

WHAT'S GOING ON?

More loops and fewer telecoils

By Stephen O. Frazier

“Wow! I can really hear now!” To the entire congregation's delight, that's what Russ Conger shouted out at the magic moment when he first attended a service at his Oshkosh, WI church. It was the first time he experienced the church's hearing loop wearing his new telecoil equipped hearing aids. Othel Moore didn't shout when she experienced the same thrill with the new loop system in her Albuquerque, NM church, “It's fantastic - I can hear everything going on.” Before its installation, even when wearing her hearing aids, she said, “I never heard anything in the service.” After her first experience with a looped meeting room, Judy Wilson in San Diego said, “The meeting the other night showed me how miraculous they (t-coils) are. In the looped room, I heard every word Juliette said. What a revelation that speech in a meeting setting could sound that clear to me!” Those are typical reactions of telecoil equipped hearing aid wearers the first time they visit a “looped” facility where they previously found it difficult (if not impossible) to hear the proceedings.

More and more people in this country are having the same experience thanks, at least in part, to the Hearing Loss Association of America's (HLAA) volunteer, consumer driven *Get in the Hearing Loop* (GITHL) campaign that's celebrating its 10th anniversary. The GITHL campaign has moved to a whole new level with an increased web and social media presence and an impressive package of promotional material. Loop Wisconsin in Oshkosh and Albuquerque's [Loop New Mexico](#) are pioneers that actually predate GITHL but they have been joined now by over 50 known looping campaigns in over 2 dozen states. Many of these are affiliated with HLAA but several are independent like the Hearing Well Club's [Let's Loop Orange County](#), [Loop Minnesota](#) or [Let's Loop Arkansas](#).

Many of the nation's local Sertoma clubs participate in a similar hearing loop campaign called *A Sound Investment*. Hearing care professionals from Faull Audiology in Jacksonville, FL to Ko'olau Audiology & Hearing Aid Services in Kailua, Hawaii and an untold number of offices in between publicize hearing loops and telecoils on their website and in their practice. With this added support, the looping movement appears to have reached critical mass with word-of-mouth driving the looping of more and more public venues prompting calls from educated hearing aid buyers for telecoils.

Availability of telecoils declining

That being said, the buyers and sellers of hearing aids are discovering that it's become a little harder to

find hearing aids that offer telecoils. Back in 2017 listings in the *Consumer's Guide to Hearing Aids*¹ indicated that 83% of the hearing aids capable of containing them had or could be fitted with telecoils. The figure for the 2020 Guide has shrunk to only 75% but that is not a completely accurate picture of the situation. Excluding completely in the canal models – called “invisible hearing aids” by the *Guide* - hearing aid makers reported a much smaller number of hearing aid models capable of containing telecoils in 2020 – 235 compared to 349 in 2017. Of those, only 176 models offered a telecoil option compared to 291 three years earlier, a drop of 40%.

Rexton was the leading eliminator of telecoils with the percent of models offering a telecoil option going from 100% to just 46%. All 20 of the models listed in the 2017 Guide had a telecoil option but only 13 of the 28 models listed in 2020 offer that feature. When questioned about this Andrew Arnold, Director of Corporate Communications for Rexton parent company WA Audiology, said, “There has been a temporary dip in the number of Rexton hearing aids equipped with telecoil for a couple of reasons. The first is that since the acquisition of the Siemens portfolio by Sivantos, it was decided to focus on the newly-created Signia brand and so most development resources were focused there. The well-known Siemens brand could only be used until the end of 2019 and we needed a strong inheritor of the Siemens legacy. As you know, the number of telecoil-equipped Signia hearing aids has risen.” He went on to say that this was a temporary situation for Rexton and that, “We will continue to plan for telecoil in our coming product launches and the number of hearing aids with telecoils will increase.” In the case of Signia, though, the number of models offering telecoils went from 14 to 16 but in both instances the telecoils were optional rather than standard and, because many new models had been introduced, the percentage of models offering telecoils went for 82% to just 53%.

Beltone, Bernafon and Phonak recorded a substantial reduction in the number of telecoil capable models. In a LinkedIn post on this topic, a Bernafon executive said, “Bernafon AG acknowledges that the option of a manual telecoil is a key technology that is useful to many hearing aid users.” The company, though, has made telecoils an option rather than standard in the 6 telecoil capable hearing aids models listed for 2020 while three year ago they were standard in all 14 models listed. With the growing availability of “invisible” hearing aids and the discontinuation of many in the ear (ITE) or behind the ear (BTE) models, the percentage of telecoil capable hearing aids has been reduced from 71% of all hearing aid models listed in 2017 to just 58% today and there are 115 fewer telecoil capable models on offer from the manufacturers..

Even though nine states now have a regulation that requires that a client be told about telecoils prior to being fitted with hearing aids, in most states audiologists and hearing instrument specialists reportedly often fail to even tell clients about the technology. In those states where they must do so, claims are heard that some will discourage including telecoils in hearing aids to be purchased. Upon hearing a request for telecoils, some providers reportedly tell clients they have no need for telecoils because they will have Bluetooth. The latter is a great technology and dramatically increases the functionality of hearing aids but it's a supplement, not a viable alternative to telecoils and loops except in those instances where a telecoil is included in a Bluetooth streamer. Bluetooth is not currently capable of connecting a number of members of the congregation to the person speaking from the pulpit or relaying the dialog from the actors on stage in a theater to multiple members of the audience. It cannot, without a remote mic, connect a passenger to the driver of a New York City taxi but the loops in all new cabs in that city can.

¹ James Wilson Group Strategic Solutions, L.P. , Houston, TX

Among the hearing aid brands listed in the 2020 Consumer's Guide to Hearing Aids, 11 offer telecoils as either included or available in 100% of their hearing aid models capable of containing a telecoil. For the others, the percentage of models available with telecoils varies from 17% to 85%. Phonak and Audina are listed as having the most telecoil equipped hearing aid models with 21 models each but in both instances many are optional rather than standard. Unitron, Widex and Signia come next with numbers in the teens.

While Rexton, Phonak, Beltone and Signia have reduced the percentage of their models that offer telecoils, other brands continue to support the technology. When ReSound introduced their Quatro 62 model it did not offer telecoils but requests from both consumers and hearing care providers convinced them to include telecoils when requested. Consequently ReSound continues to offer a telecoil option in all models large enough to accommodate the t-coil. At Starkey, Dave Fabry, Ph.D, that company's Chief Innovation Officer, said, " We remain strongly committed to providing telecoil solutions for our latest custom, behind-the-ear (BTE), and receiver-in-the-canal (RIC) products. Telecoils provide convenience, ease-of-use, and universal compatibility for adults and children to connect with assistive technology."

Excluding "invisible" hearing aids, following are the hearing aid brands and the number of models offered by each that are listed in the 2020 Consumer's Guide to Hearing Aid as being large enough to contain telecoils and the number actually offering that option.

Brand	Number of models	Telecoil equipped or optional
Audibel	6	6
Audifon	4	4
Audina	24	21
Beltone	13	11
Bernafon	6	6
General Hearing	6	1
Microtech	6	6
Miracle Ear	3	3
NuEar	6	6
Oticon	4	4
Persona	7	7
Phonak	30	21
ReSound	2	2
Rexton	28	13
RX Ears	3	2
Signia	30	16
Sonic	6	6
Starkey	6	6
Unitron	22	19
Widex	<u>23</u>	<u>16</u>
Total.....	<u>235</u>	<u>176 = 75%</u>
Invisible models	67	0
Grand total	<u>302</u>	<u>176 = 58%</u>

Jim Wilson of *Consumer's Guide* reports that big box stores like Costco choose not to be included in the Guide's statistics as do online marketers like Otofonix or companies like Zounds. Otofonix does offer one model of their aids with telecoils and one of the 8 models offered by Zounds features the technology. At one time the mid-priced Air bte model from online low cost retailer MD Hearing Aids featured telecoils but they no longer offer that feature nor do any of the 4 other models in their portfolio. At Costco almost all hearing aids dispensed can either come with a t-coil or can use a streamer to convert a hearing loop's electromagnetic signal to Bluetooth and send it on to the hearing aids. Early models of the company's private label Kirkland hearing aids offered telecoils until the introduction of their short lived Sivantos made Signature 8 model. The Signature 9 replacement model made by Sonova again offers buyers the telecoil option. Furthering their commitment to telecoil technology, Costco had Juliëtte Sterkens, AuD, the national HLAA expert on the technology, present a workshop at a recent national continuing education conference to further educate their dispensers on loop technology. They have also revised their mandatory testing and fitting protocol to include telecoils as part of the needs assessment and instrument selection discussion with Costco members.

Lubbock, TX based Livingston Hearing Aids has gone even farther. They are in the process of installing hearing loops in all 90 of their offices in a five state area of the Southwest and have developed a comprehensive training program that not only trains their staff on the fitting of telecoil equipped hearing aids but also encourages them to become advocates for the installation of hearing loops in their community. To raise awareness of this initiative, the HLAA *Get in the Hearing Loop* logo and some of their other graphics are regularly used in the firm's multi page newspaper inserts, in their TV advertising and on their website.

Availability of loops on the rise

While the number of hearing aid models offering a telecoil option has shrunk, the availability of venues around the country that feature hearing loops has grown by leaps and bounds. New York's LaGuardia Airport recently joined those in Atlanta, Detroit, Minneapolis, Seattle, Phoenix, and a growing list of other cities that offer the technology at departure gates or elsewhere in the terminal. Jet Blue has recognized the value of neckloops and offers them as an alternative to earbuds on their international flights. New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) has recently joined San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) in deciding to include hearing loops in all new rail cars and the US Access Board is even considering a recommendation to require loops in all new or refurbished rail cars. Over 600 of the New York City subway fare/information kiosks have loops that allow those with telecoils to hear the attendant over the roar of trains passing through. Hundreds of performance spaces from Broadway theaters and the elegant old Grand Opera House in Oshkosh, WI to the tiny Adobe Theater in Albuquerque or the landmark World Theater in Kearney, NE (population 34,000) are looped. An HLAA looping advocate is compiling a list of known performance spaces that is pushing the 300 mark. Loop America's Loop Locator (<https://time2loopamerica.com/loop-locator/>) and Otojoy's LoopFinder (<https://loopfinder.com/>) are online nationwide lists of thousands of known looped venues and the "location aware" LoopFinder app for smart phones offers suggestions of nearby venues with hearing loops for travelers.

From the 12,000 seat Breslin Center at Michigan State University to individual lecture halls at the University of Iowa, educators are getting their schools in the hearing loop. Retail chains like Kinney Drugs

and Wegmans Food Markets have installed counter loops to provide confidential, effective communication access to their customers. The US Supreme Court, the US Congress, various state legislative chambers and many city council rooms have gotten “in the loop.” In Albuquerque the city council installed a loop to supplement an FM system so that those with telecoils could just push a button on their hearing aid instead of removing their hearing aids and donning a borrowed FM receiver and earphones. Untold thousands of places of worship now offer hearing loops while many others have added neckloops to their old FM or Infra Red assistive listening system (ALS). Most movie theaters now offer neckloops as an alternative to earphones for use with their ALS. A huge number of home TV rooms have been looped and telecoil users are including neckloops as a means of increasing the functionality of their smart phones. The advent of Covid 19 has driven people to hold virtual meetings and neckloops connect their hearing impaired users to the sound of a Zoom meeting on their computer.

What's to come?

With Sivantos (formerly Siemens) and Widex merging to form WS Audiology and Sonova Holdings joining forces with GN Resound, what had been seven major players in the hearing aid wars has shrunk to five with an apparently thinning field of competitors. How those consolidations and the entry of OTC competition impacts the availability of telecoils remains to be seen. Some of the latter, Otophonix for example, offer a telecoils option in some devices that could be expected to be marketed as OTC hearing aids in addition to mail order. With exceptions like ReSound, many makers of hearing aids don't seem to have been listening to the users of the devices or to the mushrooming availability of venues that have been “looped” in recent years.

The majority of hearing aid buyers/users have undoubtedly not been made aware of telecoil technology by their provider but the blame for that could rest with the manufacturers who don't promote telecoils with those providers like they do Bluetooth. Lots of Bluetooth add-ons are on every brands options list but none offer a branded neckloop. It's also possible that, many of their clients simply don't educate their patients on the technology because they've had little or no training in it themselves. Educated consumers - 85% of HLAA members according to one survey for example - know about, have and use telecoils regularly and endorse the technology as a Godsend. One church goer told Dr. Sterkens of her first loop encounter, “What I experienced last Sunday was nothing short of a miracle.” Only time will tell if the hearing aid makers will recognize the growing availability of telecoil use opportunities for the end users of their devices and help to make more miracles happen.

Stephen O. Frazier, a freelance writer, was trained as a Hearing Loss Support Specialist by HLAA and has been an advocate for the hard of hearing for over 20 years. He edited the New Mexico state and Albuquerque, NM chapter newsletter for nearly 20 years and served in various other positions in the chapter. He was also the HLAA New Mexico chapter coordinator for 10 years and was a founding member of HLAA's national Get in the Hearing Loop initiative. He served on the New Mexico Speech, Language Pathology, Audiology and Hearing Aid Dispensing Practices Board for nearly a decade. He currently heads the award winning Loop New Mexico initiative and is the founder and co-chair of the Committee for Communication Access in New Mexico. Steve's writings on various hearing loss related issues have appeared in a variety of periodicals such as Hearing Journal, Technologies for Worship, Sound & Communications and several others. Many of those pieces can be accessed and he can be contacted through his website: www.sofnabq.com.