Beyond Hearing Aids as a Source of Revenue: Providing Musicians’ Services

By Melissa Heche and Luke Hinzmann

As audiologists, part of our mission is to diagnose and treat hearing disorders. We are trained to evaluate hearing loss and choose an appropriate device that would adequately offer our patient the ability to hear again. Using amplification in concert with possible aural rehabilitation techniques, we have all learned the joy of being a part of the solution to a hearing and communication disorder.

But is that the only side of the communication issue in which we should involve ourselves? What is our role in preventative hearing health care? Furthermore, how can our role benefit and help grow a practice?

There are numerous special populations that already have hearing conservation programs in place. For years, audiologists have provided annual screenings on construction sites and in special population groups, such as police officers and firefighters. However, there exists a subpopulation for which there is not a typical intervention plan in place but that could strongly benefit from preventative care. Musicians and music lovers are typically exposed to levels of dangerous sound intensities.

This has been well documented; in fact, many musicians are acutely aware of the dangerous intensities of music and noise to which they are exposed on a regular basis. How many of these musicians are proactive in their quest for preventative care? It is only when plagued with tinnitus or ongoing hearing issues that many musicians begin to consider investigating protection options. It is possible to serve this population while building your practice as a resource of services that extend beyond amplification and aural rehabilitation. The challenge is this—how can you effectively market to musicians and encourage the active pursuit of hearing protection while playing?

An obstacle to this challenge is understanding the target population.
This does not mean literally being familiar with the musicians in your area although that surely doesn't hurt but, rather, having a working knowledge of the challenges and concerns that the population carries with them even before they enter your office.

There are two primary factors to consider: the musician's priorities and the finances involved. The main priority of a musician is to hear effectively the music he or she is playing. If the musician feels on any level that the performance is going to be challenged, he or she will not wear a hearing protection device. The goal is to fit musicians with the least restrictive device possible so that they feel as though they can hear themselves and the music around them. Satisfied musicians refer other musicians, so it is imperative to consider what acoustic properties the hearing protection must have to ensure an adequate fit. In addition, the type of instrument played by the patient in conjunction with the type and size of the band should be taken into consideration when choosing a device for hearing protection. Each musician, instrument, band, and/or venue cannot be treated similarly, or the potential to overattenuate will occur. In this scenario, the musician will be unable to play properly while wearing the protection device.

Another consideration is financial. Many musicians are not working regularly; therefore, each expense is significant. If a potential patient considers an option for hearing protection to be cost prohibitive, he or she will likely not invest. However, offering multiple devices at several price points will more likely result in the musician choosing to invest in hearing protection. Musicians will be appreciative of a professional who is sensitive to their financial considerations and will be more likely to recommend others for these services. Musicians often rely on word of mouth for services—the way to build your clientele is to ensure the happiness and successful fittings of the musicians who are in your office presently.

Providing services for musicians depends on one unarguable requisite action—attracting that population into your practice. Generating new consults among musicians tends to be challenging, as musicians are not always responsive to traditional advertising methods. The likelihood of this population responding to an advertisement from a traditional newspaper or direct mailing is very slim. For musicians, there are two key points that need to be addressed before they will feel comfortable entering your office:

1. They have to know you, or feel as though they know you, and
2. They have to trust you.

Those two points are not equivalent.

As mentioned previously, many musicians rely on personal referrals to feel as if they know you and can therefore trust you. To become a familiar personality in the musical community in your area, begin by regularly attending live music events. The more regularly you are seen in venues, the more the musicians that play there will recognize you. Make it your business to get to know them. It can be beneficial to introduce yourself to the venue owners and the people who book events. If a musician has any audiological needs, he or she will often ask the venue representatives for any referrals. You want your name to be one of the first ones that they recommend. It is equally beneficial to visit rehearsal and recording studios in your area to introduce yourself to the owners, leave some literature, and become familiar with the workers. If a musician has a need for your services, he or she will ask those who are trusted for a referral. If your name is given by a venue owner or rehearsal studio, then the musician will feel as though you are “known.” This increases credibility.

Once the musician walks into your office, it is incumbent upon you to build trust and prove that your expertise is more multifaceted than just taking an earmold impression and ordering a device. Most musicians are very highly skilled with respect to the acoustic needs in the rooms in which they usually perform. If they feel that they are more knowledgeable than you are on this subject, then that will challenge your credibility. Become intimately aware of the venues, the styles or genres of music, and, if possible, the band in which your patient is involved. Remember that you are the expert. If the musicians feel as though they are answering their own questions, they will not have trust in you as a professional. Similarly, if they are fit with a product that is not an acoustic match, their trust in you as a practitioner may be called into question.

Audiologists have the ability to do more than simply diagnose and treat existing hearing loss. They can have an integral role in preventative hearing health care, particularly with special populations such as musicians. There are challenges with the practical involvement of musicians in engaging in hearing protection, but these challenges are not insurmountable. Becoming directly involved in the local music community, developing rapport with musicians, and communicating the type of services...
that an audiologist offers for the benefit of a musician are all important components in developing a relationship with the musical community. Further, gaining a knowledge base of the functional musical environments and maintaining sensitivity to a musician’s specific needs are integral components in providing adequate hearing protection solutions. By becoming well versed in the provision of this service to musicians, the audiologist is taking an active role not only in hearing loss prevention but in the long-term maintenance of a career. Simultaneously, you add depth and diversity, and grow your audiology practice, ensuring a diversity of services and a cross-section of individuals that benefit from hearing health care.

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