

Hearing Healthcare Products: With So Many Choices, What are Your Best Options for Success?

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Today, consumers with hearing loss face a multitude of choices to address their hearing healthcare needs. As consumers, we all enjoy the empowerment of choice. Choice helps us save money and find the product that best fits our needs. However, those in the market for a new hearing aid quickly will realize that choice in the hearing healthcare marketplace may become a confusing proposition.

Is that Personal Sound Amplifier Product (PSAP) you saw on TV an effective and inexpensive alternative to purchasing that much higher priced hearing aid? Is that highly discounted hearing aid sold over the Internet really a good alternative to purchasing the same device at a higher price from your licensed audiologist? Which product and purchasing method will really lead to long-term improvement in your communication ability?

For consumers with hearing loss, particularly when funds are tight, it is easy to see why saving money on a hearing healthcare product is attractive. However, before spending any of your hard earned money on the “deal of the century,” it is important to understand that purchasing a hearing aid is not like buying headphones or other personal electronics device, where the seller with the cheapest price can drive the process. While anyone with hearing loss should be encouraged to shop around - be careful not to just look for the lowest price, but for the right product and best path to success with your new hearing device.

As the saying goes, “an educated consumer is the best consumer.” “Buyer beware” is another old, but wise cliché that comes to mind. With that in mind, let’s discuss two of today’s most notable product categories considered by many consumers with hearing loss.

Personal Sound Amplifier Products vs. Hearing Aids

You may have seen ads for PSAPs. Unfortunately, after seeing an ad for one of these products, many consumers with hearing loss are led to believe that PSAPs can serve as inexpensive hearing aids, or inexpensive alternatives to hearing aids. Better yet, they believe they can diagnose and treat their own hearing loss and save even more money by cutting out the visit with their local licensed audiologist. However, none of these perspectives is accurate.

Simply stated, PSAPs are not hearing healthcare products at all. In fact, legally PSAPs only can be sold to people with normal hearing who want to increase the volume level of every environmental noise reaching the ear.

Unlike hearing aids, PSAPs are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as medical devices. However, they are subject to applicable provisions of the Radiation Control for Health and Safety Act of 1968; under this Act the FDA regulates electronic products that emit sonic vibrations, such as the headphones or ear buds you might purchase for your digital music device or smart phone.

In the best case scenario, someone with hearing loss who purchases a PSAP most likely would be under-served by such a device - receiving little or no benefit from what is essentially a non-medical loudspeaker.

In the worst-case scenario, dealing with a hearing loss by purchasing one of these products can be downright dangerous - lulling the consumer into ignoring what might be an underlying medical

condition. Failure to address a treatable medical condition puts a patient at great risk. Once treated, the hearing loss may resolve and the patient may not need a hearing aid at all. In addition, because PSAPs are just sound amplifiers, there is a real potential for consumers to cause additional and permanent noise-induced hearing loss by turning the volume way up in an effort to compensate for their hearing loss.

Simply stated, for people with hearing loss, there is no adequate substitute for a hearing aid. If you truly want to address your specific hearing healthcare needs and maximize your hearing ability so you can participate in challenging communication situations, you will find your greatest success with the use of a hearing aid or two – depending on your specific hearing deficits.

Hearing aids are regulated by the FDA as wearable sound-amplifying devices that are intended to compensate for impaired hearing. Hearing aids usually are programmed to address an individual's degree of hearing loss across sound frequencies, or pitches, to improve speech intelligibility. Further, depending on whether or not they have wireless capabilities to communicate with each other and/or external devices like smart phones, they are regulated either as Class I or Class II medical devices, respectively.

Hearing aids are only sold via prescription from a licensed audiologist or hearing aid dispenser. The type and model of hearing aid prescribed is determined based on a comprehensive evaluation. This evaluation is used to determine if there are any underlying medical conditions that a physician needs to address, as well as the type and severity of the patient's hearing loss.

When it comes to wearable hearing aids, the vast majority are used to address something called sensorineural hearing loss. This type of hearing loss occurs when the cochlea, located in the inner ear, is not functioning normally.

Only a licensed audiologist is qualified to determine the type and severity of your hearing loss, and the effect the hearing loss has on your ability to hear and understand speech. After this is determined, the next step is for your hearing healthcare professional to work with you in determining the hearing aid type and style that best meets your needs. The next question to answer is where/how to purchase the hearing aid(s). There are choices – purchasing them from your local audiologist or the Internet retailer with the lowest price. How should you make the decision? Certainly the most important factor is determining which process will lead to the highest potential for success.

The Road to Success: Your Local Hearing Healthcare Provider Vs the Internet

Hearing aids are typically not “set it and forget it” medical products; it takes some time to adjust to a change in hearing lifestyle. While this may be particularly true for first-time buyers, even experienced buyers need to acclimate to new hearing aid fitting strategies, programs, styles and the like.

It is critical to understand that achieving success with the hearing aids is a process. The process involves everything from hearing aid selection and adjustment to learning how to include family and friends into an aural rehabilitation plan.

When working with an audiologist, the selection process begins with evaluating your dexterity to change batteries and insert the hearing aids in your ears. Once the hearing aids arrive, a comprehensive orientation is conducted to ensure you understand how to use and clean the hearing aids properly.

As the process continues, the hearing professional develops a series of communication strategies to help you maximize hearing performance in the various, and unique, communications challenges you encounter day-to-day. This includes identifying visual and/or cognitive issues that may impact the plan of treatment.

An ongoing part of the process also includes verifying the settings of the hearing aids and working through the myriad of issues that may occur following a hearing aid fitting. Patients should expect to spend at least several months working with their hearing professional before maximum patient performance and acceptance of the new hearing aids is achieved.

Let's face it; everybody wants to save money – especially on high-ticket items. A hearing aid shopper searching the Internet for the lowest price can easily save hundreds of dollars on the initial purchase price of hearing aids. In many cases, all you'll need to do is select the hearing aid you wish to purchase and submit the results of a hearing test that is less than one year old. The Internet hearing aid retailer will then use the results of that evaluation to program the hearing aids and ship them to the awaiting consumer.

Sounds great, but after the Internet purchase, consumers are often left with no professional support – just when the most meaningful part of the “road to success” process begins. There will be no one to provide the technical expertise necessary for fine tuning and verifying the hearing aid settings, no one to provide counseling and guidance to support personal adjustment to the hearing aids, and no rehabilitation plan or communications strategies to help maximize personal success in the multitude of communications challenges an individual may face day-to-day. Without that level of support, the odds are pretty high that the Internet-purchased hearing aids are going to end up in the night table drawer, never to see the light of day again.

When considering Internet alternatives to the typical direct-to-patient hearing aid sales model, it is highly unlikely that everything a hearing professional addresses to ensure patient success can adequately be accomplished online, regardless of the Internet retailer's best intentions.

As you evaluate your options when purchasing your new hearing aid(s), please keep in mind that achieving maximum success in all of your most challenging communications situations is the single largest part of the value proposition.