Fitting Hearing Aids Without the Aural Rehab is Like Eating Whipped Cream Without the Pumpkin Pie

Interview With Entrepreneurial Audiologist Dr. Dusty Jessen by Brian Taylor

Successful independent businesses are able to differentiate themselves from big-box retailers and other corporate entities by providing unmatched, personalized service. Although there are many possible ways to deliver unique, highly personalized care, the unfortunate reality is that most independent practices work under the same, undifferentiated service delivery model as our colleagues at a retail chain.

One possible point of differentiation rests with aural rehabilitation and counseling. All of us understand the importance of it, but very few of us put it into routine practice. There are many reasons for this, and I am sure you are familiar with all of them. Leave it up to an independent, entrepreneurial audiologist, who has the motivation to take bold action and offer something totally distinctive and original to her patients. Like many of us, Unite member, Dr. Dusty Jessen in Colorado recognized the unflinching need to offer her patients more than a technological solution. In my interview with Dr. Jessen you will learn about her customizable aural rehab and counseling approach that you can also put into practice at your clinic.

Brian: Dusty, tell us a little bit about your practice and your affinity for Unitron.

Dusty: We are a small, independent practice with one ENT and two audiologists. I work two days per week and my colleague works one day a week. With our part-time schedules, it can be difficult to keep up with the rapidly changing technology, fitting software, accessories, etc. For this reason, we feel it is best to know the products of a single manufacturer inside and out, rather than skim the surface of products from several different manufacturers. We’ve chosen Unitron as that one manufacturer for several reasons. First, we feel like Unitron’s customer service is second-to-none. When we call, we are immediately connected to Peggy, John or one of our other friends in customer care. They treat us like we are part of their family, and do whatever is needed to help us be successful. Second, we are consistently impressed by Unitron’s products, fitting software and accessories. We love that Unitron hearing aids offer exceptional benefits all the way down to the entry level products. We have many patients who simply can’t afford premium technology. We know that we can present a wide range of options to these patients, with complete confidence that every product will provide excellent value. We are also super excited about the new FLEX program! Finally, we are consistently impressed by Unitron’s integrity. In an industry that is witnessing so much change, Unitron holds true to their values. This is evident in their trainings, customer care, hearing aids, support materials and representatives. We are proud to partner with such an outstanding company.

Brian: Like me and a lot of others out there, you notice a disconnect between the technology within hearing instruments and the process in which we fit this technology to patients. It seems that as hearing aid technology has gotten more automatic, audiologists are relying less and less on old fashioned counseling skills and rehabilitation. It also seems like consumers are more tuned into relying on a technological solution for everything. Could you elaborate on this disconnect from your vantage point?

Dusty: Sure, we see it every day! Patients come in with full-page newspaper ads touting the incredible benefits of modern hearing aids. They lead a potential consumer to believe that new hearing aids will perform hearing miracles in any situation. Honestly, I feel that manufacturers spread a similar message to hearing healthcare providers in their trainings and marketing materials. I understand that they are all proud of their latest and greatest technology, and I realize that recent advancements are impressive. However, the emphasis on technology alone can be deceiving, especially to new clinicians who weren’t around in the pre-digital era when we were forced to focus on counseling because we were so limited by analog hearing aid capabilities. In my
Brian: Because of this I know you recently started a new venture outside the four walls of your practice. Please tell us about it.

Dusty: I was desperate for an efficient way to provide this crucial education to all of my patients and their family members, without taking more valuable clinic time. I had been giving patients an educational packet, but it was long and, quite frankly, boring. I could get about half of my patients to read it. As for their family members (who are just as important in the rehabilitation process), I don’t believe I ever succeeded in getting them to read the entire packet. I wasn’t convinced that I’d have much more success with any of the other tools on the market, so I decided to create my own. I began by writing and designing the patient guidebook, Frustrated by Hearing Loss? 5 Keys to Communication Success. I knew it had to be short, engaging and most importantly, action-oriented. I tend to be very blunt with my patients (but in a friendly way), and that is exactly how I wrote the book. It educates patients and their family members about all aspects of communication, and guides them in developing a Successful Communication Plan for their most challenging listening situations. The feedback from consumers, communication partners, providers and industry colleagues has been very positive. I guess there was a widespread need for such a tool. However, as we began receiving feedback from our test clinics and using the book in our own practice, I realized that the positive impact of the book could be even greater with a more structured protocol and long term follow-up. Thus, I developed the Cut to the Chase Counseling Program. The patient guidebooks can still be purchased by clinicians and used as part of an existing counseling program; however, we recommend that providers become Cut to the Chase Hearing Pro Members to access all benefits of the Cut to the Chase Counseling Program.

Brian: I find the membership aspect of your new business very intriguing. What does a hearing healthcare professional receive when they become a member?

Dusty: Cut to the Chase Hearing Pro Members pay a small annual fee to gain access to the entire Cut to the Chase Counseling Program. Members receive a welcome kit that provides them with all materials needed to put their first ten patients through the Cut to the Chase Counseling Program. They receive wholesale pricing and free shipping on all book orders, and access to free downloads and other educational material through our website’s password-protected member portal. A huge benefit to members is access to our weekly Successful Communication eTips. Members simply sign up each patient (with their permission of course) to receive our weekly email that reinforces the communication techniques they learn in the book. Patients of member clinicians receive this weekly email for an entire year, which provides long-term education and reminders that patients must practice what they’ve learned to experience the greatest benefit from their hearing aids. Other benefits include a referral program as well as additional training and support. In short, the membership program is for clinics that are serious about providing a consistent and comprehensive rehabilitation program for each and every patient.

Brian: Could you share a success story from a member?
Dusty: You bet. We currently have five member clinics who are also serving as our test sites as we gather some data about the efficacy of the program. These sites are not yet receiving the benefit of the patient emails, as we wanted to first obtain data on use of the patient guidebook alone. One clinic has had eight patients go through the program so far, and their survey responses have been 100% positive. All patients report that the guidebook helped them understand what to expect from their hearing aids, taught them new communication techniques and helped their family members to better support them in the hearing aid process. They also report that the recommended exercises helped them to maximize the benefit they are receiving from their new hearing aids. These positive results are consistent with the feedback we’ve received in our own clinic. The audiologist who fit these patients reports that she loves having a fun and consistent way to counsel her patients without taking up any more clinic time. In fact, most of our member providers have reported that the program actually saves them clinic time due to the simple and consistent structure.

Brian: How can our fellow hearing healthcare professionals and Unite members learn more about Cut to the Chase Counseling?

Dusty: Our website is a great place to start! www.CutToTheChaseHearingPros.com. This site is dedicated to hearing healthcare professionals only. Clinicians can learn more about the program, download a sample guidebook, see all the member benefits including examples of the Successful Communication eTips and place orders for guidebooks and other support materials.

We are in the process of creating a consumer-friendly website that will reinforce the education provided by the Cut to the Chase Counseling program. That website is www.CutToTheChaseCommunication.com.

And I’m totally accessible by email: info@CutToTheChaseCommunication.com.

Brian: Excellent. And remember that Unite members can use their PDF to purchase this program. Any last words of advice to your fellow clinicians in the Unite program?

Dusty: Well, whether we like it or not, our industry is in a state of change. Consumers are more tech-savvy and their options for obtaining amplification are expanding beyond the reach of our clinics. I strongly believe that we need to position ourselves as rehabilitation experts rather than technology experts. As such, we need to clearly show our patients the value they receive from our services extends far beyond the hearing aids we stick on their ears. It is simply common sense that educated patients are satisfied patients. I think we need to lock arms as a profession and ensure that consistent and personalized education is occurring with each and every patient who pursues amplification. It is my hope that the Cut to the Chase Counseling Program will provide a fun, easy and effective way for clinicians to do just that. Thank you so much for letting me share it with your Unite members☺️