

Cultivating Ancillary Benefits



The Word of Mouth on Dental Insurance

by John T. Harmeling

Let's get real: A dental visit isn't high on the list of most people's favorite activities. In fact, the American Association of Endodontists reports that about 80% of Americans are afraid of the dentist and up to 10% are so fearful that they avoid dental checkups altogether.

Still, despite their reluctance to settle into the dentist's chair, American workers understand the value of having healthy teeth and gums: Dental coverage is the third-most-requested employee benefit after major medical insurance and retirement benefits.

One reason for the demand is that overall health and dental health are clearly linked. Numerous disorders have been connected to gum disease. Diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, respiratory infections, kidney failure, and even premature birth are among the conditions directly tied to poor oral hygiene.

Drilling down: The High Cost of Poor Dental Care

Many of our nation's large companies have recognized the need for dental benefits and are answering the call by providing employees with access to coverage. However, just 53% of companies with fewer than 200 workers offer or contribute to an employee dental plan. What's more, 40% of American employees don't visit their dentists because they can't afford it or don't have insurance.

Unfortunately, while avoiding dental visits may save employees money in the short term, it can be wildly expensive in the long term to workers and the companies they serve. The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions estimates that dental problems result in loss of productivity for American businesses to the tune of 164 million hours each year. And a recent Pew Center on the States study revealed that Americans are increasingly visiting hospital emergency rooms for routine dental care where treatment options are fewer and the cost is often 10 times higher than it is for preventive care. According to the Pew study,

emergency-room visits for dental treatment increased 16% from 2006 to 2009, and the majority of those visits were for toothaches and other preventable issues.

Sally Gehshan, director of Pew's children's dental campaign said, "The care provided in an emergency room is much more expensive, and it generally doesn't solve dental problems. Most hospital emergency rooms are not staffed with dentists, and the medical personnel who work there are not trained to treat the underlying problems of patients with untreated dental issues."

Empty Dental Chairs

In addition to taking note that smaller companies are the least likely to offer dental benefits, brokers should be aware of the great dental divide among U.S. states and regions. The Gallup Organization conducted 177,000 interviews as part of a well-being index, revealing that residents of the Northeast and upper Midwest are the most likely to have visited a dentist in the past 12 months. Residents of Southern states are least likely to visit a dentist. West Coast States fall into the higher- and mid-range dental-visit categories, with 64.6% of California residents making appointments in the 12 months prior to the survey. There is a high correlation between health insurance and dental care: The top 10 states for dental visits had an average health insurance rate of nearly 72%.

Dental and Employee Morale

When meeting with potential and current accounts, remind decision-makers that offering voluntary dental insurance can improve not only productivity, but also employee loyalty and retention. In fact, 38% of employees say that companies show they care about their workers by providing comprehensive benefit packages, according to the 2013 Aflac WorkForces Report. Employers that don't provide robust packages can face serious consequences; nearly 40% of workers who say their employers don't care about them say that they're likely to leave their jobs in the next year.

Consider proposing voluntary employee-paid dental benefits as a simple and cost-effective way for employers to show their concern about workers' health and generate employee loyalty and job satisfaction. Workers agree that benefits move the needle on job satisfaction (84%) and employee loyalty (70%) in addition to influencing their decisions to stay with a company.

The Easy Sale

There's no need for a hard sell to employees: You can easily make the case for coverage. Remind them that dental insurance is about more than cavities and root canals; it's also about regular dental visits that can keep problems from occurring in the first place. Encourage them to take their families' needs into consideration, especially if they have children. Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease among children in the U.S. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that more than 40% of children have decay by the time they reach kindergarten.

Service After The Sale

Once you've sold the account and enrolled the employees, encourage your policyholders to use their dental coverage to the fullest and take advantage of any wellness benefits that are entitled to them under the plan. After all, employees who don't use their benefits are less likely to renew their policies during re-enrollment.

Remember that looking out for the long-term health of your customers separates the salesperson from the benefit expert. Your ongoing advice and guidance will ensure that your accounts and their workers continue to turn to you when they are looking for benefit solutions. □

John T. Harmeling is Aflac's senior VP of Worksite Marketing. He is responsible for Aflac's worksite segment, overseeing integrated sales and marketing programs and extending the company's efforts to attract and retain customers. For more information about Aflac, call 800-99-AFLAC (800-992-3522) or e-mail: addbenefits@aflac.com.