



## NOVELTIES

## The Hearing Aid as Fashion Statement

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THIS hearing aid looks more like an earring. Its tiny triangular body comes in exuberant colors like sunset orange, racing green or cabernet red; a slender wisp of wire uncoils gracefully from the body to an earpod no bigger than a teardrop.



But it is indeed a hearing appliance, made by the Danish company **Oticon**. It is called Delta, after its triangular housing that contains the microphones and signal-processing electronics. Introduced in May, the device is designed for people typically in their 40's, 50's or older who are starting to lose the ability to hear high-pitched sounds but hate doing anything about it.

"This new design is appealing to people who traditionally are reluctant to seek help" for hearing loss, said Ed Bravo,

Indeed, many people have strong aversions to hearing aids, said Dr. Robert Green, an ear, nose and throat specialist in Manhattan who was amused to learn that there was a hearing aid with the moxie to come in a color like "green chameleon." "Unfortunately, there is a powerful stigma attached to hearing aids," he said. "People don't think twice about getting eyeglasses, but hearing aids are a different story."

In 2004, Oticon hired the consulting firm Olson Zaltman Associates to help it address this aversion. "We found that some people used cost as an excuse to postpone the purchase," said Lindsay Zaltman, managing director of the company, speaking from the company's office in Pittsburgh. But there were also deeper issues. Hearing aids were perceived as "a neon sign on your forehead saying, 'I'm flawed, I'm old,'" he said.

The brash new styling of the Delta is part of a strategy to fight this impression. In a trial study of people who wore the device for a few weeks, some users said their friends mistook the hearing aids for wireless headsets used with cellphones, Mr. Zaltman said. "So this thing with a negative stigma started to change to something smarter and cooler-looking, taking on this idea that you could *want* people to see this."

It's too early to know if the strategy is working, but Mr. Wilson says sales have been brisk. "Reader surveys show that customers are happy with Delta," he said.

Richard Bennett, 60, a banker who lives in Punta Gorda, Fla., is one of those customers. He hesitated before the purchase. "It was four months of soul searching," he said. "I felt I couldn't possibly be old enough to need a hearing aid."

He finally bought a pair of Deltas at Audiology Consultants of Southwest Florida in Cape Coral, and left its office with them on. "I could hear the keys in my pocket making noise," he said. His color of choice was gray, to match his hair. "I wouldn't choose alligator skin," he said. "That's not me."

He now wears the devices morning to night. "I put them in a little before sunrise, before I walk the dog, so that I can listen to the birds," he said.

The hearing aid must be working fairly well: Mr. Bennett was speaking on a cellphone when being interviewed, and though the connection was poor, he had no difficulties.

OTHER companies make unobtrusive, behind-the-ear hearing aids with the same underlying approach, called open-fit. These devices leave most of the ear canal open, avoiding the "bottled in" feeling of hearing aids that cover the canal. **Phonak**, a Swiss company, includes among its products the microSavia, a tiny open-fit aid that has its instrumentation behind the ear, bringing the sound into the ear through a slim tube.

The Delta, though also a behind-the-ear device, separates the tiny speaker from the main unit behind the ear and tucks it instead into a small portion of the ear canal. But putting the speaker there could lead to problems if users removed the speakers from their ears and then handled them carelessly, said David A. Fabry, vice president for professional relations and education at Phonak's United States headquarters in Warrenville, Ill. "If they stick

them in a pocket, they could be damaged.”

On the contrary, Mr. Wilson said, the speakers are designed to be extremely robust. “You can stretch and bend them,” he said. “They are tough.”

Todd A. Ricketts, an associate professor at [Vanderbilt University](#) who does research on hearing aids, says open-fit devices have become extremely popular in the past few years. But, he cautioned, the devices should be worn primarily by people with high-frequency loss. “The potential negative,” he said, “is overselling this technology to people who have hearing loss in the low pitches or frequencies.”

The Oticon devices may be expensive, but Robert Gamble of Cloquet, Minn., is pleased with them. “I never thought I’d pay \$6,000, but that’s what I’ve done and it’s well worth it,” he said.

He also got an additional benefit from the Deltas: “I graduated from [Princeton](#). The colors there are orange and black, and I made it a point to choose orange” for the devices, he said. “People do notice. I’m enjoying that.”

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