



Marketing Bridge

My name is Jeremy Dhondy and I am the Chairman of the English Bridge Union.

This column is to answer questions or comments about the EBU that you might have.

If you have a comment or a question, I would be happy to hear from you. jeremy@mrbridge.co.uk

Q It concerns me greatly that bridge is seen nowadays as an old person's game. Certainly, great things are being done to introduce juniors into the game, but let's face it, juniors will not generally join a club populated by the over 70s. My middle aged friends play poker and regard bridge as the last activity to be undertaken before the care home.

Why is this? In the 1960s bridge was universally played and was a family game with a huge social following. Chess is 'seen' as a young person's game whilst bridge is seen mainly for the old.

It seems to me that the problem lies in marketing and the drab image that the EBU projects onto the game. Every activity in the modern world needs its highly visible role models. So where is the modern day equivalent of Omar Sharif and where are the creative and dynamic publicists such as Culbertson who did so much in the 1920s and 1930s to make bridge the world's premier card game?

Culbertson had a marketing strategy that really worked. Does the EBU?

The image of bridge

You aren't the only one to be concerned about the image of bridge or the age of those who play the game. I don't think bridge has ever been universally played and indeed the membership of our national organisation was measured in the hundreds and then the low thousands until well into the 1970s. At 55,000 in 2017 it has never

been higher. That compares to the English Chess Federation with 10,500 members. Also note that sports such as golf are hemorrhaging members and courses are closing. They aren't the only example. There aren't many young or old who go and watch a County Cricket match these days (or even a test match outside England, Australia or India).

Some readers may think that in the 1960s and earlier it was much more a family game. New activities and technology have given people more opportunities and options than perhaps they had 50, 60 or 70 years ago. Card playing is a lot less common at home than once it was.

When Culbertson was around and introducing people to bridge he didn't have to compete with 500 TV channels, Netflix, WhatsApp and the Xbox. His style, whilst undoubtedly successful in the 1930s, probably would not work so well today, so the trick is to find a strategy that does work.

Junior bridge

Teaching the young is one way to bring people into the game but having learnt they often go to University, get demanding jobs and have demanding children so bridge is not played for quite a few years. If these young people come back to in their 50s, we must consider the possibility that there will be few clubs for them to return to. Therefore we must have a long term strategy. There are some promising ventures to bring bridge to more schools and children. To give just one example have a look at www.syba.org.uk. This is the website of the

Stamford Youth Bridge Academy. The charity EBED (www.ebedcio.org.uk) does a lot with juniors to help promote the game and bring it to more schools. It runs an annual camp in Loughborough and helps support ones organised by counties such as Sussex, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire.

There is also a junior awards scheme and one idea is to integrate it with the Duke of Edinburgh scheme. Over 260 awards have been achieved even though the scheme is young. In England we are pleased because the number of juniors has risen from a very small number ten years ago to over 500 but this is far fewer than in Sweden (where bridge is on the school curriculum) or Poland (where bridge is recognised by the National Olympic Committee) or France (where bridge is recognised as a sport). We get little support from Government. It was one reason why we took Sport England to a judicial review in 2016. Galling to find that Baton Twirling and Model Aeroplane Flying have the status denied to us.

Teaching at the club

To address the problem of the gap (ie having clubs for those ex juniors to come back to), teaching those coming up to retirement is one way to get more people coming into the game. I rather suspect that people are less willing to spend as long as perhaps they did in the past learning to play bridge. Learning with the local authority has virtually ceased to exist so teaching falls to teachers in clubs or independent teachers for the most part. If you go to a teacher it would be nice to think that

the teacher had, perhaps, a qualification and that they were teaching something relatively mainstream that the learner could play with his friends or in a club. Not too long ago you could find the odd teacher still teaching obsolete systems, such as Beasley. It came from the days before the approach forcing methods such as Acol really took off.

One example. You hold:

♠ K J 5
♥ A 7
♦ K Q 10 7 4
♣ A K J

Partner opens 1♠ and your recommended response is 6♦. Well, it could be the right contract.

EBED have introduced a new course called Fast Track Bridge in 2017 designed to get people to the table much more quickly. It also refreshed the books that underpin the traditional courses introduced by *Bridge for All*. Those clubs who undertake some teaching will be the ones to survive.

I suppose an answer to the modern day equivalent of Omar Sharif may be Bill Gates or perhaps Warren Buffet.

The impact of technology

We must now recognise the impact of technology. The online game is rather more likely to attract the young. Sometimes, the difficulty of travelling to a bridge club and playing a duplicate game of three hours may put off the younger players.

Strategy

The EBU is determined to

improve its strategy. In short some ideas we have sought to pursue are:

- Developing the Junior Game including a junior award scheme, residential courses and involving more schools (universities are next as the game has been declining there for some time).
- Introducing new teaching activities and courses such as Fast Track Bridge. Getting our clubs and counties to do the same.
- Refreshing and updating our existing courses and publications.
- Seeking to raise our profile with the government.
- Developing an online presence including online games with Funbridge and a KO tournament.

There is a distinction between what can be done centrally by the EBU or EBED and what can be done locally by clubs or counties or individual teachers. In most activities, some assurance that the person teaching you is competent and up to date is important. A national framework, qualifications for teachers and an agreed syllabus all help. EBED ran an advert in the *Daily Telegraph* last year, seeking to get people to learn to play bridge. A lot of people responded with interest. Sadly there were parts of the country where very few teachers could be found. Undoubtedly some potential students were lost. Therefore having a comprehensive database is a prerequisite to trying this again.

If you can get people to learn then the next step is to get them to join in at your club. After all, members are what most clubs want and need. So having a teaching

programme is important but so is the attempt to encourage the graduate to join. Will he or she arrive to a welcoming atmosphere? In a big club it might be possible to have a novice game but many clubs won't have the numbers to make this possible. In some clubs, where they have a few pairs who want to join in, they have a couple of tables as an appendix to the main movement. Initially they may only play two of the three boards until their pace of play picks up. This way you can include fairly raw beginners without annoying the regular and more experienced member. In the end the recruit will want a pleasant evening, so to be frequently reminded by the club Secretary Bird that they have failed to stop, alert, understand Stayman or play a hand to best advantage, is not a happy recipe for continued attendance.

So for the club the priorities are:

- Getting people to learn to teach and become qualified.
- Running courses. If you run *Bridge for All* classes, whether Fast Track or not, then your teachers get help with teacher notes and the course book.
- Introducing recruits gently into the life of the club.
- Modifying the behaviour of existing club members where needed.

Does your club have declining numbers and an ageing membership?

What are the club committee doing about it and is your club using the resources of the EBU and EBED?

Look here www.ebedcio.org.uk/node/59 to see what is on offer. ■



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