

**Ep #230: Dustin Burleson - Don't Get Amazoned in a
Commoditized World**



Full Episode Transcript

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Dr. David Phelps

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Ep #230: Dustin Burleson - Don't Get Amazoned in a Commoditized World

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David Phelps: Good day, everyone. This is Dr. David Phelps of the Freedom Founders Mastermind Community and the Dentist Freedom Blueprint podcast. Today, my good friend, my colleague, one of my mentors, Dr. Dustin Burleson, got him on a great discussion today about the mega-trends in dentistry. Listen in.

All right, so I've got my good friend, Dr. Dustin Burleson here with us. On the summit. And Dustin, great to have you here.

Dustin Burleson: Thanks for having me, David, it's an honor. Appreciate it.

David Phelps: All right, so just a really quick background because I could spend 30 minutes talking about everything you've done and what you continue to do right now. So I'm going to keep this tight, but Dustin is an orthodontist. He graduated from the University of Missouri, Kansas City back in early 2000s. He is an orthodontist, obviously, by professional training, author, speaker, consultant. He also does the coaching for over 1900 orthodontists in 23 countries. He's an assistant clinical professor in the Department of Orthodontics and Dental Facial Orthopedics at the University of Missouri, Kansas City School of Dentistry. He owns teaching affiliations with the

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Children's Mercy Hospital and St. Luke's hospital, Cleft Palate and Cranial Facial teams. He maintains a private practice in Kansas City, Missouri. Actually, multiple practices. Dustin, you're a great thought leader. You're very futuristic in your thinking. You came from a family of 12 dentists, so you were kind of born into the profession.

So also, early on your career, you were looking at marketing. You started thinking about marketing. You started thinking outside the box very, very early and you continue to do that in everything you do. Spending time with you, learning how you think I think is very important for every one of us. And the reason I wanted to have you here today is because we have a lot of disruption going on in the marketplace. The market, the economy is changing faster today than it ever has before and will continue to do so. It's not going to slow down.

So a lot of our fellow colleagues, dentists, orthodontists it's, "Woe is me, what do I do? And just not used to all this change. I thought I was going to learn to be at this great technician, go out and make a great living and now I'm getting slammed dunked every time I turn around. We've got automation, artificial intelligence, we've got direct to consumer technology that's allowing the patients to literally take their phone instead of a picture of their teeth, and they get aligners dropped by Amazon on their door front tomorrow. Teledentistry, robotics, you name it." I think the saying is today, it's like, "Well, you're from Kansas, what would Dorothy say, 'Toto We're not in Kansas.'" Right.

Dustin Burleson: You're not in Kansas anymore.

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David Phelps: So let's talk about it. Give us kind of your big picture, obviously, the things that are going on and let's turn it around. How do dentists and orthodontists adapt today to take on and look at the opportunities in the disruption?

Dustin Burleson: Well, I think it helps to be a good student of history and to see what's happened in medicine before us. Right? And how practices have consolidated. I have the benefit of working in a couple of hospitals, and I was foolish enough to go back and get my MBA because it was easier, much easier to get your degree when you didn't have businesses and kids, but I admire any professional who've gone back to school to do that. And what we've seen across the board in any free market is the true democratization of products and services. So think about all the things we used to go to the store for, right. That now just you click a button, or you just tell Alexa and it shows up a few days later. So putting the power of product, price, choice, selection in the hand of the consumer now gives them tremendous power, right. Where you and I, years ago if a car had showed up out in front of our house and pulled up when we got in, right, that would be hitchhiking. Now, it's called Uber.

If you had stayed in a stranger's house that wasn't inspected and no working smoke detectors and there was no safety protocol at all that would be called begging a friend to stay at their place. But now it's called Airbnb. So if you look at healthcare, we're not immune to that. So consumers have now been given the power via smartphone. Everyone has a super-computer in their back pocket. They've been given the power to select based on price, convenience, and to go really, in a lot of instances, in a lot of urban areas and suburban areas

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from provider to provider every six months with really no general home. And we have to kind of adapt to that.

So the first kind of mega-trend is this convenience trend. And what we've seen in our marketing is the number of patients coming to us after hours, number of patients finding us online, finding us through methods that traditionally they didn't find us through 20 years ago are now very, very important. So we have to take our phones and our instant messaging and our text messaging and our websites very seriously where years ago we didn't. We can be open three and a half days a week and earn a good living and today we have to think differently. So the biggest trend I see right now is that consumers want it now. They want it delivered and preferably through an app.

David Phelps: Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. So as we were trained in school to be technicians and go back and still take continued education today to become better and better technicians. The difficulty is that we have to be astute business owners at the same time. And that's where I think there's a lot of conflict there. The doctor wants to do what he or she does. All this other stuff is noise. "I don't want to have to do it. And when I try to go do it's, I just don't have a handle on it. I don't know how to make all this stuff work. It's moving too fast." Is there still a place for the solo practitioner or is the consolidation, the group, the multi-practices, is that where it's going? Is there still a place for the solo practitioner to try to handle all the elements that you just laid out very concisely?

Dustin Burleson: Yeah. And there're case studies, fortunately, for us in other industries, so if you look at what's going on right

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now at the time of this recording, the Avengers movies has generated over \$1.2 billion in revenue in an industry that movie producers and theater directors and large companies like AMC are saying, "Hey, the future of people coming to the movies is really in jeopardy," right? Netflix and Hulu and YouTube and everyone can just stream it to their device. But now, here we've got a mega-hit with millions of people flocking to the theaters, right?

You think about Disney thing, about Apple, thinking about really smart companies like the Ritz Carlton and Four Seasons, there's always going to be a place in any market and any segment for companies who deliver products without defects, who do it with friendly employees. Who take care of problems and remove the risk for customers. But if we're going to compete based on price, we're going to lose that competition hands down to companies like Amazon or companies who want to get into healthcare, like direct to consumer aligners, right or large DSOs. So I do think there is still a wonderful place, but we have to take this all more seriously. We have to behave like Disney, behave like the Four Seasons, behave like Ritz Carlton.

David Phelps: So you would say that today a practitioner has got to make a decision, which path they want to go down. There's not a right or wrong, but I think each individual has to decide, "Well, where do I fit into this? Where do I want to live?" That might be a big part of it because that makes a big difference. "What are the demographics, the psychographics of the people that I live around, am I going to be rural? Am I going to be in the metropolitan areas?" And that's going to make a difference. Right? So deciding where do you want to be instead of just trying to

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be all things to all people without any real focus or real clarity on what's my pathway to next.

There's a fear, of course, Dustin, with every, every bit of change that comes along, everybody wants to kind of stay with what they know because we get comfortable with that. Right? Even though it may not look like we're going to be stable. But yeah, making that change, that's really risky. So how does someone decide what path to go down? Is that an internal thing? Do they need to get outside the box and look at different models? How does someone go about that?

Dustin Burleson: Yeah, so we get data reported back to us from hundreds of private clients and over 1900 members in our newsletter program. We have our finger on the pulse of the profession, right? We're in over 20 countries, right? With active members. We've got a big group from Italy coming over this fall, and here's what we've seen in every market. The providers at the top are doing really well. The providers that serve the bottom of the market are doing really well. It's everyone in the middle who's going to be annihilated, right? So if you look like, sound like, feel like every other dentist, orthodontists, periodontist, oral surgeon, cosmetic surgeon, dermatologist, you are going to be removed from the market. Your margin is the opportunity for companies like SmileDirect and Amazon. They're going to come and eat your lunch.

So you get to pick both sociographically what's segment of the market you want to serve? There's nothing wrong with either market, by the way. You have to be congruent to your actions, and the stated objectives of your business. But I mean, listen there, I mean there's really no

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space for someone who doesn't stand out in the market. Who doesn't provide that convenience or risk removal, right? So we've got clients now I'm telling them, "If you can't guarantee something, then get out of the business. If you can't guarantee your patients are going to be happy or that you'll run on time, or that they'll show up to all their cleaning and exams that you'll guarantee the dentistry you put in their mouth. If you can't find a way to remove the risk, other companies will, and that margin that you've enjoyed for many, many years is going to continue to reduce.

David Phelps: Marketing is a big part of everything you do. We're around people that really understand that in any business, the marketing aspect has got to be there, and more so today. So you've mentioned several things about that already and one stands out. Let's talk a little bit about that. Standing out in the marketplace today, sure, you need to have a website presence, you need to have be mobile friendly. But what are some other things that a doctor, dentist, orthodontist can do to also stand out in terms of differentiating themselves in that marketplace? What other tools, mechanisms have you used to help your clients utilize?

Dustin Burleson: Yeah, I think the biggest mistake I see is orthodontists and dentists confuse marketing with advertising. So maybe they enter a slow period or the practice kind of stalls and they go, "Oh, we've got to do something to get more new patients," and so they go and do random acts of advertising, right? They might do postcards and they might revamp their website. They might buy a social media package from some company. Maybe they do TV or radio. Maybe they host a big referral event, but it's not

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coordinated. So my first piece of advice is to take a big step back and think about your practice. Marketing is everything you do. So your location, your uniforms, yes, your website, how you answer the phones, but your service recovery. What happens if someone's upset? How do you recover from that?

How do you generate referrals? How often are you soliciting those? Have you published a book? People come to us and think I'm going to push a button and fix all their problems and they realize behind the curtain they're like, "Oh, crap. It's like a lot of stuff we have to do." But first is your mindset, and the mindset is really, no matter what business you're in, I don't care if it's real estate, which you help a lot of our members with, and thank you for doing that. If it's orthodontics, dentistry, lawn care service, butcher, baker, candlestick maker, you've got to find something in the market that delivers more value than what people pay you for. So then they give you a dollar, they feel like they've got \$5 in value back. And if you'll do that you will get more referrals and you will have more trust and more repeat business, and that really is a marketing message.

So the promises we make into the marketplace have to actually resonate. They have to stop someone and say, "Why would I perceive such a high value? Why do people pay?" You and I joke, "There's no inflation in this economy." Well, if that was true iPhone should cost like \$10 right? iPhones are \$1,500 so there's a lot of inflation for things that people value, right? People are waiting in line for the next iPhone even though they already have the previous iPhone because they value and they see what Apple provides, provides tremendous value.

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Consumers who go to Disney World spend thousands of dollars and save up for months, maybe years to go take that trip because of the value. Couldn't they just go to the local amusement park and ride a roller coaster?

Are the roller coasters at Disney really that much better than the roller coasters in your backyard? They're not. Are the hot dogs any better at Disney than the hot dogs at the amusement park in your ... they're not. So why do consumers do that? Because the value this thing provides is this amazing kind of magical experience. It's bragging rights, "I took my kids to Disney World," right? It's coming back home to work and showing your friends you took your kids to Disney. So in marketing, two big tips for everyone watching. Look around at what everyone else is doing and realize they're probably not doing it right. And if there's more than one of them doing it the same way, they're definitely not doing it right.

So here's how most dentists advertise. They say things like, "Here's where we're located. We do veneers and CEREC® same-day crowns, and we do laser, and we're implants certified," and oh, shit, it sounds like you're a dentist. Wow. Okay. "And we've been doing it for 32 years, and we're located on the corner," and you're right. "And we have really friendly staff." We assume you do all those things or why would the Dental Board license you? So instead you got to say things that really resonate, right? So we talked about in the real estate industry, it makes no difference if a broker tells one of my clients, right, who's looking for commercial property, "I've been doing this for 38 years," right? Well, the only thing that matters for us is how much net we can get out of that

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thing. How much operating income. So why don't we talk about what people resonate with?

Think about selling your house. What's a better message? "We've been selling houses for 32 years and we're certified by the blah, blah, blah Realtors Association," or a message that resonates with the consumer. "Hey, do you know how much your house is worth? You could find out for free right now when you go to this website and download your free report." So look at smart people like Fisher Investments. Look at smart people like Disney and Apple, right? Even Google's spending \$100 million a year on direct mail. They don't say things like, "Hey, Google, we're the biggest." No. They say, "We can help you grow your business and here's the tools to do it." So we resonate in our market with parents. We defined our market, right? Every other orthodontist treats everyone. We only treat kids 19 and under, which says a lot about our ability to focus on our target market. We treat busy moms, that's our target. And they bring their kids to us. And so we've led for many, many years with lifetime guarantees on satisfaction, on never missing work or school and free retainers for life.

Things that a mom would go, "Okay, I'm going to get braces for my kid. Why would I choose you versus all the other options?" And just because you've been located in a town for 32 years or you've been certified in some procedure, consumers, they just really don't care. They only care what resonates with them. So big tip for everyone listening, go back, look at your marketing. If it doesn't stop you in your tracks and make it, you say, "Wow, that's different," then get rid of it, right? Because

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consumers, they don't wake up in the morning going, "Oh, come see what the dentist is doing." Nobody cares.

David Phelps: No, you're exactly right. I think too many businesses, too many small business owners, doctors, dentists, orthodontists, they try to serve everybody, right? Serve everybody, come one, come all and really don't determine who should be their key target Avatars. Who should be that? You need to sit down to patients 19 under very, very smart because now, you're speaking to me as that busy, mom, "I know you're speaking to me. You're not just speaking to the world," so you've already identified yourself. Your practice is someone who cares about me. I think that's something we've got to do. We've got to learn how to do that.

And if you've got a multi-specialty office, which makes a lot of sense, so you can have different messages for those different people, right? Not just one big branded website that again says, "Come one, come all. I'm a dentist in your town." No, speak to me. Tell me why I should come see you. Another thing about marketing that you're really good about, Dustin, you help a lot of your clients with this is increasing that authority positioning in the marketplace. And two good ways to do that. One is to certainly to have a book, publish a book. It seems like it's a big hurdle to get done, but there're streamlined ways to get that done, and once you have a book, now you've got credibility all over the place.

And then speaking, speaking, so a book and speaking in a community could be two good ways. Expand on that a little bit. What have you seen for yourself? Because you're published all over the place, books, publications, so

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you've got that credibility. Some of your clients that you helped do the same thing. What changed for them? How does, how does that authority positioning make a difference in their marketplace?

Dustin Burleson: Yeah. Publishing and speaking and writing forces you to do an interesting thing and that's to share your good ideas with the universe. And I think when you share them more good ideas come in, right? So many doctors they're a wealth of information. They've got really neat things about airway or TMD or dental implants or orthognathic surgery. Lots of really, really interesting knowledge that they really don't share with anyone except one at a time with a patient and a chair, or a mom and a dad and the patient in an exam room. And why not share it to a large audience at one time? So book's a great way to do that. Your local bookstores will carry them, give it to them for free, let them sell them for what they want to sell it for, and donate the money to charity, right.

Have the book available on your website. Give the book to referring physicians. You'd be shocked how many pediatricians don't know when to send the kid to the orthodontist. They don't know when they should be concerned about thumb sucking. If you think about all the things a primary care physician has to do whether right now, measles outbreaks, orthodontics, and malocclusion is way down at the bottom of that list of things they're nervous about. With a mom who says, "He's not sleeping really well, and he's five and has bags under his eyes," and he looks in there, and the kid's got bilateral posterior crossbite and can't breathe through his nose. That pediatrician, in our town, has a copy of our book and has probably been to one of our events where we've spoken

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about this. And so I'd encourage everyone to just give yourself the permission to share.

No one came and knocked on my door and said, "Hey, Dustin, we think you should write that book," right? And then people are like, "Well, I mean it's not like Simon and Schuster is publishing your book. So it's not a real book," and listen, I've had cardiologists, I've had neurosurgeons at the hospital say, "I got your book. That's really cool," and it's just sharing information that helps them provide better care for their kid or make a big decision. I think everyone who has knowledge should share it. So it's just been transformational for us.

David Phelps: So that leads me to another topic which you and I both understand the leverage positioning here and that is utilizing other centers of influence. So you mentioned cardiologists and other physicians who also are treating your patients. That's one example. Others could be just other businesses in general who see your patients. How can you also have alliances with other people who are centers of influence in your community to also engage in reciprocity of patients, right. And you mentioned also events, just give us a little bit about how that might work, how you can position other people who have authority to have a tribe of your patients that you could also do some reciprocity with.

Dustin Burleson: Yeah, so we've been doing bridal events for almost 15 years and even Invisalign's caught on now and teach their members to do these things. And in one bridal event, a dentist or an orthodontist could be the only doctor in that room. There're people buying dresses and picking out bands and wedding cakes and bridesmaids dresses and

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photographers. And you'll be the only person saying, "Hey, before you get married and have wedding photos that are going to last the rest of your life, have you considered what your teeth are going to look like? And maybe you want to do some whitening or Invisalign." And you can reach out to a tremendous group of people who are really passionate about how they're going to look in about six months for their wedding or a year. so that's one area. Look for businesses that have synergies, right?

So anywhere your consumers gather you should be there. So if it's warm weather every weekend we're at a 5K, dog walk, food and wine festival, art festival. And we get a booth, and we give away fun prizes, and we encourage parents to come up and talk to us. We have laptops there with Wi-Fi, and we can schedule patients, and you'll be the only doctor there supporting your community in that way. So people think this is tacky or different, but if you open your eyes, all these events, guess who you'll see? You'll see Verizon, T-Mobile, Google, Google Fiber in Kansas City, they sell high-speed Internet here. They're always at our events. You'll see really, really, really smart companies, credit card companies. Sometimes Disney's at these events if they're big enough. It's really, really powerful.

Pay attention too. If there's some, you know, Disney on Ice Event and there're some community booths around that or your local car show, go down there and put a booth down there. If you notice you treat a lot of adult men for restorative dentistry and implants go to every car show and open a booth and just sit and talk to them. It's unbelievable. You don't have to be there. You can send

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your employees, you can show up and sign books for half an hour. But yeah, events have been tremendous for us.

David Phelps: All right, last question. I think this is going to kind of tie it together so we've touched on just a handful of things that every doctor, dentist, orthodontist should be doing, could be doing. Now, it comes back to, "Well, I can't do it all myself," again, that's a mindset thing. It's something again that we all struggle with. I struggle with it is giving up that control and learning how to build a team. Now, you've done this in your practice, in your consulting business. I know who your people are. You're doing a tremendous job with that, but you again, it wasn't always easy, right? What did you have to learn and what kind of knowledge and skills and tools do you impart to your clients that you coach? Build a team so that it doesn't fall on you. Because if it falls on us, we can't do it all. It just falls apart. We get frustrated, "This stuff doesn't work. I can't manage it all." You can't manage it all. Just what are your key nuggets here, Dustin?

Dustin Burleson: Well, first I speak from experience, and your listeners might not, the viewers might not that I've had my entire staff walk out on me. And if you've had one person leave, that's horrible, but if you leave for lunch and no one comes back, that's awful. It was rock bottom for me and still painful to think about to this day, and that was in 2009. I left for lunch. The team left for lunch and they never came back. They said, "We're out of here," and I saw 38 patients that afternoon by myself and had to go rapidly hire some people for the next day. And listen, the lesson of that story is I deserved it. I was a control freak. I had systems in place that were only in my head. I expected people to read my mind. I gave them no

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authority to get the results in the way they wanted to get results. So I did everything wrong.

I think that dentistry and orthodontics and a lot of professional schools teach us that if you want it done right, you've got to do it yourself, right? So if you weren't a perfectionist going into school, you probably were one coming out, which is good. And I don't want my dentist going, "Well, is this crown on the top or the bottom? Ah, we'll figure it out." I don't want that. But, unfortunately, we take that perfectionistic tendency and we kind of spew it on our people. So I speak from experience in that I've identified my lane, what I'm good at. Right now, I joke a lot of times I stay in that lane. But I joke that we've built such a great team I might come to work one day and the job posting ad might say, "Perfect orthodontic team ensemble. Only missing one member. Looking for visionary orthodontist's," they're here to replace me.

My team has said, "We've got this." A couple of really important things. How you hire is really, really critical. And if you look at how most dentists hire, most orthodontists hire, they say things like, "Experience required," which is really dangerous from a labor law standpoint that if you state minimum requirements and then you hire someone who doesn't have those, everyone who you didn't hire can come back and sue you. Ask me how I know, right? So I say if you haven't had a slip and fall accident, you own that square feet. If you had to have patients sue you don't have enough patients. If you hadn't had an employment law ... usually not enough employees, right? Have 65 employees and see what happens.

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So hire people based on their attitude. All right, Richard Branson's a great example. His companies, most airlines do require you to have FAA certification, some sort of training. Richard Branson at Virgin Atlantic says, "We don't need any of that. We can get your training done for you. We need you to have a good attitude. We need you to be able to solve problems and hopefully have some sales skills," so if someone has a problem, right, you can help them make the right decision. Not just having them buy something but having them change their flight or upgrade to first class or maybe renegotiate something in a way that lets them leave the conversation happy with their interaction with your company.

We hire people based on their attitude, not based on experience. I think if you put ads for dental assistants and for dental hygienists, right, that say, "Twenty years' experience, you've got five years' experience, three years' experience required," right? We just say, "Hey, when's the last time you had fun at work? Would you like to work with a group of professionals that will help you learn new skills? You'll be rewarded. Great. You'll learn new things."

So we start there, and too many of us assume that there's a narrow pool of people that will come work for us. And then once we get them, we've got this great person, you've gone through all the right steps to find people that have the right attitude, right? Then we don't train them, right? We say, "Here's Sally, and she'll show you the ropes," right? That is totally unacceptable. Restaurants take this more seriously. Subway Sandwich shops take this more seriously and they're selling \$5 footlongs and we'd say, "All right, well go learn from her."

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No, I mean, there's got to be a systematized ... We have 120 hours we put everyone through before they're ever in front of a customer so that they know how to handle a service complaint. They know how to check someone in. They can bring a patient back and we invest in those people. So that then what? We attach them to task as we watch and train them, "Oh, she really enjoys this part of her job." Our job is to attach employees to tasks that energize them. Right? Most doctors have never asked their employees, "What do you hate about your job?" Right? "What do you love about your job?" And our role is to go give them more of those things so that one day you wake up and almost everything is being done by people who can help you and you're doing very, very little besides being a rainmaker, pushing things forward and helping people see the vision you want to fulfill as an organization.

David Phelps: Yeah, pretty well said. Dustin, just always talking to you and I feel the same way. See I feel invigorated by the disruption and challenges out there in the marketplace today because it's not that hard to get ahead of it because everybody else is doing what? Nothing. The same old thing. It's not that tough and yet people still think, "Oh, my gosh, I can't keep up." Yes, you can. If Dustin can do it if I can do it if other people can do it, is it easy? No. But if it was meant to be easy, everybody would be doing it. So I want people just to understand, look, change is going to be with us going forward. Just get used to it except it. Take that challenge and run with it. How fun with it. It's never going to be a perfect pathway.

But you've got people around you, you've got tribes, communities, masterminds, coaches that can take you

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through it, they've been down that path. That's the thing. Don't go solo. I always say, "Don't go solo," you got to be with other people that have already down a path. You, want to think the way they think, because that's what's going to get you there. Dustin Burleson, I really appreciate your time. I appreciate your friendship and all that you give back to me and to so many people that you help both your patients and your coaching clients. You're a guy that I love to hang with, so thank you so much.

Dustin Burleson: Thank you, David. What you've done by the way for our members is tremendous. So I mean, I see our members just blossoming with a new outlook on life in retirement because of what you've done for them. So thank you. We really appreciate it.

David Phelps: Thank you, sir.

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