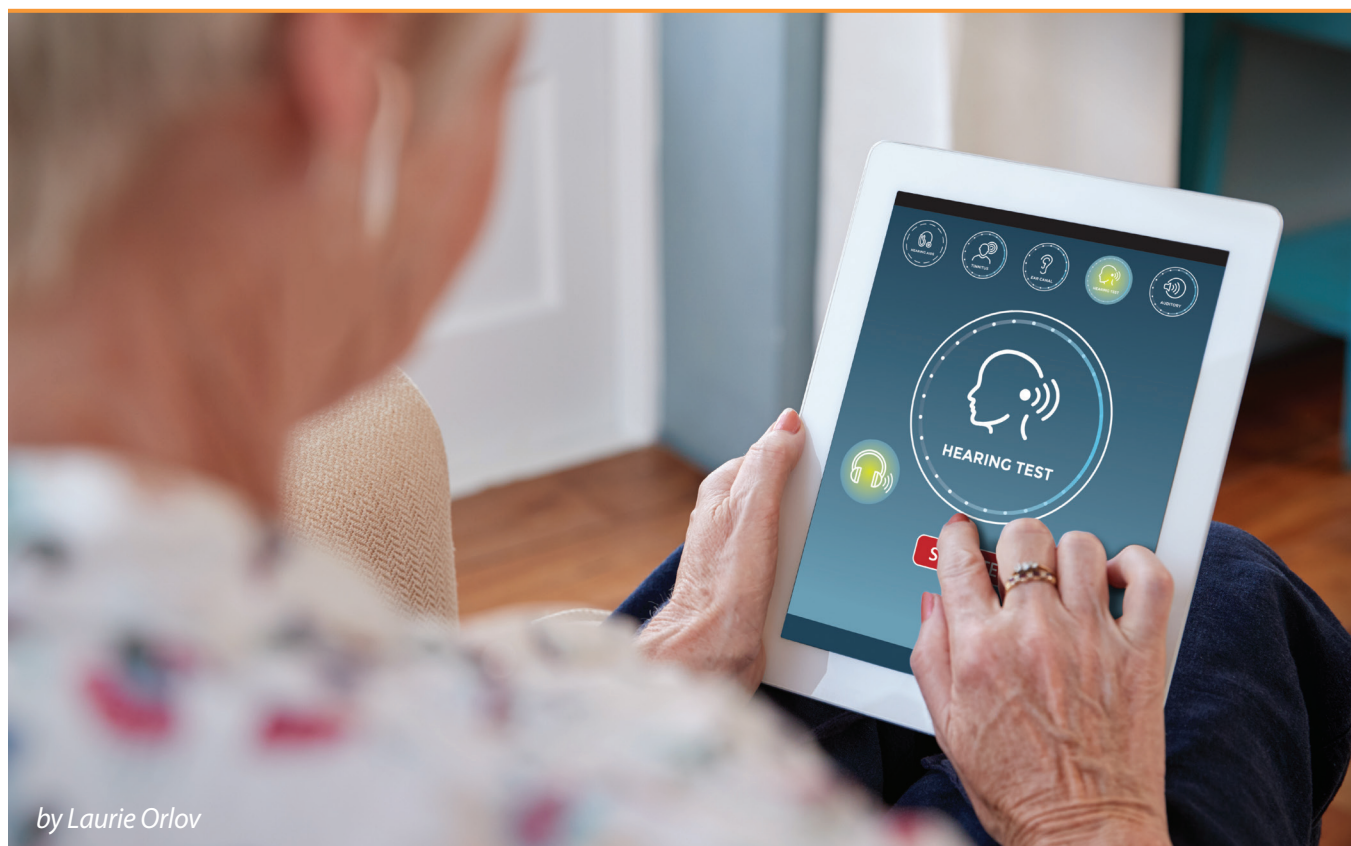


Making the case: Audiologists can benefit from embracing self-service hearing healthcare



by Laurie Orlov

Hearing health is often not initially addressed by seeing a professional. It is well-known among hearing healthcare professionals that people put off seeing them as long as possible – averaging seven years of deteriorating hearing.¹ *Consumer Reports'* recent (2018) survey found that nearly one-third of people who reported difficulty with hearing did not visit – or delayed seeing – a professional.² Reasons vary but often include denial of hearing loss, perception of stigma associated with hearing aids or concerns about cost. However, those who delay dealing with hearing loss are now thought to be at greater risk for dementia and other forms of cognitive decline.³ Furthermore, they are increasingly known to be at risk for social isolation and its impact on overall health.⁴

Self-service is permeating a significant number of industries, and healthcare is no exception.⁵ Two-thirds of all patients search online for their own answers to health questions before contacting a professional.⁶ Why? Because they want to understand what's going on with their health and the internet provides a plethora of answers to nearly any question.

- **Self-assessment works.** A 2018 study of the use of the Self-assessment for Hearing Screening of the Elderly (SHSE) questionnaire correlated with the results of pure tone testing, which validated that self-assessment is a viable means of verifying hearing loss in the elderly.⁷

- **Self-testing one's own hearing at home is recognized in the industry.** Hearing aid manufacturers see the potential in self-testing. The first step for many people beginning to confront their own hearing loss is to search online – which has resulted in many self-assessment questionnaires and online tests. For example, one hearing aid company claims that 1 million people have taken its online test.⁸ Another sign of interest in self-testing is the emergence of the **National Hearing Test**, an \$8 test taken by telephone, endorsed by AARP and provided free to its members.⁹ By 2012, this test had been validated in separate studies.¹⁰ Additional tests are available online and may require a downloaded app.¹¹
- **Buying hearables online from home.** These wireless, in-ear micro-computers are now recognized as a step in the hearing loss journey and can be used for noise-canceling or improving conversations. Buying a self-fitting hearing aid can even be done online at home. “However, it’s important to note that these devices are only for moderate or mild hearing loss,” reminds Dr. Katie Faulkner, an audiologist and speech pathologist. She adds that without an audiologist’s examination, it’s difficult for a patient to know the extent of their hearing loss.

It’s a new era for the hearing healthcare field.

“The hearing healthcare field is embracing this new era of ‘highly informed’ patients who may be more skeptical, have heard good and bad things, and may even bring their own device to the office,” Dr. Faulkner says. “We can find the model that allows us to provide service to these patients by shifting our model to unbundled services and

being open-minded – knowing that the earlier someone adopts a hearing aid, the better off they are. We should also help patients recognize when it might be time to get more sophisticated technology or help them understand the broader range of services, like counseling, communication needs, training, education, listening aids, etc.”



Ensure your website includes the latest self-help tools and information.

This is a key step – both in supporting the patient in their hearing loss journey, as well as ensuring your website’s Search Engine Optimization (SEO).¹²

A quick search for an audiologist in any given location, reveals that many audiologists are not acknowledging or participating in the trend towards self-service as a first step in the hearing loss journey. While some websites offer a questionnaire to help an individual make the decision to pursue treatment, other websites simply promote the audiologist. This works best for referrals to the audiologist – since the user knows who they are looking for – but such websites may not appear in a

simple online search about hearing loss. What else should be part of the transition to this new online-offline blend of services? Consider the use of:

- **Online hearing screening.** Self-testing is just an initial step and doesn’t actually provide a diagnosis for cause of hearing loss or account for things like variances in the headphone technology the patient uses at home.¹³ Recognizing this, many audiologists subscribe to referral programs where self-assessment tools direct the user to a local audiologist if hearing loss is detected.
- **Hearing loss simulators.** Hearing loss simulators can be found on the websites of manufacturers, but also on other sites, such as HearingLikeMe.com.¹⁴ Adding “hearing loss simulator” to the search for “audiologist”, no surprise, turns up sites of audiologists who offer one online. These can be helpful to family members trying to understand what a loved one with hearing loss may be experiencing, and should include information about when to seek out an audiologist.
- **Tools that help in the consideration of hearing aids.** *Consumer Reports* shared an interesting statistic that 48% of those who investigate hearing aids had received a suggestion to do so from a doctor or other hearing specialist.² These days there are multiple online marketplaces people can turn to for educating themselves on the variety of hearing aids available.
- **Information about Medicare Advantage coverage.** In 2020, nearly all Humana Medicare Advantage plans offered hearing aid coverage. In 2019, United Healthcare began offering coverage for hearing services and hearing aids for all ages (including Medicare Advantage subscribers), with an “80% lower cost of hearing aids than through traditional channels.”¹⁵

Is your practice part of the self-service trend? Self-service is another way to describe the use of online search tools accessed from the privacy of one’s own home. In the case of hearing loss, this is especially important because of the

denial, stigma and prolonged delay in addressing the issue. Ask yourself these questions – and if the answer is no to any of them, investigate ways to add more value for those you serve:

Self-Service Checklist

- ☐ Are you offering a full suite of online tools?
- ☐ Does your practice offer information that educates patients on options available to them, such as hearing assistive technologies like neck loops, hearables and captioned telephones?
- ☐ Are you aware of the risks of social isolation that comes from hearing loss, and does your site note the impact of hearing loss on social isolation?
- ☐ Can you be found easily with a search such as, “Find an audiologist near me?” This means that sites that provide reviews of providers know about you, as well.
- ☐ Do you provide online materials regarding the impact of hearing loss?
- ☐ Do you provide follow-up online contact, tools and appointment check-ins?
- ☐ Are you providing the latest in reimbursement guidance as well as pricing options?
- ☐ Are you trained in dealing with older individuals, veterans and their families?

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of all patients search online for their own answers to health questions before contacting a professional.



Audiologists play a key role in serving patients with all types of hearing loss. Audiology services extend well beyond initial assessment and fitting of hearing aids. "In addition to providing technology, offering a variety of services such as; training, counseling, questionnaires, targeted intervention, communication tools, listening aids and the unbundling of services addresses the communication needs of patients and their families in a holistic manner," Dr. Faulkner says. Audiologists who understand the above dimensions of "full service" will thrive well into the future as patient expectations continue to evolve.

About the author:

Laurie M. Orlov, a tech industry veteran, writer, and speaker is the founder of Aging in Place Technology Watch, providing thought leadership, analysis and guidance. Laurie spent many years in the technology industry, first as a CIO and then at analyst firm Forrester Research.



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¹⁴ "Hearing Loss Simulator: Understanding Mild and Moderate Hearing Loss" HearingLikeMe.com, July, 2013 ([hearinglikeme.com/hearing-loss-simulator/](https://www.hearinglikeme.com/hearing-loss-simulator/))

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