

# One Way to Bring More Business in Your Door?

# LEAVE THE BUILDING!

*By Pam Pech*

**NEARLY EVERY BUSINESS** struggles with the problem of getting more customers in the door. The audiologist, however, faces an additional factor which makes the acquisition of new customers even more difficult; largely due to the fact that many people who could benefit from the use of hearing aids won't even consider the product and "would rather fight than change."



**While frustrating, it's my belief that we have never lived in a more advantageous time to not only solve this "customer acquisition" problem, but also a time when we can provide more all-encompassing benefits for the patient as well...**

The demographics of our target market, current technology (from hearing aid technology and social media), resources available to address the needs of a “typical” hearing-loss patient, and the empathy that you, the audiologist, feel – which is what most likely drew you to this career to begin with - can all be used to create a powerful solution for patients.

The solution is Customer Advocacy – the core of which includes not only providing the patient exactly what the patient needs relative to hearing loss, but also the concept of being a resource of information addressing other needs recognized in working with the “whole person.” If authentic in both spirit and delivery, advocacy goes far beyond customer service or the idea of simply “educating the patient.”

The purpose of this article is to help you identify steps to becoming a Customer Advocate for those in your targeted market. An evidence-based fitting protocol, a “relationship-focused” marketing plan, which includes a permission-based social media strategy, research into new technological advances in products and services for seniors, involvement in the community to influence influencers, and a deeper understanding of the most common psychological needs and fears of many seniors, are just some of the ways to **become an advocate** and to **create advocates for your business**.

Advocacy, as a concept is not new. It harkens back to the days when the doctor made house calls, knew the entire family and was a trusted member of the community. However, the execution of an advocacy program in today’s world demands innovative thinking, a well-defined operational strategy (in addition to marketing) and consistent follow up and follow through. It requires the courage to try new ideas, measure results, risk failure and try again. The key measurable is patient satisfaction and word of mouth referrals.

It will require understanding who your patient is, their needs, fears, joys, hobbies, concerns or confusions, and their community. It requires going where they go, knowing who they talk to, where they hang out, what gives them comfort, what makes them laugh. It requires knowing who the true influencers are in their lives...not just assuming it is the family doctor. It may be, but no assumptions are allowed.

Before outlining the steps of the program, let's first take a look at why NOW is the time to adopt a community based marketing/advocacy program:

## The Demographics of Our Target Market

There are approximately 75 million baby boomers in the US that are at or close to retirement age, representing around \$3.2 trillion in annual spending power. In addition, people age 65 and older now make up 13 percent of the total population, compared with 12.4 percent in 2000.<sup>1</sup> This means that there are now more Americans age 65 and older than at any other time in American history... with that number expected to increase rapidly over the next decade as baby boomers start to turn 65.<sup>2</sup>

With the average age of the new hearing aid user being approximately 69<sup>3</sup>, there has never been a more favorable window of opportunity, having such a huge target market and so many ways to reach them.

## The Psychological Profile

As we age, when body and mental abilities create challenges, certain fears begin to become realities. Falling, loss of loved ones, fear of being alone or feeling isolated, having to leave a home or cease driving, are just some of the fears which can become a part of the life of a senior. However, as mentioned, the size of this population group and its buying potential, will make this generation one that will be catered to with new advances in technology and resources, allowing them to stay active, connected and in their own homes.

## Current Technology

The topic of current technology is applicable in several ways. First, there are tremendous resources for the senior in terms of home products and services. Secondly, there is a tremendous advantage in utilizing social media as a way to reach people in unique and personalized ways – *and* with their approval. As a resource, instead of worrying about a “no call list,” people will actually want to stay connected with you to receive information about products, services or entertainment opportunities.

<sup>1</sup> Cortez, D. (2012, September 7), Serving the Massive Baby Boomer Market, *Yahoo! Small Business Advisor, Startup Nation*.

<sup>2</sup> Brandon, E. (2012, January 9) 65 and older Population Soars, *US News and World Reports*.

<sup>3</sup> Kochkin, S. (2009, October). MarkeTrak VIII: 25-Year Trends in the Hearing Health Market, *The Hearing Review*, 22.

## Compassion and Empathy for the Senior

In each workshop I facilitate, favorite “patient” stories are shared. Rarely do these happen without an emotional response. Feeling like we make a difference in lives when hearing is improved, is a major reason for many people to enter into a career in audiology..

The demographic factors, the technology and resources available to meet patient needs, along with a sincere compassion for those we serve, make this the perfect time to create a community-based advocacy program. Please review the following recommended steps for success:

### 1. Operational: Establish and Follow an Evidence-based Fitting Protocol

In *MarkeTrak VIII: The Impact of the Hearing Healthcare Professional on Hearing Aid User Success* (Sergei Kochkin), data from an extensive survey on reasons for low hearing aid adoption rates concluded that while hearing aids themselves had shown significant technological improvements, as had fitting software, it appeared that quality control at the point of dispensing had not kept up with the technological improvements. Kochkin suggested that part of this was due to the great variability in the hearing aid fitting process. Kochkin went on further to state that “...it appears that **critical aspects of the fitting protocol are not followed** despite general consensus among all the professional societies and consumer based advocate groups representing patients.”<sup>4</sup>

The article outlines a key “common sense” process, identifies basic mistakes done by variation from this process, and states that what results is low consumer satisfaction and low adoption rates. In contrast, the article continues, data from the study suggests that following comprehensive protocols have a major impact not only on hearing improvement and utilization, but also on a) hearing aid brand loyalty, b) positive word of mouth advertising and c) satisfaction with the benefits achieved.<sup>5</sup>

Along similar lines, in the January 14, 2013, Audiology Online, *Evidence Based Hearing Aid Dispensing: Financial Benefits for Audiologists*, Brian Taylor Au.D. and Kim Cavitt, Au.D., report that since 2004, when Dr. Robyn Cox authored

an article on the success of an evidence based practice, numerous scholarly papers and professional associations have continued to advocate for these best practice guidelines. And yet, Taylor and Cavitt contend, “Many audiologists are still reticent to implement these procedures into their clinical routines, and the majority of audiologists do not routinely conduct several procedures considered to be best practices.” (Mueller & Picou, 2010, Humes, 2012).<sup>6</sup>

The underlying conclusion made in both studies, is that one of the most obvious and critical steps to being a patient advocate – would be to follow a comprehensive, “common sense”, evidence-based protocol that not only brings about a greater success in hearing improvement for the patient, but also *creates an advocate* in *YOUR* corner through customer satisfaction.

### 2. Become A Resource of Information for your Patient

For years, I was in business-to-business sales. On each personal visit, I learned one important piece of non-confidential information, which could be shared with another business. I soon had a much easier time setting appointments as my prospects and clients wanted to hear something new about the market. After all...I heard from business leaders regularly what was working and what wasn't. The same is true for you.

What information can you learn and share that will make people WANT to come to you?

As mentioned above, the size of the aging population represents great financial potential to people who have relevant products and services, and there are many ways to learn about them and for you to pass that information along.

Senior Fairs, Expos and Community Events, which display these products and services, are commonly held in many cities many times during the year. Vendors exhibit state-of-the-art products, such as Wii technology, which can be built into floors to noninvasively detect falls. Blue tooth medical equipment allows Mom or Dad, in the privacy of their own home, to test their blood pressure, take their medication, with all results showing up on a computer screen in their

<sup>4</sup> Kochkin, S. et al (2010, April) MarkeTrak VIII: The Impact of the Hearing Healthcare Professional on Hearing Aid User Success, *The Hearing Review*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Kochkin, S. et al (2010, April) MarkeTrakVIII: The Impact of the Hearing Healthcare Professional on Hearing Aid User Success, *The Hearing Review*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, B., & Cavitt, K., (2013, January). Evidence Based Hearing Aid Dispensing: Financial Benefits for Audiologists, Audiology Online, 1.

children's home thousands of miles away. Skype and video conferencing help the elderly see grandchildren on a frequent basis, despite the miles in-between.

These community expos provide a great opportunity for you to know what is available for people as they age and they can also help you become a trusted resource to the public and potential patients. By providing valuable information to seniors, you will become a trusted partner in their "whole picture" health care planning.

### 3. Leave the Building!

Ever heard of pickle-ball? Did you know that there are wonderful elder-hostel classes being held at community education centers? Did you ever go to a McDonalds around 3:00 p.m. and see a group of 20 seniors chatting about what's going on in their neighborhood? Did you ever go to a computer store and look at the average age of the folks learning about computers? Ever attend a class on Skype? Ever heard of Silver Sneakers or the Red Hat Society?

These are just some of the places where older adults go for fun. They don't always want to know about their declining health, hearing loss or funeral arrangements. They want to improve the quality of the rest of the years they have. Do you on some bright sunny day want to go hear about how to make your funeral arrangements? Neither do they! We need to not only be there when they have that salient moment about their hearing, but also earn their trust by being there as much as a resource for fun and for other ways to make their lives enjoyable. What if your clinic provided coffee for their next "coffee hour?" What if you provided the next pickle-ball tournament? How about having a brochure rack in your office that provides information on skype classes, information on having a will, how hearing can impact balance or falls? Become a resource for information beyond hearing and balance and broaden your reach within your community!

### 4. Share Information by developing a Permission-based Database

Social media ties relevantly into this idea of being a resource of information.

The more information you have that is of interest to your potential patient, the more they will seek you out.

If we, as a profession rather than an industry, plan to attract this market, we need to be innovative in how to approach them. The same old marketing and advertising is not going to work. As Bill Lee states in his article, *Marketing is Dead*, "Traditional marketing...is dead. There's a lot of speculation about what will replace this broken model. Actually we already know in great detail what the next model of marketing will look like. It's already in place in a number of organizations".<sup>7</sup> Lee then lists community marketing and customer advocacy as two of the features in the new marketing paradigm.

Offering your patients and prospective patients information they want allows you to keep them informed, while also receiving their permission to market to them. You now have a willing audience to listen to what you have to offer. You become an expert, a builder of confidence, a valuable resource for products and services that help them in this stage of their life. Newsletters, educational sessions on pertinent topics, lunch and learns, morning coffees in a local restaurant, community education workshops, looping sponsorships, all make you a valuable asset to them and to the community at large.

Being a resource for those who come to you should fit your strategic plan, tying back to the passion that brought you to the profession. Marketing needs to be sincere or it won't work. Seniors and other potential patients are looking for real relationships with people they can trust.

The book, *Hub Mentality*, by Carl Woolston, is an excellent source for guidelines on how to make social media work for you, as a "hub" of information with suggestions for dispensing it appropriately to each segment of your database. As Woolston states, "Marketing is no longer driven by how many people you can reach. It's driven by how well you reach people in the right ways".<sup>8</sup>

### 5. Partner with others who can help enhance your message and inform your patient.

Recently I noticed a poster from an insurance agency inside the lobby of a large car wash. The poster stated "Save at least 17% or we'll wash your car." Pretty clever cross-marketing.

How could you do that? Who could you partner with? Think about the areas of interest of the senior, or areas where they

<sup>7</sup> Lee, B. (2012, August) Marketing is Dead, *Harvard Business Review*, HBR Blog Network, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Woolston, C, & Palmer, S. (2011), *Hub Mentality*, Shifting From Business Transactions to Community Interaction.

do not have confidence. You represent technology. Some seniors thrive on it, others are afraid of it. What if you partnered with someone who could demonstrate the basics of a smart phone?

What about fear of falling? Partner with an organization that does seminars on fall prevention, such as a hospital. Partnering with a doctor or nurse from a hospital gives you instant credibility. What about a facilitated discussion group helping prepare “boomers” for difficult conversations with their aging parents? Many companies, such as Thrivent Financial Services and Home Instead, have informative brochures and workshops on helping start and maintain this type of communication. There are endless resources available today.

## 6. Measure and Perfect what you are currently doing.

Another obvious and more traditional way to approach “bringing more people in the door” is to perform an analysis of the results of measuring your key performance indicators relative to new customer intake. How many calls came in from a specific marketing “campaigns?” How many appointments were set from those calls? How many sales were directly attributed to that marketing? How much revenue was created vs. cost of the marketing piece? The results of this analysis determines the success or failure of each marketing strategy executed. Consistent measurement allows management to tweak or dramatically change the plan until the data show appropriate results.

Simply stated, if you run an ad several times and it doesn’t draw – quit running it – or at least quit running it as it is. So many people continue to use the same marketing materials and either fail to measure results, or do measure and find it doesn’t work, and continue doing the same thing anyway.

Measuring is absolutely critical. But once you do measure, tweak, adjust, eliminate, enhance—do something and measure again until you find what does work.

Make certain that every ad, mailer, endorsement, business card, etc. creates a relationship. Even a picture on a business card starts a personal connection. Make sure each marketing “piece” you put out there with your name on it tells your patient or prospective patient that you are a resource for them, you know what they need and you are a part of their community.

Finally, while this point does not relate to bringing more people in the door, it does relate to “closing” those who do come in – and falls in line with perfecting what you are currently doing.

With most of the clients I work with, I find that the difference between not making a sufficient profit and making a sufficient profit, usually falls within the realm of selling less than 10 more hearing aids a month. By closing one more test loss/no sale, by eliminating one less return, by creating one more appointment per day, you can make a significant impact on the profitability of your practice. If you are not the receptionist or the dispensing audiologist, how often do you review the phone call protocol, the fitting protocol of those who work for you? You might be surprised at what you hear being said, tests not handled as you expected, or information not conveyed as appropriately as trained. Improvement may start simply with closer observation and with working with those around you.

In summary, ways to become a customer or patient advocate are:

1. Follow an Evidence-based Fitting Protocol and Fitting Protocol Best Practices.
2. Become a resource for your patient by gathering relevant product and service information.
3. Bring more people in the door by leaving the building – get to know who your patient is and what they need.
4. Create a permission based data base, segment your market and distribute appropriately gathered information.
5. Partner with others who can help convey your message.
6. Perfect your existing operations and staff training.

Perhaps Og Mandino said it best and most simply, in *The Greatest Salesman in the World*, “I will increase my knowledge of mankind, myself and the goods I sell, thus my sales will multiply.” ■