



Company goes public; Better Hearing and Speech Month

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Byline: BY ANNE BEATY, ECHO EDITOR

For more than 75 years across America, May has been designated as Better Hearing and Speech Month.

While undiagnosed and untreated hearing loss is an issue year-round, this month offers an opportunity to raise awareness of the importance of hearing in everyday life.

With that thought in mind, bringing better hearing to the public at large is the aim of Robert Oswald, president of **HearAtLast**, a Canadian company dedicated to providing accessible and affordable hearing loss treatment.

"We shouldn't make hearing loss (correction) cost-prohibitive," Oswald said.

As well, he added, many people don't know where to go to get their hearing tested, so his company's goal is to reach as many people as possible.

As such, **HearAtLast** is set up in 'storefronts' in Wal-Marts across the country, including Airdrie, and open seven days a week. The idea is to be front and centre with the public at large, encouraging people to at least have their hearing tested -- at no charge -- in order to diagnose any problems or potential problems and provide options.

"It enables us to get the message out how crucial your hearing is," Oswald said.

According to statistics on the **HearAtLast** website, approximately 21 million people in North America are hearing-impaired, yet 75 per cent of those who could benefit from hearing aids do not use them.

For Oswald, that trend needs to change and he is hoping that **HearAtLast** will help to do just that. Having been in development for two years, **HearAtLast** opened its first store in October 2006. Now there are 25 locations (and more coming on board) across the country -- a number that, along with the statistics, tells Oswald that there is a need to be filled.

Along with offering high-quality brand name hearing aids and complementary screening tests, **HearAtLast** is also focused on educating the public, especially given that 90 per cent of people who come into a **HearAtLast** location are first-time buyers.

"The big misconception about hearing loss is that you have to be 75 years old to have it," Oswald said.

However, he said, more people under the age of 65 than over 65 suffer from hearing loss to some extent. In a society overwhelmed with noise -- from cell phones and music to trains, planes and automobiles -- people's ears are being blasted.

"Noise right now is just affecting all walks of life," he said. "It just never ends."

That said, Oswald -- who has worked in his field for 23 years -- is enthusiastic about reaching out to Canadians of all ages and de-stigmatizing hearing aids is one way of encouraging people to take charge of their ability to hear properly.

"Hearing aids now are invisible and affordable," he said. "In all honesty, you can't see these new hearing aids -- they're brilliant."

One problem is that many people wait too long to get hearing aids, making it much more difficult for them to adapt to the new sounds. According to Oswald, the brain needs to be able to gradually accustom itself to the new sound of the auditory messages it is receiving.

However, he added, with **HearAtLast**, clients are able to return their new hearing aids within 90 days, hassle-free.

"If you don't like it, bring it back," he said.

Overall, Oswald is hoping that the concept of Better Hearing and Speech Month continues throughout the year. With Walter Gretzky, who has been hearing impaired for 40 years, on board as spokesman, the company president is encouraging people to take advantage of what is right in their own community. While **HearAtLast** is a business, it is also providing a service.