

HLA-NJ News and Views

A Monthly Column from The Hearing Loss Association of NJ

By Peter Yerkes, Trustee, HLA-NJ

Epiphany at 40,000 Feet — How I Stopped Pretending to Hear Plus, A Reader's Story About Positive Customer Service

Year after year, my New Year Resolutions include a pledge to stop faking it—to give up my habit of smiling and pretending to hear something when I really didn't. I suspect I'm not the only person with serious hearing loss who does this. So I thought it might be helpful to share a recent experience that persuaded me once and for all to give up this bad habit.

The story begins at 40,000 feet over the Atlantic, in a jet carrying me home from a wedding in Rome. I am tall and have a stiff right leg, so I need to get up every hour or so and walk around and stretch.

In an age of tight security, flight crews hate this. When I was stretching in the unoccupied galley, I wasn't surprised when an attendant walked up and said...something. I didn't understand a word because large jets are so noisy but I was sure she was asking me to go back to my seat. For once, instead of guessing, I explained my hearing is poor and asked her to repeat what she had said slowly and to make sure she was facing me. After a couple of tries, the story emerged. She and another flight attendant had noticed my cochlear implant. The other flight attendant had hearing problems and wanted advice. Would I mind talking to her? I'd be glad to, I replied.

The attendant (I'll call her Beth) said that a few years ago, she got a bad ear infection. Her ear doctor advised to stop flying until the infection healed. But the airline refused to allow her to go on leave so her hearing started a steady decline. She was reaching the point where it was difficult to function. As we talked, she had to twist her body to get her ear close to my mouth. I could imagine what it was like for her to deal with difficult passengers.

She found it impossible to get advice, she said. Doctors told her to get used to it. I gave her some sources—the Center for Hearing and Communication in New York, the Hearing Loss Association of America and the Hearing Loss Association of New Jersey (where she lives). I also gave her my e-mail address.

I never heard from her so I have no idea how she is doing, but I learned a big lesson. Had I just smiled and walked back to my seat, I would have left Beth feeling she had been snubbed by one more person who didn't care about her or her problems - and I would have missed a conversation that I will always remember. I'm very glad I admitted that I had hearing problems, and did my best to try to converse. One of my New Year's resolutions is to keep trying.

Another incident is on my mind as we start the New Year. I was delighted to hear from an HLA-NJ member named Ellie Berg who had a positive story she wanted to share. Here, in her own words, is her story.

"For a number of years my Sonic Alert Clock with a bed shaker vibrator has been important in sustaining me in an active life style. Without it, I would often be unable to keep appointments and other commitments. I cannot hear my phone ring," she wrote in a letter of appreciation to Sonic Alert.

"So last week, when the bed shaker didn't function, it was serious. I emailed Sonic Alert about a

replacement and immediately received an offer of assistance from Ed Brink, Jr. Over a period of days, he was helpful and thoughtful beyond the call of duty. He phoned me on my Caption Call phone, knew to speak slowly and distinctly, and guided me through various steps with both the shaker and clock to see if together we could reboot the equipment. He spent a very long time with me, perhaps half an hour, patiently waiting for me to read his words on my phone captions, then providing instructions for me to make various adjustments on the clock mechanism. We were successful and I was embarrassed to have let out a great scream of joy. I send you all my deepest thanks and wishes that all the Sonic Alert people will be blessed with a healthy joyful New Year.”

Many thanks go to Ellie Berg for sharing her story. I join her in sending best wishes to the people at Sonic Alert, and to everyone like Ellie Berg and Beth who work hard to live with hearing loss.

I would love to hear other experiences, positive or negative, about customer service, or any other aspect of living with hearing loss. Please contact me at p.yerkes@comcast.net.

To learn more about HLA-NJ, please contact Arlene Romoff at info@hearingloss-nj.org and request to be put on the email contact list. We also invite you to visit our www.hearingloss-nj.org, or to attend one of our local chapter meetings in Bergen, Monmouth/Ocean or Middlesex County, and our newest Morris County chapter. Dates, places and times for chapter meetings are available from info@hearingloss-nj.org.