Internet Hearing Aid Sales: Our New Reality

By Kayce Bramble

As audiologists, we are committed to providing quality hearing health care to our patients. We strive daily to follow evidence-based practices, and integrate individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence (Sackett et al, 1996). These practices include a detailed patient case history, otoscopy, and a comprehensive audiological assessment prior to making any hearing aid recommendations. Many audiologists today also employ needs assessments, speech-in-noise tests, and hearing aid outcome tools as well. We set high standards for ourselves as hearing health-care providers. It’s rather unfortunate that today a whole slew of Internet-based organizations without our same high standards for quality, care, and service are providing hearing aids to the general public.

Who Are These Organizations?
There are a variety of organizations attempting to join the hearing aid dispensing market via the Internet. There are Internet start-ups, large corporations, major brand companies, and even managed care organizations. A Google search for hearing aids brings up a variety of Internet retailers on the first few results pages. These groups have varying reasons for entering the hearing aid dispensing market, and often the bottom line is profit. Some see a large untapped market of hearing impaired individuals who have yet to purchase any hearing aids. In fact, MarkeTrak VIII estimates prevalence of hearing loss in America to be 34 million. There obviously is a great opportunity for potential hearing aid revenue.

From a consumer’s perspective, the opportunity to obtain hearing aids without the significant and sometimes unmanageable price tag is attractive. Internet hearing aids range in price from as low as $279 from HearPod (HearPod, 2012) to $1,299 from America Hears (America Hears, 2012). MarkeTrak VIII indicated that the retail price of hearing aids was one factor considered by users, but not the most important factor in their decision to purchase. What consumers often don’t realize is that hearing aids are more than just a product. This lack of knowledge is to their detriment. There are so many scenarios that we can
Imagine or may have already experienced in which hearing impaired individuals make an online hearing aid purchase and don't receive the results they needed and had hoped for.

**Internet Hearing Aid Delivery Models**

The online hearing aid delivery models can be broken into three broad categories. The first group advertises online and offers hearing aids from the major manufacturers. They require their customers to first see a participating provider for audiological testing and hearing aid recommendations. The hearing aids are purchased online by the customer through the Web site and are shipped to the participating provider. This provider then fits the aids and provides counseling as well as follow-up care. Individual dispensers can choose to sign up and dispense for these programs. The dispenser is then paid a fee from the company for their services.

The next category of retailers sells online, programs the hearing aids at the factory based on an audiogram or information provided by the customer, and then ships the hearing aids directly to the customer. This is a very common model and used by a number of organizations. There is a bit of variety with regard to how patients provide these retailers with their audiograms. Some companies use a list of questions about the individual’s hearing to determine hearing aid candidacy and product recommendations. Other programs allow the customer to select the hearing aid and then the customer can fax or e-mail an audiogram to the company. This is a widespread and popular format for providing audiometric information to the retailers.

The final category of delivery models provides hearing aids and software that are both shipped to the customer. The customer has the freedom and the responsibility of programming the hearing aids. For the interested and capable customer, this can be a great opportunity to take ownership in his or her hearing. Unfortunately for a lot of individuals, programming hearing aids is way beyond their capability.

**Product Instead of Professional**

VanVliet found that the much publicized hi HealthInnovations hearing aid program is of no particular advantage to consumers. He reported that if existing technology was offered through the Internet to eliminate professional services that there is no considerable cost benefit. He stated that this idea of cost benefit is “grossly misleading and unfair to consumers, is not in their best interests, and is certainly not an improvement over the existing distribution model” (Van Vliet, 2011).

With all Internet hearing aid sales that ship directly to the consumer there is no way to verify audibility and comfort. In fact the customer really cannot be certain if the best aided prescription has been programmed into the hearing aids. There is a clear risk of underfitting or overfitting the hearing aids. The American Academy of Audiology states that best practices require real-ear measures to be implemented to verify appropriate prescriptive gain or real-ear aided response in SPL from the patient’s ear canal (American Academy of Audiology, 2008). Real-ear measures cannot occur in the direct-to-consumer hearing aid delivery model. Most Internet hearing aid retailers give little consideration to recommended evidenced-based practices, and with some Internet retailers the focus is on the product and its price. There is little to no importance placed on benefits of receiving services from a hearing health-care professional.

**How Do We Respond?**

We have the opportunity for several different responses to Internet hearing aid sales models. We can simply ignore online retailers and hope that we are unaffected. We can be reactive and just wait until Internet hearing aid sales affects us individually. Lastly, we might choose to be proactive. As a profession, we can evaluate and address the situation with knowledge, skill, and experience. We can come up with solutions and suggestions for helping the hearing impaired who have been impacted by Internet sales. We can use the Internet sales situation as an opportunity to educate the public about who we are and what we do. Several organizations including the American Academy of Audiology, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA), and the Better Hearing Institute (BHI), have created consumer information sheets. We can define ourselves as the best

**ALSO OF INTEREST**

The Direct-to-Consumer Hearing Aid Model, Academy Efforts and Member Resources

Direct-to-consumer hearing aid models are becoming more common and the Academy has undertaken a multipronged approach in assisting members in this paradigm shift. Visit www.audiology.org and search keywords “hearing aid model” or use the QR code to view the resources on your mobile device.
choice for hearing health-care services. We can promote our skills, education, training, and our commitment to evidenced-based practices. Finally, our ultimate responsibility is to the hearing impaired and providing them with quality hearing health care.

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References


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