How To Be Heard

Anna Wells, Executive Editor, IMPO

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Most of the time, my dog puts his training to good use, and listens to me when I call. However, it's when something particularly enticing grabs his attention that he becomes a little less "aware." Thank goodness there are no pizza-delivering, firefighting rabbits in our neighborhood, or I'd spend my entire day chasing him. When we first adopted Omar from a Chicago-based rescue organization, we thought he might have a slight hearing problem. Nine months later, I've come to realize we're contending with more of a listening problem than a hearing problem.

I was interested to learn a little more about the relationship between listening and hearing at a recent seminar at the Grainger show in Orlando. The focus of this presentation was not on eliminating noise, rather, addressing the ways those affected could greatly reduce or eliminate the resulting damage that came with the prolonged exposure to high volumes.

The speaker, an audiologist for a hearing protection manufacturer, gave the crowd of attendees a free hearing lesson, before terrifying us with some data around hearing loss, including the troubling fact that much of the hearing damage that results from prolonged exposure to noise levels above 85 dBs occurs in a painless fashion, meaning the damage is taking place before the subject even realizes.

It's almost like an odorless carbon monoxide leak — but with no detectors to sound the alarm on our behalf. Instead, many find out when it's far too late and hearing loss has reduced the ability to enjoy the sounds around us at full impact. In fact, the most common form of preventable on-the-job injury is related to noise-induced hearing loss.

The speaker went on to relay some facts behind a hearing study where they were able to determine the key variables influencing hearing retention. Surprisingly, things like gender, ear protection product model used, or online safety course completion had no discernible effect on a user's individual hearing outcome. What did factor in, however, was whether the user had participated in a brief, one-on-one training on how to more effectively don an earplug. You see, much of what this study uncovered was that, simply, many users weren't using the PPE in the most effective way. At this moment, I realized that I had never been properly trained in how to take a soft, malleable ear plug, roll it between my fingers, and insert it far enough in the ear canal so it is not visible when facing forward. This training session will often take less than one minute.

After walking the floors of dozens of plants over the years, this little surprise was disturbing. That said, it was also interesting to know how easily this pervasive, industry-wide hearing damage could be prevented.

Every plant manager I've met in my career values the well-being of their employees over all else, so I have no doubt the safety team is on board with whatever needs to be done here — and if you can prevent a listening problem, you can likely prevent a hearing problem. This goes for management, whose job it is to focus resources on the training aspect, and for plant floor employees, who are responsible for executing the correct use of the PPE. Working in concert, these can have a discernible effect on preventing noise-related hearing loss before it happens.

I do believe this industry is full of good listeners, so let's make sure your staff really hears what you have to say.

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