

One of the Best Kept Secrets in the Hearing Care Industry (And It Needs Your Help!)

By Sergei Kochkin, PhD

In discussing the Better Hearing Institute (BHI) with hearing care professionals, I have tried to understand their apathy toward the organization in the past. A number of times I've heard, "What is BHI doing for me?" It is unfortunate, but few people within the industry seem to comprehend the scope of what the organization does to further the cause of hearing loss prevention, identification and treatment.

The BHI is an extremely positive and productive force within the industry. To whit, it is practically the *only* market development entity within the industry which presents unbiased representation for all segments of the hearing health care professions. Having followed the BHI for 10 of the organization's 25 years, I would like to offer some observations about its accomplishments which are, in my view, quite remarkable.

Over the past few years, a quiet transformation of the Better Hearing Institute (BHI) has been taking place under the leadership of Michele Hartlove, who was recently appointed executive director of the organization by its board of directors. The BHI has dedicated itself to a slightly wider course. Historically, the organization has done a good job recruiting celebrity spokespeople for public service announcements (PSAs) with the specific purpose of using these people to educate potential hearing-industry consumers on hearing loss issues—including diagnosis, treatment and prevention issues. While celebrity spokespeople are still deemed important in its educational efforts, the BHI has expanded its mission to include "inspiring the public and physicians to take action about hearing loss."

Physician Program

Physicians are the single most important gatekeeper to hearing-impaired consumers. In Knowles' MarkeTrak research, we have shown that people with hearing

Sergei Kochkin, PhD, is director of market research and market development at Knowles Electronics, Inc., and is on the board of directors of BHI.

The Better Hearing Institute (BHI) is practically the only market development entity in the industry that promotes hearing health care and unbiasedly represents all of the hearing care professions. After 25 years of remarkable achievements, BHI's current financial situation could seriously threaten its ability to survive.

loss are eight times more likely to purchase a hearing instrument if their family doctor recommends one than if no recommendation is made. The BHI has appointed the well-respected Dr. Dean Griffin to its board and appointed a physician advisory panel to assist in developing strategies to educate physicians in America on hearing issues. The mission with physicians is "to ensure that a hearing screening is included in all routine physical examinations." It is the BHI's belief that identification of hearing loss is the first step to referral and subsequent treatment.

In the first year of the BHI Physician Program, the organization was able to achieve the following:

- Published a brochure for physicians titled, "Physicians Guide to Identifying Hearing Loss."

- Gave a keynote lecture at the 50th Annual Scientific Assembly of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) Convention in San Francisco (see Nov. 1998 *Hearing Review*, pgs. 23-25). The speech was given by Dr. Steve Allen (son of the comedian) to approximately 2000 family doctors. In addition, a back stage lecture was presented to physicians on hearing technology and screening devices. The conference also featured a BHI demonstration booth

where stations were set up in which hearing care professionals demonstrated the latest diagnostic techniques, hearing conservation products and hearing instruments.

- Conducted a survey of 465 residency programs as a first step in planning for future educational efforts with physicians.

- Received approval to provide workshops to attendees of the National Congress for Family Practice Residents. This summer, the BHI will provide training to 2000 future family physicians on hearing loss, its identification and treatment.

Future activities of the BHI will involve the development of:

- Simple suggested hearing screening practices for the AAFP;

- Educational videos for residency and post-residency training programs, and

- Up to seven CME courses for family physicians which can be given at a state level;

- Medical lobbying on such important topics as infant hearing screening.

The Internet

The BHI has developed an informative Internet site (www.betterhearing.org) on hearing issues. If you have not visited the site yet, you should. It is tied into 200 other Internet sites and represents a cost-effective method of reaching people seven-days-a-week, 24-hours-a-day. In 1998 alone, 47,000 people visited this site.

A key provision of the BHI website is the listing of the names and addresses of 19,000 hearing health care providers (audiologists, hearing instrument specialists and ENT physicians). People with hearing loss who are visiting the site merely need to enter their zip codes and they are able to print a complete list of hearing health care providers in their neighborhood.

Consumer Awareness Campaigns

The use of celebrity spokespeople will always be an important part of BHI

outreach efforts. In 1998, Rosalynn Carter and Leslie Nielsen were the focus of Better Hearing Institute PSAs. The organization received *free* public service magazine placements with a media purchase value of \$1 million in such high-profile magazines as *Time*. BHI television placements had a value of \$10.4 million, 60% of which ran in the attractive time slots (6 AM to midnight). The 1998 consumer awareness campaign has resulted in 45,000 calls to the BHI Helpline—up from 38,000 in 1997 and 12,500 in 1996. That's nearly a four-fold increase in only two years.

Hearing Instrument Promo

In 1997, the BHI developed the consumer brochure, *Help Through Hearing Aids*, a guide to hearing instruments. This brochure was produced through grants from the Hearing Industries Assn. (HIA). Tens-of-thousands of copies of this booklet have been distributed to prospective consumers spurred on by PSAs by Leslie Nielsen. The Institute was also instrumental in getting positive articles on hearing instruments published in AARP's *Modern Maturity* magazine.

New Directions

The BHI's PSAs are now appearing in Cineplex-Odeon Theater lobbies. Pharmacies nationwide are distributing BHI information. Callers "on-hold"

at health care facilities around the nation listen to BHI mini-PSAs, and you will find BHI material in Health touch-kiosks in shopping malls.

Results

The reader may still be asking What is the impact of these BHI initiatives? For this industry to grow, constant exposure to hearing loss issues (e.g., signs of hearing loss) and solutions (e.g., hearing instruments and assistive listening devices) is critical. The approximately 100,000 contacts to the BHI this year represents a significant improvement over the recent past. Undoubtedly, a significant portion are seeking solutions for their hearing loss (or the hearing loss of a loved one). In a survey of 1847 contactees to the BHI Helpline, 86% reported the information received from the Institute was helpful. As a result of their contact with the BHI, 22% had their hearing tested, 34% reported that they intended to take action and 7% had already purchased a hearing instrument! Considering the survey was conducted within a few days of their contact with the BHI, these results are impressive. I would expect that a survey gauging long-term actions would be significantly higher. If we just take the short-term hearing instrument purchase results for the callers to the BHI, that equates to an estimated \$2 million to manufacturers and \$5 million to hearing care professionals.

There are so many additional

things the BHI could do if it was adequately supported by the entire hearing health care industry. With 1998 sales in the U.S. at only 4% above 1997 figures and market penetration at an all-time low (20%), this industry needs the promotional and educational efforts of the BHI more than ever.

Very few dispensing professionals commit financial support to BHI, yet many benefit from its efforts. To my knowledge, the Kentucky Hearing Aid Society, headed by the efforts of Michael Stone, is the only state organization supporting BHI. I wonder what the possibilities of the Institute would be if all state hearing instrument dispenser and audiology organizations copied the Kentucky model and challenged their members to contribute either a per-hearing-aid fee (e.g., \$.50-\$1.00) or a professional fee (e.g., \$150 per year)? I challenge each state organization of hearing care providers to develop a funding mechanism for supporting the Better Hearing Institute. Without the on-going financial help of the industry, it is conceivable that this friend of the hearing health field will cease to exist. ♦

Correspondence can be addressed to HR or Sergei Kochkin, PhD, Knowles Electronics, Inc., 1151 Maplewood Dr., Itasca, IL 60143. The BHI can be reached at Better Hearing Institute, 5021-B Backlick Rd., Annandale, VA 22003; (703) 642-0580.