

Acting on Sound Advice

By Michael Hartranft / Journal Staff Writer on Mon, Aug 29, 2011



The EarPOD is designed for people who suffer from age-related hearing loss and sells for \$325. It resembles an MP3 player, letting “an older person look like a younger person,” creator Garth Gobeli says with a chuckle. (Courtesy Earpod Inc.)

The retired Albuquerque physicist made a splash at the 2010 Equity Capital Symposium with a prototype of his invention, the EarPOD, a high-tech, low-cost device to correct age-related hearing loss. He didn’t land the venture funding he was looking for, but took away some sound advice on how “to get this product off the ground.”

“The sort of universal thing was you need to make a modest run, a hundred, something like that, and demonstrate that the market will accept it, and the market will pay for it,” he said.

So, Gobeli dug into his own pockets to begin production of the first instruments at Albuquerque-based Betatron Electronics.

“We’re completing the first of what I would call a truth-of-market run,” said Gobeli, who founded the company EarPOD Inc. last year. “We got our first delivery the first of August, and we’ve already sold 28 of them — which is not bad for a beginning that we haven’t even advertised.”

Employing patent-pending technology, the EarPOD looks like an MP3 player, with volume controls for each ear and a rechargeable battery. Its target customer is someone who’s experienced ordinary hearing loss associated with age.

“That type of hearing loss is one that starts generally at 45 to 50 and as you get older and older, it gets worse,” Gobelli said. “It’s characterized by a continual decline in the ability to hear high frequencies. By high, I mean, say 10,000 Hz.”

Priced at \$325, the EarPOD costs a tenth of standard aids on the market and can outperform them, he said.

“The speech (range) people talk about, which encompasses the full range of sounds per the human voice, peaks out in what’s called the sibilants — the s, v, th, f sounds — they’re up very close to 8,000 Hertz. A small bird tweeting is about in that range, maybe 6,000 to 8,000 Hz,” he explained. “Standard hearing aids ... amplify fairly well until they begin to roll over and peak out. So ordinary hearing aids will not assist in the 4,000 to 8,000 Hz frequency range, which contains all those high frequency sibilant sounds.

“Ours continues to increase the amplification all the way out to 10,000 Hz so speech comprehension is much better,” he said.

The next step is getting the 100 devices sold, then reinvesting the proceeds to produce 300 to 500 more, Gobeli said, adding that he’s planning to start some advertising and to promote it at local senior centers.

The EarPOD’s electronic design was done by electrical engineer Steve Mills. The case itself was designed by Paul Gard of Paul Gard Design.

The company has also gotten plenty of family help. Gobeli’s wife, Jean, is the chief financial officer. Son Stephen, who lives in Plano, Texas, and works at Alcatel, delivered the EarPod presentation at last year’s symposium. Stephen’s wife, Victoria, designed the EarPOD website. His daughter, Lynne Ray of Las Cruces, who has a master’s degree in technical English and technical writing, has written the instruction manual.

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