

▶ **AS I SEE IT**

How to Achieve Customer Bliss

By Sergei Kochkin, PhD

Satisfying customers is not enough. If we want to dramatically expand our practices and the hearing instrument industry, if we want better salaries and lifestyles for our families and if we want the practice of dispensing hearing instruments to have an enhanced image in the marketplace, then we will have to find more ways to achieve customer bliss.

From my own studies I believe this industry has the ability to achieve this level of service to customers. Customer bliss occurs through the blending of science and art in this industry and results from the correct application of technology and counseling based on the unique needs of the consumer. To satisfy a consumer need means basically to meet that consumer's needs. If we want to unleash into the marketplace blissful clients who act as personal apostles for our practice, then we will have to find ways of *exceeding* consumer expectations. My research with thousands of consumers shows that only 64% of the time are we able to meet or exceed consumer needs with "newer" (< 2 years old) hearing instruments.

I polled a sample of 2300 individuals (MarkeTrak) who admitted their hearing loss but decided to stay out of the market. Based on their responses, it can be estimated that close to *4 million people* with a hearing loss in the United States indicated their decision was based on the negative experiences of their friends; *close to 60% of the reluctant market question the value of hearing instruments*. In addition, 14% of new users report that their decision to purchase their first hearing instrument was due to the positive experience of other users.

By my calculations, our shortcomings here in the United States—whether real or perceived—could cost dispensing professionals in excess of *\$19 billion in revenue*, if the reluctant customer stays out of

the market permanently—that is when you consider their binaural rate, their younger age (by about 15 years) and therefore, their greater number of repeat purchases. Negative word-of-mouth is indeed a powerful deterrent.

So how can we achieve customer bliss?

While the list below is nowhere near to being all-inclusive, I believe there are a number of things we can do *now* to begin the process of transforming the hearing instrument industry:

▶ Ask all new customers 90 days after purchase how happy they are with your service and their hearing instruments. Administer a satisfaction survey to every customer. Measure pre- and post-benefit (objective or subjective) with every customer. This act will demonstrate to some of your customers that you care. Additionally, how can you tell what adjustments to make in your practice unless you know where you are and how can you tell if you have improved unless you know where you've been? In this era of managed care, statistics relative to benefit also may be worth their weight in gold when demonstrating the efficacy of your services and the value of more expensive high-performance hearing instruments to third-party payers.

▶ Develop the consciousness in your practice that you are not in the business of selling hearing instruments; instead, you are in the business of serving your community's needs. This includes, but is not limited to, improving speech intelligibility, improving each client's quality of life, improving communication in listening situations important to the consumer, enhancing harmony among friends and family, reuniting loved ones, facilitating acceptance, reducing free-state anxiety,

increasing comprehension, improving self esteem, enhancing enjoyment of life, enhancing psychological well-being, and yes, sometimes even saving lives.

▶ Take customer service workshops and make sure your staff has also taken a workshop. For starters, I recommend the very practical and readable book, *Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service* (Zemke, Ron, AMACOM, 1991).

▶ Strive to fit at least 80% of your bilateral loss customers with binaural hearing instruments. The evidence is simply too strong to ignore the binaural advantage (see Kochkin & Kuk's *The Binaural Advantage: Evidence From Subjective Benefit & Customer Satisfaction Data*, HR, April 1997, p. 29). This means you may need to develop a binaural selling protocol. If you have not already done so, I suggest you have all qualified consumers (i.e., with symmetrical bilateral loss) who refuse binaural instruments to sign a legal document indemnifying you against legal action

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in the event that they suffer auditory deprivation in their unaided ear. At the very least, this underscores your commitment to comprehensive hearing care and impresses upon them the value of binaural hearing.

▶ Influence your customers to move to advanced technology. Programmable product with advanced features (multiple memories, multiple channels, multiple microphones and multiple signal processing) have been shown to result in dramatically improved customer satisfaction scores (see Kochkin's *Customer satisfaction & subjective benefit with high performance hearing aids*, HR, December 1996, p. 16).

▶ Get training in rehabilitative guidance and counseling. The issue of hearing loss is an emotional one for both the individual with the loss and their family. By learning how to deal effectively with these emotional issues you can help people alleviate their denial (which is really repressed feelings about themselves) and therefore, adjust to their hearing instruments better. Learn how to run post-fitting group counseling sessions or aural rehabilitation programs for new users. I

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have seen evidence that this could reduce return rates by a factor of 3-4 time (see Mark Ross' "A Modest Proposal: Hearing Instrument Orientations", HR, June 1996, p. 8 and High Performance Hearing Solutions, Vol 1. *Counseling, January 1997, special supplement to HR*).

▶ Create impeccable hearing instrument expectations with all your customers. The expectations you set can make the difference between a dissatisfied customer and a blissful customer. Unrealistic expectations can threaten to cast you and your business in a needlessly poor light. Make your objectives and the customer's objectives clear.

Make them useful and understandable, obtainable and agree on them in advance with the customer. Educate the customer as to the possible outcomes.

▶ Share with your colleagues (e.g., in journal articles and in professional forums) the customer satisfaction techniques—counseling, marketing, fitting protocols—which work well for your practice. By doing this you move the entire industry up and enhance the chances that your colleagues will become wiser decision-makers for their consumers. Your image as a hearing care practitioner is dependent on how your colleagues

are viewed by the marketplace.

▶ Seek to have each customer leave your practice with a smile on their face, for we honestly are in the "smile business." This is accomplished by assuring that the energy you expend (service, time and product) exceeds the energy your customers expend (money and time). The extra effort it takes to put the smile on each customer's face will have a dramatic impact on your business and the market for hearing aids. More importantly your efforts have the potential of bringing the gift of enhanced hearing to more people. ♦