

The 12 Habits of Highly Effective Bidders (August 2005)

How does your partner react when you propose a new addition to your bidding system? Some players have never met a convention they didn't like – or wouldn't at least try. The slower adopters will want to research the benefits and make the decision later (or never). Others may go into bargaining mode ("I'll play your pet convention if you'll play mine").

There's no shortage of new bidding theories and conventions to try, but if you aren't selective, your system can become a patchwork of mismatched bidding toys. The most successful bidders use four criteria to evaluate all system changes. The habit they share is:

2. They choose bidding agreements based on value, frequency, simplicity and compatibility.

Value

The value of a new agreement is best judged not by what the bid itself shows, but by where your auction ends. The purpose of any system change should be to improve your ability to get to the optimal contract. A convention has little value if it pinpoints a specific type of hand but doesn't help you bid to a contract you couldn't have found without it.

Almost all conventions involve tradeoffs. One important consideration is the amount of extra information your auction is likely to give to the opponents. Another is the potential value of alternate meanings for a bid. Your decision to play a FLANNERY or ROMAN 2D should come after you evaluate the effects of giving up the weak 2D opening. If you add LEBENSOHL or the GOOD-BAD 2NT to your system, you won't be able to make a natural notrump call in some competitive auctions. With conventional doubles – RESPONSIVE, ROSENKRANZ, SNAPDRAGON – you lose the penalty double.

Frequency

When evaluating a new convention or treatment, consider how often it's likely to occur. The frequency of suitable hands isn't always a good indicator of a bid's real value, but it may influence your decision. The more often you can take advantage of a special meaning for a bid, the stronger your justification for using it instead of an alternate meaning.

A hand that will occur once or twice in 100 deals offers a fairly high frequency. Any situation that will come up once in 200 deals can be worthwhile.

You can use dealer or simulation software to determine frequencies, but even a ballpark guess can be helpful. For comparison, a weak two-bid hand is dealt about 5-6 times in every 100 deals. A FLANNERY 2D occurs about once in 100 deals; A ROMAN 2D (11-14 pts.) occurs slightly more often.

Simplicity

Your success with complex or rarely used bidding agreements may depend on how much time you have to practice and work on your system. However, even long-time, practiced partnerships recognize the value of sometimes opting for simplicity over science.

The danger of a complicated convention isn't just that you might forget it when it finally comes up. It's **that keeping it in your system (and your head) can contribute to a "brain drain" that affects your overall energy and concentration.**

If you include too many memory-intensive agreements in your system, your subconscious will always be working to keep the knowledge available. Even a relatively simple auction may trigger a minor panic -- "Is that one of the obscure agreements we discussed last year?" – and deplete the brain cells you need for the rest of the session.

Compatibility with your system and style

No convention can be evaluated in isolation. It has to be compatible with other elements of your system, and you'll often need to make adjustments to handle the hands the agreement doesn't cover.

For example, if you define the auction 1D-2C as forcing to game, what does responder do when he holds 11 points and a club suit? If you agree that the auction 1H-2C-2S does not promise reversing values, how does opener show a stronger hand?

Your bidding style can also affect your choices. If you tend to prefer the suit opening bid when you have a strong notrump hand with a five-card major, there's not much value in adding PUPPET STAYMAN. If you like to make weak two-bids with a wide range of suit qualities and hand strengths, OGUST will be a better choice than a FEATURE-ASKING 2NT for responder's advance.

The most important point to remember is that bidding systems don't win events. Good judgment does. No matter what system you're playing, if you know it well, make good basic decisions and commit fewer errors than your opponents, you'll probably win.