Shedding New Light on an Old Tool

Using the COSI During the Pre-Fitting Appointment

BY BRIAN TAYLOR, Au.D.

Even though the COSI is known by virtually every audiologist dispensing hearing aids in the US, it is not routinely utilized during the pre-fitting appointment. This is unfortunate, because the COSI is one of the most powerful tools in the audiologist’s clinical arsenal. By methodically executing the five steps outlined in this article, audiologists will find that the COSI is an indispensable tool undoubtedly contributing to the success of your practice.
Current research indicates a sizable gap between office traffic and units sold. In a recent survey of 300 practice owners and managers in the United States, analyzed by an independent research company, the typical audiology practice sees, on average, 80 new patients per month. Of these 80 new patients per month, 44% of them (35) are being seen for hearing aid consultations, and would, therefore, be considered candidates for amplification in most cases. Given a bilateral fitting rate of 80%, these 35 patients represent 56 potential units sold each month. According to the same survey the average practice location dispenses only 17 devices per month. Taken together, this data would suggest a huge opportunity to improve revenue and efficiency for the typical practice owner or manager. A tool like the COSI when conducted in an efficient manner, as outlined in this article, is one way to close the gap between opportunities and actual sales.

The COSI (Client Oriented Scale of Improvement) is the ideal tool for completing a pre-fitting assessment of communication need. It takes something many audiologists naturally do quite well, which is to emotionally connect with the patient, and adds structure to it. The COSI was developed over a decade ago at the National Acoustic Laboratories (NAL) in Australia, and today, it is available in many manufacturers’ fitting software. If you can’t find it in the software, you can do directly to the NAL website (www.nal.gov.au) and download it. Even though many manufacturers’ have the COSI available in their software, the most effective way to use the COSI is to sit down face to face with the patient, completing it using pencil and paper.

Because the COSI allows the patient to target five or more specific listening situations for improvement, it is called an “open-ended” pre-fitting assessment. Since it is open-ended it allows the audiologist, patient, and even the significant other to work together during the pre-fitting devising a structured treatment plan. There are five practical steps involved in completing the COI during the pre-fitting.

Step 1. Generate a Broad List of Goals
The first step when completing the COSI is to obtain patient-specific goals related to initial hearing aid use. The objective of step 1 is to obtain from the patient a list of the five or six most important listening situations that present frustration or challenges. This is generally done during the initial case history before the hearing assessment.

After collecting the individual’s five or more specific needs it is important to rank each area in order of importance to the hearing impaired person. The five specific needs can then be directly targeted as areas of improvement for the hearing aid user. The COSI allows the audiologist to build a patient-specific counseling agenda, as well as to pinpoint specific areas that are essential when talking about expectations. Below is the COSI for a patient, Henry O. His five specific needs are described in detail then ranked in order of importance to him (Figure 1).

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Step 2. Get the Details
When obtaining the five specific needs from your patient it is important to obtain as much information as possible. For example if the patient states, “I want to hear better in noise” it is important to find out where, when, and with whom. Try to have your patient be as specific as possible by asking targeted follow-up questions.

Here is a list of follow-up questions to help delve further.

- Describe the listening situations where you struggle the most?
- Tell me about the listening situations you find the most challenging.
- Who are you trying to communicate with in noisy situations?
- What kind of room are you in when you have difficulty hearing in noise?
- How many people are typically in this environment?
- Tell me more about that situation.
It seems logical to pick both an easy and more difficult listening environment to specifically focus on during the initial few weeks of hearing aid use, and then develop realistic expectations around these areas. Stated differently, when the patient begins using hearing aids, there should be no doubt in their mind what the first two goals are. These two goals are developed during the initial pre-fitting appointment using the COSI to record them.

**Step 3. Pick Two**

After the five or six specific goals are written down and ranked, choose two of the five most important areas to specifically focus on.

Because patient communication needs can change for no apparent reason, it’s worth spending a couple extra minutes narrowing down the long list of five or six goals to two goals that can be targeted immediately during the first few weeks of hearing aid use.

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**A Tactic for Establishing Realistic Expectations**

After choosing the two situations to focus on, ask the patient how much benefit he or she expects to receive from their hearing aids in each environment. This is done to ascertain the patient’s expectations before the hearing aids are fitted. The audiologist can do this by simply drawing a scale (like the one below) from zero to one hundred on a blank piece of paper and asking the patient, “From zero being no improvement to one hundred being perfect

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**Figure 1. A sample COSI with five specific goals listed**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client Oriented Scale Of Improvement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person can hear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding my grandchildren when they are over visiting. The biggest trouble is when the 6 and 8 year old tells jokes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding my wife when she talks to me in the car and when the TV is on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the speakers at community meetings at the VFW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the speakers at mass - the women are the most difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding my wife and 2 friends at our weekly “date” at Byerly’s restaurant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Given the suspected gap between new opportunities for business and actual units sold in the typical practice, the prudent audiologist would be wise to incorporate more structured tactics into their routine pre-fitting procedures. This article outlines a practical step-by-step process for completing the COSI with the intent of providing more specific communication goals and more precisely aligning patient expectations with real world performance.

Let’s say that the patient has told you he expects 70% improvement, as shown in red below. Depending on several factors, such as personality, age, speech understanding in noise, etc., the patient’s expectations may be in direct alignment with what you would expect after the fitting. Asking one extra focused question about expectations, allows you to tailor the conversation regarding expectations in a more precise manner.

**Step 4. Leveraging COSI with MELU**

The results of the pre-fitting COSI may be used to begin a conversation with the patient about the need for premium products with advanced features. This can be done by leveraging some of the findings of the MarkeTrak studies, and using this information to build a case for recommending advanced hearing aid features.

One of the significant findings from the well known MarkeTrak surveys is that the more listening situations you can satisfy with amplification, the higher the overall satisfaction of the patient. The so-called Multiple Environment Listening Utility or MELU suggests a relationship between overall patient satisfaction and the use of premium technology. A summary of the findings are shown in the figure below. MELU findings give us the evidence we need to recommend premium technology and many advanced features for patients nominating several challenging listening situations on their COSI.

Leveraging the findings of MELU help us recommend premium technology with confidence because there is evidence to support our recommendation. The relationship between overall satisfaction and the need for premium products and advanced features for improved communication in multiple listening environments can be discussed with every patient using Figure 2. Given the suspected gap between new opportunities for business and actual units sold in the typical practice, the prudent audiologist would be wise to incorporate more structured tactics into their routine pre-fitting procedures. This article outlines a practical step-by-step process for completing the COSI with the intent of providing more specific communication goals and more precisely aligning patient expectations with real world performance.

**References**

Dillon, H, James, A, and Ginis, J. (1997). The Client Oriented Scale of Improvement (COSI) and its relationship to several other measures of benefit and satisfaction provided by hearing aids. *J Amer Acad Audiol.* 8, 27-43.


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Brian Taylor, Au.D., is the Professional Development Manager for Unitron in Plymouth, MN. In addition to his 15 years of clinical experience, he has been active in teaching and business management at a global level. Over the past five years, he has written numerous articles on a wide variety of topics related to clinical audiology and hearing aids and practice management. He has also lectured in the U.S. and Europe on these subjects. In addition to his duties at Unitron, Dr. Taylor is a Contributing Editor for Audiology Online and an advisory board member for the Better Hearing Institute.