

Do You Tell Your Clients About Captioning?

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Audiologists, do you accept that some (or many) of your clients need to use captioning? If so, are you helping them *access* it?

For many (or some) of us, hearing aids alone—no matter how fabulous they are—do not provide full communication access. We need visual information as well, which we can get from speechreading and text interpretation in all its glorious forms.

We need to see what we cannot hear.

And sometimes, even with technology, we simply cannot hear or understand the words—perhaps they were made from too far away...or from back *behind* us somewhere...or on the TV or computer screen in the presence of lots of background noise. Even if we *are* speechreading, that helps for less than half the words, because of the many speech sounds and words that occur out of sight – behind the lips, back in the throat, the tongue touching teeth and the upper mouth. Facial expressions do help, but there are still barriers.

This is when we need to see the words in text form – spelled out and strung together in real-time, as they happen. Captioning shows us the sounds we are missing, not just speech and this is the difference between captioning and subtitles, which only translates the words. Captioning tells us that birds are singing, footsteps are happening, or that eerie music is playing. As best as it can, captioning tells us what other people are hearing, so that we can experience the same reactive emotions that the writers or speakers intend.

Captioning is generated in several ways and we, the people with low or non-existent hearing, don't particularly care *how* they are made, just as long as we have access to them.

Closed captioning can be turned on and off by the user, on TV and on programs we watch on our electronic devices. Pre-recorded programs have the captioning added after the filming but before the show is viewed. Live programs, such as the news, are captioned in real time by a captioner who may be working from home a thousand miles away. In meetings and conferences, live captioners, either in the room with us or phoning in from far away, provide CART (*Communication Access Realtime Translation*), that enable those of us with hearing loss to participate on a level playing field.

But in just the past few years, the exciting and ground-breaking technology of Automated Speech Recognition (ASR), has made the hearing loss life infinitely richer and more accessible. We don't have to wait for a live captioner to provide text interpretation. We don't suffer the disappointment of programs that are *not* closed-captioned. Now, in our daily lives we can connect thanks to computer-generated captions in phone conversations, video calls and online virtual meetings.

ASR is not perfect yet, but the speech-to-text apps such as those that are bubbling up almost daily, allow me to use my phone as an interpreter when I can't understand someone from behind their mask, or if a computer video is not captioned. This is a smartphone communication strategy that I hope you are sharing with your clients.

ASR captions are included in top virtual meeting platforms such as Google Meets and Microsoft Teams. Zoom does not yet offer ASR for its free platform users, thereby cutting out the ability of millions of people who are deaf and hard of hearing to stay fully connected in a call.

To *not* do so, is discrimination. Just as no business, government service or city planner would charge a person using a wheelchair to use an elevator or ramp, why in the world should people with deafness be *charged to understand*?

"Captions are our ramps," says hearing health advocate Shari Eberts in a [recent interview with National Public Radio \(NPR\)](#). "Why should we have to pay to use the feature we require for equal access?"

Hearing loss advocates are hoping that this will change in the near future. Why indeed. We are not asking for special consideration. We are asking for the *same* level of communication access that hearing people have. Your clients need captioning. Tell them how they can get it.

