

COVID-19 AND THE ELECTRONIC MEDIATION OF SPEECH

How does the Covid-19 pandemic impact the consumer-patient experience with hearing loss? A crucial change is that *social distancing results in a significantly greater proportion of speech being mediated by electronic devices*. This new element in the consumer-patient's experience suggests important opportunities for hearing care professionals (HCPs) to update their service model and for hearing aid companies to consider new feature-functionality.

The Impact of Social Distancing: More Speech Mediated by Electronic Devices

When people observe social distancing, phone calls, video calls and videoconferencing become the predominant medium for spoken human communication. Speech mediated by electronic devices replaces much of in-person interactions. People hold work meetings, "quarantinis," even memorial services over video.

Yet people with hearing loss often struggle over video. Poor internet connections cause the speaker's voice and lips to become unsynched. Speakers turn away from the camera mid-sentence or their lips slip below the camera line. *As a result, speech degradation caused by electronic mediation, as opposed to speech-in-noise, takes center stage as the primary hearing challenge.*

Immediate Opportunities for HCPs: Helping Patients with Video Calls

In the near term, HCPs can remain relevant by providing services to help patients succeed with video calls. HCPs may recommend videoconferencing resources, such as this [excellent knowledge base](#). Of particular help would be to show patients how to activate captioning features on the videoconferencing platform of their choice.

The Medium-Term Outlook for Social Distancing: Continued and Intermittent

Public health experts predict that we are in for "at least another 18-24 months of significant Covid-19 activity, with hot spots popping up periodically in diverse geographic areas." In other

words, expect intermittent social distancing for the next two to three years while the country builds up immunity. The exceptions of essential workers—about 28% of men and 33% of women—combined with people who chose to flout social distancing requirements will not be significant enough to eliminate the impact on society. In fact, in states with relaxed requirements, some people will continue to take precautions by maintaining social distancing. A prime example will be the hearing industry's core customer, people aged 60 and older, given their higher risk of mortality.

Potential Outcome: Increased Demand for Hearing Apps

In a world of periodic social distancing, consumer-patients will have even a tighter relationship with their smartphones and personal computers. Apps which provide customized amplification by frequency range may become more appealing for people with hearing loss. Contributing to apps' appeal will be their convenience and also affordability in what could be an extended period of economic downturn.

Potential Outcome: Increased Demand for Earbuds

The pandemic may also drive increased penetration and use of earbuds. In the home, earbuds enable multiple members of the household to conduct video calls at the same time; at work, earbuds will most likely become more socially acceptable for minimizing noisy distractions. As in the case of apps, consumers may find an all-in-one solution, an earbud which also provides hearing personalization, to be more convenient than a hearing aid. This is particularly true of those with mild hearing loss. *To remain competitive, hearing aids will need to keep pace with earbud feature-functionality.*

Conclusion: Adaptation Required by HCPs and Hearing Aid Companies

With the prospect of ongoing and periodic social distancing, the shift of a significant portion of in-person communications to phone and video calls will be a multi-year phenomenon. Both HCPs and hearing aid companies will need to adapt to a consumer-patient experience which is moderated more than ever by smart phones and PCs. The industry's recent innovations in online hearing tests, direct ordering, and remote fittings demonstrate the kind of flexibility needed to succeed in this new world wrought by Covid-19.

About the Author

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