

January 14, 2010 – Buying from A Big-Box Company

Jim Wooll called the meeting to order at 3 PM. He announced that he has Margaret Hutchins tentatively set as our February speaker. He will not be here in February, so if she cannot come then, she will be our March speaker. He needs more ideas for speakers. He has requested a Monday meeting time slot around the 15th of the month.

Our guest speaker this month was Nancy Innes from Costco.

Nancy preferred a question and answer format.

Q: What is your educational background?

A. I just completed my D.Aud through Central Michigan in December. I have my MA in Audiology through UT and Bachelors in Audiology and Speech Pathology from U Hawaii.

Q. What is your experience?

A. I have 15 years of experience in total. Some of that was working with an ENT, some in an independent practice and 8 and ½ years at Costco.

Q. Then you like Costco.

A Yes, I am salaried and I like not being on commission and having to push particular hearing aids.

Q. What is the history of Costco hearing aid centers?

A. Originally there were two entities that merged, Costco and Price Club. Price Club had hearing aid department in about 56 centers nationwide at that time. Costco now has 300.

Q. What is the examination process at Costco?

A. The examination process is fairly traditional, we discuss problems, do tone and speech tests (including a bone conduction test). If there is a bone loss we refer the patient to an ENT. The tests include a word recognition test and an uncomfortable loudness test. These tests are done in a sound-proof booth with earphones. I am in the booth with you but these tests you are facing away from me.

Q. What is the buying process?

A. We run the tests and see if you need hearing aid(s), or need to be referred to a physician. If not, then we discuss your life style and what hearing aids would work with your loss and your life style. If we have a hearing aid(s) that will work, you need to join Costco (if you are not already a member), and pay upfront. We do not take insurance but we will fill out all the forms for you to submit your claim, and I have spent many hours with insurance companies on behalf of my clients. You have a 90 day trial period and if you are not satisfied you get all (100%) of your money back (including your membership fee if this is the reason you joined Costco).

Q. What is the fitting process?

A. We check the comfort of the fit, go over how to insert the batteries, we hook you up to the computer, and do some feedback measurements and then fit parameters to the hearing instrument. We also go over care and maintenance of the hearing aids (use the hearing aid dryer).

We decide on the programs (1-4). Typically the first one is an automatic, then perhaps speech in noise and some others depending upon the lifestyle. We verify the measurements, measuring the in the canal response to sounds obtaining a reference point. We discuss the properties of the hearing aids, the low battery and the program sounds. If the hearing aid or cell phone has a T coil we will check how to hear on the phone (but we do not have a land line telephone in the booth). We also schedule a follow-up within a couple of weeks, where we can change or add programs. (Note follow-ups continue until the situation is stable). We also schedule a follow-up at a year.

Q. What is Bluetooth?

A. It is a shortcut for the phone to the hearing aids (or just to the Bluetooth receiver).

Q. What about your selection of models?

A. The selection is limited. We carry Bernafon, Rexton (Siemens) and one other Intercont (Rebounds) The Bernafon is a receiver in the ear model only. We have one entry level or basic model, which I do not recommend and two to three models (by style) for the mid range (advanced) and for the high end (premium). Most high end hearing aids are similar. The high end aids do better in noisy situations.

Q. What is the price range?

A. For the basic model it is \$499.99, the mid range is \$999.99 and the high end are \$1299.99. Remotes are extra but available. Costco sells 30 batteries for \$9.39

Q. Is there much variation in cost by provider?

A. Yes! Additional features cost more.

Q. What is the warranty?

A. Mid level – two years, High end – three years.

Q. What about service?

A. There is no charge for what we can fix in the office. If we have to send the hearing aids back to the factory and they are out of warranty it is \$135.