

Importance of the Hearing Aid Manufacturer

AT-A-GLANCE

- You want a manufacturer who does not make you return to the original place of purchase should you have difficulty with the aid or move to a different locale.
- You want a manufacturer who does not lock the hearing aid software.
- You want a manufacturer who understands what it takes to fit and service hearing aids, and is committed to staying in business for the long haul.



Elsewhere in our website I've promoted how it is not the manufacturer that is most important to your success with hearing aids. So, is it important who manufactures your hearing aid?

Yes.

If you look at the parts that make up a hearing aid, most of those parts are not particularly exotic. If a particular company is familiar with electronics and medical-grade plastics, it is very likely that company could buy most of the parts needed to assemble hearing aids. An analogue to digital converter and amplifier that runs on 1.4 volts would be more difficult, but most manufacturers of those voltage and hearing aid specific items are willing to sell to others.

ONE EXAMPLE

The large St Paul company 3M did this in the 1980s. They made one of the first programmable hearing aids available and they did their homework as to the needed electroacoustic characteristics needed for a large segment of the hearing impaired population. Their hearing aids worked very well.

Why did 3M get out of the hearing aid manufacturing business after only a few years? I think that what they, and other companies, underestimated was the infrastructure needed to keep hearing aids going in a profitable fashion. There is a lot of follow up and repairs to be made even when the hearing aid is extremely well-made. As a case in point, Starkey, the largest U.S. manufacturer, spends well over a million dollars a year in research and development and has one of the largest staff of audiologists in the United States.

I also think that what 3M did not understand was that any prosthetic device usually falls short of normal hearing. The nature of some people's hearing impairment is that they are still going

to have some difficulties compared to normal hearing, even when the hearing aid is excellent and it is fit perfectly. It is not unusual for a hearing impaired person to wonder “*why does my wife still hear better than me – what is wrong with this expensive hearing aid?*”

Even the world’s one-time largest hearing aid manufacturer, Siemens, has sold their hearing aid company. Keeping up with technologies intended for general public usage, such as TVs or washing machines, is one thing. But keeping up with technology for a prosthetic device that is to be worn in a warm, damp environment, subjected to sweat, talc powder, earwax and misuse, and having the staff who has been educated in pairing hearing aids to impaired ears, is not an inexpensive matter and requires a significant unique infrastructure that includes having the staff needed for education, and repairs, making parts and the like.

HOW DO I DECIDE

So, you want a manufacturer that is dedicated to this infrastructure and that has the experienced staff available to keep the company at the top. And you want a company who understands not only what it takes to make hearing aids, but what it takes to actually fit hearing aids to individuals. You want a company that not only makes hearing aids for a large segment of the population, you want a company that can make aids for those with mild hearing losses all the way up to profound hearing impairment.

When I consider working with a given manufacturer I look at such things as staff turnover. Would I rather do business with a manufacturer who has a real person answering the phone, who has staff that I recognize from 2 years ago, and who has people on staff who have actually coupled hearing aids to impaired ears, or would I rather deal with a company who has a president or CEO who knows little about fitting hearing aids, who puts me on hold for 5 minutes through a recording, and then when I do talk to a real person it is someone new?

You also want a manufacturer that does not limit who can fit their hearing aids. Some companies use an outdated business model of franchising, whereby that hearing aid you bought in Florida may not be able to be serviced in West Virginia. Some companies even “lock” the hearing aid software so that you are forced to return to said franchisee.

There are other things I look at, including hearing aid software. One company I use has a software that makes it easy to test the hearing aid and see if it is working to specifications. I can do it in less than 5 minutes. Another company’s hearing aid may take me 10 minutes and multiple steps to connect to the aid, put it in a test mode, test it, and then return it to the “as-worn” mode. I prefer the shorter, easier, and more direct procedure.

DISCLAIMER – THE FOLLOWING IS JUST MY EXPERIENCE AND IS NOT EXHAUSTIVE

What companies do I think are solid and have a proven track record?

Starkey, ReSound, Widex, Oticon, Phonak, Sivantos. For the consumer, I would mostly leave the choice to the Audiologist, but I would still ask: is this manufacturer common in the United States - If I move to Kansas or New York or Chicago, will I have trouble having it serviced.