

The sound of hearing

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In 2009, IITians Mr Patel and Mr Anurag Sharma together co-founded Quadio Devices in Pune.

[Hearing loss in India](#) is largely unaddressed and the existing hearing health facilities are scarce and unaffordable for many. Quadio aims to bridge this gap by empowering people by providing accessible and affordable hearing care solutions, from hearing aids to portable diagnostics.

Recently, the company launched its indigenously developed India's first hearing app, Q+, a smartphone app which converts a contemporary smartphone into hearing aids by harnessing the phone's processing power, microphone and wired headsets for delivering sound to the user.

BioSpectrum caught up with Quadio's CEO Mr Neeraj Dotel, who shares the company's vision and strategy in making hearing solutions affordable to the common man and Quadio's innovations in the pipeline. Edited excerpts:

Q: Tell us about Quadio's recent innovations.

A: Initially, we started making hearing aids but then we soon realized that the real challenge was accessibility. The company then started developing Net Dispensing, a solution built around internet and mobile technologies with a goal to improve the accessibility, affordability and adoption of hearing solutions.

We recently launched India's first hearing app, Q+, which comes with an inbuilt hearing test and automatic sound enhancement based on the user's hearing loss.

Quadio's hearing solutions -- hearing aids and apps -- for individuals are do-it-yourself (DIY), programmable, personalizable and rechargeable, thus making them easy-to-use and low on maintenance.

For hearing health solutions, Quadio dovetails internet and mobile technologies to connect its highly qualified pool of audiologists to the last mile point-of-care, thereby pushing the boundaries of telemedicine and hearing care.

Q: What trends are impacting the global hearing solutions space?

A: Globally, there is an increased awareness about the numerous medical, social and psychological consequences of untreated hearing loss. In India, however, the awareness remains extremely low.

Earlier this was presumed to be an age-related impairment, but hearing loss is beginning to affect young adults due to lifestyle changes, such as excessive use of headphones for long periods on personal devices, and increased noise pollution. According to a 2015 report by World Health Organization (WHO), over 1.1 billion young adults are at risk of hearing loss.

In terms of trends, consumers are rapidly moving towards pre-programmed and customizable devices that give greater control on hearing experiences.

Increasingly people are buying hearing solutions over the internet in the US and Europe, since there are various affordable options available at the click of a button.

Q: What is your business model?

A: Quadio's business model centers on traditional hearing aids, services, and mobile and internet-based solutions.

Q: What's the market size for hearing solutions in India?

A: The market for hearing aid products is over Rs 350 crore and growing at 15 to 20 percent per year. However, the market size has nothing to do with market potential.

WHO data states that only 1.4 percent of affected people actually use hearing devices in India as opposed to 20 to 30 percent in developed countries. Quadio aims to massively increase penetration of low-cost assisted hearing in India.

Q: What's your market share in the country?

A: Our growth has taken off after introducing net dispensing (telemedicine) and the Q+ app. Both of these will disrupt the hearing industry as it will be no longer necessary to rely on brick-and-mortar infrastructure to find and provide service to customers.

In the coming three years we aim to be amongst the top hearing care providers in the country.

Q: What are the top growth drivers for Quadio?

A: Our biggest growth driver is the Q+ hearing app which can be downloaded by anyone who needs hearing care.

People who need advanced diagnostics opt for our net dispensing solutions (telemedicine) that provides easy accessibility to professional hearing care from anywhere in the country through our partners like hospitals, ENT surgeons, NGOs and social organizations. Net dispensing is a proprietary solution that converts any point of care to a virtual hearing clinic.

Q: What are the mammoth challenges in the Indian market?

A: The biggest challenge is awareness and access to affordable hearing care. This is followed by lack of adoption for assisted hearing due to social stigma. Most people aren't aware that hearing starts degrading with age, with lifestyle preferences along with work hazards adding to it on a regular basis.

Educating everybody about this is really important as hearing loss leads to depression, dementia, cognitive decline, physical injuries, Alzheimer's disease and even mortality.

India also doesn't have enough number of practicing audiologists. The country has only 2000 for a population of 1.2 billion.

The few practicing audiologists that we have are mostly situated in the tier 1 and 2 cities, leaving the large rural population

without much options. Besides this, a good pair of hearing devices cost upwards of Rs 40,000 for each ear, thus putting it out of reach for the common man.

Q: What's unique about Q+ app, though we have other apps in the same space?

A: Q+ app has the following features that differentiate it from the other apps available in the market:

- i,§ Inbuilt hearing tests calibrated for precision per ANSI standards
- i,§ Intelligently-adjusted sound per hearing test results
- i,§ High-quality sound enhancement by using the same algorithms as hearing aids
- i,§ Wide bandwidth - up to 8250 Hz - for improved comprehension and clarity of sound
- i,§ Automatic adjustment of amplification to reduce feedback (whistling sound)
- i,§ Versatile controls for customizing listening experiences
- i,§ Environmental noise reduction

Most free apps only amplify sounds while Q+ app is designed to reduce feedback and background noise. It also provides a wider sound bandwidth.

Q: How do you address a price-sensitive market like India?

A: By giving a hearing aid that is free on a smart phone! Our Q+ app can work very well for an individual who suffers from mild to severe hearing loss. The Lite version of this app is free for download and the Pro version will be available for a one-time fee of Rs 500.

The app is compatible on both iOS 8 and above, and Android 5 and above platforms, and hence will drastically lower the price points for hearing mechanisms in India.

Our traditional hearing aids provide significant value for money in terms of features, customizability, and user control and are priced direct-to-customer.

Q: What are the differences between Indian market and others when it comes to launching a new product?

A: The stark differences are very visible in reach, awareness and affordability when introducing a new product.

India is still a developing nation, and hence a considerable effort is required for any launch. Customization in regional languages is also a pre-requisite for the Indian market.

Q: What partnerships are you looking out for?

A: We are ready to partner with anyone looking to offer hearing care services with little or no upfront investment.

We have partnered with hospitals, ENT surgeons, NGOs and eye care specialists to reach a large swathe of the population that needs hearing services.

Q: About your clientele?

A: Our clientele are customers who require hearing care at affordable prices. We also engage with health care providers who we operate with on revenue share to provide net dispensing and remote fitting of hearing aids.

We are also working with heavy industries with loud factories to provide counselling around noise management as well as services for diagnostics and rehabilitation for employees.

Q: Are you be open to M&As?

A: We are not looking for M&As. However, any company we tie-up with has to be passionate about accessibility and affordability of hearing care.

Q: To which cities or countries are you planning to expand?

A: India is a huge market and we wish to increase the percentage of hearing solutions from 1 percent to 5 percent in the near future.

The BRIC countries also have low penetration and Quadrio plans to add value to these markets by providing them with high-quality Quadrio hearing care services.

The Q+ hearing app is a game changer in global markets, and we are seeing a lot of downloads in the US and Europe. We will be addressing those markets as well at the appropriate time.

Q: How much do you invest in your R&D annually?

A: We wouldn't like to share exact figures but would let you know that we invest heavily in R&D.

Q: Where are your products designed and manufactured?

A: Pune.

Q: What'd be your revenue target for the next couple of years?

A: We plan to be a Rs 3 crore company this year, and then continue to grow in multiples of that in the coming years.

Q: What next for Quadrio?

A: We have some very interesting research and cool products that are not just for hearing impaired individuals but for anybody looking to have superior hearing experiences.