

Who is Popular?

At this point you are a considerate social dancer who always puts his/her partner first. But building a reputation takes time. What makes someone popular at first sight? If you look around a dance hall at the start of a song, you will see dancers going around, scanning the crowd, looking for their next partner. Surely, you think to yourself, they don't all know their potential partners. Then what are they looking for? Here are some answers:

Good dancers are in demand: This is by far the most effective way of becoming popular in the dancing circles. Regardless of everything else, good dancers are always in demand. This should serve as a powerful incentive to try and improve your dancing. There is no need to know a million patterns; but one needs to have good technique and lead/follow. Practice, practice, practice! Then practice some more.

Dancers seek dancers: Dancers are more likely to seek those they see dancing on the floor. Only as a second choice do they turn to those sitting on the sidelines. Maybe this is due to a feeling of confidence that someone seen on the floor is actually a dancer, or a pleasant dancer, or is less likely to decline a dance. Whatever the reason, if you are seen dancing on the floor, you have a better chance of getting the next dance. Think of it as a form of dancers' inertia. Getting over this inertia will help you have a pleasant night of dancing. Do your best to get the first few dances once you arrive at a dance event; it gets easier afterwards.

Dance shoes: Dancers look for dancers, but how does one spot a dancer (unless you see one dancing)? The answer is: dance shoes! At a dance event where people don't know each other, you will see experienced dancers scan the crowd, not looking at faces, but rather looking at the feet! Making an investment in a pair of dance shoes is a sign of enthusiasm for dancing. Dancers know that, so wearing dance shoes will increase your chances of getting asked to dance.

Dancers seek those who say ``yes'': Being turned down for a dance is never fun. Besides, it is a waste of time: with only a few seconds between songs, if one gets turned down once or twice, the next song is a loss. If you decline dances, or if you look stern, or hard to please, your chances of being asked to dance will be reduced, which brings us to the next point.

Eagerness, willingness to dance: Stand close to the edge of the dance floor. Watch the dancers on the floor, tap your foot to the music. Smile. Dancers will be attracted to you if they feel you want to dance. Better yet, don't wait to be asked. Go ask someone to dance! What is the worst that can happen? Even if you are turned down, you have demonstrated your willingness to dance.

Sense of humor, pleasantness: Be nice to your partner. He/She was certainly nice enough to ask you to dance, or agree to dance with you, so return the favor. Remember, you are there to have fun, so have fun! Have, or at least emulate, a pleasant demeanor. Most importantly, smile!

Physical attraction: This is the one factor that is somewhat out of our control, but it is undeniable that in dancing, as everywhere else, good-looking people have an advantage. Men, especially, will gravitate to pretty women. Women, while lamenting the shallowness of men, generally behave no better.

That said, for the most of us who are not endowed with movie-star looks, there is good news. Good looks might help in getting the first dance, but in the long run, personality, sense of humor, and most importantly good dancing skills, trumps good looks (at least on the dance floor).

Dance Partners

We already know about not monopolizing a partner. Dance etiquette has ruled that no more than two consecutive songs be danced with the same partner, so that everyone can find a diversity of partners to dance with. To do this is not only fair, it is smart: you will get to dance with everyone and improve the prospects of your social dancing.

Dancing with a wide set of partners is a cornerstone of social dancing. This general principle applies to everyone, including dancers who are romantically involved. A romantic pair that dances only with one another undermines the structure of social dancing by refusing to contribute to it.

Romantic couples who refuse to dance with others often act out of fear and inhibition: fear of damaging the romance by dancing with someone else, or feelings of insecurity when their sweetheart is dancing with someone else. These negative emotions are unfounded, and arise from completely invalid notions of social dancing. Requesting or accepting a dance carries no commitment outside of the duration of a song, typically 3-5 minutes. Think of it as a brief chat with someone in a cocktail party, before moving on to the next conversation. Going to a dance and declining to dance with everyone is as boring and pointless as going to a party and not speaking to anyone.

A great way to increase one's circle of dance acquaintances is to ask beginners to dance. I still fondly remember the advanced dancers who with some degree of regularity asked me to dance when I was a novice. Dancing with beginners is not only an excellent way to develop your lead/follow, but also is a great human investment that will pay off handsomely, because novice dancers don't remain that way for long. Don't think of dancing with a novice as charity, you are doing yourself a favor.

On the other hand, be judicious about asking those more skillful than you. If everyone was constantly seeking dance partners better than themselves, virtually no dancing would take place. Dancers are nice, so the skillful partners that you seek may not decline at first, but if you continue to hunt them down, they will start avoiding you. My rule of thumb is: the frequency of asking someone to dance is inversely proportional with their level of dancing. If someone is far more skilled than you, then ask them only sparingly (of course feel free to accept whenever they ask you, which could be often). If someone is equally or less skilled than you, ask them more often.

How do you get dancers, especially better dancers, to dance with you? Just be a considerate, warm, fun-loving partner, and keep improving your dancing.

Finally, on the subject of regular dance partners: whether or not to have a regular partner depends on many factors. The obvious advantage of a dance partnership is having someone to take classes and practice with, or to go out dancing with, especially to places not frequented by dancers. However, dance partnerships present unique challenges, and may complicate other parts of your life. A dance partnership is a very special kind of relationship, with a delicate balance, whose maintenance is highly nontrivial. The interaction of dance partnerships with your personal and romantic life is especially something to be carefully considered.

There are many arguments both in favor and against regular dance partnerships; the validity of each of these arguments varies greatly according to the personalities involved. Like any other relationship, a dance partnership requires care, consideration, and expenditure of time and effort. Before getting into a partnership, make sure you are willing to make the personal investment necessary to make it a success.

It is worth noting that one has no claim on the regular dance partner during a social dance. In a social dance, everyone dances with everyone, with the exception of the first and last dance of the evening, which can be reserved.

The Dance Community

Shortly after starting to dance, you will have come across most of the "regulars" who make up the backbone of the local dance community. Dance communities are fairly small. The dance community is like a family, and its members are like family members. Friendships come and go over time, but family is there forever. That is why maintenance of relationships within a family is critical: few of us ever choose new parents or siblings. Once a relationship within a family has soured, its effects are long-lasting and painful. In the same vein, it pays to maintain good relationships in the dance community, because as long as you go dancing in the same geographical area, you will run into the same people over and over again, and awkward situations will remain, well, awkward.