



Hearing Health Care: More Choices, Better Outcomes

Surveys of consumers and providers reveal the importance of extensive product choice within a health plan's hearing benefit

Executive Summary

Once widely regarded as an afterthought, hearing benefits have rapidly gained popularity among health insurers, especially those offering Medicare Advantage plans — and not just as a tool for saving money on hearing aids, but for enhancing overall health and quality of life. However, one aspect of a hearing benefit has not received the scrutiny it deserves: the hearing aid itself.

The fact is, no single hearing aid brand can fully satisfy the needs, lifestyle and preferences of a health plan's diverse member population. And, as the results of surveys commissioned by Amplifon Hearing Health Care clearly show, consumers and hearing care providers value extensive product selection within a health plan.

When any product doesn't fulfill a buyer's needs and expectations, it's unlikely to deliver the intended benefit. This certainly applies to hearing aids. The consumer survey found that almost a quarter of non-Amplifon beneficiaries did not wear their hearing aids every day, and a substantial number of these individuals never wore the devices prescribed for them.

Besides preventing individuals from receiving the hearing help they need to navigate everyday life, unused or underutilized hearing aids may be putting their overall health at risk. Specific risk factors associated with untreated hearing loss include depression, dementia, balance issues leading to catastrophic falls, loneliness and social isolation, according to various studies. Untreated hearing loss is also associated with higher health care costs, more inpatient stays and a higher risk for hospital readmission.

Of course, many factors shape the hearing health care experience of a health plan member and must be considered when choosing a hearing benefit. Crucial attributes include product price transparency, provider network coverage, professional credentialing, utilization management accreditation and member experience measurements. However, as is reflected in the results of consumer and provider surveys, health plan administrators should not overlook the importance of ensuring that their members enjoy access to an extensive hearing aid formulary, offered without bias by the third-party administrator.



Executive Summary

Consumer survey key findings



Overall positive view of the hearing health care experience, particularly among health plan members with an Amplifon benefit



Belief in the importance of a wide range of hearing aid brands and provider freedom to choose the hearing aid that best serves their patients



Willingness to consider switching from current hearing aids to a lower-cost option with similar technology, if it will reduce out-of-pocket expense



High level of brand awareness and desire to know the available brand/product options before visiting a hearing care provider or purchasing hearing aids



Substantial reliance on the hearing care provider to recommend a hearing aid brand

Provider survey key findings



Strong desire to offer patients a broad selection of hearing aid options



Belief that extensive product choice contributes to improved patient communication, ability to meet lifestyle needs and increased satisfaction with the hearing aid purchase



Perception that a limited range of product options was a contributor to a negative patient experience



Reports that a growing number of patients request specific brands of hearing aids



Satisfaction among providers, especially those in the Amplifon network, with the range of products available to health plan members



Hearing aids:

More sophisticated, more tailored — and everyone should benefit

Consumers today are benefiting from an incredible array of advanced technologies that address hearing loss more effectively than ever. Moreover, the availability of multiple hearing aid brands helps ensure that individuals, with guidance from hearing care providers, can arrive at a hearing solution that's tailored to their hearing loss, communication needs and lifestyle.

The effectiveness of a customized hearing solution points to the importance of giving health plan members access to a full spectrum of brands. Not only does this satisfy a growing consumer preference for specific brands, but it helps ensure the high-quality delivery of hearing health care to different segments of the population.

Examples of technologies that address different hearing, communication and lifestyle needs:



Sophisticated speech enhancement and noise reduction technologies are designed for individuals with difficulty communicating in high-noise situations.



Induction charging technology makes it easy for people with vision or dexterity limitations to keep their rechargeable hearing aids powered up.



Technology that detects falls and automatically summons help may save the lives of individuals with balance issues.



Hassle-free Bluetooth® connectivity (i.e., no need for an additional streaming device) allows tech-savvy wearers to stream music or speech from any smartphone or tablet to their hearing aids.




In short, no single brand of hearing aids addresses the needs of a large and highly diverse population of people with hearing loss. As this white paper will discuss in detail, surveys of consumers and hearing care providers confirm the importance of a formulary that contains a full selection of hearing aids brands.



Hearing aids:

More sophisticated, more tailored — and everyone should benefit

The size and brands within a hearing aid formulary can vary among hearing health care third-party administrators (TPAs). The chart below, showing TPA ownership, offers clues as to what’s behind this disparity.

Landscape of major hearing aid manufacturers and their ownership of TPAs		
 Global Hearing Aid Company	 Third-Party Administrators	 Provider Locations
GN Group	None	N/A
Demant	Your Hearing Network	More than 3,000 locations
WS Audiology A/S	TruHearing; HearUSA; Hearing Care Solutions	7,000 locations; more than 250 locations; more than 5,000 locations respectively
Sonova	None*	N/A
Starkey Hearing Technologies	Start Hearing	More than 3,000 locations

*Sonova sold its EPIC Hearing Healthcare division to United Health Care in 2018.
Source: MedCity News, 2019, accessed December 2021¹



Consumers:

Product choice helps drive satisfaction with the hearing health care journey

A variety of factors drive the experience and satisfaction of consumers with their hearing benefit and their hearing health care journey. To better understand consumer perceptions, Amplifon Hearing Health Care commissioned an independent global market research firm to conduct a survey of individuals across the country.

The vast majority of survey respondents were current hearing aid owners age 65 or older. Respondents included health plan members with a hearing benefit administered by Amplifon as well as non-Amplifon beneficiaries, both with and without a hearing benefit in their health plan. In addition to questions related to hearing health, the survey asked consumers about other aspects of their lives, including income level and the presence of other **health conditions**, as listed below.

Health Conditions of Survey Respondents

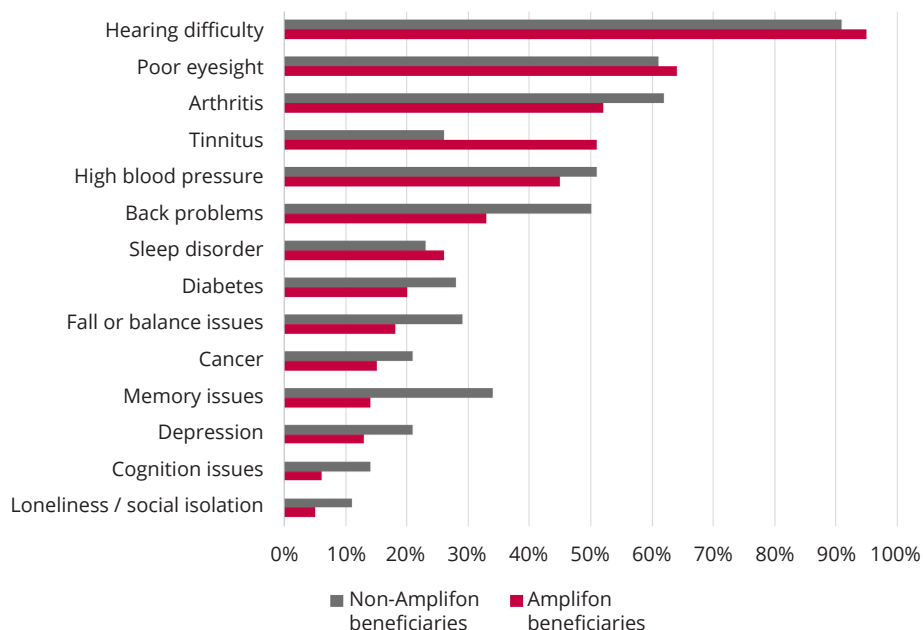


Figure 1: Besides hearing difficulty, poor eyesight, arthritis, tinnitus, high blood pressure and back problems are among the top chronic conditions. Non-Amplifon beneficiaries exhibit higher prevalence in geriatric issues such as fall or balance, memory, and cognition issues. This can be attributed to the fact that this group has higher proportions of respondents aged 85 and older.



Consumers:

Product choice helps drive satisfaction with the hearing health care journey

Overall, consumers reported a positive experience with their hearing care provider. The highest marks came from Amplifon beneficiaries, who, on average, rated their experience an 8.7 (10 being “extremely positive”). Factors driving this satisfaction included quality of care, staff knowledgeable, office cleanliness and savings on hearing aids.

Based on the survey results, a broad availability of hearing aid brands also plays an important role in the consumer experience. Survey participants assigned a score of 6.8 (10 being “most important”) to the question of “How important is it to have a wide range of hearing aid brands from which to choose?” Even more telling, consumers felt strongly (7.8 out of 10) that providers should be able to choose whichever hearing aid best serves their patients.

As discussed previously, a comprehensive selection of hearing aid brands — each offering a unique set of attributes, technologies and options — is essential for satisfying the needs and preferences of a diverse health plan membership.

Having more hearing aid options also gives providers greater flexibility in addressing the concerns of members who want to reduce their out-of-pocket expense. Survey respondents were asked if they’d be willing to switch from their current hearing aids to a lower cost option with similar technology, to which they assigned a score of 6.9 (10 being “most likely to switch”).

Consumer experience with their hearing care provider

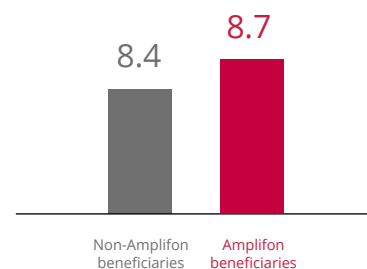


Figure 2: Overall, consumers rated their last experience of seeing their hearing care providers as positive, with Amplifon beneficiaries rating their experience slightly higher.

A broad availability of hearing aid brands plays an important role in the consumer experience

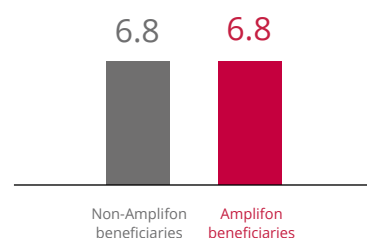


Figure 3: When asked to rate importance to have a wide range of hearing aid brand from which to choose, both groups responded with the same rating at 6.8 – meaning they share the same level of importance.



Consumers:

Product choice helps drive satisfaction with the hearing health care journey

It's interesting to note — and important to recognize — that a growing number of consumers are aware of hearing aid brands, even though these products are considered medical devices and require a professional fitting. One of the survey questions inquired about the pieces of information consumers want before visiting a hearing care provider or purchasing hearing aids. "Hearing aid brand/product options" ranked highly (66% of respondents), just below insurance coverage and out-of-pocket costs.

What information would you want/need prior to your hearing care appointment and purchasing a hearing aid? (Check all that apply.)

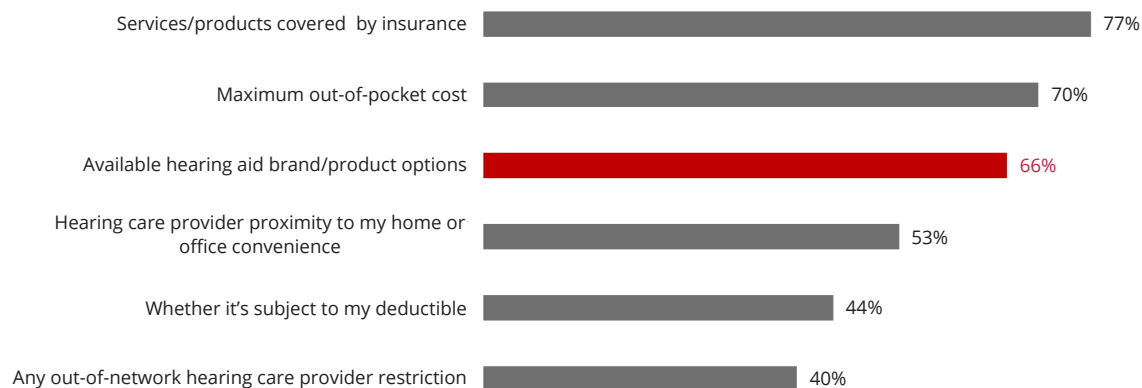


Figure 4: Besides insurance and out-of-pocket costs, consumers indicated that available hearing aid brand/product options are top information needed.

The impacts of a limited hearing aid formulary on the member experience can be significant and far-reaching. But first, it helps to understand the issue of product choice from a hearing care provider perspective.

Providers:

Product choice plays a key role in finding the best hearing solution for every patient

Consumer survey respondents ranked their hearing care providers as most influential in the selection of a hearing aid brand. With 10 being “most influential,” health plan members with an Amplifon benefit gave providers a score of 8.5; non-Amplifon beneficiaries were close behind at 8.3. Other influencers, including family members or friends, advertising/media, caregivers, employers and social media, received scores ranging from 1.7 to 4.7.

In reality, choosing a hearing aid brand, model and options tends to be a collaborative process between the patient and provider. Following a comprehensive evaluation, which typically consists of audiological testing, hearing health history and other elements, the provider recommends one or more hearing aid options that will match the patient’s hearing loss, lifestyle and preferences.

Recognizing the importance of providers in the hearing aid selection process, Amplifon commissioned a separate survey of hearing care professionals. The survey encompassed both providers in the Amplifon network and non-network providers. (It should be noted that providers often join multiple networks.) Some of the questions were similar to those asked of consumers, while others focused only on the provider perspective.

One thing became clear from the survey results: As is the case with the patients they serve, providers appreciate having access to a broad selection of hearing aid options. With 10 being “highly important,” Amplifon network providers rated the ability to offer a wide range of product choices to their patients at 8.2, compared to 8.0 for non-network providers. In addition, Amplifon providers assigned a higher score (7.6) to their satisfaction level with the range of products compared to the choices offered by other networks (6.8).

Amplifon providers are able to offer wider product choice and are more satisfied with the range of products offered by their TPAs

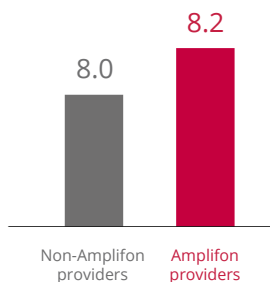


Figure 5: Compared with non-Amplifon providers, Amplifon providers rated their ability higher to offer a wide range of product choice to their patients.

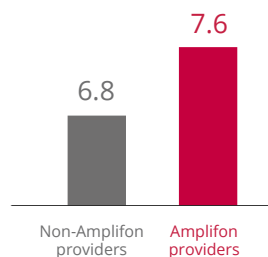


Figure 6: Compared with non-Amplifon providers, Amplifon providers have higher levels of satisfaction with the range of products offered by their hearing benefit administrators.

Providers:

Product choice plays a key role in finding the best hearing solution for every patient

The survey also asked providers why product choice is important to their patients. The response categories included treating hearing loss, improving communication, meeting lifestyle needs, ensuring affordability and increasing satisfaction with the hearing aid purchase. With 10 being “highly important,” each of these categories received a score of 8.8 to 9.7 — a solid endorsement of broad product choice.

Providers: Why is product choice important to your patients?



Figure 7: Providers offered reasons why product choice is important to patients.

But not every provider or patient enjoys access to the most appropriate and desired hearing aids. Providers were asked about the factors that led to a negative patient experience. While high cost and affordability were cited as the top reasons, more than one in 10 patients (13%) had a negative reaction to the range of hearing aid brands and products offered by non-network providers. By comparison, only 5% of Amplifon provider patients expressed this sentiment, according to the survey.

As noted in the previous section, a growing number of consumers are brand-aware when it comes to hearing aids. This fact was substantiated in the responses to one question: “Which of the following hearing aid brands/manufacturers is the most requested when the patient walks into your office?” Providers reported a total of 11 patient-requested brands, representing all major manufacturers; however, some brands received more mentions than others.

It happens both ways: A patient visits a provider’s office asking for a specific brand of hearing aid, perhaps based on a prior experience with the product. Or, more commonly, the provider feels strongly that a particular model best meets the needs of the patient. Regardless of how the product is selected, an extensive formulary has become an increasingly important tool for satisfying the needs and preferences of both patients and providers.



Impacts:

Unused or underutilized hearing aids waste dollars and may put health at risk

In a perfect world, the hearing care provider enjoys great latitude in tailoring a hearing solution to the needs, preferences and lifestyle of every patient. In other words, the provider is able to fit the hearing aid to the patient, rather than trying to fit the patient to the hearing aid. But the world of hearing aid fittings within the framework of a hearing benefit is often far from perfect.

Looking at the consumer survey results, it appears that providers generally are doing a good job of addressing their patients' hearing and communication needs. However, there's definitely room for improvement. Among non-Amplifon beneficiaries, 77% said they wear their hearing aids every day — meaning 23% (nearly one in four) are not receiving a daily benefit from their hearing aids. Even more concerning, 11% of this group said they never wear the hearing aids that were prescribed for them. By comparison, 81% of members with an Amplifon benefit wear their hearing aids every day, and only 3% said they never wear their hearing aids.

Hearing aid use among consumers

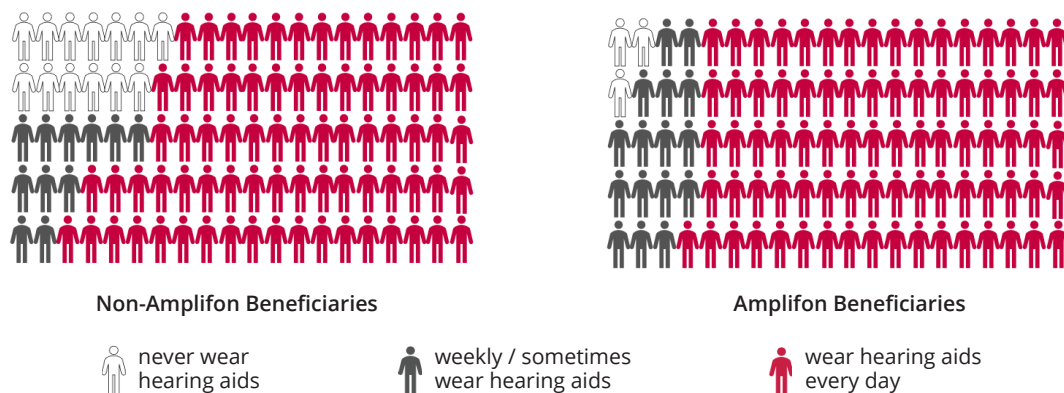


Figure 8: Among non-Amplifon beneficiaries, 77% wear hearing aids every day, and 11% never wear them, even when they are fit with hearing aids. In contrast, Amplifon beneficiaries have a higher portion who wear hearing aids everyday and a much lower percentage (3%) that never wear hearing aids.

Hearing aids returned for a refund within the trial period may provide another indicator of a less-than-optimal match to the patient. Although the overall percentage of returns is low (in the single digits), the two leading reasons cited in the survey were “did not perform as well as expected” and “sound quality not good enough.” Providers also were asked about the reasons for hearing aid returns, and their number-one response was “did not perform as expected.”

Impacts:

Unused or underutilized hearing aids waste dollars and may put health at risk

Certainly, underutilized or unused hearing aids do not represent a good investment for the consumer. Moreover, if the purchase was funded in part by a hearing benefit, this is not a wise use of health plan dollars.

Beyond the obvious financial ramifications, individuals with hearing loss may be at risk for costly, life-altering health conditions, especially if the problem goes untreated. Specifically:

- Older adults with hearing loss are 47% more likely than their normal-hearing peers to experience symptoms of depression.²
- Hearing loss was found to be a factor in 36% of all U.S. dementia cases.³
- A mild hearing loss (25 decibels) was associated with a three-fold higher risk of falling; every 10 decibels of hearing loss increased the chances of falling by 1.4 fold.⁴
- Hearing loss is a known contributor to social isolation and loneliness. Loneliness is associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes daily.⁵



In a report entitled “Trends in Health Care Costs and Utilization Associated With Untreated Hearing Loss Over 10 Years,” researchers concluded that, over a decade, the total health care costs for older adults with untreated hearing loss were \$22,434 (or 46%) higher than the costs for people with no hearing loss. Individuals with untreated hearing loss also experienced more inpatient stays and were at a greater risk for hospital readmission.⁶

Bottom line: Being competently fit with the right hearing aids can increase the likelihood of consistent use and fully realizing the benefits of hearing aids. In addition, hearing loss treatment may help improve overall health by reducing the risk of serious comorbidities.



Solution:

Choose a hearing benefit with extensive product choice plus other key attributes

In the span of about a decade, hearing benefits have evolved from “add-on” status to a key point of differentiation, especially for Medicare Advantage plans. And for good reason.

First, a hearing benefit can significantly reduce out-of-pocket expense for health plan members. On average, a pair of hearing aids costs \$4,700,⁷ plus potentially several hundred dollars more for batteries and professional services. It's little wonder, then, that a high percentage of respondents in the consumer survey (78% of members with an Amplifon benefit and 68% of non-Amplifon beneficiaries) said “yes” when asked “Do you expect your insurance plan to cover hearing aids?”

But a high-quality hearing benefit should go beyond simply lowering the cost of hearing health care for consumers. As discussed previously, a hearing benefit can be a mechanism for enhancing overall health and contributing to lower costs for medical care — a plus for both health plans and their members.

As a bonus, the right hearing benefit can become a point of differentiation in a highly competitive Medicare Advantage marketplace, enhancing efforts to attract and retain members. Of course, Medicare Advantage plans are always looking to boost their Star Ratings, which hinges in large part on the member experience, both with the plan as a whole and with individual benefits.

The question then becomes: How can a health plan elevate its hearing benefit to improve member satisfaction and even gain a competitive edge? As the surveys have revealed, consumers and providers view an extensive hearing aid formulary, offering unbiased access to all major brands, as a big plus. But other attributes are important, too. They include:

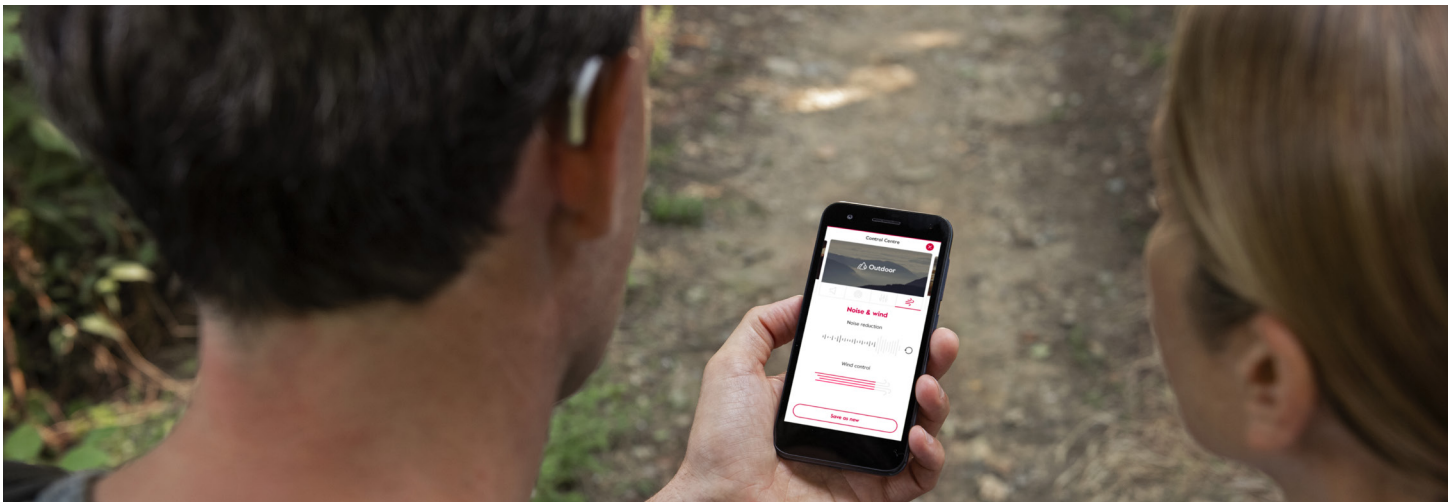
- **Product price transparency** — prices clearly listed across all hearing aids in the formulary and inclusive of essential items (e.g., batteries or charger, warranty and aftercare) at no extra charge
- **Size and coverage of provider network** — network should be large and brand-agnostic - members should have access to all major hearing aid brands at locations convenient to them



Solution:

Choose a hearing benefit with extensive product choice plus other key attributes

- **Independent provider credentialing** — by a nationally recognized, independent nonprofit organization, such as the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA), signifying the highest evidence-based standards in hearing health care
- **Utilization management accreditation** — by a recognized, reputable organization such as URAC, demonstrating a commitment to the most effective, medically appropriate and individually tailored hearing solutions
- **Medical necessity reviews** — performed by audiologists using evidence-based clinical best practices, ensuring that health plan and member dollars are appropriately spent
- **Universal provider reimbursement** — across all products, from basic to premium, preventing unnecessary upselling and ensuring that members receive the most cost-effective hearing solution
- **Member experience measurements** — using a highly respected standardized tool (e.g., CG-CAHPS survey) to continuously gauge and improve the member experience



Next step:

Review current status and consider a partner that offers extensive product choice without bias

Many factors shape the consumer experience with a hearing care provider, including quality of care, staff knowledgeable, cleanliness of office, savings with a hearing benefit and hearing aid quality.

Survey results suggest that consumers and hearing care providers also place a high priority on a hearing benefit that gives them unfettered access to an extensive selection of hearing aid brands and models.

Ultimately, the goal should be for health plan members to receive a hearing solution that best addresses each individual's unique set of needs, preferences and lifestyle in the most cost-effective manner.

How consumers define their lifestyles

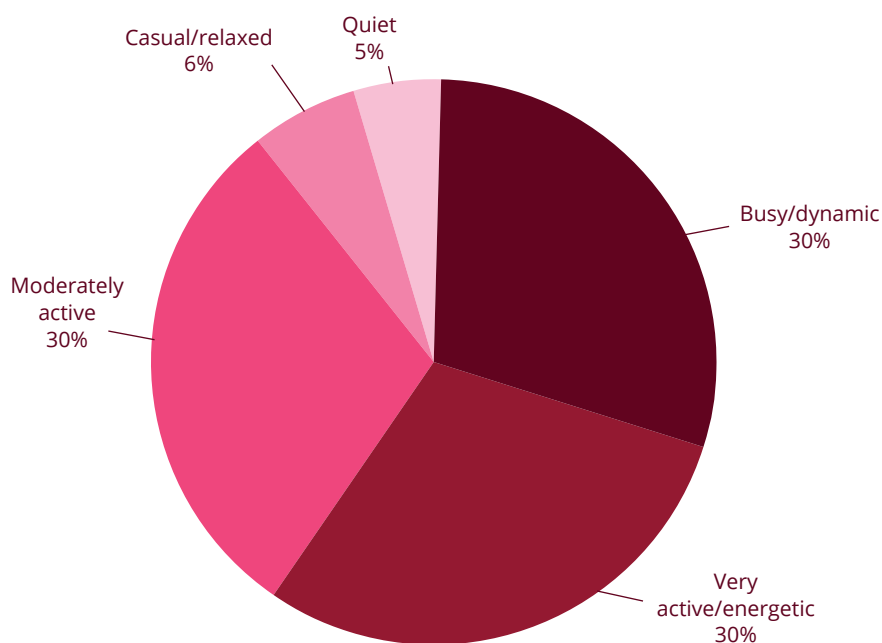


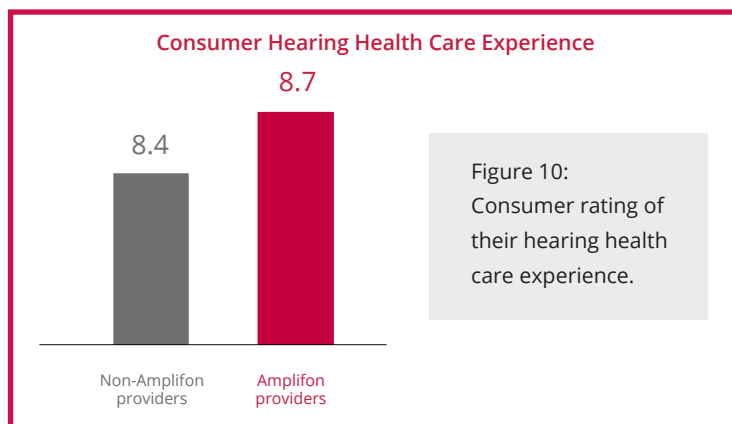
Figure 9: Equal proportions of respondents (30%) indicate they are moderately active, very active/energetic, or busy/dynamic. Only 11% have less active lifestyles. Lifestyle is a key factor in selecting the right type of hearing aids that members need. Consumers should be fit with different types of hearing aid technologies according to their lifestyles. Note: due to rounding, figures in the pie chart do not add up to 100%.



Next step:

Does your hearing benefit administrator offer extensive product choice without bias?

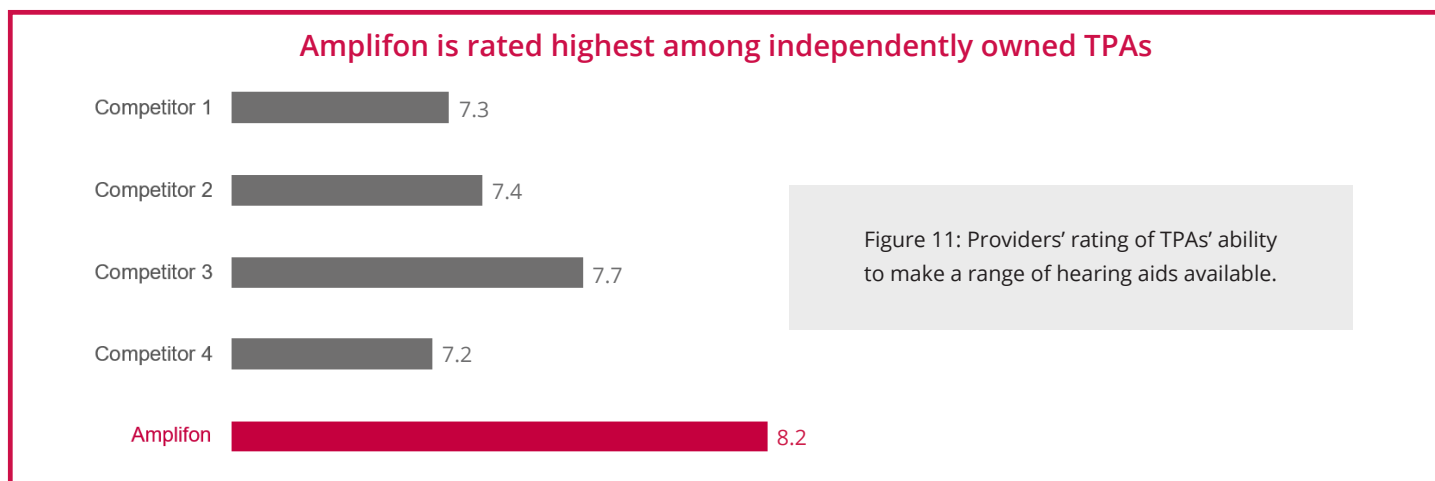
Overall, health plan members with an Amplifon benefit assigned high marks to their hearing health care experience — an average of 8.7, with 10 being “extremely positive.” Non-Amplifon beneficiaries rated their experience at 8.4. In addition, Amplifon beneficiaries expressed a high degree of confidence (7.8, with 10 being highest level) that they were offered a full range of choices available to address their type of hearing loss, without bias or financial incentives for the provider.



This survey result is consistent with Amplifon’s scores from the Clinician & Group Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CG-CAHPS) survey, which gauges the experiences of patients with their provider and benchmarks these metrics against peer organizations. Using the September 2021 year-to-date CG-CAHPS survey results, 95% of health plan members said they would “definitely recommend” their Amplifon provider.

Surveyed providers in the Amplifon network also voiced a favorable opinion of the Amplifon product formulary. On average, they gave a score of 8.2, on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest level, to Amplifon’s ability to make a range of hearing aids available to their patients. This was the highest score among independently owned TPAs. In addition, providers awarded an 8.2 score to the availability of hearing aid technologies through Amplifon.

Today’s health plan leaders, especially those who oversee Medicare Advantage plans, are constantly seeking ways to create an exceptional member experience and improve member health outcomes. The right hearing benefit, administered by the right hearing health care partner, can help them achieve these important goals.



About Amplifon Hearing Health Care

Amplifon Hearing Health Care makes it easy for health plans to provide high-quality, affordable hearing health care to their members. We do this by partnering to deliver turnkey products and services that are simple to implement and administer; customizable to meet the unique needs of each health plan; and designed to add value by improving health, reducing medical expense, and delivering an exceptional member experience.

Amplifon's dedication to quality and service excellence means Medicare Advantage plan members have access to a large, quality nationwide network of more than 6,000 locations, supported by 5,500+ fully contracted and NCQA-credentialed providers, virtual hearing care, hundreds of hearing aid models with the latest technology from all major brands, guided support from our knowledgeable team of Hearing Care Advocates and a comprehensive service package. In addition, Amplifon is the first and only organization of its kind to receive full URAC Health Utilization Management (HUM) accreditation, signifying a strong commitment to quality, accountability, and consumer protection.

As an independently owned and operated hearing benefits administrator, Amplifon is dedicated to serving the best interests of our partners and members.

For more information, visit amplifonusa.com/our-solutions/health-plans.



About the surveys

Amplifon Hearing Health Care commissioned The Marketing Audit, an independent global market research firm, to conduct surveys of consumers and hearing health care providers nationwide. The surveys, which were completed in October 2021, aimed to help Amplifon, the hearing industry and health plans better understand the needs, preferences and experiences of consumers and providers across the hearing health care continuum of care. Through an online questionnaire and telephone interviews, the surveys yielded responses from:

- 602 consumers, mostly hearing aid owners age 65 and older, including 402 health plan members with a hearing benefit through Amplifon Hearing Health Care and 200 non-Amplifon beneficiaries
- 200 hearing health care providers, including 100 providers in the Amplifon network and 100 non-network providers



Sources

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150 South 5th Street
Suite 2300
Minneapolis, MN 55402

amplifonusa.com/our-solutions
(888) 669-2169