

Hey, Siri, What Are Hearables?

A new category of wearable emerges

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Although some wearables have failed to deliver on early hype, the overall market continues to grow as new use cases emerge.

One device that could take off is hearables—think Apple AirPods, but cooler.

“Headphones such as AirPods have been getting incrementally smarter over the past few years. As voice interfaces become more important and biometric sensors more prevalent, it makes a lot of sense for functions now embedded in phones to shift to smart headphones, aka hearables,” said Yoram Wurmser, principal analyst at eMarketer.

Smart Speakers Pave the Way

Only 1.4% of wireless headphone owners interacted with voice assistants through their headphones [in 2018 according to a report from Voicebot](#), but the rapidly growing smart speaker market signals that consumers are ready to break free from their screens.

“The primary interface will be voice,” said Daniel Neumann, head of strategy at Red Interactive Agency. “It’s about reorienting how we think about mobile from this kind of singular focus on developing for the smartphone screen and shifting how we think about mobile to

craft experiences that work across these new touchpoints.”

A [Q1 2018 report from Publicis Media](#) echoed Neuman's sentiment. "Voice represents a logical next step in the evolution of how we interact with information. It's more natural than using a touchpad or keyboard, takes less brain power, and creates even more opportunity for tech to move further into the background and reduce our reliance on screens," the report authors wrote.

Voice tech is ready for its time in the spotlight too, mostly thanks to advances in natural language processing by leaders like Google and Microsoft. "Just three or four years ago, you'd see a lot of search results that weren't what you were looking for. Now there's a lot more confidence. It has accelerated rapidly in the last year or so, especially to pick up dialects," said Susan Panico, senior vice president of strategy solutions at internet radio firm Pandora.

Expect Growth in 2019

Although AirPods aren't true smart headphones under eMarketer's definition, their runaway success has opened the door for true hearables and helped acclimate consumers to wearing a device in their ears rather than looking at their screens. "AirPods changed the way I take phone calls and listen to music and audiobooks," said Ben Gaddis, president of T3. "The simplicity of being able to pull them out or put them in and have music immediately play has changed my behavior."

CCS Insight, which defines hearables as ear-based wearable devices that provide smart functions beyond music, forecast that shipments of hearables worldwide rose to 6 million in 2018 from 2 million in 2017.

And in a [Gartner forecast from November 2018](#), ear-worn devices were estimated to overtake worldwide shipments of smartwatches by 2022, and rise to 158.43 million units compared with 115.20 million smartwatches.

Reporting by Fast Company [indicates](#) that Google, Amazon and Microsoft are all interested in launching hearable products. [Bloomberg](#) also reported last February that in 2019, Apple will release upgraded AirPods that can be activated by saying "Hey, Siri." Qualcomm too

introduced its first chips specifically for hearables this year, and according to Fast Company, other chip makers will soon follow suit.

Our definition of hearables only includes devices that can operate some features without being connected to another device. Other organizations define it differently and include Bluetooth connected ear devices including AirPods, but according to Wurmser, most people describe devices that send biometric data or audio signals to smartphones and integrate with apps or personal assistants as hearables.

Interested in more on wearables? eMarketer PRO subscribers can read our most recent report on the topic.

Report by Yoram Wurmser Jan 03, 2019

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