

INDUSTRY INSIGHT

Adding riders maximizes dental and vision benefits

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It's hard to ignore daily news reports of a possible recession in America. Rising gas prices and rapidly increasing food and health care costs are being felt across the country, including in the business sector. Forced to cut expenses, employers are looking hard at the employee benefit packages they offer. However, voluntary benefit options allow employers to maximize their benefit offerings. More employers are choosing to offer voluntary dental and vision benefits, realizing immediate financial savings as well as increased employee retention.

Dental benefits alone lead to more efficient, healthier employees. Employees in the United States lose more than 164 million hours of work each year due to dental disease or dental visits, according to "Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General."

A growing number of dental plans are allowing members who visit dentists annually to rollover their unused maximum treatment limits to the next year. These plans encourage members to visit the dentist on a regular basis for preventive care, reducing overall medical costs.

Some carriers have added the cosmetic benefit rider to their dental plans, which can help serve as a valuable employee retention tool. The number of cosmetic dental procedures performed has jumped about 50 percent each year since 2005, according to the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry. The rider generally covers teeth bleaching, porcelain crowns and posterior composite, or "white fillings," restorations.

Offering both vision and dental benefits can further boost satisfaction. Over 120 million Americans are currently affected by vision problems, according to the Vision Council of America. Daily computer use, stress-related issues and extended work hours increase vision problems for today's workforce. Nearly 90 percent of those who use a computer for at least three hours a day suffer vision problems associated with computer eye strain. U.S. employers lose an average of \$8 billion a year due to productivity loss, and uncorrected vision can decrease employee performance by 20 percent, according to the Council.

Moreover, employers gain as much as \$7 for every \$1 spent on vision coverage. Besides the financial gain, offering vision care to employees has numerous health benefits. Serious diseases and health problems such as glaucoma, diabetes, hypertension, brain tumors and various vision impediments can be detected by annual screenings.

One of the newer riders to vision and dental plans is the fully insured hearing benefit rider. In fact, AlwaysCare is the only insurance provider in the country to offer this rider. Most employers don't realize that hearing loss is the third-most chronic disability in the U.S., affecting more than 31 million Americans.

Hearing loss is no longer just a concern among seniors and the baby boomer generation; 20 million working adults ages 18-64 suffer some type of hearing loss, according to the National Institutes of Health. The current generation is growing up with a cell phone glued to one ear and an iPod plugged in the other. The NIH suggests that the next generation of young Americans will be the most hearing-impaired population since World War II.

The hearing rider provides affordable access to services and materials often not covered under general health insurance plans, along with substantial discounts on hearing aids and other hearing-related services and support. The rider provides access to annual hearing screenings with high-quality hearing physicians and audiologists, and allowances toward hearing aids, among many other benefits. This benefit facilitates access to routine care, valuable to ensure early detection of hearing loss, and opens treatment to employees who may not otherwise consider the critical wellness aspects of hearing exams.

Finding the right dental, vision and hearing plans can make it easier on resources: Low cost and high-value benefits are key. A carrier that presents standard plan options with various riders offers the flexibility many employers and employees look for today. Having the option puts the price decision directly in your hands.

Tough economic times should not discourage agents or employers from maximizing their dental and vision benefits. Your clients can find the dental and vision plan option — pre-designed or customized, voluntary or employer-paid — that fits their budget and benefit needs.

Erich Sternberg is president of Starmount Life Insurance Company and its subsidiary AlwaysCare Benefits. AlwaysCare Benefits is a nationally licensed third party administrator providing administration services for supplemental group benefit products, including dental, vision, life and disability income plans. For more information, visit www.AlwaysCareBenefits.com or call 888-729-5433.