


Maker of Oakley and Ray-Ban sunglasses buys Israeli hearing tech startup Nuance

EssilorLuxottica will develop prescription glasses seamlessly paired with the Israeli startup's hearing technology, for customers suffering from mild to moderate hearing loss

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For illustration: Ray-Ban sunglasses made by French-Italian eyewear group EssilorLuxottica. (Courtesy)

French-Italian eyewear group EssilorLuxottica has bought Israeli startup Nuance Hearing to develop glasses with integrated hearing aid technology.

With the acquisition of the Tel Aviv-based hearing technology startup, the owner of the Oakley and Ray-Ban sunglasses brands is seeking to expand into the hearing aid market, EssilorLuxottica said in a statement. Financial details of the transaction were not disclosed but the value of the deal is estimated at tens of millions of dollars, according to industry sources.

Tech veteran brothers Yehuda and Zohar Zisapel – founders of RAD Data Communications – together with Yoni Hertzberg established Nuance in 2015 to develop a technological solution for what they called the “cocktail party problem” – or the unaddressed challenge of picking out speech in noisy social situations or to hear more clearly in environments such as classrooms.

The device developed by Nuance harnesses acoustic beamforming technology, a signal processing technique to cut through background noise and voice distractions. Using an algorithm, the technology automatically selects the preferred hearing direction from one or two sources with the highest acoustic energy. This allows tracking the dominant speaker, even in motion, such as a classroom teacher, or automatically switching between speakers in a multi-participant conversation. The startup says its hardware and software platform captures sounds, processes them, and plays them at a record speed of 6.25 milliseconds.

Over the next year, EssilorLuxottica is planning to develop regular-looking prescription glasses that are seamlessly embedded with Nuance’s acoustic beamforming technology for the 1.25 billion consumers suffering from mild to moderate hearing loss, the group said.

EssilorLuxottica, which expects to roll out the hearing aid eyewear in the second half of 2024, said that the audio component will be invisible, “removing a psychological barrier that has historically stood in the way of consumer adoption of traditional hearing aids.”

“While sight remains our core business – and growing the optical market our strategy – we are uniquely positioned to open up a new avenue for the industry by addressing the need for good hearing with innovative technologies,” said EssilorLuxottica chairman and CEO Francesco Milleri. “Our proprietary hardware and software, combined with our design and manufacturing capabilities, will enable us to pair hearing solutions and prescription glasses into one groundbreaking product, and to bring it to market everywhere through our open network model.”

“As we did in the vision space, we will be the first to remove the stigma of traditional hearing solutions, replacing it with comfort and style,” Milleri added.

EssilorLuxottica plans to engage with traditional hearing aid firms as well as select optical wholesalers and its own retail network to market the hearing aid glasses and make them accessible to consumers in 150 countries. EssilorLuxottica designs, manufactures and sells ophthalmic lenses, frames and sunglasses. The group last year generated consolidated revenue of €24.5 billion and has a workforce of about 190,000 employees.

Nuance was advised on the transaction by Israeli investment house Cukierman & Co., which specializes in cross-border mergers and acquisitions and capital raising.

The acquisition is not EssilorLuxottica’s first acquisition in Israel. Last year, the eyewear firm bought the remaining 50% holding in optical lens manufacturer Shamir Optical, of Kibbutz Shamir in the Upper Galilee, after acquiring a 50% stake in 2010 for \$130 million.