

MarkeTrak V: "Why my hearing aids are in the drawer": The consumers' perspective

By Sergei Kochkin

INTRODUCTION

The great quality guru W. Edwards Deming, in his book *Out of the Crisis*,¹ states that research with consumers has found that happy customers tell eight friends about their positive experience, but angry customers tell their troubles on average to 16 people.

That finding is of great relevance to the hearing industry. As I reported in earlier installments of the MarkeTrak V series of articles, customer satisfaction with hearing aids has not improved appreciably since we began measuring it in 1991.^{2,3} Furthermore, 16.2% of our customers report that they never wear their hearing aids. That's 907,200 people!

What if those customers not using their hearing aids each told 16 friends about their negative experience or, even worse, what if they told their family doctor? We are assuming, of course, that people who do not use their hearing aids are unhappy with their experience. In fact, that assumption is borne out by the MarkeTrak data, which show that only 10.6% of customers with hearing aids "in the drawer" are satisfied with the product, 27.1% are neutral, and 62.3% are dissatisfied.

I believe that dissatisfaction with hearing aids is a serious problem in our industry, one that for years has impeded growth of the market. In fact, in part 1 of this series, I demonstrated that hearing aid penetration is at an all-time low: 20.4% of the total hearing-impaired population, down from nearly 24% in 1984.² Clearly, if we are to change this negative trend in the market, we must identify and eliminate the root causes of dissatisfaction.

To this end, we asked hearing aid owners during the MarkeTrak survey process to write us a letter concerning their experiences with their current hearing aids. This paper will focus on reasons why hearing aids are purchased but

not used. It will rely nearly totally on the experiences of consumers in their own words.

METHOD

The first and second articles in the MarkeTrak V series described the survey methodology in detail, so that will not be repeated here. In addition to the quantifiable survey of 2720 hearing aid owners, we asked respondents to tell us in narrative form of their hearing aid experiences, especially if they wore their hearing aids less than 1 hour a day.

We received more than 1000 short letters from the MarkeTrak panel; 348 were from hearing aid owners who never wear their hearing aids. All the letters were keypunched into a computer and content-coded. This analysis yielded 567 unique responses. Nearly 80% of the hearing aid owners with their hearing aids in the drawer responded. Given the sampling methodology used in MarkeTrak and the high response rate, we believe that the results of this study can be generalized to the U.S. hearing aid owner population.

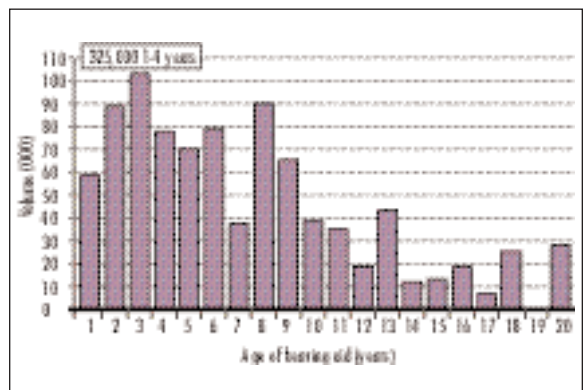


Figure 2. Number of hearing aids (in thousands) in the drawer by age of hearing aid; 907,200 hearing aid customers never use their hearing aids.

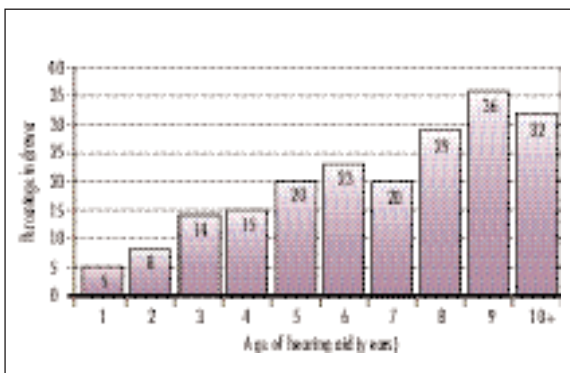


Figure 1. Percentage of hearing aids in the drawer by age (in years) of the hearing aid.

RESULTS

First, it would be useful to understand the extent to which the non-use of hearing aids is related to their age. Figure 1 shows the percentage of hearing aids in the drawer by age of the instrument. The portion of hearing aids in the drawer ranges from 5% in the first year to around a third of hearing aids 9 years or older. Figure 2, which plots the number of hearing aids in the drawer, shows that approximately 325,000 of the unused hearing aids are 4 years old or less.

In analyzing the letters from consumers, we identified 32 reasons why their hearing aids are not being used. These are documented in rank order in Table 1. I recommend to

readers as you review these reasons to ask yourself, "Which of these reasons for not wearing hearing aids, do I have direct control over?"

TOP 10 REASONS FOR NOT WEARING HEARING AIDS

Reason #1: Poor benefit

Nearly three in ten (29.6%, or 268,510 customers) hearing aids are in the drawer because the consumer felt the benefit was minimal or non-existent. Some consumers indicated that their hearing aids amplified, but they could not understand words. One respondent, who gave actual names of dispensers, asserted that the aim of the dispenser was to "take old people's money without giving much value."

This comment and those listed below are sobering. I can only imagine how many prospective customers and their physicians have heard such sentiments expressed. The fundamental purpose of dispensing hearing aids is, of course, to provide benefit to purchasers. Unfortunately, it appears that all too many consumers do not perceive any benefit from their purchase.

If we are to transform the hearing industry, we must find answers to the following question: "How can more than a quarter of a million consumers with reportedly close to a 100% money-back guarantee

for little value."

"I can't hear high-pitch sounds."

"Hearing aids amplify everything but human voices, which are what you need to hear."

"When I received it and wore it every day, it did not make my hearing any better. So, I don't wear the hearing aid and feel like I wasted my money. I tried to return it and the person did not seem to want to help me. I am quite dissatisfied with the whole experience."

Reason #2: Background noise

A quarter (25.3%, 229,407) of the consumers reported that they did not wear their hearing aids because they did not work in difficult listening situations, they amplified loud noises sometimes painfully, or background noise was annoying, distracting, or unacceptable. Some people wrote that they purchased their hearing aids specifically to help them in noisy situations and that the instruments provided no benefit in these situations.

"I will not wear my hearing aids because they increase background noise. After a while I get a headache and get somewhat nervous."

"Hearing aids don't work when there is a lot of background noise. This is when you need them to work."

"My problem is with background noise. All my hearing aids do is amplify, so they are of little help."

"My hearing aids are too big for my ears."

"It is uncomfortable and my wife says I don't listen to her anyway."

"I do not like the feel of it in my ear."

"I don't wear my hearing aids because they plug up my ears and feel uncomfortable."

"My hearing aids have a tendency to fall out when I am working hard in hot weather."

"It's hard to keep it in my ear. I travel for business a lot and can't risk it falling out of my ear."

Reason #4: Negative side effects

Close to 100,000 consumers complained of a wide variety of side effects associated with wearing hearing aids, including: ears that hurt, too much pressure in the ears, blisters in ears, rashes in ears, itching ears, dizziness, makes them nervous, ears that sweat, wax build up in the ear canal, headaches, hair gets caught in hearing aid, infections in ear, problems chewing or swallowing, plugs up ears.

Reason #5: Price and cost

Slightly more than 90,000 consumers reported that their situation had changed so that their hearing aids are no longer worth the cost of maintenance, or that their hearing aids need to be replaced or repaired, but that they cannot afford to do so.

"I bought the hearing aids when I was teaching. I had trouble hearing students' questions. Since retiring I have stopped using them. They were costing too much for what good I was able to get from them."

"Programmable hearing aids would be desirable, but they cost too much."

"My current hearing aids are broken and I am unable to afford replacements. They are too old for service."

"The expense of owning and maintaining is too great."

"HMO does not cover hearing aids. Price is high."

"I enjoyed my hearing aids, but they burned up in a house fire and I can't afford another one."

"If I could afford it, I would buy a different brand."

"My hearing aid was never dependable. Taking it in for an adjustment was only a headache as it never performed very long. The last time I had trouble, the office wanted to send it to _____ at \$200 just to check it, plus another \$200 to repair it."

Reason #6: Don't need help

Around 70,000 consumers indicated that they are socially isolated and therefore no longer need hearing aids, that surgical pro-

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wind up with a product that provides them little or no benefit?" Here are some of the comments we received from customers:

"I threw it away. It was worthless to me."

"I don't see much difference with them. I feel I was sold one under false pretense. Don't feel I really needed one."

"I don't wear the aids at all. Volume is OK, but I can't distinguish words."

"I have not been able to wear the hearing aid since the day I received it. It was made wrong and the company said there was nothing wrong with it."

"It is not worth the trouble or expense for the small difference in hearing. I wish I had my money back."

"_____ aims at taking old people's money

"I don't wear my hearing aids because I need them at a dance, restaurants, and large groups. All the hearing aids do is increase all sound, including background sounds. No help."

"Hearing aids amplify other sounds so much that I actually feel pain."

"If someone drops a spoon on the table it is like a rifle going off."

"I hate them. They don't work for me. All sounds are amplified. Never knew there were so many. I can't adjust the hearing aids constantly to every noise."

Reason #3: Fit and comfort

Nearly 170,000 consumers said that their hearing aids did not fit right, hurt their ears, were uncomfortable, or fell out of their ears.

Rank	Stated reason for not wearing hearing aids	Number of mentions	Percent of respondents	Estimated number of hearing aid owners
1	Poor benefit from hearing aids	103	29.6%	268,510
2	Background noise/noisy situations	88	25.3%	229,407
3	Fit & comfort	65	18.7%	169,448
4	Negative side effects of H.A.	38	10.9%	99,062
5	Price & cost of repairs	36	10.3%	93,848
6	Don't need help	28	8.0%	72,993
7	Hearing aid is broken	27	7.8%	70,386
8	Sound quality is poor	22	6.3%	57,352
9	Unspecified - do not wear	21	6.0%	54,745
10	Volume control adjustment	17	4.9%	44,317
11	Whistling and feedback	15	4.3%	39,103
12	Nuisance/hassle/annoying	14	4.0%	36,497
13	Poor service from dispenser	11	3.2%	28,676
14	High-frequency loss not helped	10	2.9%	26,069
15	Stigma of wearing hearing aids	10	2.9%	26,069
16	Work in limited situations	9	2.6%	23,462
17	Profound hearing loss not helped	9	2.6%	23,462
18	Too loud	8	2.3%	20,855
19	Battery life too short	7	2.0%	18,248
20	Forget to use	4	1.1%	10,428
21	Does not work on phone	4	1.1%	10,428
22	Monaural aids inadequate	3	0.9%	7,821
23	Oversold expectations	3	0.9%	7,821
24	Have tinnitus	3	0.9%	7,821
25	Family pressure led to purchase	3	0.9%	7,821
26	Manual dexterity	2	0.6%	5,214
27	Rare social user	2	0.6%	5,214
28	Feel like earplugs	1	0.3%	2,607
29	Poor directivity	1	0.3%	2,607
30	Gain is too low	1	0.3%	2,607
31	Can not find them	1	0.3%	2,607
32	Ear wax problem	1	0.3%	2,607

Table 1. Reasons hearing aids are in the drawer based on a content analysis of 348 letters from owners who do not use their hearing aids.

cedures have improved their hearing, or that their hearing loss is too mild to necessitate wearing hearing aids.

"I work and live alone and do not need the aid most of the time."

"I had an operation on my right ear and I can hear better again."

"I don't talk to anyone during the day."

"I can hear most everything without hearing aids."

"I feel I was sold under false pretense. I don't feel I really needed one."

"Don't wear very often since my hearing loss is only 35 degrees."

Reason #7: Hearing aids are broken or no longer work

Approximately 70,000 customers reported that their hearing aids are broken or do not work correctly. Many of them said they cannot afford to replace them or that the dispenser who sold them

was not responsive to their needs, even during the warranty period.

"After a year, the hearing aids are down. I can't afford to repair them."

"Because it doesn't work. _____ refused to do anything. The man that sold it to me has been fired."

"The housing is currently broken and will have to be glued back together. This is the fourth time it has broken."

"It seems as if the aids were in the shop for repair more than in my ear. They are still not adjusted correctly for my comfort level. The cost of the repairs was too much. It is easier to go without them and have everyone speak louder."

"I have two hearing aids that don't work. It costs \$200 apiece to have them fixed."

Reason #8: Sound quality

Slightly more than 50,000 customers complained that the sound quality was unacceptable. Typical responses in this category

included lack of clarity (e.g., *"Never got true sound clarity I wanted"*) and aversion to the sound of their voice (e.g., *"Can't stand sound of my voice"*). Other complaints were as follows: uncomfortable sound, sound of crickets, unnatural, distorted, slight hiss, tinny, picks up wind, chewing, and swallowing noise, poor fidelity, hollow sound, aversiveness of sounds (running water, sharp sounds).

Reason #9: Unspecified

More than 50,000 customers simply reported that they do not use their hearing aids, but gave no specific reason.

Reason #10: Volume control adjustments

More than 40,000 customers complained about their volume controls. The constant manipulation of the volume control is clearly an annoyance to some consumers and certainly an argument in favor of

“smart” or automatic hearing aids. However, as part 2 in the MarkeTrak series reported, a better solution for some patients is to offer hearing aids that include volume controls as a manual override to the automatic hearing aid system.

“I have trouble adjusting the sound.”

“Hard to adjust. Every time the phone rings I have to adjust the volume.”

“They need adjusting, because the background noises are annoying.”

“They are a bother having to turn up and down too often.”

“The volume never stays at setting.”

“I can’t adjust hearing aids constantly to every noise.”

OTHER REASONS

Several other complaints garnered mentions from 1% to 4% of the respondents. These are: The hearing aids whistle or feed back; hearing aids are a nuisance or a hassle to wear; poor service from the dispenser; the hearing aids do not help their high-frequency loss; the stigma of wearing hearing aids; hearing aids do not help profound hearing loss; hearing aids work only in limited situations; the hearing aids are uncomfortably loud; and the battery life is too short.

DISCUSSION

I believe that many of the reasons why close to a million of our customers choose not to wear their hearing aids represent root causes of customer dissatisfaction with our industry’s products and services. The accompanying Table 1 is meant to serve as a Pareto analysis, with the most important reasons for non-usage being in the areas of poor benefit, performance in noise, fit and comfort, negative side effects, cost of repairs, broken hearing aids, and sound quality. Clearly, if our industry is to move forward, we need to work together to solve the key problems that cause consumers to put their hearing aids in the drawer.

I think few would dispute that the essence of a hearing aid is to improve speech intelligibility in listening environments important to the user. Apparently, for many consumers, this simply does not occur. Or, if it does, the benefit is considered to be so minimal that consumers perceive that they have received poor value.

For this industry to grow we need to place products in consumers’ ears that result in high perceived value. One could define value as the performance of the product relative to how much the consumer spent; or as the amount of money

spent per handicap point reduction.

Previously I have shown that customer satisfaction is highly related to the amount of money the consumer paid for a 1% point improvement in handicap reduction.⁴ If we cannot deliver benefit that meets or exceeds the expectations of the consumer, then it is unlikely that the industry will ever achieve its potential. And if we cannot provide benefit for a

Fit programmable instruments

A second strategy for improving benefit is to fit as many consumers as possible with advanced programmable technology. Large-scale research by this author has determined that programmable technology is rated significantly higher on overall satisfaction, performance in noise, sound quality, benefit, reliability, and multiple environmental listening utility (MELU).^{3,5}

“...For this industry to grow we need to place products in consumers’ ears that result in high perceived value...”

particular consumer, then how can we justify charging large fees to that person? Here’s a thought: Perhaps dispensers should charge a sliding fee; that is, they bill consumers based on the amount of handicap reduction they were able to achieve (i.e., pay for performance).

Measurement of benefit is essential

It is critical that all sectors of the hearing industry address the issue of why so many hearing aid purchasers fail to receive substantial benefit. To make headway in this area, I believe that, as a first strategy, every dispenser should conduct subjective and objective benefit measurement for every hearing aid fitted at 30 and 90 days after the fitting.

MarkeTrak research shows that fewer than a third of dispensers routinely measure consumer benefit with hearing aids.⁴ But, without on-going measurement or consumer feedback it is unlikely this industry will be able to overcome our basic shortcoming, which I see as failure to satisfy our customers or, better yet, to *exceed* their expectations.

By conducting on-going measurement of consumer benefit, the dispenser will be stretched, for inevitably the measured benefit results will serve as a dispenser’s report card, customer by customer. This will lead to solutions, because it forces enhanced communication with the consumer and the manufacturer. I personally believe we now have the technology to satisfy a great majority of our consumers. Unfortunately, procedures and policies at the local level currently permit consumers to leave the dispenser’s office with hearing aids that provide little or no benefit.

The most recent national MarkeTrak norms indicate that the average programmable technology achieves overall customer satisfaction ratings 10% points higher than the average non-programmable hearing aid.³ Other studies have shown that advanced programmable technology can improve customer ratings of benefit by as much as 30% points.⁶⁻¹⁰

The second most common reason why hearing aids wind up in the drawer is due to the extreme disappointment many of our customers experience with the performance of hearing aids in noisy situations. I believe today’s non-linear programmable technology can alleviate some of these serious consumer complaints, especially in terms of improving comfort in noise or with loud sounds, reducing aversiveness of sounds, and increasing speech intelligibility in noise.

Many customers can get by reasonably well with their hearing impairment in quiet situations. Many of them indicated they purchased their hearing aids specifically for help in noise, not quiet. The road to customer bliss, as difficult as it might seem, is to satisfy our customers in as many listening situations as possible. If we can satisfy them in at least half of their listening needs, then we have the capability of achieving customer satisfaction ratings of benefit in the 80%+ range.³

Benefits of multi-microphone instruments

The need for improved hearing aid performance in noise is one of the key barriers to growth in our industry. A number of prominent industry authors recently have come together to propose solutions to improving hearing aid perfor-

mance in noise;¹¹ the reader is encouraged to study this monograph carefully.

Currently, it would appear that multiple-microphone hearing aids, which allow the consumer to choose between omni-directional and directional modes, hold the greatest promise for satisfying users in noisy or difficult listening situations such as cars, restaurants, concerts/movies, and group gatherings.

Kuk demonstrated that dual-microphone hearing aids more than doubled customer satisfaction in noise (that is when compared to MarkeTrak).⁹ In a more recent study, Schuchman, Valente, Beck, and Potts documented 400% to 500% improvements in customer satisfaction in noisy situations with a dual-microphone in-the-ear instrument when the subjects (all veterans) were asked to compare the dual-microphone product to their own hearing aids.¹⁰ Their ratings of this product in noise were sometimes three times higher than Knowles' national MarkeTrak norms.

Improving fit and comfort


With respect to fit and comfort, it is unfortunate that 170,000 of our customers do not wear their hearing aids because of a poor physical fit. This is a custom industry, so it is inexcusable to find so many customers dissatisfied in this area. One would expect problems such as hearing aids falling out of ears, hearing aids that hurt because they are too big, or hearing aids that feel

like plugs to occur only in the stock canal, direct-mail segment. With the average retail price of hearing aids approaching \$1000, the consumer deserves better.

Strategies for improving fit and comfort include improving dispenser vigilance during the fitting stage, reworking shells at the point of sale, continued education in the taking of ear impressions, and, perhaps, eventual movement away from hard acrylic shells toward soft shells especially with the in-the-ear product. Creel, Desporte, and Juneau described a soft-solid instrument being test marketed, which would appear to hold much promise in improving fit and comfort.¹³

CONCLUSION

I hope that my commentary on the top reasons for hearing aids going unused will serve as a catalyst for an industrywide dialogue on how we can satisfy more customers and thereby ensure that hearing aids are placed in ears rather than in dresser drawers.

The solution is multi-dimensional, for it must include: appropriate application and further evolution of technology, enhancement of dispenser counseling skills, improved dispenser hearing aid fitting skills, more advanced fitting strategies that maximize the probability of selecting hearing aids suited to each consumer's individual characteristics, and more consumer-oriented marketing and sales strategies. 

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