



Hearing instruments business

An open ear for customers

Christoph Schwob has been running *Hörberatung Basel*, his specialist audiology store, for more than 30 years. In the meantime his two sons have also joined the family business. Sonova brand Phonak has been with them from the very beginning.

A large, red, plastic ear is mounted on the wall outside a store in Basel's Old Town. Attached to the ear is a set of headphones that passers-by can put on. To run a basic hearing test, all you have to do is press a little red button. "A lot of people don't even know our name," jokes Christoph Schwob. "To many of our customers, we're just the ones with the red ear on their door." Schwob is an audiologist and managing director of *Hörberatung Basel*.

He opened his specialist hearing aid store here in the Old Town more than 30 years ago. He loves his profession because it allows him to combine his passion for technology with the "people" work. "The nicest thing for me is when I can help customers who, because of their hearing loss, are able to engage with speech, music, and communication in only a limited way," he says. The real pleasure, he adds, is discovering precisely what is required for his customers to hear better again and thus regain their quality of life. "There's a story behind everyone," says Schwob, "and my job is to pinpoint where someone has problems with their hearing in their daily life."

Schwob is also passionate about the Sonova brand Phonak, which has been a part of his career since his training more than 30 years ago. Phonak has been developing hearing solutions for more than 70 years and has decades of experience in supplying and fitting devices for children.

Schwob specialized in supporting children with hearing loss at an early stage. Most of the little ones affected are born with hearing loss and Schwob's youngest customers are no more than two or three months old. "Fitting babies and infants with the right hearing aid is a real challenge and a responsibility – children like that can't stand up for themselves or tell us exactly what they need," he explains. As an audiologist, he will be there for them throughout their lives. "I always find it inspiring to see how the children learn to communicate and can go to school with the help of our hearing solutions."

AN OPEN EAR FOR CUSTOMERS

Six-year-old Flurina is a case in point. She is affected by inverted hearing loss, that is to say, she hears “darker” sounds (like a “U”, for example) poorly, but can make out “brighter” sounds such as sibilants very well. This is rather unusual, according to Schwob; it was thus only possible to diagnose Flurina’s hearing loss when she was three years old. She has worn hearing aids ever since, and has to call into the store with the red plastic ear on the door for a check-up every six months. Flurina finds having to wear hearing aids at such an early age completely normal and patiently sits facing Schwob during the hearing test, lifting her right index finger whenever she hears a signal beep in her headphones.

Next, Schwob plays her a video with images of a kindergarten, transforming his practice into a nursery school with the aid of the loud soundscape of children playing and making noise that emanates from the speakers. “Is that OK for you?” he asks Flurina. “Yes, that’s fine,” she answers, incisively. And now there are cars and trucks driving across the monitor, like the five o’clock rush hour at an intersection.

Finally, Schwob checks Flurina’s Roger wireless receiver, which helps her hear her teachers better (they wear a discreet wireless microphone, which transmits their voices to the receiver in Flurina’s hearing aids). This allows Flurina to hear her teachers directly without any distracting background noise. This Roger technology is just one of the many pioneering and easy-to-use hearing solutions in Phonak’s portfolio that have been specially designed to meet children’s needs.

“Phonak and I are a good fit,” says Schwob. “I remember the brand from the days when their business in Switzerland was just a small family firm,” he explains. *Hörberatung Basel* can itself now look back on decades of tradition and the next generation is on board; his two sons Nicolas and Joshua have both worked for the family firm for years. The *pater familias* is of course delighted: “They both simply felt my passion. For me as a father, it’s obviously wonderful to see my sons taking an interest in what I’ve built up,” says Schwob.



The Schwob family in Basel has been working with Phonak for decades

Three Schwobs working together at close quarters is a winning combination. “As we all have our own customers to look after, we don’t see one another that often in the store,” explains Joshua Schwob. He is mostly concerned with the digital side of things, where hearing aids interface with smartphones and apps. His elder brother Nicolas is mainly in charge of their many house calls – a lot of Christoph Schwob’s customers have grown old with him over the more than 30 years he has been running *Hörberatung Basel*, so old in fact that the trip into Basel’s Old Town has become too much of a challenge for some. And what condition is the boss’ own hearing in? “Well, it’s slowly going downhill, especially when I’m in places where there are a lot of people talking at the same time,” he says with a grin. On such occasions, Christoph Schwob takes his Phonak hearing aids with him to compensate for his own hearing loss. “It always brings home to me just how helpful modern hearing aids are.”