

Webinar Recap: Taking Your Business from Fine to Fabulous

Taking your hearing care practice from “fine” to “fabulous” requires measuring and improving KPIs and making certain you are providing a memorable and personable customer experience. Here’s how to do it.

An average hearing care practice generates \$350-450,000 per year selling approximately 17-18 hearing aids a month. Those numbers are respectable, even “fine,” but they are not “fabulous.” Gyl Kasewurm, AuD, owner of Professional Hearing Services, St Joseph, Mich, is convinced that most hearing care practice owners can do better.

Kasewurm’s single office in St Joseph—a town of about 10,000 people—generates 10 times the gross revenue of the average American practice, thanks largely to a closing rate (she prefers “help rate”) that far exceeds the typical 45% reported by some industry sources. In a recent 43-minute webinar, brought to readers *The Hearing Review* by CareCredit, Kasewurm revealed a few of her tips, as well as her overriding philosophy that has yielded success for the past three decades.

Know Where You’ve Been and Where You’re Going

The first necessity is the accurate tracking of key performance indicators (KPIs) like your “help rate.” Most practices tend to think this is above average when, in fact, prime candidates for hearing aids are slipping away at the typical rate. However, in order to track a KPI, you need to carefully define it.

For example, what characteristics constitute a candidate for a new hearing aid when determining your “help rate”? Although the definition may vary from practice to practice, Kasewurm defines a legitimate candidate in her practice as:

- ▶ Hearing at thresholds of 30 dB at two or more frequencies;
- ▶ Not hearing well with present aids and adjustments cannot improve outcome;
- ▶ Wanting the best technology available;
- ▶ Choosing to not have medical intervention to improve hearing after seeing an ENT; and
- ▶ Currently using technology more than 4 years old.

The criteria are less important than the act of you measuring those important KPIs that will spell success or failure—or “fine” or “fabulous” for your practice. “If you take your help rate from 45% to 50%, without seeing any extra patients, you will pocket an extra \$28,000,” says Kasewurm. “If you could take it to 60%, you would pocket an additional \$80,000. That’s just doing your job slightly better, and not seeing extra patients...About 90% percent of the patients you see will need hearing aids [and most of them will need two hearing aids].”

First Impressions Last

Three decades in practice has taught Kasewurm that, “Whatever you say *first* is what the patient remembers.” The axiom is backed up by actual recorded conversations in Kasewurm’s practice. “I would say, ‘Your low frequency hearing is normal,’ and that’s what they remembered,” muses Kasewurm. Meanwhile, patients forgot the key areas of concern, like high frequency hearing loss, that impact their communication abilities.

Asking the proper questions sets the right tone. Some good questions include:

- ▶ What types of problems are you having hearing people?
- ▶ When do you experience difficulty understanding others?
- ▶ How do you feel when you are left out of conversations?

“You need to build the pain to help patients recall the problems they have had so you can discuss solutions,” says Kasewurm. “You want them to reflect on their problems.”

While it’s not always possible due to a practice’s space constraints, Kasewurm recommends a special waiting area for first-time patients. The reason is to keep first-timers from coming into contact with the occasional “chronic complainer” who can poison the hearing aid well even before the first clinician interaction.

If the first-timer waiting room is not possible, make sure the office is warm and friendly. “I have gone to extremes with the patient environment,” confesses Kasewurm. “Patients like greens and blues more than other colors. Try not to have a bright red office. We have patients who come in just to have refreshments because it’s so unique. We also have no barriers between receptionist and patient.”

Kasewurm attributes her “extreme” commitment to the office environment as a concession to the fact that hearing care professionals “are dealing in a luxury market with luxury products, and we want our offices to reflect that. We offer refreshments—fresh-baked cookies, flavored coffee, and popcorn. We have a room that looks like a park complete with clouds. We demo new technology while the patient is waiting.”

Even before patients set foot in the building, the initial phone interaction can go a long way toward pleasing, or torpedoing, a prospective sale. Focusing on how the phone is answered is a crucial first step, and it’s one that even Kasewurm once neglected.

“[In the early days of my practice] the person answering the phone was often the least qualified,” she admits. “I was not spending enough time with that person. The person answering my phone [now] knows about new technologies. I listen to those conversations myself. If a patient is turned off by the receptionist, that may turn them away from your business, and that would be a very expensive phone call.”

After the successful first phone call, Kasewurm’s professional staff makes patients feel special by:

- ▶ Knowing their name and history, and recording it in the software;
- ▶ Knowing the name of their spouse or accompanying friend or family member;
- ▶ Ensuring minimal wait times, because patients want their time to be respected;
- ▶ Sending specific directions and paperwork ahead of time, as well as providing Mapquest directions;
- ▶ Pick-up and delivery service on a case-by-case basis, and
- ▶ Offering convenient hours—such as 7:30AM-6:00PM at least two days a week.

Show Don't Tell

Boosting the help rate and transforming the practice from fine to fabulous requires a “show-don't-tell” mentality, because few people want to hear that they need hearing aids. An effective show should:

- ▶ Demonstrate need for amplification;
- ▶ Demonstrate benefits of better hearing (include the family), and
- ▶ Illustrate benefits of noise reduction features and wireless devices.

Kasewurm “illustrates the handicap” by contrasting *hearing potential* with actual hearing. “I just tested your potential for hearing well; now I’m going to determine how well you are really hearing in daily life,” she says. “I present recorded words to them at 40 to 45 dB HL, and if possible, I have that third party listening. This goes a long way toward showing patients what they are missing. If the patient has a precipitous high frequency loss, be sure to use high frequency words. Once they know what they are missing, demonstrate the benefit through appropriate hearing aids. ‘Now I want to show you how you should be hearing...’”

When the inevitable financial objection comes, be ready to offer financing. “Baby boomers are often still working, but have not planned for the expense of hearing aids,” says Kasewurm. “Financing options help us close more patients. We have used CareCredit for years, and patients love it. It’s a great way to overcome the main objection that it’s a lot of money.”

Free Trials are Not Free

Kasewurm does not equivocate during her webinar when it comes to much-discussed freebies. “I don’t believe in free trials [without charging the patient anything for your service],” she says simply. “I don’t think there’s anything free about a trial, because you must account for your time.”

Free trials send the wrong message. Especially for a new patient, Kasewurm believes free trials equate to a lack of faith in the product. “We’re saying [with a free trial] that we’re not sure if it’s going to work,” she says. “And, of course as professionals, we are sure it’s going to work. That’s why it’s so important *what we say* when we’re talking to patients. It takes an investment on their part to overcome a long-term problem. We don’t want to give them

the impression that trying hearing aids is a [singular] event. It’s a *process* of learning how to hear better.”

All of it amounts to a lot of equipment loaned out with no down payment from patients. Worse yet, the majority of patients come back without ultimately buying the “free product,” leading to greater costs for you and the entire industry.

Best Practices for a Fabulous Customer Experience

Clients will pay for value if they are getting great customer service, and they will become “raving fans” that lead to huge referral rates. About 70% of Kasewurm’s new patients come courtesy of referrals. It’s a high number that starts from the top with consistent Best Practices that include:

- ▶ Demonstrating best technology;
- ▶ Offering loaners;
- ▶ Performing while-you-wait repair;
- ▶ Offering telehealth;
- ▶ Pre/post benefit on every patient using a subjective APHAB or HHIE, and objective HINT and/or QuickSIN, and
- ▶ Customer satisfaction surveys 90 to 150 days post-fitting.

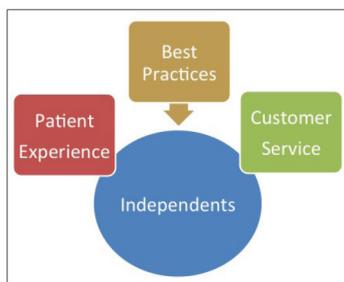
“Send satisfaction surveys, and if they say they are unhappy, be sure to follow-up,” adds Kasewurm. “The average age of people coming to the practice is 68 to 70, and I want to keep those patients for a lifetime.”

Kasewurm recently started offering formal aural rehab sessions that she calls “hearing aid boot camps” for patients who are truly motivated to get the very most out of their devices and her services. “We get patients together and show them how to use their hearing aids more efficiently and effectively—how to use them in a car, where to sit in a restaurant,” she says. “We talk about the challenges and the coping strategies.” Additional ways to make patients feel special include:

- ▶ **Loyalty Programs.** Patients who have purchased with Kasewurm get a modest discount. Other options might be an extra warranty or a free cleaning.
- ▶ **Customer Referral Programs.** Hand out cards to patients to make referrals easier.
- ▶ **Thank You Cards.** These are special touches sent after a patient visit.
- ▶ **Special Birthdays.** Staff members send flowers to patients on those special birthdays that end in a 0 or 5.
- ▶ **Anniversaries.** Staff members keep track of anniversaries and patients are blown away—so much so that they will tell more people about anniversary remembrances than their hearing aids.

“If you love your patients, success will follow,” enthuses Kasewurm. “If you make them feel like family, they will never leave, and that will take your practice from fine to fabulous.”

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