. If there's additional time available for us to go dance to other callers, so much the better.

Caller Breaks

<Anne> Callers need to pee, too. *It's very difficult for staff callers at a convention to do something as simple as take a bathroom break.*

Everyone wants to talk to a staff caller as they make their way from one room to another. This *especially* includes us trying to go to the bathroom.

A simple task (such as going to the bathroom) which would take a dancer 5 or 10 minutes to accomplish, often takes us as long as 20 or 30 minutes...because people keep stopping the caller to have a conversation.

<Sandie> *It's worth noting that both of us have been approached for conversations when we're still USING the bathroom.*

Yep, those voices start sailing right over (or under) the door just as we're "doing our business" At one convention, someone's head popped up over the top of the partition just as I was starting to do my thang.

(No, we just wish we were exaggerating on that last point ... but it *really* happened.)

This same problem (everyone wanting to talk with the staff callers) applies to moving from room to room, too. We're frequently scheduled to work successive dance sessions at opposite ends of a hotel.

- Both of us like the idea of giving staff callers 15 minutes of slack time between sessions. Use that 15 minute period for guest callers (see "GCA Callers" for more info).
- Be mindful of how far apart your rooms are when you schedule a given caller to bounce from room to room.

Alternate Routes

When we started talking about the going-to-the-bathroom problem, we quickly realized that Allan wasn't just a pretty face.

He suggested, *"what about giving staff callers access to hotel employee-only areas, for getting in and out of dance and banquet halls quickly?"*

And we looked at each other with this amazed expression like, *"after all these years, why didn't we think of that?!"*

We don't need a "Men In Black" bodyguard corps ... we just need a way to quickly and privately get from one end of the hotel to the other, using something like the hotel staff areas.

This is something you should discuss with your hotel's catering manager. Large convention hotels should be very used to providing such access to VIPs. (Some of them may require that a hotel security officer accompany the VIP. Check with your convention's hotel catering staff to be certain.)

Pre-Convention Newsletters

Attendees to a convention will be more comfortable if they receive information about the convention, the host hotel, and the local area in advance of the event. We like the tradition of a series of pre-convention newsletters.

These can be sent out via both email and snail mail.

An archive of all newsletters should be maintained on your convention's website, so that attendees who've already discarded (or never received) a past issue can go back and check up on stuff.

What goes in the newsletter? Here's a list of things we think people want to know *before* arriving at your convention:

- Airport(s) to use
- Airport Transfer Methods & Costs -- this is rarely done, and when it is done, it's not done particularly well. Get this info out to convention attendees early, and get it out there often, in case some people missed it the first time.
- Hotel Parking
- Hotel Restaurants
- Hotel Check-In/Check-Out Policy
- Hotel Room Types / Rates / Sharing Policies
- Extra charges for refrigerator, extra bed, etcetera?
- Hotel Telephone surcharges/fees
- Area Restaurants, Shops, Stores, etc.
- Area Attractions

Hints for Setting up Registration & Preregistration

Split registration into at least four lines/groups of letters. In fact, since registration tends to have several hundred people waiting when the desk opens for the first time, we suggest no fewer than *six* registration lines for the first day.

Have two people at each station; one to get the name and pull the registration envelope, and a second person to pull any goodies/giveaway items and hand them to the first person. Having that extra pair of hands to give out t-shirts, goodie bags, etcetera, will speed up the line more than you know.

Have a trial run for registration using the Convention staff and GCA Caller School attendees. It'll show you what works and what doesn't. Remember, you want everybody to hit the desk all at once, just like they will on Day One of the Convention.

Oh. **People working registration need to be able to smile, say the same thing over and over and over again, and really mean it.** This is each attendee's first look at your convention; put your best foot forward and schedule volunteers who love helping people and being social.

What should go into a registration packet? Our suggestions:

- Printed Schedule
- Mini-Schedule (pocket sized card)
- Meal Tickets for Brunch & Banquet
- Fun Badge Tour Ticket
- Cloisonné Pin
- Official Program
- Local Advertising Flyers
- Special offers from local bars, restaurants, stores, etcetera

Trail-In/Trail's End Dance

Since this is the first test of your flooring system, schedule the entire flooring/floor repair crew to be on hand and on standby at the Trail-In to repair any flooring problems. Do this at the Trail-In, so you won't have to do it on the first morning's dancing.

If you have a flooring vendor, write it into their contract that they must be on hand for the *entire* Trail-In dance to view and repair any floor damage, and figure out if anything needs to be done to the other calls prior to the next morning's dancing.

A Trail-In would also be a great place to schedule some Mainstream/Plus workshops, for any dancers who are either new and nervous, or experienced but rusty.

[Added for 2021 revision] Might also consider scheduling some Sustainable Square Dance (SSD) tips at the start or in the middle of the evening, and invite non-dancers to participate. This also gives rusty dancers a chance to warm up before the big event.

Opening Ceremonies

OK, we're going to get a little bitchy for just a moment. Please bear with us, as this is a sore point with both of us.

<Sandie> *The opening ceremonies should open the convention. They should not be held two days later. That's why they're called "opening" ceremonies. OK?*

<Anne> *Opening ceremonies should be all about: "Hi, how're you doing? Here are our callers. Here's how the weekend works. Welcome to the event! Let's dance!"*

An opening ceremony should last only as long as it takes to convey essential information; no more than half an hour is probably a good target to shoot for.

What goes into the opening ceremony? We have a suggestion:

- Welcome from the chair
- Brief introduction to the committee
- Location of the convention office
- Introduction of calling staff
- Logistical announcements (where are the restaurants, is there a meal deal, are there room monitors if there are sound problems, are there any dance rooms in a remote location, etcetera).

Everything You REALLY Need To Know About The Grand March

Three rules to keep in mind when planning your Grand March:

1. Keep it *short*.
2. Keep it *simple*.
3. Keep it *inside*.

Club Name Signs

You will need to get the club name signs to the hotel.

Someone will need to lay out the club name signs in the assembly hall or area, so that attendees know where to gather together.

Someone will need to gather up the club name signs after the march.

National Anthems

If you want people to sing the national anthems, give them the words on a piece of paper or project them on a LARGE screen.

We both like the idea of having a local chorus sing the various anthems for the audience. (You should still hand out the words to each anthem so folks can sing along.)

You could also have a prominent local singer or celebrity lead the anthems.

We suggest it's easiest to sing the national anthems *before* you have people march, so that they aren't all carrying printed lyrics with them during the match.

Marching Order

Nobody cares what order you use for the Grand March, *as long as you communicate it to everyone in advance*. Please don't make it a guessing game. Tell people how they'll be lining up so they can find their clubs easily. Don't make people search up and down a hallway to find their sign.

Some of the marching orders we've seen over the years:

- Alphabetical
- Distance, from farthest away to the host club to the nearest
- Date each club joined the IAGSDC
- Size of attendee contingent, from smallest to largest

March Choreography

Honestly, the more involved or intricate the march choreography is, the more likely it is to fail or confuse or annoy people. *Keep it simple*. We really can't say that enough.

Also consider that long walks are getting harder for our aging community every year. Hence, "*keep it short*".

Convention Giveaways

We'll say it here, and we think we even repeat it elsewhere: *We both really miss the coffee cups and cloisonné pins.* They were beautiful collectibles that we enjoyed gathering. (We also like the refrigerator magnets.)

Let's talk about how to give away prizes, for just a moment. When you start pulling draw tickets, why not just post a list of winning tickets? Don't make dancers stand around for twenty minutes while people are standing around in squares. Making people stand around ruins the floor's excitement and enthusiasm levels.

Allan doesn't agree with us on this, but he put it in because we made him. (He thinks that this will create a bottleneck as everybody rushes up to a bulletin board to check their tickets against the list of winning tickets.)

How about creating a central prize desk for all of the different drawings? Let people go to the prize desk to collect their prizes. This should be at the same desk as your registration staff, so that people can find it easily.

Monitoring Dance Halls

Once the dance halls are set up, your job's not over! *You need a monitor for each hall*, who will be there to handle any or all of:

- Injured dancers
- Broken flooring
- Bad sound
- Malfunctioning sound equipment

The monitors don't actually have to *handle* these things ... but they should be equipped with cell phones or radios that will put them in touch immediately with people who CAN handle these things.

- Some conventions have stationed one or more monitors in each dance hall for each dance session.
- Other conventions have used "roving" monitors, who walk from room to room.
- From a caller's perspective, a stationary monitor is preferable, if you have enough people to spare.
- We suggest putting some sort of brightly colored vest, cap, or shirt on hall monitors so that dancers and callers can easily identify them in case of a problem or emergency.

The monitors must check in each room at the start, and end of *each* dance session. *No exceptions.*

We *especially* like the room monitors who come up to us *before* we start calling, ask if everything is OK, and then check in with us at the end of the session.

We also like monitors who check each room *during* each dance session. This can easily be accomplished by assigning a block of, say, three rooms to each monitor, and asking them to walk, round-robin, between all three rooms on a continual basis, to make sure no sound or flooring problems develop during the session.

Fun Badge Tour Logistics

We've never seen so much unnecessary drama as that which surrounds each convention's Fun Badge Tour.

<Anne> *Get permits for your locations well in advance.*

<Sandie> *The Santa Clara fun badge notebook handed out to bus hosts and hostesses and us callers was great – it listed everything that everyone running the tour needed to know.*⁵

<Sandie> *If you get us up at 7:30 AM, even though we don't start calling the FBT until noon, we need to be paid for the time, starting from when we're required to present ourselves to the FBT people.*

<Anne> *Callers working the FBT need to be given both breakfast and lunch...often, they're calling right after they get back to convention.*

<Sandie> *Scheduling committees: Perhaps the callers working the FBT should NOT be scheduled to call immediately afterwards for a couple of hours--? Just a suggestion to make everyone's life easier.*

We've found that "leapfrogging" two callers works well logistically, but it's not a lot of fun for the callers. We like working *together*.

Now if the committees were willing to leapfrog *teams* of callers ... but that would create a dilemma of having four callers trying to call the last tip at the last stop. Never mind...

One possible compromise: have two teams of equipment/setup/teardown folks who leapfrog, and a third vehicle to take the callers from site to site.

We like seeing the seating selection of the FBT initiated during registration, so that people can sign up as they register, in dribs and drabs, rather than descending upon the seating charts *en masse*.

⁵ Editor's Note: A copy of the Santa Clara 2005 FBT notebook is available online, at <http://www.danceinfo.org>, as are the Fun Badge Tour scripts for 2005, 2010, and 2014. There is also a "How to Stage a Fun Badge Tour" document.

Fun Badge Tour Destinations

Many FBT committees have problems finding suitable destinations. Here are some destinations to consider:

- A “fountain” or “water” stop is always popular
- Beach stops are great, but have somewhere to dance that's not sand
- Where will people dance at each stop? Pay attention to dance surfaces!
- Unusual places that people normally couldn't go to are great, such as theatre stages (watch the edge!), closed off streets, national/local monuments, middle of an arena infield, etcetera.

There are quite a few FBT stops we'd both like to see. Some of these have been employed in the past, and we loved calling there. Others are places we think it would a lot of fun to call in:

- A bandshell stage
- On any beautiful theatre's or concert hall's stage
- The rehearsal hall of a well-known dance or theatre company
- Sports arena floors (Think “Astrodome”, “BC Place”, “Energy Solutions Arena”)
- Rail transit stations...many cities have beautiful railroad depots (or former depots) with tiled floors.
- Office building or hotel atriums (it's fun to draw a crowd)
- Around computerized fountains
- Aircraft maintenance facilities (how about underneath a 777 or in a cargo plane?)
- Art galleries
- Museums (science, natural history, railroad, Liberace, etc.)
- Factory floors (especially if the factory has historical significance)
- Aircraft hangars
- Airport terminals (a lot harder since 9/11)
- Beautiful gardens
- Tennis courts
- Amusement Parks (especially the “backstage” areas, such as a dance rehearsal studio)
- Famous hotels (e.g., the Coronado in San Diego) – outside or in the ballroom.
- College campus quads
- Historical sites

<Anne> *Anything but another damned parking lot.*

<Sandie> *Thank you!*

Specialty Tips

These tips are popular with the dancers, but we think they're getting a little out of hand, both in terms of number of, and staging of.

If your convention offers any specialty tips, we believe the nature of each tip should be specifically addressed, defined, and explained in the caller orientation meeting and in each caller's welcome package of written information. Some callers have never heard of some or all of these types of tips, and won't know what to do with one.

- **Moonshine Tip** - Which, by the way, should include compensation for the caller(s) volunteering to call it. We talk about some of the requirements for this under the "Room Logistics" section.
- **WFH/TNP Tips** - Please explain this stands for "Way Freaking Hard/Take No Prisoners". We also think you should allow the callers to go back and workshop something particularly difficult if *the caller wants to*.⁶
- **Don't Stop Don't Slow Down** - This is a given level called continuously, with no breaks, for at least 45 minutes. DSDSD tips should consist of easy, well-flowing choreo with peppy music that keeps the dancers wanting to dance. Please keep in mind, that at several recent conventions, nobody told the callers what this was, or how it worked ... which defeated the purpose of the tip when all of the callers gave breaks every 15 or 20 minutes.
- **Intro to Next Level** - *must* be advertised as "introduction to ___ for those who are thinking about taking it this year"
- **Workshops** (and desirability of) - *must* be advertised as "workshops for those who already dance this level"
- **Medallion Tip** - If callers are going to get 10- or 20-year medallions, please don't schedule them to call in a different room during the medallion tip. Actually...if there's a caller receiving a medallion that year, we'd like to see that caller hired to call the medallion tip (compensated for it at the same rate as the staff callers).

<Sandie> *Don't put all of the specialty tips at the same time. Sprinkle them across the schedule and give people some time to change their clothes.*

Scheduling Note for Specialty Tips

A moonshine tip right after a leather tip is probably a bad idea, for example. People need extra time to dress and undress for leather tips.

⁶ If you are going to have a WFH/TNP Mainstream hour, *please also have a regular Mainstream hall running at the same time. Don't make your newest dancers try to keep up with hard choreography. We want them to always have a safe, relaxing hall to dance in.*

Special Events

We know each committee wants to put its own special stamp on their convention, but folks, really: *every convention doesn't have to be a show-stopper, nor does every convention have to try and top a previous year.*

A prime example of this is what we call "The Dreaded Special Event".

<Anne> We're a little tired of costume parties, for example. Do we really need more stuff to carry onto a plane? This isn't a boat cruise, kids.

<Sandie> If you're going to have a special event, give people something to do other than mainstream dancing. How about beginning contra dance lessons? Beginning line dancing lessons? Specialty tips such as hexagons?

Finally...why do convention committees feel the need to make everything a *secret*? If you're going to have a special event, explain the event to the dancers waaaaay up front. In detail, please.

Banquets & Brunches

Please, no more "land rush" seating or sticker-affixing events.

People are used to seeking out the reservation maps and affixing their little stickers right after registration. Don't hold these back until the last minute. *Let people get all of their registration business done during registration.* (This also applies to the Fun Badge Tour.)

Please don't stand your callers up on the stage while someone talks at the audience for two hours. *Let us sit.*

<Anne> *Honestly, we're on our feet all day long...*

<Sandie> *Let. Us. Sit. Please.*

Banquet Entertainment (or lack thereof)

This is where we've seen convention committees delight, horrify, and really piss off their audiences.

Here are some ideas that we *know* will work well...*after* everyone is finished eating:

- Local *professional* cabaret singers/vocalists (e.g., Kim Kuzma from Vancouver, BC)
- *Professional* a capella groups (e.g., Kinsey Sicks, etc.)
- Nationally known LGBTQ comics
- Local LGBTQ choruses
- Local LGBTQ professional theatre groups – they may have revues they can perform/promote

There are a couple of DO NOTS we'd like to see more committees pay attention to:

- **Do not try to provide entertainment while people are eating.** Please, just Let. Them. Eat. Also, keep in mind that brunches and banquets are when people are most eager to talk. To each other. Without someone singing or playing an instrument in their ear.
- **Please don't "entertain" us with amateur acts** unless they're (a) tasteful, (b) professionally performed, and/or (c) somewhat relevant.

If someone wants to stage a lip-sync drag routine, we'd rather see them do it during the Honky Tonk Queen contest. Really.

Banquet Centerpieces/Gifts/Flyers

Oooh, Allan really set both of us off by asking about this. It wasn't pretty.

<Anne> *Do we really need to give away centerpieces to dancers who already have too many carry-ons for the airplane?*

<Sandie> *Centerpieces do not need to be SIX FEET TALL, because people can't see through them.*

<Anne> *We haven't had convention coffee mugs for a long time. It was a nice touch, and a cheap, easy, and fun collectible. We'd like to see more of 'em, please.*

<Sandie> *And the pins. We also miss the little cloisonné pins each convention produced.*

Fly-in flyers on each table at brunch and banquets are a great way to kill trees. Please put these on a table out front of the banquet/brunch hall. If you insist on putting flyers on every table—which we both believe is a waste of time and effort—don't be surprised when they're used for taking notes, exchanging phone numbers, or just left on the tables for the banquet staff to clean up.

Evening Entertainment

With one exception (noted below), the Convention committee doesn't usually need to arrange this. Sometimes there's nothing available in the immediate area surrounding the hotel, or downtown, and/it's just not practical to go to an area where entertainment *can* be found in the evenings.

To help your dancers entertain themselves after the dancing is over each day, here are a few suggestions.

The convention committee should make some sort of LGBT-friendly Bar/Theatre/Entertainment guides available in the packet.

<Anne> *The exception to "no evening entertainment" - we both love piano bars/lounges/whatever.*

<Sandie> *Uh-huh. A nightly Piano Bar is always popular at a convention.*

We both especially like seeing a piano in the hotel lobby – you'd be *amazed* at some of the honestly terrific musical talent that attends a convention.

If your committee wants to do something useful for evening entertainment, have the hotel place a piano in the bar area that our folks can play. We have plenty of talented piano players in our group.

Consider offering a discount to any attendees who are willing to play the piano every night (in shifts, of course). We know of at least three dancers who are also professional musicians who would happily take you up on such an offer.

Closing Ceremonies

That "round robin" thing (multiple callers sharing the final tip, each caller calling a single sequence) can be great or a nightmare, depending upon how you set up the equipment and the ceremonies. Here are our personal observations.

- We *hate* funky sound equipment that claims to mix twelve mics at once. We'd rather use our own splitters, thank you.
- It's easier for us to share three or four mics if you split us up into small groups. We can hand off 3 or 4 mics as a group to the next group. (This is the only time we don't mind sharing mics...as long as it's not one of *our* mics.)
- Keep the closing ceremonies *short and simple*. One resolving sequence per caller.
- *Don't* ask for an extra tip because people are still full of energy.
- *Leave them wanting more*, OK?

The Last Day

The closing day of a convention is as important as the opening day. Here are some of our observations about what to do and not do on the last day. Many people leave a convention *on* the last day, which means you need to plan for early departures and fewer dancers. For example:

- Have closing ceremonies on the *morning* of the last day, scheduled to end *well in advance of the hotel's check-out time*, so that as many people as possible can be together to close out the weekend.
- If you schedule the Memorial Tip to happen during the closing ceremony, don't let it be the last thing on the program. You want to begin and end the convention on a high note.
- Closing ceremony tips should *not* be 25 to 45 minutes long! Each caller should be asked to call a single resolving sequence – singing call sequences are usually pretty good for this purpose – and then pass the mic on to the next caller.

If you have too many callers to accomplish this in less than 20 minutes, ask some of your staff callers for suggestions on how to work around the problem. Trust us, we'll work something out. *Oh, and ask us about this during the orientation meeting, OK?*

- Make time in the closing ceremony to turn over the Ugly Suitcases to next year's convention committee. It may be hokey, but this is part of the process of establishing continuity for your dancers. It's also considered polite to introduce the committee chairpersons for next year's convention at this time.
- Another hokey (and recent) ceremony: passing the IAGSDC Torch and/or Ugly Blue Suitcase to the next year's convention committee. Don't forget you're expected to apply a travel sticker for your own city before passing on the torch.⁷

<Anne> *If you have the closing ceremonies early, keep all of your rooms open on the afternoon of the last day.*

You don't want to penalize higher-level dancers who have paid the same amount of money as lower-level dancers by closing or sharing their calls. However...

<Sandie> *A lot of the halls often empty out the last afternoon/evening after closing ceremonies.*

If you think a lot of people are going to leave on the afternoon/evening on the last day ... move to a reduced hall schedule, sharing halls between a couple of levels. That'll let the dedicated dancers keep going while other people say their goodbyes, etcetera.

[end]

⁷ The Torch was a ceremonial item passed from committee to committee in the early to mid 2000s. At the time of this document's most current revision (2021), the passing of the torch has been lost from memory, and no record exist.

It is still customary to pass a battered blue American Tourister suitcase from convention to convention.

The history of the blue suitcase can be found at https://www.iagsdchistory.org/historywiki/index.php/Blue_Suitcase