

Retail business

The AudioNova Group is dedicated to delivering best-in-class service and technology solutions for people with hearing loss.



In May 2016, Sonova announced its agreement to acquire Audio Nova, one of Europe's largest hearing aid professional service providers. The acquisition was completed in September 2016, expanding Sonova's retail service network in Europe by over 1,300 stores with attractive market positions and established customer bases. The acquisition added around 1,600 hearing care professionals, significantly expanding the retail network's service capacity and bringing it even closer to its customers.

AudioNova's complementary footprint and high-quality retail platform are an excellent fit with Sonova's existing state-of-the-art service network and integrated retail strategy, creating an optimal basis to exploit the strengths of the combined businesses. After the completion of the acquisition, Sonova renamed its global retail business "AudioNova": a fast-growing international network of professional hearing care providers, operating from over 3,300 locations in twelve major markets around the world.

The AudioNova Group operates under several market-specific, well-established local brands, which besides AudioNova include Audium, AuditionSanté, Boots Hearingcare, Connect Hearing, Geers, Hansaton, Lapperre, Schoonenberg, and Triton. All these brands share a single, global strategy: to offer best-in-class professional services and to drive sustained growth by putting customer experience at the center of attention.

New products and services

The Sonova model of innovation extends to our retail activities. Hearing loss affects all aspects of life – and life is always changing. Our retail business benefits from direct, timely access to the latest Sonova technology. To be fully effective, our solutions need to be presented, fitted, explained, and supported in a way that works optimally for each customer, every day. Continuous improvement in services allows us to take advantage of step-changes in technology to enhance our customers' experience and further improve our own productivity.

Over recent years, we have successfully expanded our partnership with Boots, the UK's leading pharmacy-led health and beauty retailer. Building on the company's strong customer base of around eight million visits per week to Boots pharmacies and opticians, and through access to around 18 million Boots Advantage loyalty-card customers, our Boots Hearingcare business continues to extend its leading position in the UK private market. Along with increasing sales, we have offered new payment plans and have improved productivity, introducing easy-to-use electronic appointment scheduling and optimizing the deployment of our professionals: many of our nearly 500 locations are fully booked all week and some even on weekends.

In the Netherlands, our Schoonenberg network operates nine Expertise Centers, with a further two due to open soon. These offer a unique experience for people with highly specific or complex hearing needs, as well as customers who demand the most innovative solutions – such as wireless communication systems – and expert service. The Expertise Centers boast state-of-the-art equipment and listening environment simulations, along with highly trained and motivated staff who work in close co-operation with ear, nose, and throat specialists and hospital audiological centers. In a competitive market where insurance-paid standard offerings predominate, the result is higher average sale prices, client value, and private market sales – and, most important, higher customer satisfaction.

Market access

Our approach to professional hearing care builds customer loyalty through operational excellence. We look closely at every stage of the customer journey and ask: how could this interaction be made better, easier, quicker, more welcoming, more productive? Shared services and training, combined purchasing and equipment standards, uniform performance management and information technology – put together, all these help to deliver an outstanding experience of our people, our services, and our solutions, while at the same time delivering efficiency and increased profitability.

As an international network spanning many key markets, we want to make clear to current and potential customers that the outstanding experience we provide is the same across all our stores and reflects our values. Personal referral is still the largest and most profitable source of new business. To earn that referral, we want to be considered the most trusted brand in our industry, which means connecting the customer's individual experience with the brand identity. The advanced solutions and streamlined procedures you enjoy in your local shop should be expected wherever our brands are seen. To that end, we are working to apply uniform country-level branding across our networks, giving all our stores a consistent appearance to emphasize our shared values.

Our current strategic priority is to shape the merged businesses of the AudioNova and the Connect Hearing Group into one integrated network with a product offering increasingly based on Sonova technology. We have appointed a new manager with extensive retail experience to our Management Board to implement our clear and comprehensive integration plan on both the global and local level. We remain committed to organic growth in each of our stores, achieved through ever better products and services, and enhanced customer experience. We will also continue to fill in gaps in our key markets with new stores, innovative distribution models, and selective acquisitions.

eSolutions

In an ever-more connected world, customers expect that their experience will be streamlined and easy, and their hearing journey enhanced by efficient digital tools. We consider our suite of eSolutions to be just such essential tools. They automate routine tasks and give our professionals the ability to deliver their expertise through multiple channels.

The most commonly-cited challenge in the hearing care industry is how to convince people with hearing loss to seek help. In the past, this was done predominately through traditional marketing campaigns in newspapers or shop windows, but now people are increasingly turning to the internet to find information.

As part of our partnership with Boots in the UK, we have been providing for over a year our convenient, easy-to-use online or in-store tablet-based screening app, combining a few simple questions with a hearing threshold test at low, mid, and high frequencies. Since we introduced it, tens of thousands of hearing checks have been completed. Once customers complete the screening, they can choose immediately to book directly an appointment at their nearest store, with real-time availability. The booking automatically generates a confirmation email with a link to a questionnaire, which prepares them and their Boots Hearingcare professional for the appointment, enabling a more constructive discussion during the first face-to-face meeting. The program also sends a reminder email 72–48 hours before the appointment to improve attendance rates. We took this approach one step further in late 2016 with a market trial of the eCoach: a smartphone app that engages new hearing aid wearers by providing them with tips, listening tasks, and a direct link to their audiologist. It also provides the Boots Hearingcare professional with real-time data that helps to optimize any hearing aid adjustment during the next face-to-face visit or remotely in the future.

Even within the digital universe, people do not like to have only one way of contacting their professional services. Potential new customers will be reaching out to us through a multitude of channels including email, voice, text and video chat, or even through social media. The wide range of channels comes with a shorter attention span: to capture potential leads, we need to respond knowledgeably, quickly, and efficiently, no matter how they approach us.

Our Geers network, one of the largest hearing care retailers in Germany, addressed this need with the launch of a multi-channel customer management solution, which provides a consistent customer experience with fast and accurate responses, regardless of the contact channel the customer chooses. Trained personnel handle simple customer inquiries, appointment bookings, and responses to marketing campaigns, taking calls or emails when the shop is not available, thus ensuring that leads are not lost. This innovative customer management initiative can be considered as a blueprint for similar centers in other markets.



Network for better hearing

Australia is almost twice the size of all the countries in the European Union put together, but despite the vast distances, the Connect Hearing team manages to stay in constant contact with customers right across the country: in addition to the face-to-face service offered in more than 120 specialist stores, they have also gone online. “Australia is an ideal market for eSolutions,” explains Managing Director Wolfgang Bennedik. “Many of our customers are very net-savvy; more than half of older people in Australia surf the web and possess smartphones, and we take advantage of this in our customer relationship management.”

Connect Hearing’s marketing team posts new content to the “We’re all Ears” com-

munity’s Facebook page on a near daily basis, and the website already has more than 12,000 fans, with more joining every day. There is also a “We’re all Ears” online platform, through which Connect Hearing provides information on an array of topics. “We want to offer our users genuine added value,” says Marketing Manager Beat Meier. The posts range from tips for jobseekers who wear hearing aids, through recommendations for relatives of people with hearing loss, to the latest research findings. “Dealing with hearing loss has always been the heart and soul of the project, it’s not principally about products,” explains Meier. “We also use promotions to invite potential customers to visit our specialist stores.”

Meier has an appointment with Sonova audiologist Julie Sutcliffe and the “We’re All Ears” community today – every two months, users can ask the hearing care professional questions in a live chat. “This helps the community, and we find out what’s on the minds of

our existing and potential new customers,” adds Sutcliffe.

The Connect Hearing team sits around a conference table in the roomy loft of its Sydney headquarters and waits for questions; the live chat is projected onto a screen and Sutcliffe’s responses are typed directly into the computer. The audiologist mainly supplies contact information for hearing care professionals and doctors – for many, this advice is the spur they need to address their hearing problems. Everyone is content at the end of the nearly two-hour session: “Once again, we’ve been able to help lots of users,” beams Sutcliffe.

“The ‘We’re all Ears’ community has been a complete success,” says Managing Director Wolfgang Bennedik enthusiastically. “It allows us to tap into the huge potential of social media for our company and to forge ahead with developing further eSolutions in Australia.”



Users can browse the latest information from the “We’re all Ears” community on a tablet: Connect Hearing’s online platform in Australia already has 12,000 fans. The content they post is first and foremost about dealing with hearing loss rather than about products.