

Revolutionary DENTISTRY

Dr. Eric Cadwell of PureCare Dental in Bend, Oregon

BY GREG BIERSACK | PHOTOS BY STEVE TAGUE

Planted in the high desert country of central Oregon, Dr. Eric Cadwell's practice offers something truly unique: dental membership. By offering an alternative to dental insurance, Dr. Cadwell and his staff at PureCare Dental provide an avenue for Bend residents to achieve dental health. Recently, I interviewed Dr. Cadwell to discover more about his distinctive program and how it facilitates practice success and sustainability.

HOW DID YOU CHOOSE DENTISTRY AS YOUR PROFESSION?

I've always loved to work with my hands, including restoring old cars with my dad and brother, so it was a natural option. My dad practiced dentistry in the Tri-Cities in southeastern Washington where my mom was a hygienist, and my brother is a dentist. Growing up, I never considered dentistry. Following the completion of my MBA, I ran a start-up software company for a couple of years. After sitting at a desk or on an airplane a lot of the time, I realized I like the hands-on aspect of dentistry and returned to school. Dentistry is a good fit because I run it as a small business, but I still help people and work with my hands.

HOW DID YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH YOUR SOFTWARE COMPANY SHAPE HOW YOU RUN THE PRACTICE?

It clarified my philosophy on employees and staff and the importance of having a great team. This means that everybody on the team has the right attitude and shares in your vision. Jim Collins said it best in his book *Good To Great*—you need to get “the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats.” I tell everyone I hire I'm committed to creating an awesome work environment where people can shine. Our team is the number one thing that keeps our practice successful. I almost feel like once I set it up, I'm just along for the ride. Did I mention that our team is awesome?





Dr. Eric Cadwell, Briana Cadwell and Liz Sitzman.



Dr. Cadwell with a patient.

DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCE OPENING A NEW PRACTICE.

In short, a lot of work and a lot of stress. In 2010, I opened a scratch-start practice in one of the hardest-hit towns in the Northwest. When I started, unemployment in Bend was around 16%. How we succeeded in that economic climate is a testament to offering something people want and creating an experience far beyond their expectations. Several dentists in the dental society told me I was crazy. Some of them have also told me they respect what we've done and it was a pretty gutsy thing to do. There certainly were risks opening up a scratch practice, but we had done so much preparation, I didn't think it was a lot of undue risk. Even during a recession, people need dental work.

I came to the dental field through another path and thought a lot about how I wanted to treat people, changing the way dental care is delivered and people's expectations.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUCCESS FOR YOUR PRACTICE?

My dad always taught me that if you take care of people, they take care of you. We are in a two-way relationship with our patients. They are the ones that help this practice grow so we show our appreciation throughout the year. We show patients from beginning to end they are valued and appreciated. That focus is building incredibly loyal customers.

HOW IS YOUR TEAM ENGAGED IN THE PRACTICE'S SUCCESS? WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY FOR ASSEMBLING YOUR TEAM, FROM HIRING PRACTICES TO MANAGEMENT?

We want to "wow" the patient and that is what our team does. The benefit of being new is you can start the way you want, right from the beginning. We have an awesome team here and that's not an accident. When I first started the software company, I assumed everyone had the same work ethic I did. Since then, my philosophy

has been to hire for attitude and train for excellence. If somebody doesn't have the skills we need, but has a great attitude and is a hard worker, I will hire and train them. Having the right team is the most critical component to creating the best patient experience, from the time they walk in the door to when they leave the office. Patients often see the dentist less than the other staff in the office so the staff has to share that philosophy.

HOW DID YOU GET THE STAFF TO BUY IN? WHAT ARE SOME THINGS YOU HAVE DONE TO ENGAGE THE STAFF IN YOUR VISION?

It was harder in the beginning because we didn't have staff to reflect that vision. We were lucky with hiring the right people at the beginning and now, as we hire more staff, it becomes easier because those people reinforce the values and the vision of the office.

Even with the right team, it's a challenge to keep that ship on the right course. We reinforce our philosophy daily during the morning huddle by reading patient reviews from the previous day. Getting reinforcement every day for making a difference keeps us focused on the vision. We also invest a lot of time and resources in our staff. We want them to feel valued and to know our philosophy thoroughly. We encourage staff to investigate what they need to improve their skills and then we pay for travel to do training.

WHAT METHODS DO YOU USE TO MOTIVATE YOUR TEAM?

We track everything—marketing response, new patients, and referrals—and provide incentives to the staff if they meet production or customer satisfaction goals. Goals are set in three areas: daily, monthly, and "stretch" goals. Each department has its own metrics that are tracked and rewarded. This gives everyone different timelines to monitor, and they are responsible for tracking

their own metrics. We give prizes and pay bonuses based on each department's metrics.

An example of a stretch goal that we finally met this month is a production goal we set several years ago: each full-time staff member gets a trip for two to Hawaii. The staff is fired up because we didn't just make it—we slaughtered it. When the staff comes back from their trips, we'll sit down, ask how they liked it, and set the next stretch goal together.

If you just have the big stretch goal, it might take you several years to accomplish. That's not very motivating. It's the same with a daily reward. You have to have a balance of short- and long-term goals and associate them with various rewards.

EXPLAIN THE WAYS YOU AND YOUR STAFF DELIVER A UNIQUE PATIENT EXPERIENCE.

It starts at the door. I looked at office design and how to make people feel more comfortable and at ease. I didn't put in any confining walls, so it feels more like a meeting place than a dental office. Customer service is woven into everything we do—from the way we dress, our office policies, and how we value our patients. For instance, to accommodate our patients, we are open two nights a week until 7 p.m. and Saturdays by appointment. We also guarantee to seat them within 10 minutes of their appointment time, or we will give them a Starbucks gift card as a way of acknowledging we value their time.

The greatest compliment we receive is our patient's referral so we give people reasons to be part of the practice. It's not uncommon to get 100 new patients a month. For referrals, we send a thank-you card and include a couple of movie tickets. Last year, I gave away my 2008 Jeep Grand Cherokee as the grand prize for referrals. This year, we have a monthly referral contest where patients enter drawings for items like a PlayStation 4 or flat screen TV. Patients who consistently refer others become part of our VIP program which gives them other benefits, including free birthday dinners and inclusion in other contests.

TELL ME ABOUT THE DENTAL MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM. WHY DID YOU CREATE IT? WHAT IS THE BENEFIT TO YOUR PRACTICE?

We looked at a completely unfilled need, especially in this part of the country. Our membership model works really well for people here—young families with kids, retirees, or people with tourism or hospitality jobs that don't provide insurance. It's amazing the number of people who come in using the dental membership plan who haven't been to the dentist in years. They thought they couldn't go anywhere if they didn't have dental insurance, as if having dental insurance was the key to getting care.

The medical insurance model just doesn't fit with dentistry. It makes a lot more sense to put the relationship back between the dentist and the patient. If we provide services and keep our administrative costs down through membership, we can offer better prices. We take insurance as



Dr. Adam K. Veitschegger, Burkhart Account Manager Sherry Perrigan, Dr. Eric Cadwell



Liz Sitzman and Dr. Cadwell with a patient.

well, but my relationship with my patients who have memberships really works well because it's just between me and them.

The plan is \$19.50 per month for regular adult membership, with a lower price for children and another tier for perio maintenance patients. Members receive all of their preventive and diagnostic care, as well as a 15% discount off regular fees, with some cosmetic work discounted 20%. Since patients now return on a more routine basis, I treatment plan more work, offer conservative treatment when it's still early, and have more chances to reinforce treatment.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES YOU FACED STARTING THE MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM?

The first hurdle was creating a more comprehensive, consistent program than memberships offered elsewhere in the country. My brother and I also invested a lot of time with lawyers, and then ran our plan by the insurance commissioners' offices in both

Washington and Oregon to ensure the program's strength. Six years ago, we implemented the prototype in my brother's practice, followed by my practice three years ago. Since then, we've been developing custom software to manage the membership program for us to reduce the administrative costs even further. At this point, getting the software up and running smoothly has proven to be the most difficult challenge.

The second piece was shifting perception. Some patients think that membership is insurance, but it's not. Initially it was more of a problem, but now we have more than 1000 people on membership in our office alone. We then added corporate membership for local companies to provide coverage for their employees. Membership is about half our business now and continues to grow steadily.

When it comes to growth, membership is the key. I can see twice the patients with half the billing staff. I keep the process more efficient



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FRONT ROW (LEFT TO RIGHT): Haley Anderson (Patient Care Coordinator), Liz Sitzman (Dental Assistant), Nicole Olts (Dental Hygienist). **MIDDLE ROW:** Ashley Burrell (Lead Dental Assistant), Jodi Jagow-Smith (Dental Assistant), Ashley Schneider (Dental Hygienist). **BACK ROW:** Sherry Perrigan (Burkhart Account Manager), Brianna Cadwell (Operations Manager), Eric Cadwell (Owner, Dentist), Adam Veitschegger (Dentist), Stephanie McDermott (Office Manager), Calliope Fleming (Lead Dental Hygienist).


and still offer a better price. Because I feel so passionate this is the best direction for dentistry, my goal is to eventually license the support software for the membership program and make it available to other dentists.

WHAT SUGGESTIONS WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE CONTEMPLATING A START-UP PRACTICE?

Find someone who runs an ethical and financially sound practice and work for them. This gives you a chance to start paying down debt while learning the business. Practice management is something not taught at all in dental school, and it's such a huge part of what it takes to run a dental practice well. Even if you can't work for the person, meet with them routinely. Contact the Burkhart rep in your area if interest to do a ride-along and network with other dentists. While still in school, figure out where you want to live and what would be a good fit patient-wise, then travel and attend the local dental society meetings. In my second year of dental school, I came to Bend every quarter and attended dental society meetings to meet other dentists.

I wouldn't discourage anyone from opening a start-up dental practice, but if you don't have the business background, that's going to make it more difficult. I would find mentors from which to learn, earn some income while still living like a student, then go out and do it!

FOR THE TYPICAL DENTIST THAT DOESN'T HAVE YOUR BACKGROUND, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE THEM TO SUCCEED?

A great mentor in dental school told me any town can always use a great dentist who takes good care of people. There may be a few patients who switch dentists periodically, but nearly half the population has no dentist at all. If you provide an exceptional patient experience, you've improved the community. 

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