

Addressing Hearing Loss Stigma Within the OTC Context

Insight from Anti-Smoking Campaigns



Introduction from Nancy M. Williams, Auditory Insight Founder and President

In July, President Biden issued an executive order on market competition, including a directive for over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids.¹ The FDA's proposed rule creating a new category of OTC hearing aids is close to a year overdue.

In the past year, in advance of the OTC rule, new players have been introducing devices for mild to moderate hearing loss that achieve good hearing outcomes at an array of price points significantly less than hearing aids from the clinic.

These new devices, along with the OTC category, will help address consumers' most prominent objection to hearing aids: price.

We expect that once price recedes as an adoption barrier, the role of stigma will be thrown into relief.

Societal stigma against hearing aids is deeply entrenched. Looking outside of hearing healthcare for inspiration, Auditory Insight has identified an iconic public health initiative as a compelling analog: the U.S. anti-smoking campaigns.

The anti-smoking campaigns offer three innovative marketing strategies for addressing stigma:

- **Deploy a negative shock factor**
- **Create empowerment**
- **Encourage counter-narratives.**

In this research note, we delve into these three strategies, including a comprehensive example of applying this insight to hearing healthcare. We look forward to discussing these findings with our valued clients.



Four Trends Are Providing an Array of Lower Price Points to Consumers with Mild to Moderate Hearing Loss

A pair of hearing aids from an audiology or ENT clinic currently exceeds \$5,000 on average.² However, we see four primary trends creating a proliferation of hearing devices for consumers with mild to moderate hearing loss at significantly lower price points.

White/Grey Labeling at Costco

Costco now offers premium hearing aids from the global hearing aid manufacturers under the Kirkland Signature, Jabra, and Philips brands. These fully-featured devices are priced considerably lower than the traditional hearing aid clinic, with the Kirkland Signature starting at \$1,399 a pair.

Consumer Electronics Brands' Entry

Apple, Bose, and Samsung now compete with either FDA-cleared hearing aids or personal sound amplification products (PSAPs). Bose recently launched SoundControl hearing aids for \$849 a pair. Although lacking streaming and rechargeable batteries, the hearing aids are self-fit, effectively serving as an OTC-category test case.

Telehealth D2C Companies

Select direct-to-consumer (D2C) companies, like Eargo, Lexie, and Lively, provide full-service telehealth. In addition to offering significant savings over hearing aids from the clinic, these companies augment the digitized ordering process with hearing experts who work with consumers to maximize hearing outcomes.

New OTC Category

The 2017 OTC Hearing Aid Act calls for self-fit hearing aids for adults with a perceived mild to moderate hearing impairment. In contrast to PSAPs, these hearing aids will have the imprimatur of FDA clearance. Once the FDA finalizes requirements, consumer electronics brands will most likely deepen their investment in the hearing aid category.

Proliferation of Lower Price Points Will Increase the Importance of Marketers' Addressing Stigma

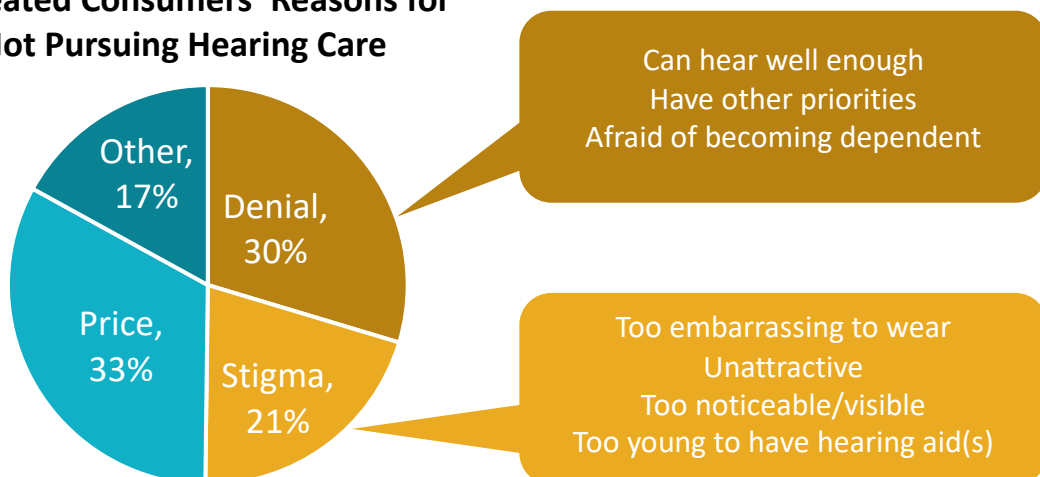
In 2018, price-related reasons collectively topped consumers' explanations for not taking any steps to pursue hearing care (see chart). One-third of respondents complained that hearing aids were "too expensive" or that they lacked insurance coverage.³

Yet with lower price points, other adoption barriers will gain importance. About 20% of people cited stigma as a barrier to pursuing hearing care. People protested that hearing aids are "unattractive" or that they are "too young" to wear them.

A close cousin of stigma is denial, when people delay seeking care because they believe that they "can hear well enough". However, hearing loss stigma is usually a taboo topic, per Auditory Insight's research. Some people sense stigma in their interactions but are unable to describe its presence. Others may recognize stigma but feel uncomfortable admitting to concerns that could be dismissed as shallow or controversial. Finally, people who experience societal stigma may internalize their shame, finding it difficult to discuss their experience.

As a result, people's reasons for not seeking hearing care that we classified under "denial" may also be fueled by stigma.

Untreated Consumers' Reasons for Not Pursuing Hearing Care



Source: Auditory Insight analysis of MarkeTrak X showing top reasons for non-owners who have not taken any steps to obtain a hearing aid. Participants could provide multiple responses. N = 583 participants.

Stigma Against Hearing Loss and Hearing Aids is a Powerful Force

Societal perceptions reflecting stigma against hearing loss and hearing aids generally fall into three categories: not whole, disabled, and cognitively impaired. Margaret Wallhagen developed these categories from a longitudinal, qualitative study of people with hearing loss and their partners.⁴

In the study, participants expressed feeling “not whole” with terms like “deteriorated,” or “defective.” Participants said they felt “disabled” when explaining their hearing loss as a “physical deficiency,” or “impairment.” Others explained their self-consciousness over being perceived as “cognitively impaired”, using terms such as “falling apart” or becoming “decrepit.”

Stigma impacts people along the entire lifecycle of living with hearing loss, from their initial acceptance of their hearing loss, to their decision to be tested, to their resolve to be fitted with hearing aids, and finally their commitment on where and how often to wear hearing aids.

Three Perception Categories of Hearing Loss



Not
Whole



Disabled



Cognitively
Impaired

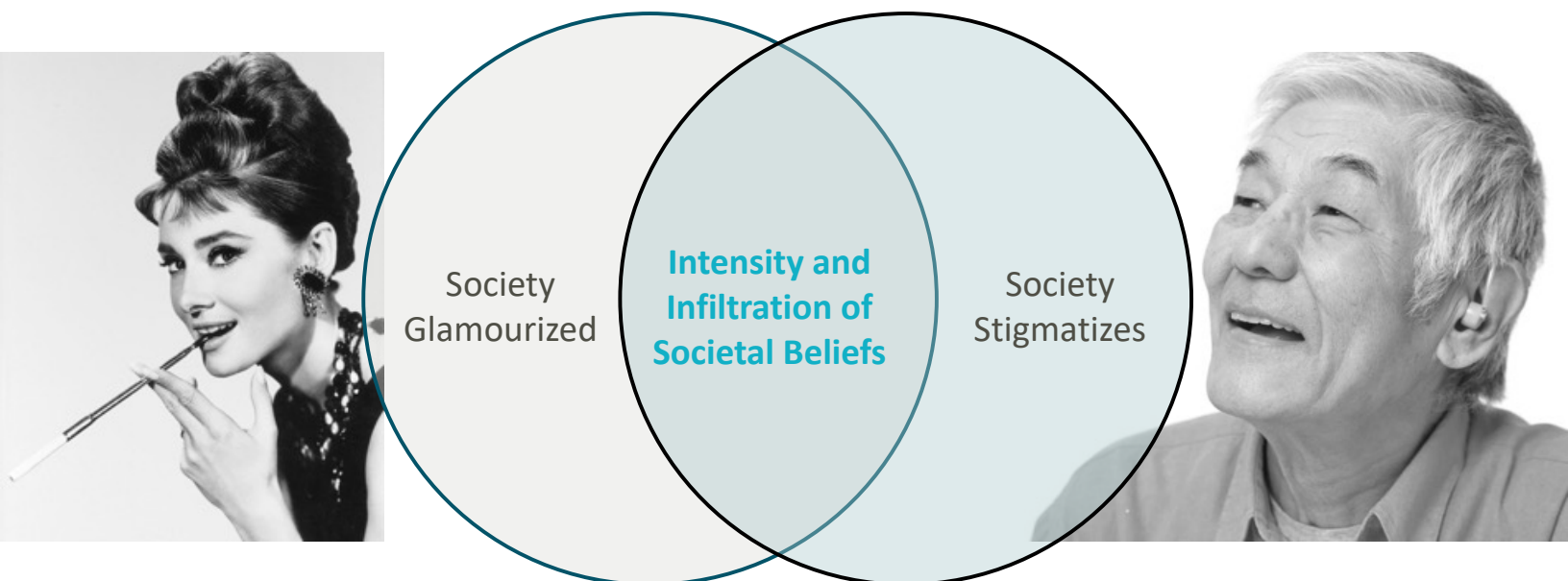
Anti-Smoking Public Health Campaigns Offer Powerful Analog for Addressing Stigma in Hearing Healthcare

To increase adoption, hearing healthcare companies must grapple with a deeply embedded societal stigma against hearing loss. Auditory Insight has identified the anti-smoking campaigns in the U.S. as a productive analog.

In the mid-20th century, cigarettes symbolized urban elegance, with movie stars acting as brand ambassadors. People lit up in restaurants, workplaces, and even on planes. Society perceived smokers as projecting ease, camaraderie, and glamour. But since its mid-20th-century peak, the smoking rate has decreased dramatically, thanks in large part to public anti-smoking campaigns.⁵

The intensity with which society stigmatizes hearing loss today parallels the potency with which society once glamorized cigarette smoking. In both cases, these strongly held beliefs widely infiltrated society.

Strategies for combatting the intensity and infiltration of a set of beliefs that leads to poor health outcomes is what makes anti-smoking campaigns a useful analog for the hearing healthcare industry on the fundamental change.



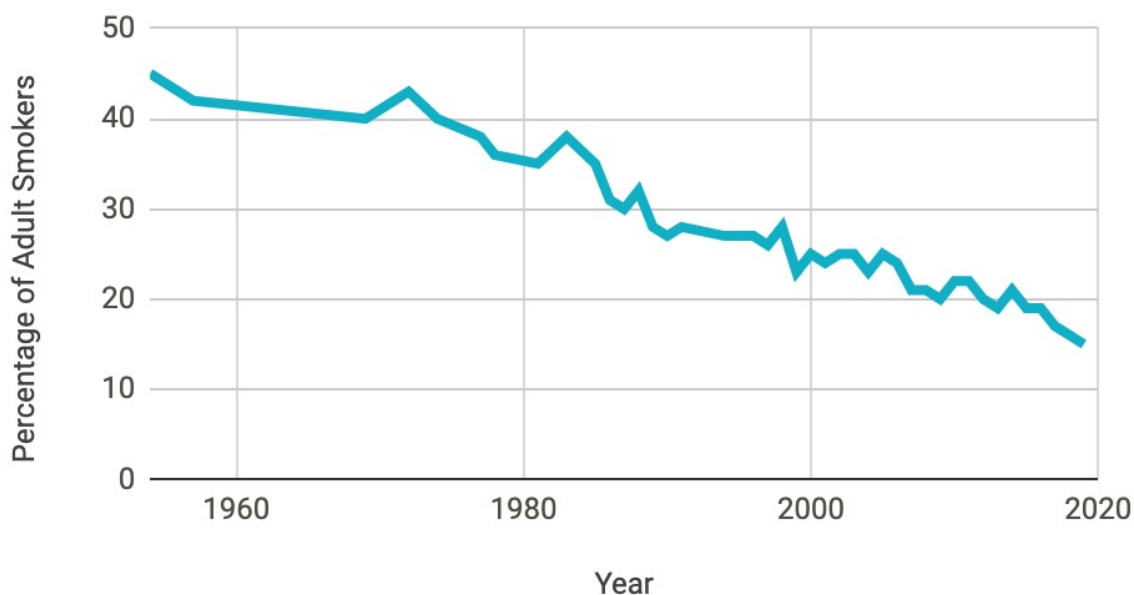
Anti-Smoking Campaigns Precipitated Dramatic Reduction of Cigarette Usage

In 1954, before the U.S. surgeon general first warned Americans that smoking could cause lung cancer, 45% of American adults had smoked at least one cigarette in the past week. By 2019, Americans had reduced that rate by two-thirds.⁶ The anti-smoking campaigns' cumulative effect, along with payers' and providers' efforts to reduce smoking, have been striking.

The term “anti-smoking campaigns” refers to a series of public health advertising funded by the federal government, such as Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA), as well as state governments, non-profits and big tobacco companies advertising under court order. These campaigns began in the 1970s, but well-funded and concerted efforts to significantly curtail cigarette use did not happen until the '90s.

Some population segments have remained relatively resistant to these campaigns, including those with lower socioeconomic status and less educational attainment.⁷ In addition, some campaigns were far more effective than others. This note focuses on more recent campaigns that were particularly effective.

Percentage of Adults Who Have Smoked a Cigarette in the Past Week



Anti-Smoking Campaigns Suggest Innovative Marketing Strategies While Reinforcing Best-Practice Marketing Approaches

An analysis of successful anti-smoking campaigns yields an actionable framework for addressing stigma.

First, the anti-smoking campaigns reinforce the importance of best-practice marketing strategies. Successful campaigns have relied on proven techniques of targeting, researching and testing, and utilizing an effective call to action. Marketing campaigns employing these techniques are more likely to dislodge entrenched societal beliefs.

In addition to these best-practice approaches, the anti-smoking campaigns have embraced three innovative marketing strategies of deploying a negative shock factor, creating empowerment, and encouraging counter-narratives. These innovative strategies help consumers to question embedded beliefs, eventually changing their behavior.

In the following pages, we explore how the campaigns leveraged these three strategies.

Auditory Insight Proprietary Framework for Strategies Addressing Stigma

BEST-PRACTICE STRATEGIES



Targeting



Testing



Call To Action

INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES



Shock Factor



Empowerment



Counter-Narrative

Innovative Marketing Strategy #1: Deploy A Negative Shock Factor

Anti-smoking campaigns use shocking, **visceral images and stories from real-life people to illustrate the toll smoking takes on habitual smokers** as well as people exposed to secondhand smoke. This strategy has been effective at boldly defying smoking's attractions.

One prime example is CDC's *Tips From Former Smokers* campaign, which has been running since 2012 on television, online, and in magazines.⁸

The campaign emphasizes that smoking causes severe health problems and death and exacerbates existing comorbidities.⁹ In one ad, for example, Shawn, age 50 from Washington, explains how his habitual smoking caused him to receive a tracheostomy, resulting in a stoma (a surgically created hole into the windpipe). Other campaign participants, like Brandon and Marie, were diagnosed with Buerger's disease—an illness caused by smoking-related blood vessel infection, triggering gangrene—whose treatment required multiple amputations.



Individual stories coupled with straightforward and **objective reporting** of their health complications was effective at bringing into reality **smoking's consequences**. *Tips* is credited with saving a life for every \$3,800 spent and has caused over 16 million Americans to attempt to quit smoking, with over a million permanently doing so from 2012-2018.¹⁰

Innovative Marketing Strategy #2: Create Empowerment

Other anti-smoking campaigns aim to create empowerment. By helping smokers to **harness personal agency with factual information, positive reinforcement, and support programs**, this strategy is effective at countering deeply held societal beliefs.

FDA's *Every Try Counts* campaign, which launched in 2018, targets adult smokers, aged 25-54, who visit convenience stores at least once a month and tried to quit smoking within the past year but were unsuccessful.¹¹

Focused on 35 counties across the US, *Every Try Counts* advertises at the point of sale in convenience stores, supported by billboards and digital advertising.

The campaign seeks to empower smokers by **reframing** past failures as positive steps, **instilling beliefs** that they are ready to quit, and **celebrating** each quit attempt in a non-judgmental manner.¹²

Visitors to the website may choose one of **three text message support programs and may contact a coach** trained in cessation, reachable through chat or phone.¹³

The FDA plans to evaluate the campaign with a multi-year longitudinal study. FDA reports that after viewing campaign ads, participants felt highly motivated, empowered, and understood.¹⁴



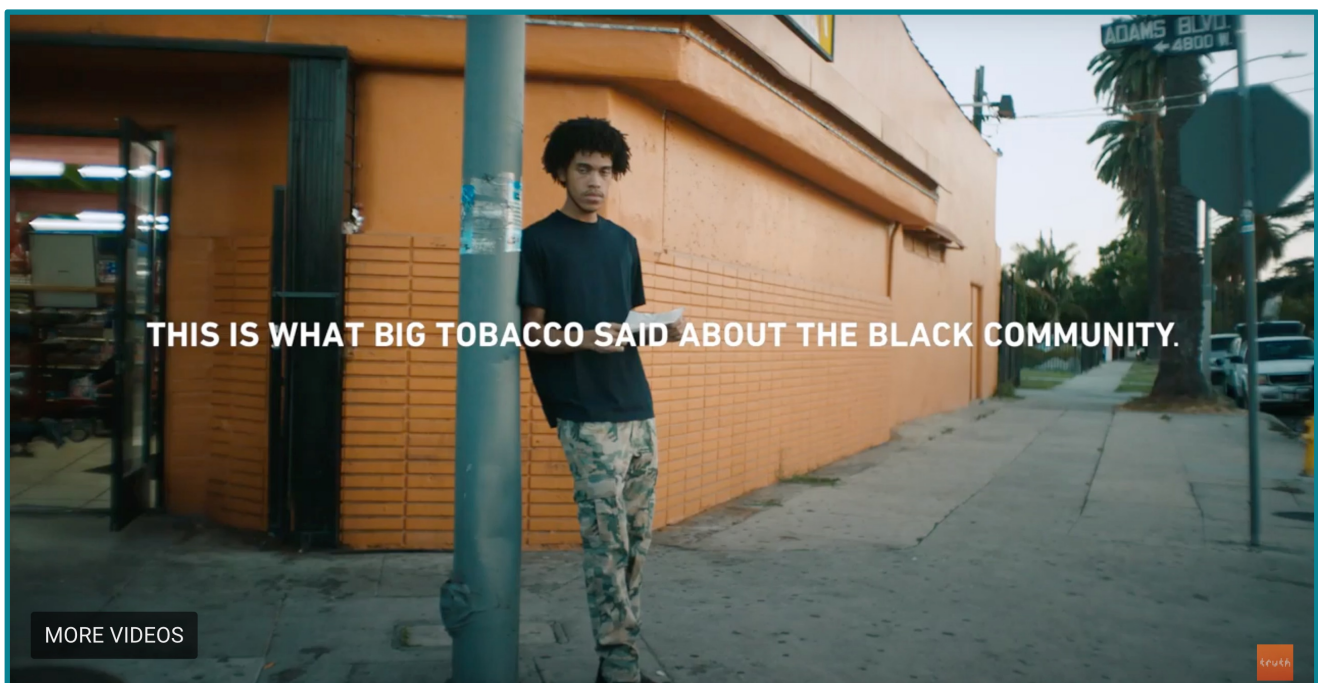
Innovative Marketing Strategy #3: Advance Counter-Narratives

The third innovative strategy used by anti-smoking campaigns is advancing counter-narratives—**perspectives that oppose the dominant stereotypes of specific groups** in society. This strategy seeks to rewrite entrenched societal scripts.

Truth Initiative's *Finish It* campaign, launched in 2014, posits that today's youth could be the generation to end smoking. It reaches 15- to 21-year-olds over TV, social media, and digital platforms.¹⁵ One of the campaign's content areas focuses on how Big Tobacco targets the Black community for cigarette advertising.

One video ad depicts three Black individuals reading derogatory statements made by Big Tobacco executives about Black communities. The ad sets up the counter-narrative with each person gazing directly into the camera. Through **facial expressions** and the tone of **delivery**, the readers communicate their staunch condemnation of the racist claims made by the tobacco industry. Truth Initiative's ad ends with a **reclamation**: "Big Tobacco has spoken, now it's our turn," setting up the Black community to define their own statements about smoking.¹⁶

The Truth Initiative estimates that *Finish It* has prevented 2.5M U.S. youth and young adults from becoming cigarette smokers between 2015 to 2018, with those who already smoke expressing greater intention to quit.¹⁷



Hearing Healthcare Campaigns Would Benefit From Applying Anti-Smoking's Proven Marketing Strategies

The three innovative strategies highlighted by our analysis of the anti-smoking campaigns offer opportunities for the hearing healthcare industry to adopt fresh approaches.

Consider the strategy to create empowerment. One specific campaign example would be to help destigmatize wearing hearing aids in the workplace. Prior to the pandemic, a third of people aged 66 to 69 were in the workforce, in either part-time or full-time roles.¹⁸ With the economy shifting in the distribution of jobs, people 65 and older face new challenges in maintaining employment.

Being able to hear on the job is essential. Yet Auditory Insight's research shows that many people with hearing loss will wait until they receive a negative performance review, potentially risking their job, before they seek treatment with hearing aids.¹⁹

A campaign creating empowerment would target people with either a confirmed or suspected hearing loss who want to continue working. Factual information would underscore that people with untreated hearing loss are more likely to be underemployed and even unemployed.²⁰ Positive reinforcement would encourage people to experiment with different forms of hearing assistance in the workplace, from video-call captioning, to earbuds with customized amplification, to full-fledged hearing aids. Support programs would structure participants' goal-setting by connecting them to text programs and counselors on-demand.

Hearing healthcare companies would benefit from employing creative strategies to dislodge stigma. With consumer electronics brands, telehealth companies, and Costco introducing reasonably priced hearing devices, and with forthcoming regulation creating a lower-priced category of OTC hearing aids, price will block adoption less often. Yet the challenge of stigma awaits.

About the Authors

A strategic advisor and thought-leader on transforming hearing healthcare, Nancy M. Williams is Founder and President of Auditory Insight.

Research Analyst Morgan Leppla graduated from Tufts University *summa cum laude* and has interned with the Hearing Health Foundation.

Advising Leaders on Transforming Hearing Healthcare

Auditory Insight partners with senior leaders of device and pharma companies to develop successful commercialization strategies. The firm also advises growth equity and private equity firms to create portfolio value in hearing healthcare. Auditory Insight has deep insight into consumer needs and experience, a practical understanding of clinical behaviors of audiologists and ENTs, and unique viewpoints on how hearing healthcare is evolving.

Endnotes (1 of 3)

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Page 4: Auditory Insight proprietary graphic, “Untreated Consumers’ Reasons for Not Pursuing Hearing Care”

Page 5: Auditory Insight proprietary graphic, “Three Perception Categories of Hearing Loss”

Page 6: Photo of Audrey Hepburn sourced from [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Page 7: Auditory Insight proprietary graphic, “Percentage of Adults Who Have Smoked a Cigarette in the Past Week”

Page 8: Auditory Insight proprietary graphic, “Auditory Insight Proprietary Framework for Strategies Addressing Stigma”

Page 9: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Tips from Former Smokers* [Campaign Ad](#)

Page 10: U.S. Food and Drug Administration, *Every Try Counts* [Campaign Ad](#)

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