



## Sound Bites Podcast Transcript

### Episode: Growing Your Practice feat. Madison Levine | Levine Hearing

Dr. Dave Fabry:

Welcome to Starkey Sound Bites. I'm your host, Dave Fabry, Starkey's Chief Innovation Officer. I'm really excited for today. Our guest is a second generation professional in the hearing healthcare industry, who founded her own practice in Charlotte, North Carolina. Madison Levine is also an ambassador for Starkey's Listen Carefully initiative, which helps educate elected officials and leaders about best practices around hearing healthcare. Today we're going to get her perspective on the health of the hearing industry and also get her to provide some tips for providers on how it is that they can enhance their relationships with their patients and communities. Madison, it's so great to have you on the podcast today. I've been a big fan. You're a force of nature and really we appreciate your taking the time to spend with us on today's episode of Sound Bites.

Madison Levine:

Thank you. I'm so happy to be here and I'm honored. I'm excited to be interviewed by you. I'm thrilled.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

Well, let's start at the beginning. As I said, you're a second generation hearing healthcare professional. You started in this industry really as a kid and have been now involved for five or six years, let's just say. But I know that your mom purchased her practice initially in your hometown of Macon, Georgia. And talk a little bit about the origins of your mother as a business owner, and then also what sparked your interest to decide to follow in her footsteps?

Madison Levine:

I always looked up to her as a business owner. I think she really took that on as an identity that was really important to her and being a member of her community. I mean, all of us know when you're in hearing healthcare, you are intimately involved in your community and you're learning deeply about people's lives, sometimes more than their primary care physician. You're seeing them more hours per year than any other doctor that they're seeing. Growing up, my mom would pick me up from school, take me to her office where I would do my homework in the back, and I got to see the impact that she was making. When I went to school, I went in a different direction as many kids do. I didn't know for a while that this is what I wanted to do, but actually my husband is the one who encouraged me to go

shadow her. He felt like it was a really fascinating industry. It was very heart forward, and he felt like I had a lot in common with my mom. And so as I was leaving one industry I didn't want to be in, I went and shadowed her and I just immediately felt this click. It was like, "This is what I'm supposed to do." So I came back to Charlotte. I didn't get to study under her. I was already in North Carolina. I picked the person that I felt like was going to be the absolute best as far as teaching me. He had been teaching for 30 years and I wanted a mentor like my mom. And so I went after him, got the job. And like you said, I started in the industry young and I also started my business young. I was only with him about two years when I decided to open my own office, young and naive.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

That's awesome, so much there. Thank you for sharing that background story because I think it's really interesting because many audiologists and hearing aids specialists kind of wish that their children would follow along in their footsteps while also wanting them to find their own way. And it's interesting where you started and where you were planted. You grew in a different direction, but then found your way back and that-

Madison Levine:

[inaudible 00:04:50] She was probably the most surprised of anybody. Because like you say, you want your child to maybe want to follow in your footsteps, but then also, you don't want to get your feelings hurt. So I think she just said, "Oh, she would never be interested. No, no." "Oh, you wouldn't want to." And it was an amazing way... Kids have this independent streak that happens through teenage years, college years. Me, to circle back and then for me to have this mentor relationship with her. I mean, I was calling her three times a day about cost of goods and billing and how to handle this patient. And it was an incredible change to our relationship.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

There's no greater pleasure, I think, as a parent to be able to not only see your children mature and find their way, but then also to be able to have you come home, if you will, to that industry where she has expertise and could offer that guidance is the best of both worlds. And so interesting then that you decided and to make that bold decision after only a couple of years after you had made the decision to come back to the discipline to go out on your own. And you said young and naive, what were some of the early missteps, if you don't mind sharing, that you found where even with the history, that you didn't know all the answers?

Madison Levine:

Oh my gosh. At that point, having never worked for myself, you can imagine there's so many things, figuring out how to negotiate insurance contracts, how to keep up with billing and sending statements, how to employ people and how to manage those relationships. Those are all the normal things that go along with any business, I think. But looking back, also having her as my mentor, it set the bar to me

pretty high for what I wanted to achieve to copy her. And that was a really good thing. What she did was she really created a lifestyle business that was beautiful. She was able to spend afternoons with us. She was able to move her schedule around for vacations. That's what I aspired to. And so the first few years I was building just towards that goal, and I had two babies during that time. And I managed to take two maternity leaves by hiring on another provider, but there came a point where I was surpassing where my mom had been and I didn't know who to look to next.

I felt kind of alone in the industry, and something I wish I had done early on is that I connected with the community bigger than just her, and it took me some time to find those people to look up to. But I think having somebody to chase, to emulate, to use as a mentor, that is what has helped me get to the growth that I'm at now.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

Excellent. And you mentioned early in your opening remarks that when you choose this discipline in your community, you have an intimate relationship. Everyone starts to recognize you as the person devoted to hearing and hearing healthcare. I can tell you that stimulated a memory in me years ago when my daughter was young and I worked at Mayo Clinic. I'm surrounded by world experts in all of these different disciplines related to healthcare. But at the time that my daughter was young, personal sound listening devices first were starting to become popular and kids were getting headsets and things and all of the parents, they knew I was the hearing guy and they wanted to know how loud is too loud. And so they were constantly asking me for guidance as to whether their children were at risk of noise damage. Do you talk about this intimate relationship being known as the hearing person? Are there any memories that were triggered by that remark or that led to that remark?

Madison Levine:

I get those questions all the time like you do. How loud should this be? How should I clean my ears? All those kinds of things. From the very beginning, I wanted to get so embedded in the community, I went to every health fair. I was just giving out free hearing tests anywhere that somebody would host me and had a little room for me and getting to answer those questions for people, even when it was a free setting. It was just, here I am to provide you with something, asking nothing in return. I think that is what started to elevate my notoriety in the community where people did know me as your ear lady or whatever, there're worse things.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

Absolutely. I completely agree. So if you don't mind me asking, how long have you been in your private practice now?

Madison Levine:

So we're just coming up on eight years.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

So talk a little bit about the changes, maybe from when you were shadowing your mother to then eight years ago to now. Some of the changes may be for the better, some of the challenges in the way that you've had to pivot from the way your mother did business.

Madison Levine:

My word of the year last year was pivot. This year is just growth. She worked in a more rural area and when I started out those first two years, I also did the same. And I saw such a drastic difference. After those first two years, I moved into opening my own practice in a much more urban area. The demographics were completely different for the people that were seeking hearing healthcare. That shocked me. And so the whole business plan that I had written, I had to rewrite. It didn't quite look like I thought it was going to look. So when I first started practicing, I was seeing people with much more severe hearing losses. Many who had worked industrial jobs and they had noise exposure and they were in a pretty bad way by the time that they came to me.

When I moved into the urban area, I was getting much more people in suits, business, bankers who had very mild loss, but they were feeling very affected by it and they were ready to get help earlier. And that stayed consistent throughout the last eight years that I've been in this practice is we treat a lot of mild losses and we change lots of lives. And that took me a little bit those first couple months to realize that it wasn't up to me to necessarily judge the amount of impact that their hearing loss was having on them and to stop being surprised. If it was impacting them, I had a way to help them and they were thrilled.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

I've said for a long time that you don't know your patient until you know your patient. So many times, particularly with young professionals, I see them start thinking already when they're doing the audiologic workup. They're thinking about, "Okay, what device am I going to fit? What technology? They're pre-conditioning based on what the limited interaction they have with the patient without really understanding what the patient's fears, concerns, attitude, stigma, all of that. And that just really takes time and it takes establishing trust, as you said, in your community, establishing trust in your knowledge about what it is, how it is that you can help them. And then really, two ears, one mouth. I try to listen more than I talk.

And it sounds like that was invaluable sort of to your experience as you transition from this rural environment with predominantly noise induced loss, one set of conditions. To this urban area where maybe even mild to moderate hearing loss, but people were feeling significantly impacted by the degree of that loss. So you couldn't just look at the audiogram, you got to know what their concerns are.

Madison Levine:

You are so right. And that two ears, one mouth, that's something that I have tried very hard to nurture in the audiologists that have come to me and come to work for me. Most have been very young, early in their careers. And in giving them that coaching, the way that we aim to counsel patients is listening way more than we're talking. And oftentimes the more that you are proud of what you know, and you spout it off, the less that they care and the less they feel that you're trying to help them. And they see that their health rates go up significantly when they talk less, which is good.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

So, let's talk about the impact of third party pay and over-the-counter hearing aids. You said last year that was your word of the year. I'm assuming some of that pivot was related to third party payers. The impact of OTC starting to become a reality. Do you see it as an opportunity, a threat, or both?

Madison Levine:

My word pivot actually wasn't addressed to either of those. But going directly to your question, I really see opportunity, I mean, I have not been severely affected by either of those things. OTCs, in my opinion, have had no impact, at least no negative impact on our business. Third party payers, I think that there are areas of the country where people are getting strangled by them. And I think that it is very, very difficult to operate in some areas of the country effectively. And they've had to morph their business models in order to handle it. And I think that's possible. You just have to be ready to pivot in order to make a service model that's going to work and you're going to get paid what you deserve. In my area, the third party payers have not been a huge issue. We have people that pick us every day instead of going to the clinic that takes the third party. And I know that doesn't work for everybody. It depends on where you are. My model has been to deliver a very high level of service and quality. And in my pretty affluent area, people are willing to pay for it.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

Well, because they trust you. You've established and identified yourself as an expert in the community. So I think that's kudos to your hard work and dedication to that. But I'm curious then, you said neither example that I gave you was your pivot. What was your pivot?

Madison Levine:

I moved from a retail model to a medical model last year. And some of that was probably in response to some of the changes going on in the industry. I wanted to have more ways to serve people, to not take away anything from our hearing care, but to keep adding on complimentary services. So I'm an HIS and I hired my first audiologist almost three years ago and then another, and now we have two fourth years with us this year that just started a couple of weeks ago. We just brought on a doctor of physical therapy a couple of months ago. So we went from just hearing care to also vestibular and physical therapy, and it has been really great. They are feeding each other. It took a lot of preparation, but last year was a really big leap for me in terms of Medicare, moved offices, went from 1100 square feet to almost 5,000, which we have not filled out.

We're about half full. But I want to have, I'm going to build a Death Star. I'm going to be like one huge location before we open another one. And I believe that we are building something so great that we are able to attract the people we need to feed it and provide them something that they're not getting somewhere else.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

I love your reference to a Death Star wanting to build one big office before you go to a second. I mean, I think in many cases, young professionals, private practitioners really identify their success with multiple locations. And I'm reminded of Steel Magnolias where Dolly Parton at the end of the movie, she says, "I'm a chain." When her husband got the second office. But I think so many times and maybe this is an influence from your mother and your mentor. Where when you go to two offices, it's probably the most important and most precarious decision that a lot of people make because overhead goes up, personnel issues become more challenging. And I think building that Death Star in a single location is so important. But then also you're not ruling out developing the Death Star and then going on to another location. But I think the change that you made such a bold decision to move from more retail in a medical practice, not the least of which your dependence more on service and working with balance, which is a huge growth area. We know hearing and balance, of course, are inextricably integrated. And that this issue on balance is an area of opportunity as people get older, they also elevate their risk of falls along with their increased risk of hearing. So kudos to you on that.

Madison Levine:

Thank you. It's a big lift. I mean, as anybody who is an entrepreneur, a business owner knows when you go through big changes like that and you add lines of service, I was in a pretty comfortable position before I decided to push the chips in and go bigger. And I would tell everybody that it was the best decision that I made, but it like was going into a startup again.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

It's like the old Baz Luhrmann song, Wear Sunscreen. Where one of the lines in it is one of my favorites is do something every day that scares you. It's sounds like last year you did something every day the entire year that scared you, but look where you are now. So congratulations.

Madison Levine:

Thank you.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

So now I want to pivot since I've now used it three times, but you've just talked about how your practice, you made this, you adapted. You had this new vision to transition from more retail into a medical model, incorporating both balance and hearing. What can you share about that journey as well as how it is that you've been so successful at building an online community to support that growth in addition to the organic growth that comes from being visible in your community?

Madison Levine:

I think that plugging in a new line of service can be very intimidating. You don't know where the leads are going to come from, and it's something that I really enjoy and I think I'm pretty good at. I have written several business plans through the years I referenced. I know there are people that say, "I don't write a business plan. Just hold your breath and go for it." I really strongly disagree. I believe you have to write something down and you have to have at least a semblance of what you think it's going to look like. So when I decided to launch vestibular, I did align with the American Institute of Balance. They helped me immensely with getting a template of something that had been done before. I'm an HIS, so I was coming from no knowledge. And there may be audiologists that have done it before and in other practices and they say, "Oh, I know how it works." And they may not need as much support as I felt like I needed.

But taking a model that worked and then refining it also to make it work for my practice, I couldn't have taken it just the template that I had. I had to keep developing it. But I think what has happened, and us doing both of these services, is that it has completely changed the way that the community views us. They knew that we were the hearing people, but now we're the audiology group and we are getting so many more physician referrals. I'm getting asked to speak on platforms that I wasn't getting access to before. I'm in the independent physician network in my city. Going from retail to medical changed the game as far as who my colleagues really became. And that for me changed who my community was as well and the messaging that I get to send out there. Whether it's on my website, my Google Ads, my social media, my radio, my print ads. I believe in layered marketing.

I don't think one thing is a silver bullet, but I watch my numbers very closely and I know how much I'm spending per month on each medium and how many patients are coming from it so that I can keep moving around the pieces as I need to.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

And I would imagine in, like you said, as a hearing instrument specialist, making this bold move into balance. You had a lot of people telling you, "Well, you can't do that. What makes you think you can do that?" And by having the presence of mind and to hire audiologists who can assist you with that, you have the vision, you have the overarching view for where the practice is going. But then also having the humility to say, "Okay, we're going to work on this together," is really music to my ears. Because although hearing aids have been my first professional love, balance, when I was at Mayo, I had the pleasure and privilege to work with a lot of experts in the area of vestibular.

I think it's one of the areas that's really fun too, in that we can really treat patients you think of with benign positional vertigo, and knowing how to do the assessments and do the treatment and becoming regarded as the expert in the area may not be for everyone, but it's very clear you've made this work. And it is very impressive to think about how it is that now you are likely really identified in that community, as you said, with getting referrals from other physicians, from other practice areas, et cetera. And so what a bold initiative and congratulations to you for that, and then raising awareness in the community for that.

Madison Levine:

It was scary, you're right. Coming from being an HIS, I have had my own self-doubts as everybody does. And when you're in an industry where there are some things within my scope and things that are not within my scope, it was so important to find people who were going to give me really good advice, advisory, being able to elevate one of my lead audiologists here to be our clinical director so that she is really overseeing that vestibular work. It's important to me that the patients are getting the appropriate care, and I'm not the right person to oversee that type of work. And I know it, but getting it out in the community, I have been hustling my little tail off the last few months. I have gone into dozens of medical offices to bring in lunch just like a drug rep would. So for years, I would go to the front desk, I'd drop off cookies and try to get an appointment and I couldn't get past the front desk.

And this year I really just threw that out the window and I'm going direct to them and saying, "Hey, I want to buy your whole team lunch," just like the drug reps do. You're scheduling four lunches a week. They're thrilled that it's somebody that's not trying to sell them drugs. And they're surprised.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

And you're getting an audience with them and you're talking about the impact.

Madison Levine:

And they see me as a colleague and they don't have good resources for either hearing or dizziness. You ask them how often they're referring, and it's rarely for either, but you know that they're seeing tons of patients with both those issues. So there's a lot of physician education that's going on.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

And I think we all have self-doubts, and I've struggled with imposter syndrome for years and self-doubt, but you can't let it paralyze you. You use it to motivate you and then recognize what pathway you were going to take and then executing on that and figuring out what's going to work best. What sort of online tools ancillary to that are you using to educate, raise awareness, have people identify you as the source of where they can go get information and treatment?

Madison Levine:

I started with a lot of attention on Facebook the first few years, and I made a shift towards more attention on Instagram actually the last few years. And people might think, "Well, our hearing demographic, is that the primary place that you're going to find them on Instagram?" There are plenty of people who are in the 55 plus age group that are there, but I also am focusing on vestibular and ear cleaning and things that have broadened the age group that I'm trying to reach. So I am looking for them where they are in these younger demographics.

My website is my front door. Most people are going to see that front door before they see my physical one. And so I put a lot of attention into curating the look of the website and the education that's on it. I'm really heavy into video. And so I'm filming about every other week right now, content that is used for



Google Ads, that's used on the website, on social media, paid advertising for all of those. But also I'm putting together playlists on YouTube, private playlists to be able to send to patients when they have questions, here's my answers to all of that. Curated directly for them. And that has gotten a really incredible response from people.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

Personalization and curation for specifically what they're looking for is so important. And people don't think about that. They just do sort of a broad based information instead of being able to curate for specific areas, specific concerns. And I think that's so smart.

Madison Levine:

It's different. You can just say, "Hey, go look at my YouTube." But then they're having to dig and the whole point is that you're the professional and you know what they need, if they're only looking for custom devices. You can send them a playlist just about all the FAQs for custom.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

Brilliant. Well, and as you know, Starkey's also extremely interested in this area of fall risk. We were the first in the hearing aid industry to introduce devices that had sensors built into them so that if someone is at risk of falling and has hearing loss that they can notify three trusted contacts regarding the unlikely and hopefully rare event where they fall. And that person can then call them or text them or see on a map where they were when they fell. And we've had to educate many practitioners because they think falls are just for older people. And I've got several friends who are hearing care professionals who also had hearing loss and never enabled the fall alerts. And then they suffered a fall and now they've become our best advocates in this area because they realize it's... Any hearing loss, even a mild degree of hearing loss raises the risk of falls.

And we're really on a path where fall detection's great and it really gives that peace of mind to family members and individuals who want to live independently but that's not the end game. We're really working to assess fall risks, to do training exercises, to help prevent falls before they occur. So stay tuned. I think we're going to be able to stay aligned with your long-term vision in terms of the assessment, treatment follow up, and really helping people hear better, live better and connect with that strong comorbidity between hearing and balance.

Madison Levine:

I love it. I think that we have been so aligned. I am just so impressed what Starkey has done. Me going into a more medical model, it has felt very aligned with what Starkey has done as well. There are other manufacturers that have not looked towards the holistic health viewpoint. And I think that's why we especially love the Starkey products for that.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

Well, thank you. I do want to talk a little bit, I knew this conversation would go fast and we're already running out of time, but I want to talk a little bit about the advocacy initiatives. You've already identified several ways that you're doing this, but you are a Listen Carefully ambassador and talk a little bit about why it is that you agreed to participate in that. What sorts of things so far have you done and where do you see this going?

Madison Levine:

It's another example of Starkey, in my opinion, really leading the way in an area that others might not have even thought that they could have an impact in. Having a national organization like this where you've got people across states, across different types of cities. You've got rural, you've got urban bringing all of their concerns together. We have quarterly meetings, and it has been so impactful to hear from colleagues across the country, what are the primary concerns that they're having related to whether it's third parties, OTCs legislation that looks like it could be harmful to the patient. And just the things that have already been accomplished through this group have absolutely made a difference in patient's lives and safety. And so when I got the ask about it, it was very easy to say, "Oh my gosh, I would love to be a part of it, and I want to have a voice in it as well."

Dr. Dave Fabry:

We've already had seen and heard from Listen Carefully ambassadors who, as you said, they've developed their own mosaic, their own fabric across every state to ensure that as legislation is introduced to improve, let's say accessibility and affordability to technology, that we don't see unintended consequences from some of that in terms of license law changes or the way that access, particularly as you said in rural areas, might be restricted, where we know there's a shortage of practitioners across the board. And I really do believe in many cases, it was an unintended consequence of that improving accessibility to the technology that if we didn't have this network of professionals involved with Listen Carefully, there could have been damage to patient care associated with that. So thank you for that. And another area we're really proud of with Listen Carefully is a partnerships with Special Olympics.

Recently I had the privilege of going to the World Games in Berlin. And another role for some of the Listen Carefully ambassadors is, for those who say, "Well, I'm not interested in politics or legislation." And another way that people can be involved with Listening Carefully is to participate if an athlete... We did the World Games this year, we did the US games last year and fit state-of-the-art hearing aids on athletes in one of the most sobering statistics for Special Olympics is 30,000 athletes say that they have a hearing loss or a hearing problem. 83% have not had so much as a hearing test. So we're ensuring and partnering with Special Olympics to get hearing tested, but then importantly, rather than giving them a voucher and saying, "Good luck, God bless." We're fitting them if there's no contraindications.

And most importantly, hooking them up with someone in the local community and being able to partner in that way is another way that we can tie the impact of what it is that you do, give you the fields of working with some of these athletes who otherwise have their hearing and balance concerns ignored and giving that opportunity to make an impact on their lives. So lots of ways that people can become involved.

Madison Levine:

I love that. And as far as the local community, I know that in my area there's been some work to get some local legislators into the office in order to see what does the impact look like on the ground. And I'm very much looking forward to hosting some of our local legislators for that. And I know that that's happening across the country and until they come in and they get to see it, most people don't have exposure to what hearing healthcare even looks like. So the assumption I think, by people on the street would be, why can't you just pick one up at Walmart? I mean, seems like you would just plug it in and go, right? There's just so much to see behind the scenes to educate people.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

And like you said, I mean OTC, if it's another channel that provides a way to increase adoption rate for hearing aids, that's great. But I'm not afraid of OTC as a challenge. I see it as an opportunity to raise awareness. Hearing loss is often an invisible disability. People don't realize, as Helen Keller said, that vision brings in the beauty of the world. Hearing connects us to each other. The way that you are extending your business, your practice to use hearing and balance and then connect to other comorbidities is I think really is an example of not being paralyzed by fear in the face of threats, but thinking about how it is that I can boldly move to my vision as you've done with the pivot and now growth for this year. And I think you're a shining example of forward-thinking and really growth opportunities to serve your patients, your customers in ways that is very creative and then also executing on it. So congratulations to that.

Madison Levine:

Thank you. Thank you for that.

Dr. Dave Fabry:

And to our listeners, thank you for listening and or watching if you're watching on our YouTube channel. Um, and, uh, we really wanna hear from you too! First, if you like this episode, please rate us. Please subscribe, please share with your friends, your network, your families.

Uh, get the word out there if you have ideas for future content that we should cover in sound bites, please email us [soundbites@starkey.com](mailto:soundbites@starkey.com) with ideas. We'd be happy to bring other experts in the area, uh, uh, on like Madison. And, um, we, we'd love to hear from you sincerely. So, at this point, uh, we are out of time for today and I just again, express my gratitude for your participation in soundbites!