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, 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. 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. 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.

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
WEARING HEARING AIDS

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 (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 quit. Sometime it is like a rifle going off.”

“Hearing aids don’t work where 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.”

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.

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Reason #3: Fit and comfort
Nearly 170,000 consumers indicated that their hearing aids were uncomfortable, or fell out of their ears.

“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 #4: Negative side effects
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 someone to check it, plus another $200 to repair it.”

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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-
cures 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

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

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.
“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 feedback; hearing aids do not help their high-frequency loss; the stigma of vice from the dispenser; the hearing aids do not accompany Table 1 is meant to serve as a Pareto analysis, with the most important 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-useage 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.

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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. Other studies have shown that advanced programmable technology can improve customer ratings of benefit by as much as 30% points. 

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.

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; 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). 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. Their ratings of this product in noise were sometimes three times higher than Knowles’ national MarkeTrak norms.

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.