

# 52 Strategies to Make Your Classes and Games Grow

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**Overview:** What is the difference between teaching bridge in highly populated cities rather than in more sparsely populated smaller cities and towns? **Your Market Base.** Somewhere I read a demographic that about 10% to 15% of the population plays bridge. So if your population is one million, you have between 100,000 to 150,000 bridge players, and if you live in a city the size of Halifax with a population of 300,000 you have 30,000 to 45,000 players. From that number you must draw your students.

I have learned that students do not come out of the woodwork just to learn the game of bridge – they need prompting. They need YOU to suggest that they **want** to take lessons!! Then once you have them – you have to get them hooked.

Your students may move on to playing more and taking lessons less or they might play in a Supervised Play game and continue taking lessons forever. You want to run a good service based business.

The Bridge Studio has grown from a little Studio (in 1998 we held one morning class, beginners of about 16 students; one afternoon class, intermediate, approximately 12 students and in the evening one sanctioned game with 8 or so tables). Today we have bridge Monday through Friday morning, afternoon and evening. Each week we teach approximately 60 beginners, 60 intermediates, have 24 tables of supervised (unsanctioned) bridge, 20 tables sanctioned limited games and 55 or more tables in our sanctioned open games. **PLUS** the other Halifax Bridge club has the same amount of business – maybe even more in their supervised games. Plus we run weekend games and workshops.

I've come up with 52 things we do that I feel have allowed our bridge business to become what it is today. I hope you can use some of these ideas:

## The 52 Strategies

**52. Name tags** – Issue new ones each week. It is a great way to learn your students and players names. I use regular labels and have cute stickers on them.

**51. Phone lists** – At the end of each series of lessons (be sure to ask for permission), have the players pass around a list, then I photocopy.

- 50. KNOW your material.** Study it! Understand it! Practice it! Be prepared for questions before you present it. AND if something comes up you are not sure about – don't make up an answer. Sooner or later, the student will find out they were given bad advice or information and your reputation will be **toast**.
- 49. Have access to good reference material or reference person.** Do not use too many sources, because you will find that they contradict each other.
- 48. Create a logo,** catchy name, something easy to remember. Create a mission statement. My logo is easily recognized.
- 47. Logo Power.** People will remember your ad or logo if they see it often enough. Someone might not even think of taking bridge lessons for another five years, but if your name and number is out there enough, they will remember you.
- 46. Get a sign for your car** – Bridge Lesson bumper-sticker!! I added my telephone number. You can have an inexpensive magnetic sign made for your car. Keep it on display when you are driving around town.
- 45. Fridge magnets** – with telephone, e-mail and web site.
- 44. Pens & Pencils and other promotional items** – include your club name, phone number and web site – you do not mind if they leave them around, especially at other bridge centers – it is more advertising.
- 43. Look professional, act professionally** – You will gain respect and you show respect.
- 42. Be out and about.** Drop into other games and classes. I have taken my students to one of the seniors' games; very casual, non-sanctioned. I have purchased a table at the local charity event.
- 41. Tell a joke** – or in my case, tell a story – Most of the time the story is about something I did wrong when I was learning how to play. Making mistakes is part of the game.
- 40. Personal items with name and logo.** I have clothing with my Bridge Studio logo and name. Balon (my former business partner) and I bought them for fun when we first started – a little investment that has paid off. I still wear the shirts, advertise when I go to outside bridge functions, and I can write off the clothing as a promotional expense.
- 39. Write your own bridge article to submit to your local paper.** If you are in a small community your chances are better of getting it published – but first, you have to write the article.
- 38. Try other venues,** if your local paper does not seem interested. I have had articles in the Sear's "Mature Outlook" magazine, a veteran's newsletter, and the community section of the Daily News. I got into the community section by purchasing an ad, and then they agreed to print my article.
- 37. Get your students in the game!!** All those lessons are not worth much if your students do not play. And once they get addicted to playing – they will take MORE lessons!!

**36. Special events with your students in mind.** We hold two 0 to 300 games. Once they get over 300 masterpoints, they are bid a fond farewell and given a Free Pass for an open game. We encourage them when it's time to move on.

**35. Bus trip to a local sectional tournament** – Sectional tournaments have more “C” players participating (a larger peer group), making it a more comfortable environment. Provide fun on the bus and get them excited to go and play.

**34. Tournament advice while on the bus** – Some basics ethics should be the theme on the bus, plus mini-lessons and some fun stuff. **AND** while at the event, be sure to check on your new players. Help them score a team game. Encourage them even when they scored 34% in the pair's event.

**33. Follow-up of Hands from the Bus** trip tournament, or even from a local tournament – I hold a session where we review hands and auctions. If you have time at the tournament, check after the rounds for hands they had trouble with and do a class around those as well.

**32. Get your students involved.** Setting up, making boards, cleaning up and baking. Be sure to thank them!!

**31. Social events – with little or no bridge.** Truro (population of 12,000) hosts a Christmas party with a couple of tables that had an ongoing game. Some play and some just socialize. They had fun while NETWORKING.

**30. Community Involvement.** Is someone in your class active in a Fun Run or other community activity? You could help support their efforts by holding a game. POTLUCKS are popular. A church holding a fundraiser? – donate a “Lesson Package” or some free plays for a Learning Game.

**29. Yellow Pages** – advertise lessons in the yellow pages. Put in the words American Contract Bridge League and qualify for the CAP (Cooperative Advertising Program) subsidy.

**28. Local events** – I advertise in the program for a local choral competition. A small advertisement is cheap, and it gets our name out there.

**27. Encourage, encourage, encourage.** Bridge is an addictive game. If there are other places to play or even to take lessons, encourage your students to attend. **Number 1** – once they start to play, they will continue. Your student's loyalties will **always** lie with you. I have confidence that my Studio has better games and most certainly better lessons. So when they try out the competition, I know they will be back.

**26. With that said, I do not put down the other clubs or learning facilities.** I might toot my whistle that my teachers are better- trained and we have the most up-to-date materials. Discouraging your students from visiting another venue will make them uncomfortable around you, if they chose to try something different.

**25. My positive attitude** makes it easy for strangers to come to MY studio. They always feel welcome, by me and my students.

**24. Check on your students.** If someone has been AWOL for awhile, you may think he is traveling when in fact he might be in the hospital, or just lost a spouse, friend or family member. Give them a call.

**23. Patience is a virtue** – especially if you are a bridge teacher. The smaller your community, the more patient you will have to be. If you are known to get irritable, that character flaw will soon become public knowledge, and it may keep potential students away. Always being patient goes a long way even if a student does not seem to be receiving you well. They may just be having a bad day. Remember – most people are well intended.

**22. Don't forget the "old" customers,** while you are spending a year or two to coddle new students. Old customers are just as important as the new ones. Old customers, who once were treated like royalty at the beginning and are suddenly taken for granted, will suddenly disappear!!

**21. Hold workshops.** In my area we have a regional in the even- numbered years. I hold a workshop before our Regional named, "**Go for the Gold.**" Tournament tips, ethical issues, the convention card are all discussed. The workshop attracts students and players of all levels. I explain conventions that they may run in to at the tournament.

**20. Wave the Flag.** Our regional was away this year. Several of my students and new players wanted to go and win some points, so off I went to **wave the flag** for them. I answered questions and had dinner with them as they poured over the hand records. It was fun and it kept their interest up.

**19. Snail Mail.** Send out information to everyone you can find. Check out the surrounding clubs, are there names you do not recognize. Send a welcome letter and invite them to a supervised game or lesson you are holding. Workshops are a great way to attract new students.

**18. FUTURE MASTERS AWARD** and other ways to recognize new players are important. After Anniversary week, I have awards that have nothing to do with bridge, just some recognition. When someone at my Studio becomes a Life Master, we have a cake and a Moving-Up ceremony!!

**17. Game winners board** – if you are renting, you can make a portable game winners board by using a piece of laminated poster board and writing last week's winners on it. If you are new to the game – seeing your name up there is **huge**.

**16. Know your customers,** so you are able to put compatible personalities together. During practice play sessions or a beginner game or a special event, be careful when matching people. Marriages and life-long friendships have been born through bridge.

**15. E-mails.** Make it a project to see how many e-mail addresses you can collect! Make a contact list and send out information. Don't delete anyone unless they ask you to. I have received many a response from someone who took lessons five or more years ago. They love my "keeping in touch" and promise that as soon life will let them, they will be back. **ONE** important point is to be sure to use the **Blind Carbon Copy** option. I do delete the returns if I do not

recognize the name. One quick and easy way to pick out the returns is to sort the e-mail addresses.

**14. Weekly E-mail for students** – Send out “What’s up with Special Events” and lesson topics for the week. Give them a quick question they have to think about – “If you were to open 1 diamond with only a three-card suit, what is your likely holding.”

**OR**

“On an auction of 2NT – 3NT, LHO leads the 2 of hearts. You win and play the diamond ace and then the king of diamonds. LHO shows out. What is LHO’s hand shape? The following week they get the answer.

**13. Social events outside the Bridge Class** – Have a barbeque or ice cream social, or just a get together. We often go to a local restaurant for a glass of wine after one of our afternoon games, and at times I have gone with just students. They love to discuss hands or just bridge in general. When you can mingle students with players, it is a **win/win situation**. In this day and age, there are many people out there that have joined bridge to get to know people and make friends. It is easier to make new friends over a glass of wine than across the bridge table.

**12. Business COMPETITION** – good or bad – 12 to 15 years ago, bridge participation was extremely low in Halifax. We were lucky to have **200** tables in a month. When the Bridge Studio was formed, many said we would be the death of bridge in Halifax. Our focus was on the students and bringing in new players. It took about 18 months to prove that we could exist on our student base. The other club in town then focused on students and new players, initiating a **most successful** sanctioned game for beginners. With the change in focus and the clubs working to service students and players, bridge in Halifax flourished!! Table count in June this year for sanctioned games was a total of **733**, and that does not include the 160 or more tables from supervised games. If you have only one club in your town, don’t rest on your laurels – get out there and hunt those players down!!

**11. Pay for ALL series courses up front.** If you use the pay-as-they-come approach and miss a class or worse two, they will not come back. Or use pay cards – I have them for my Wednesday Topics class. These are small cards purchased for the fee of 6 classes (or whatever). It cuts down on collecting at each class. I did one that was purchase 10 classes and get the 11<sup>th</sup> free.

## **MY TOP TEN LIST**

**10. WORKSHOPS** – Weekend Workshops on a variety of bridge topics are a great way to attract new students, or bring back old ones. Some of the “players” think they are too good to take a course, but will sign up for a workshop. Workshops also attract students from other areas in your community. I have done “Bridge in a Day,” “Killer Defense,” “Thinking Declarer Play,” “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” and many more. Use catchy titles and stress the fact that there are concepts for the advancing beginners as well as the advanced

intermediate! Make sure your workshop materials have that professional look. Use covers, binding, neatly put together.

**9. Support a LOCAL CHARITY** – We have recognized the Alzheimer's Society of Nova Scotia as OUR charity. We walked when they had their fundraiser. Everyone was in the action – players, students and friends. One way or another, everyone gets involved. Right now we are preparing for the Duck Derby.

**8. WEB PAGE** – create your own, or piggy back your local club. It is easy for you to create a page with your information and have it on another web site. You can direct people to the page in your posters and flyers. Remember to keep your web page up to date.

**7. ADVERTISE Everywhere** – flyers, posters, business cards, pens, clothing, articles, – Marketing is KEY! Recognize your Target Market – The Baby Boomers are NOW retiring. They played bridge in college and they have disposable income for quality leisure time. You are running a business, find out where your clients hang out, (tennis club, gym, yacht club), and go get them.

**6. Pro/Am games** – Hold one on your own or go to a local club. Pros team up with two students and the matches are set so the pros play pros and the students play students. We had a most successful “challenge” with a club one hour away. We put together six teams, with a variety of players, and spent the day in Wolfville. One month later, we completed the challenge when they came to the Bridge Studio. The winning Club got a case of wine!!

**5. FREE PLAYS** – Encouraging students to play will get them to more classes, or at least workshops. Free plays for supervised play games, and when you think they can handle it – free plays to open games. I have a 0 to 300 game where I hand out free plays all the time. Right now I am promoting an OPEN game with the “C” strat as 0 to 100. It is growing and the “C” players are challenged.

**4. SUPERVISED PLAY** – I cannot say enough about how this type of game keeps students interested in learning and gets them in the game. Ours always starts with a tip or mini-lesson. One of our games is 12 boards long and the students receive a hand record. For some people, this is the level of bridge they prefer, so it keeps this game going.

**3. Remember you are running a BUSINESS** – Most of us start teaching bridge to assist our local club or put back into the game what we got out of it – but if you want to succeed and get more students, look at it like a business. When you hold a new class – track where these people came from how they heard about you. Learn what works and what doesn't. Spend money on promotional ideas – work toward the goal of having a full time premises. We did not get bigger until we had to succeed to be able to pay the rent!!

**2. “Smile and the world smiles with you!”** Words from my Mother. Say “Good Morning!” with a big smile whether you mean it or not! The students don't know about your personal issues, and they really don't want to know. As far as they are concerned, you do not have troubles – **you are at their service!!**

**1 NAME IN LIGHTS!!** Everyone (new players, old players, expert players) love to see their name in lights – ANYWHERE, ANY TIME. I have Anniversary Week winners, Weekly winners, Rookie/Master winners, Rankings, game results, Student achievements, a 70% game board, Plaques, Certificates! All are on my walls.