

The Importance of the non-manipulative Ethical Selling of Hearing aid Solutions

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The Future of Practice Success.....through Personal Concern and Exceptional Service!

Practices struggle today

Many independent practices or private small chains which sell hearing aids are struggling to cover wages and expenses, hoping to survive the current business year. I have many clients who do not see the future anymore. Most of these businesses often focus mainly on selling hearing aids, accessories related to better hearing (e.g. remote controls, microphones, TV headsets, etc.), as they have done for ages: counting on a good margin from the products sold.

Unfortunately, product margins get smaller and smaller. Owning a Hearing Aid Practice is not as attractive as it once was, when an owner of a couple of practice locations could become very successful in a short period of time.

Competition has grown drastically in the past three years. My clients fear the OTC 'threat' and the increased number of consumers buying hearing aids online. They ask me: "...what shall I do? Often I get clients in the shop asking me to fit hearing aids they bought somewhere else...What should I charge for fitting?"

My answer always is: "Do not charge anything...convince them to do a hearing and language test with you!". Let me come back to this in a minute.

The past in hearing aid dispenser land...

Much has changed in the hearing aid industry over the past 20 years, it is no longer the same. High margins and territory protections have gone due to the changes in the competitive and marketing landscapes. Third Party Administrators of Hearing Aid Benefits, OTC hearing aids, high-tech hearing devices, On-line Hearing Aid Stores, and Big Box Stores have increased their presence significantly and are continuing to do so. All of these new competitors provide hearing aids and hearing devices at significantly lower pricing which small practices cannot match.

In addition, our industry's client target group has changed. The target market used to be "old people" and now our target market is including much younger people in addition to the seniors.

The stigma of wearing hearing aids is melting away for two main reasons:

- Much smaller but more powerful hearing aids are available
- Wearing ear buds has become common and 'fashion' among young people and baby boomers!

Because of this more people will be seeking hearing assistance. The question is: "What do hearing aid providers need to do to differently to attract these people and increase the number of happy patients?" Read on to learn more.

What is better: Product Selling versus Solution Selling?

Unfortunately, most hearing aid dispensers, whether big or small, focus on 'product' selling instead of Solution Selling! Let me explain the differences and how important they are.

Product Selling

- It is called “box” moving
- It does not promote a total hearing solution, the price or discount is the primary focus
- It creates low client loyalty because they ‘shop around’ to see if they can get the hearing aids cheaper somewhere else

Solution Selling

1. The main difference is that it is about the total hearing solution,
 - o This is a combination of the Practice, the Audiologist or Hearing Instrument Specialist, the services offered, and the product:
 - The best individualized and most optimal Hearing Solution
2. In our industry clients do not need just a ‘product’ but rather a complete hearing solution to really improve their quality of life, and those of spouses, family members, on the job, friends etc.
3. Once this is achieved the client and his/her spouse become FAN’s
 - o They proactively promote your practice by word-of-mouth!
 - Telling others proudly, although they spent a lot of money, to see YOU for a Hearing Aid Solution

Be better than the rest! Focus on Personal Concern and Excellent Personal Services

Future revenues will not come from ‘hardware’, i.e. hearing aid sales, anymore! For many years this was the main source of the turnover and profit. Many businesses struggle, or are taken over by competitors.

Like in the IT industry, in the ninety’s big companies as IBM, for instance, skipped the PC business and concentrated on services like making the life easier and more profitable for both clients and IBM itself.

Practices must learn to put the focus on two major strategies:

- a) Do not sell products, but individualized HEARING SOLUTIONS
- b) Surprise patients and their spouses with something they did not think about themselves
 - Personal Concern and Excellent Service!

This is what clients want: being helped for the time they use the new hearing aid solution, often regarded as a life time of 5 years.

By doing so it is a perfect customer relationship strategy:

- Give them reasons to stay with you!

Secondly, if you have a service model strategy, you will earn money with it

The overall goal is to create FANs, those very satisfied clients who do proactively the mouth-of- word = equal proactive business development!

What Services a practice might or must consider implementing?

As follows I suggest some services some of my clients implemented to offer services their clients appreciated and are willing to pay for it. E.g.:

- 6 days a week open, or even 7 days!
- In-Home services
 - o Hearing Testing
 - o Hearing aid Fitting
 - o Installation of accessories
 - o Hearing aid cleaning and service
- Tele Care 24/7/365
 - o E.g. for those travelling often or are not mobile enough
- Experience rooms in your practice
- Trained, inspired and motivated personnel:
 - o “Customer is King” attitude & behavior
 - o Focus on helping and not on ‘selling’
- Maintenance and repair plans
- Spare parts for free
- Batteries included, free for 5 years
- Frequent personal and individual contact by phone
- Always the same provider per client
- Frequent contacts:
 - o Every 3-month personal contact by phone:
 - “May I ask you, how satisfied are you with your Hearing Aid Solution?”
- Office layout and decor : Is it old fashioned, the same as others have, worn furniture, dusty?
 - o Make it unique, outstanding and a sort of ‘experience’ for the client!
- Serve your clients drinks like in a first-class hotel!
 - o Espresso, coffee, or assorted tea

- o Drinks not out of a can but personally served in a glass!
- o Cold filtered water dispenser
- Waiting room? Make it a “living room”! E.g.:
 - o TV with HHN (Hearing Health News) playing. <https://cleardigitalmedia.net/hnn/>
 - o Hearing Loop connected to the TV and a Microphone to demonstrate technology
 - o Music in the back ground
 - o Working wireless accessories, alerting systems, amplified phones and other assistive listening devices.
 - o Table with recent magazines—and Testimonial Albums and Journal Articles
 - o Flowers and plant: Real ones, not plastic!

All services suggested help increase your revenues. Create and use a total hearing solution model per client, including hearing aids, accessories, services, repair, batteries and more. In a total solution concept these services are include in the total price: Total Hearing Solution Package.

What to do now?

Reconsider your client approach: personal, practice and your marketing. Lift it on a higher quality level. Think about what made Steve Jobs successful: “Get closer than ever to your customers. So close, in fact, that you tell them what they need before they realized it themselves”.

Most important is that a HIS is able to convince a client individually with facts and arguments that just buying a hearing aid is no all: It is about the Personal Concern and Exceptional Service for the coming 5 years: The professional After Sales Services.

Customer is King and it is not just “selling a hearing aid’ and all is settled. Prepare for arguments and facts to show them the value of the Total Hearing Solution you offer. Prepare to convince them that it is more than worthwhile to invest in a 5-year Total Solution Hearing Solution. Containing much more valuables than just ‘hearing aids’.

Advice: always avoid words like ‘price’, ‘expensive’, ‘price tag’, ‘a lot of money’ etc. Better: use terms like investment for the coming 5 years, or, investment for a better life quality. And remember: Hard selling is out and does not create FAN’s!

BIO Oliver F. von Borstel, MBD

- Born 1956 in Switzerland, living in Holland: Professionally fluent in English, German and Dutch
- Swiss University Degrees in Business Economics and Marketing Management
- Masters of Business Development BV founded 2006, clients in Europe and USA
- Since 2006 Oliver has trained in dedicated training workshops more than 2500 HIS and personal coached about 1500 live on the job during patient meetings
 - o Subject: Ethical Selling of Hearing Aid Solutions
- Oliver’s clients confirm a remarkable increase of sales in top high level hearing aid solutions and growing businesses by the word-of-mouth
 - o E.g. CEO Martin Stratman of EarWorks BV: “By using Oliver’s concept and methodology since 2016 we went from 25% of high value hearing aid sales up to an average of 51% per HIS.”
- Masters of Business Development BV is an accredited member of StAr, the Dutch Audiologist Register.

Here are some of my thoughts

1. Reading your article: I would say this concept is not new to most of us.
2. You may want to add some statistics at the end of the article. Since you have been teaching this method of Solution Selling –How many Specialists have you trained? How many put your suggestions into full practice? Of those how many have increased their closure rate? And how many have increased their profits? Just because your closure rates have increased, your profits may be lower if you started included service and batteries that used to be paid for separately.
3. The big debate right now is to offer bundled vs unbundled pricing. With Online Sales and TPA’s being mostly unbundled and the providers getting paid only a minimal amount of money for the fitting fee, those of us who included service and batteries, now need to put a value on those services. This is very difficult for many of us. This has been a real struggle for me. Some TPA’s put a limit on what we can charge other make us include service—for life of the aid---think I need to “fire” them. Some allow us to offer a service plan. Then there are the COSTCO’s that sell below our cost and include service. Our biggest need is to educate our patients about the need for preventive maintenance of their hearing aids and the importance of wearing the aid full time.

4. Having a big fancy office, quite often makes patients think that we must be making lots of money. My office has always been clean, neat and comfortably professional. With every new office my patients say that they are better than the one's before. Nothing fancy, but functional but with a smiling face to greet them on the phone and at the office. No lab coats to make people think we are doctor's when we are not, although I have debated this---I would not have to invest in so many nice clothes, and I could easily hide my imperfections. Offering the person a drink make them happy but going over the top is not always necessary.
5. Some people do need to be reminded of these things because all they do is push product and make deals. You may want to talk about the negative aspects of undercutting price to get sales. And price consistency---I would think that is discussed in your course. In addition to a formula to determine what fair pricing should be.

I hope that what I have done helps and that you don't find me to be too critical.

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