

## Missed words can mean missed business

By Stephen O. Frazier, Hearing Loss Support Specialist

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Imagine a travel agent being asked what tours of New York City are available and having the agent say, "Dostępnych jest kilka różnych wycieczek. Jak długo szukasz trasy?" Well, of course you can't understand that answer because it's in Polish instead of English. It might as well be Polish or Chinese or whatever, though, if that agent is responding to a potential traveler who is hard of hearing. Hearing loss is the third most common problematic medical condition among seniors but it's a little known fact that 65% of hard of hearing people are under the age of sixty five including a significant percentage of teenagers.

It's estimated there are over 48 million Americans with a measurable hearing loss and for a good percentage of them it is severe enough that they would benefit from wearing hearing aids. Unfortunately only 20 % of those who would benefit from the devices have them and some in that group don't always wear them. As a result many with a disabling hearing loss will ask others to repeat themselves to clarify what they believe they heard. Others will simply fake it, acting as though they heard what was said to them when, in reality, they did not. The "sale clincher" may have been misunderstood and actually killed the sale. A hard of hearing person may also think they heard something but it made no sense because of their hearing loss. They can't always tell the difference between words like bill and pill or gate and late. When told, "That's the city's tourist area" they may think they heard, "That is the city's poorest area" and actually avoid it. They can't always hear the "f" and the "S" in "fifty" and "sixty" - they just hear "ixty". Consequently they may think they were told a certain service would cost sixty dollars a day when it's only fifty.

Hearing loss is called the invisible disability because it doesn't involve a wheel chair, a white cane or other unmistakable visual clue that it's present. Hearing aids have become smaller and smaller and with today's technology they may be all the way in the ear canal and thus completely invisible. Then there's that larger group who need but don't even have hearing aids. So, how do you identify a person who is hard of hearing? Discretely unless he or she calls your attention to that fact.

Being asked to repeat something or experiencing an obvious misunderstanding of something they were told are sure signs that listeners may be hard of hearing so rule number one is always to pay attention to the listener. A puzzled look can indicate a

hearing problem and alert you to a misunderstanding. Asking you to repeat something is another giveaway. Tactfully ask the person if they understood you, or ask leading questions so you know your message is getting across.

Beyond this simple communication strategy, here are some basic do's and don'ts that should be used when dealing with a potential client or guest who may or may not be hard of hearing:

1. Make sure you're facing the person so your lips and facial expressions are visible. What used to be termed lip reading is more accurately now called speech reading and most hard of hearing people use it either consciously or subconsciously, to varying degrees in their communication with others. In addition to lip movement, facial expressions and body language help any listener (not just the hard of hearing) better understand what's being said to them. Face a hearing impaired person directly, on the same level and in good light whenever possible. Position yourself so your own face is well lit.
2. Don't shout if you've come to realize or been told a person is hard of hearing but be certain you are speaking at a volume comparable to the person you are speaking to.
3. Avoid talking too rapidly or using sentences that are too complex. Slow down a little, pause between sentences or phrases, and wait to make sure you have been understood before going on. This is particularly important when talking with seniors as it takes their mind a little more time to process sounds into speech than it does for younger people.
4. Keep your hands away from your face while talking. If you are eating, chewing, smoking, etc. while talking, your speech will be more difficult to understand. Beards and mustaches can also interfere with the ability of the hearing impaired to speech read.
5. Most hearing impaired people have greater difficulty understanding speech when there is background noise. Try to minimize extraneous noise when talking. So called background music, especially with lyrics, makes it much more difficult to hard of hearing people to identify sounds as words and to separate the voice of a speaker from the voice in the music.
6. Whenever possible, provide pertinent information in writing, such as directions, schedules, financial information, etc.

7. Download a speech to text app for your cell phone. That phone can be an invaluable tool to ensure good communication with both the hard of hearing and the deaf. A new Android app from Google called "Live Transcribe" allows the user to, in effect, caption everything being said in a conversation so a hard of hearing client can follow the conversation easily. A similar, though not as accurate, program called "Live Caption" is available for the iPhone and both offer the transcription almost immediately.
8. Search out and include any special accommodations offered at venues on the itinerary of tours or points of interest for a hard of hearing traveler. Become familiar in general with special accommodations available to them and you'll win their repeat business. For example, Virgin Atlantic now offers neckloops as an alternative to ear buds to passengers on their international flights. Neckloops silently and wirelessly transmit sound to tiny receivers called telecoils in many hearing aids and allow users to hear inflight music or the sound track of a movie without having to remove and possibly damage or lose their hearing aids. Most Broadway theaters now offer neckloops as an alternative to earphones but the theatergoer needs to know to ask for a receiver with earphones or a neckloop at the box office. They may not know to do this unless coached by their travel agent. Such travelers should be encouraged to take a personal neckloop when traveling to serve that same purpose on airplanes, guided tours, theaters etc. where FM systems are used if they have telecoil equipped hearing aids or cochlear implants.
9. Encourage hard of hearing travelers to download a voice to text app in their smart phone for use in communicating in difficult hearing situations anywhere they go.

Most hard of hearing travelers are not even aware of deaf/hard of hearing kits available in hotels and motels. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires such businesses to have these kits that will include such items as a door knock sensor, telephone handset amplifier, telephone ringer signaler, visual/audio smoke detector, and a special alarm clock. Not all hotels are in compliance with the ADA so check for their availability when making a reservation for a hard of hearing client and then alert the client to that accommodation.

Unless they are very experienced travelers, those with a hearing loss should also be encouraged to watch for this symbol when traveling. It indicates a venue has a hearing loop in operation - a room sized version of a neckloop.



Most major airports in Western Europe including Russia and most of Australasia have them in operation. They broadcast gate changes, flight delays and other information simultaneously with the terminal's public address system. There are websites that list historic and other tourist sites that feature hearing loops or neckloops such as LoopFinder (<https://www.loopfinder.com/>) or Loop Locator (<https://time2loopamerica.com/loop-locator/>). Refer to them when planning a tour or compiling a list of hard of hearing friendly sites in a city a traveler plans to visit.

A trip from the booking to it's end where there were good accommodations for a hard of hearing traveler will encourage that person to take another. Whether it's just a weekend away or a grand European tour, it will bring that traveler back. One where the traveler was humiliated by his or her inability to hear docents, tour guides and other key aural experiences, on the other hand, will leave that traveler in despair, discouraged from ever repeating the experience. As he was becoming deaf, Beethoven wrote, “ But what a humiliation for me when someone standing next to me heard a flute in the distance and I heard nothing, or someone standing next to me heard a shepherd singing and again I heard nothing. Such incidents drove me almost to despair...”

Whether it's shepherds singing, gate agents calling passengers to board, or you extolling the marvelous sights and sound of the Big Apple, let not your clients despair.

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