

# Kickstarting conversations: The Power of Talk

Full transcript of audiocast

There's a golden rule in the business world: People trust people over products. Studies have shown that people are more likely to buy from someone they trust, even if it means buying the same product at a higher cost. That's why building a connection through meaningful conversation is so critical when helping guide patients to their ideal hearing care solution.

Doing so demands a patient, curious, and sincere approach to understanding them. And while there's no one-size-fits-all roadmap for having conversations that lead to action, thankfully there are plenty of strategies and tips that can help you make those connections.

## First Impressions

Before you even kick-off your conversation, pay attention to how you make your first impression. Because sadly, the cliché is usually true: there are no second chances to make a first impression.

Right off the bat, patients are instinctively going to get a "feel" for if they can trust you through all kinds of verbal and non-verbal cues. So be authentic, and be yourself – and don't forget to smile when you meet them. Shake their hand, make eye contact. Your time in the clinic is precious, yes – but these initial moments help establish much-needed trust.

The more approachable you seem, the stronger your connection will be. And the smoother the conversation to follow is likely to go. To help you have more impactful conversations, there are a number of well-known methods you can use.

One tried-and-true approach is called 'Motivational Interviewing.' This is a methodology that helps draw out a patient's needs through guided, reflective questioning – and thoughtful listening. Think of it as giving patients a space to voice their concerns. Their fears, hopes, objections. Or even a place to work out their emotions. Process what they're saying, then reflect the thought back to them as an open-ended question that encourages them to go deeper.

This can include questions like:

- *I understand that you're worried about how wearing hearing aids might feel, or what your friends might say. What are you feeling when you imagine that?*
- *It sounds like your wife and some of your friends think you're dealing with hearing loss, but you don't. Why do you think they feel that way?*

After you've identified some of their core needs, you might take it a step further with questions that help them reflect on potential goals. After all, today was the day they decided to walk into your clinic – your job is to find out why. This can include questions like:

- *Can you recall a time when you had trouble hearing or communicating? What would be your goal for next time you were in a similar situation?*
- *Do you think there are specific situations in your life where a hearing aid could help?*

By acknowledging patients' concerns and validating their emotions, you can help resolve their ambivalence to change – and potentially motivate them towards treatment options.

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Another approach you can try is known as 'The 5 A's'.

The Internet is bursting with appealing, acronym-powered sales techniques. But 'The Five A's' is one that fits especially well to hearing care. Each 'A' is a step-by-step tactic to help focus your conversation with a patient towards action. For patients who are especially averse to change, this is an approach that can help cut to the core of their resistance.

Let's break down each of the A's – Ask, Advise, Assess, Assist, and Arrange – along with some helpful examples.

- First, Ask
  - Actively engage with the patient by asking questions that draw out their concerns and needs. Similar to 'Motivation Interviewing,' this is where you should validate, listen, and reflect their statements as questions to help them go deeper, like by asking: What kinds of hearing challenges are you encountering? or What are your goals for improving your hearing?
- Next, Advise
  - You've heard their problems and concerns. Now it's time to give your strong, simple, professional advice. Give it to them straight, though with respect, like by saying: Based on what you describe, I think a hearing aid could greatly help your hearing, or You should do a proper hearing evaluation to know for sure what your problem is.
- Now, Assess
  - Study their reaction to your advice and assess their willingness (or not!) to accept it. This is something you can gauge by making it a natural, active part of the conversation. Be sure to listen, but you can also try asking questions like: Do you think a hearing aid could improve your hearing? or Do you see yourself using a hearing aid if it were to help you communicate with your grandchildren?
- Then, Assist
  - Now's your chance to offer assistance – in whatever form they need – to help a patient cross their threshold of hesitation and take action. This will be different from person to person of course.
    - Some might need more emotional support: Do you think being able to converse with family like you used to could help you feel less alienated?
    - Others might be fighting external barriers like social stigma, or price point: I'm hearing that price is a concern for you; is there a price you'd place on being able to talk comfortably on the phone with your daughter?
    - Others might only need some practical information about what different products can offer: What's the most important thing for you about what a hearing aid should help you do?
- Finally, Arrange
  - Which should transition them to the next step in their hearing care journey, whether it's a follow-up appointment, a hearing evaluation, a product, or sending them home with demo instruments to try out for themselves.

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Lastly, a third method to try is known as ‘shared decision-making.’ Chances are you’re already using it with patients, and you don’t even realize it. Shared decision-making is a widely-used method that explores conversations more like a collaboration between you and the patient, rather than a traditional doctor/patient relationship. This isn’t necessarily a blueprint to steering a conversation. It’s more like a philosophy to keep in your mind, to help set the tone of your conversation with a patient.

Essentially, shared decision-making involves three key steps:

1. Listen and Learn

- First, take the time to get to know the patient, including their lifestyle, their concerns, and even their goals for their hearing health. Similar to both ‘Motivational Interviewing’ and ‘The 5 A’s,’ ask them open-ended questions that will reveal the core of their needs.

2. Inform and Involve

- Here’s where the conversation should begin to feel more like a partnership. First, give them your professional advice – then engage with them to explore the issues together through active participation. Weigh the pros and the cons together, giving your input when appropriate. Discuss their uncertainties as a teammate, rather than as a coach or a spectator. Whenever possible, invite their loved ones to join the discussion as well. Involving them early in the hearing care journey will help create a supportive environment – and make the team effort all the more positive.

3. Collaborate and Confirm

- Finally, work together – and make mutual decisions – on a gameplan that aligns with their preferences, values, and goals. Confirm their understanding of the choices you’ve made together, and provide ongoing support as needed.

## Some Last Words

At the end of the day, your conversations with patients are about more than selling hearing aids. They’re about empowering people to take action that can tangibly improve their lives. These strategies – or any combination of strategies – are just one of many ways you can help them articulate their needs, confront their concerns, and overcome their hesitations to begin their hearing care journey.