

# Dance devotion

## Melanie Murphy introduces the RAD global community of dancers and dance teachers

**T**he Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) is an international dance education and training organisation with a rich heritage and a history spanning nine decades. Despite being a multi-faceted organisation operating in a multiplicity of contexts, at its core the Royal Academy of Dance is a membership organisation and its members are at the heart of the RAD's operations.

Although the RAD was founded in London in 1920 as a British institution (the then 'Association of Teachers of Operatic Dancing in Great Britain'), today two-thirds of its 13,000 members are based overseas in 79 countries. Over half of those members are professional dance teachers, committed to inspiring children and young people by teaching them to dance, every day. And the other 50% are made up of some of those students (taking examinations and dancing vocationally), dancers at various stages in their careers, choreographers, notators\* and dance enthusiasts.

In short, our membership is a wonderful, vibrant, mixed bag of people in far-flung places! It doesn't matter how each individual member or friend of the RAD engages with dance; it only matters that they do engage because no matter where they are in the world, they are all connected by that wonderful art form that is dance.

### That funny thing called membership

Isn't it funny? It wasn't until I sat down to write about membership for *JAM* that I asked myself the all-important question. What does membership mean? Taking it literally, 'membership' has two senses: (1) the state of being a member; (2) the body of members of an organisation or group.

In the first sense, 'the state of being a member', the more interesting question is, what are you a member of and why? Any membership organisation worth its salt should be able to answer the 'what's in it for me?' question on behalf of its members. Why do members join? What benefits, services and level of service do they want, need and expect?

In the second sense of the word, 'the body of members', one assumes, carries weight, and is greater than the sum of its parts. A membership body therefore has the strength to effect change but, as many colleagues will know too well, it also has the power to stop change in its tracks.

In each sense, the idea of the collective, of connectivity and a sense of belonging to a community or being part of something that is bigger than the individual, is the strength of the membership ideal.

### How do we measure up for our members?

In these terms this 'membership thing' sounds exciting, doesn't it? A group of like-minded people coming together in powerful unison to get things done; to make a difference. However, how often as membership professionals do we take our members for granted or let things stagnate? Take a moment to think about how your members measure up. If the ideal conjures up the image of a 'perfect storm' of loyal and engaged members, hands up everyone who is left with 'a wet weekend' as the only comparable metaphor?

If you have your hand up (or even half up) I imagine that you are feeling a little despondent right now. But ask yourself how your actual members feel. They were once alive with excitement about your organisation, eager to give feedback, perhaps even willing to volunteer, and now they can't even be bothered to read their membership magazine. So what happens to make happily engaged and committed members want to divorce their membership organisations?

Without mixing my metaphors too much, it seems to me that there really is something in this marriage comparison; after all, any type of membership is, in its simplest form, a relationship. So, speaking as a recently married woman and as a membership marketer, I think that members generally want three things out of their relationship with an organisation:

- Value: value for money; relevant benefits, services and information; efficient, respectful and professional customer service.
- To be valued: to be treated as a 'person'; appreciated and rewarded for loyalty; recognised for achievements.
- Values: to know, understand and believe in the vision, mission and values of the organisation of which they are a part; to be able to trust and to be inspired.

\*Dance notation is a system that can document any form of dance or human movement and is primarily used for the preservation of dance and the analysis and reconstruction of choreography.



### Making the marriage work

Like many membership organisations the RAD has experienced difficulties in sustaining membership over the last five to ten years, where the trend more often than not has been one of decline. More recently, however, we have begun to arrest that decline and last year achieved a 2% increase on the global membership base which looks set to continue this year.

We have achieved this by going back to basics and developing a very simple strategy based around four Rs:

- Retention
- Recruitment
- Research
- Responsiveness

Underpinning those four principles is a commitment to improved communication with all members in terms of frequency, quality and direction, i.e. a consistent, two-way dialogue with members delivered in different ways across different channels.

Getting to know your members, understanding their needs and wants and then meeting or exceeding their expectations is the only way to deliver value. Equally, taking the time to thank, personally and publicly, Life Members, for example, for their contribution to an organisation is one effective way of communicating to all members that they are valued. After all, everyone likes to be appreciated. And finally, depending on the type of organisation

that you are, it may well be that what you stand for is what attracted many members to you in the first place. However, as organisations operating in competitive markets and constantly changing environments, change is often a requirement of survival. In so doing and with a determination to keep members informed on what and why change is necessary it is easy to forget to communicate that, although there has been a policy change, perhaps necessitated by government legislation, the fundamental values of the organisation remain the same.

I may have been a wife for less than 12 months but I already know that the secret to a happy marriage lies in constant communication. You have to work at a marriage and you have to talk everything through – membership is no different. ●



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