

**Ep #261: Dr. Chris Griffin - Going Against the Majority  
with a Practice That Fits YOUR Lifestyle**



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**Dr. David Phelps**

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## **Ep #261: Dr. Chris Griffin - Going Against the Majority with a Practice That Fits YOUR Lifestyle**

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David Phelps: Hello, everyone. This is Dr. David Phelps on the Freedom Founders Mastermind Community and Dentist Freedom Blueprint Podcast. Today here with my really good buddy, a guy I always love hanging out with, love talking to, a guy who's really an innovator in dentistry and I respect him so much because he is truly authentic in what he says because he not only talks about things that work but he actually does them in his practice, it's Dr. Chris Griffin. Chris how are you doing sir?

Chris Griffin: Man doing great. David as well as a wet finger dentist can be doing on this beautiful Thursday morning.

David Phelps: Very good. Well Chris, we met about 10 years ago now if I had to plug it in, it was probably 2009 and I know we were at a business and marketing conference. This was not just for dentists, it was for all kinds of business. Entrepreneurial mindset, being different, thinking differently, and that's what I love about you. First place I met you was at a place that was not for dentists, it was for those who want to be different. That's been your whole language and your whole mindset from the get go. People

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I think get too locked into doing what the industry says or they feel like they're forced into a box to have to do it certain ways. You're one of those guys that says, "No, no I'm going to figure this out. I got different ways to do it," and of course you were always out there innovating but also finding the right people, the right groups, the right masterminds, leading your own of course, but always taking yourself and challenging yourself to go higher and higher and higher.

David Phelps: You're definitely a thought leader, influencer in our industry and I got to first and foremost thank you for the influence you've had on me. You inspired me to also do things differently and speak a different language, to be contrarian to what everybody else says is the way you got to do it. Let me give people more insight into who you are because not everybody may know you but they should. Chris while rebuilding his practice from a devastating fire. How many years ago was that now Chris, that fire?

Chris Griffin: That would be five years ago.

David Phelps: What you're saying here is it hasn't been a perfect pitch from graduation of dental school to success at the top of the mountain, it wasn't exactly that way, is that what you're saying?

Chris Griffin: No, we had a flood in 2009 and then the fire demolished the practice five years ago. In between I was turned into the state board four different times, so it's been a fun ride.

David Phelps: You keep bobbing back up. That's what I love. Big fire, devastated the practice. I remember talking to you right at that time and again, to go through that perseverance, take your staff, your team, financially get through all that and I

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know the whole insurance thing was rocky too. I mean there was all kinds of stuff. If it was going to go bad it was going to go bad, but here you are back again today, rebuilt, going strong. During this mess to success, one of the major turning points, you unearthed several breakthroughs that helped you achieve the lifestyle that you always aspire to have as a dentist, a hardworking, professional, highly educated, we should be at the top of freedom and lifestyle yet very few are and I think that's part of what you've unearthed here.

David Phelps: Now you're on a mission. Your mission is to help dentists work less, make more, secure the practice independence through acquiring practice members and delivering more for service procedure. You believe in empowering your dental team. I know your team culture to do the behind-the-scenes work necessary to book more big cases using your big case board developed from the same system used by technology companies from Silicon Valley. If you're a solo or private dentist who doesn't really want to get steamrolled by corporate dentistry, you can start working Chris' strategies now to secure your independent dental future.

David Phelps: All right Ripley, Mississippi, it's really a metropolis of the highly affluent. People show up and they've got money pouring out of their pockets, they've got credit cards galore, they walk in the door and say, "Doctor, fix my whole mouth, book it today, no problem, insurance, I don't give a crap, I don't need insurance, that's really what it is in Ripley, isn't it?"

Chris Griffin: It is a population 6,000 and a very poor area where nearly 50% of the population gets some sort of government

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assistance. It is a challenge but I'm from here. I always tell everybody you got to be from here to want to take up that challenge and come back and practice, but I am from here, I love it, feel a real kindred spirit to the land and so I'm here. I've embraced being the community dentist and so I decided you know what, if I love it here I'm going to figure out a way to make it work. I really don't want to move so that was my whole perspective.

David Phelps: You decided to set up your business, your practice to suit your and your family's lifestyle where you wanted to be and do it your way. Now it didn't start out that way like probably most every other dentist you've got a school you associated. I know you had an associateship that went wonky and then like everybody, getting started in your own practice you feel like you got to be all things to all people and you got to work five, six days a week to try to meet overhead and have anything left to take home. You're the original three day dentist, you really captured tagline and title back about 2008 so many, many years ago, well over a decade. You went from the typical five days, then to four, then to three, and the ability to do that wasn't again because you magically changed your environment overnight with marketing for big cases, you had to do the things we talked about in your bio.

David Phelps: You had to develop a team, a culture, marketing that attracted certain patients, and then the wherewithal to go from five to four to three. Give us a little bit of the insight into how you went through that process because it didn't happen overnight.

Chris Griffin: Got out of school 1998, went into associateship, thought I'd be there forever. Didn't work out, I was only there a

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year, decided to go into private practice because my wife was expecting our first kid so I hung a shingle in Ripley, Mississippi, my home town. The bad decision I made at that time I'm right out of school, you're not as good right out of school as you are 20 years later. I decided to go to LVI Pankey and Dawson and I came back and I said, "Now I'm this amazing expert dentist." At that time I dropped all my PPOs. I tried to be a cosmetic dentist. Well I almost went bankrupt doing it, so then I said, "Okay, let's not do that." Then I started joining back to the PPOs and we built out. That's what I started my side business as is teaching dentists how to accept lower fees and do a lot of dentistry in the same amount of time.

Chris Griffin: By 2005 we were rocking and rolling doing that, so I was making pretty good money. At that time I went to Louisville, Kentucky and I met with a doctor up there who had about 20, 25 practices. I was thinking about getting into corporate dentistry. It wasn't even called DSO dentistry back then, but he worked so hard that I said, "You know what? What if I made the same amount of money but went from five days a week to three days a week? That would be pretty cool." I did that in 2008 and we were super successful. Actually went up \$250,000 that first year going from five to three days a week and then I met you in Dallas at the Diane Kennedy event and we're sitting there and me and you are having lunch with your wife. You're like, "Wow, I'd really like to do this, what Dan's talking about." I'm like, "I would too," but you're like, "I think I want to do that as an actual business." I'm like, "I still want to practice dentistry and do that on the side."

Chris Griffin: I'm really impressed with you David because you jumped in with both feet man. You really impressed me. This is

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my side business. I make most of my money still from my clinic, which I love it, it's great. Then I've got a nice business on the side, but what you've done is really impressive.

David Phelps: Well Chris what I think we've both learned is that when you want to be an innovator, you want to adopt a different way of doing things, which you certainly have done. Again it's not a perfect world, you have to go through, you have to test things, not everything works right away, you step out and risk a few things that aren't going to work right. But to get somewhere you've got to get out of that comfort zone so you've done that. When you do figure things out, not just the things that work, but what didn't work, then I think we have a desire to help other people. When you take something you've learned in life, real lessons, and you can take that and then you start to teach that to other people. You take that IP, that intellectual of your actual practice doing what you do and you teach other people, you become stronger at doing it, and what I also noticed is of course you incorporate your entire team, that's your leadership and culture.

David Phelps: Your team is proud of who you all are, how you serve, the things you've gone through. It's like a fraternity. You went through some hazing together did you not? You're stronger as a team and they love to follow your lead and teach other people, so when you have people come to your office for over the shoulder programs I know you've done over the years, or now you've got your practice growth club. They love to be a part of that as well. In teaching what you learn it makes you stronger at what you do, it makes you better because you have to always



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aspire to improve what you've already setup and I think that's what we both learned.

Chris Griffin: Yeah and so a continuation of the journey. Then after we met I was really doing a lot of high volume stuff, and then about three or four years ago I don't know if any of your clients have noticed this but man, insurance companies got real ornery. It's the worst I've ever seen. I thought I could make a living working with these guys and they've gotten tough to work with, it's really bad out there. Recently, last couple three years we decided to start dropping some PPOs and to replace it we built up an in-office membership and so that's been a real Godsend for us because now we've got a nice pool, we got a 600 and some odd members at our practice.

Chris Griffin: Now Ripley population's just 6,000 so to be a member you have to have no insurance, so we've got 600 and something members and those people are fee for service. That's allowed us to go back and now, I call it the big three. We're big into orthodontics, implants, and sleep. We're able now to do a lot of those big cases with that stuff with our members and other people we're not victims to the PPOs doing that kind of stuff. It's been a real journey and I guess if you stay in any profession long enough you're going to have to figure out ways to navigate things but that's what we've done.

David Phelps: For a lot of dentists it's a scary thing for them to think about, dropping PPO plans because it keeps them busy. It keeps them busy but busy doesn't mean profitable does it? And working long hours doesn't make you profitable. As you went from busy, efficient, certainly making money back in the day with companies, but wanted to get tighter,



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more efficient, take on bigger cases Chris, what did you cut out? Five days, three days, did you have to cut patients out to do that? You talk about cutting some insurance companies out more recently. What did you cut out?

Chris Griffin: As our membership has grown we've dropped... We got a whole strategy. Looking at your bookcase you've probably got the Rockefeller Habits up there somewhere.

David Phelps: Right.

Chris Griffin: All right, so every quarter we have a goal of how many members we want to have and we keep track of it, whatever the theme is that quarter and then at the end of the quarter we'll have a big party if we've hit our goal. Last quarter I took everybody to Germantown Day Spa and then we went to eat at a steakhouse. I mean stuff like that, and so that's allowed us, the team, to focus on growing the membership. Then we've dropped PPOs as we've grown. We get every 50 to 100 members we drop another PPO. When I get to 1,000 members I'll be PPO free except for Delta Dental and we'll see what happens with those guys. I've got 2,500 Delta Dental patients so I may have to consult with some people smarter than me to figure out how to unclaw myself from those folks, but everybody else will be gone.

Chris Griffin: It's fine, as long as you have a manageable number of PPOs it's fine. I don't dislike working with those patients, it's just you can't afford to have a completely PPO practice and have a good profit margin. You'll kill yourself. You'll think, "Oh I can do it now," and then the next thing you know you have labor and surgery, you have carpal tunnel surgery, you have tennis elbow, something. Your

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body will not allow you to do it forever. Anyway, that's what I thought. I'm 46 now. That was strategic on my part, so I thought I better get out while the gettings good. That's what we did.

David Phelps: You mentioned having measureables and I know that's a bit part of who you are. You can't improve what you don't measure so you've got your team focused on certain metrics, certain numbers. In this case how many members in the membership club. I know you got other ones as well. How critical do you think that is for any practice, any business to have certain measureables? We talk about leading indicators, lagging indicators, how important is that to making decisions that a business owner, a dentist wants to impart? If you don't have measureables then it's going to be really hard to get there so talk a little bit about how you've used those.

Chris Griffin: Well so I'm a big numbers guy. I used to be in engineering school but here's the thing. I also at one time I had what I called a war room and we had, I kid you not, I had my staff keeping up with 46 different statistics that they would draw in pencil on a graph paper and put in these clear things to put on the walls, and so we'd have our meetings in there and we'd look around at all the measureables and try to make good decisions. It was okay. As time's gone on and I decided not to go for a big DSO type practice and I wanted to shrink back and have more quality high dollar cases, we really have a smaller team. When you have a smaller team you can have better people. When you have better people you don't need as much management.

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Chris Griffin: I've dialed that way back. Now I only have two team leaders. We have about 10 numbers we look at. I couldn't name all 10 unless you put the sheet of paper in front of my face, but we have about 10 numbers. We go over some of them daily and some of them weekly, and then for the rest of the team they have the big quarterly goal that everybody's focused on. This quarter it's members, members, members. Next quarter it may be hygiene visits. I don't know what it is but we're picking a theme for a quarter and we're sticking to it and that's all we care about for that quarter as far as the team's considered. Of course me and my team leaders care about all of them, but as far as the whole team we're focused on one thing.

Chris Griffin: One of the biggest problems for any practice, I don't care who you are, is implementing new ideas. We are big on implementation around here so I went and studied real, real hard. I studied Apple, I studied Microsoft, the way that they did things and I sort of took... and I'm lucky in that one of my college roommates is the CEO and big percentage owner of a publicly traded oil company. He is very wealthy individual, he's killed me. If all you care about is the scoreboard of money you got me buddy, there's no doubt about it. But I've gone and visited him and like a big company, they incorporate a lot of the same techniques I was reading about with Apple and Microsoft. If you have a small team and you can come up with an objective and take it and break the objective down into little bitty tasks and assign tasks to individuals and then have one person manage the movement of that task through a workflow, sounds confusing. It's not as confusing I'm trying to make it sound. But if you can do that you can get a lot accomplished at the end of the day.

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Chris Griffin: I coined it the Silicon Valley Bonus System because we have implementation projects and as those projects get accomplished by the team members, we reward them with bonuses, money, and other stuff. We actually discarded our big production collection team bonuses we had done forever in lieu of an implementation bonus system where now, they get a bonus for implementing this, well guess what? Now I have to pick another task for them to take forward. Just recently we wanted to incorporate a new sleep appliance. Well somebody had to take charge. I'm not going to do all the paperwork and research to make sure we can deliver one of those, but we had a couple staff members that took it and at the end of the day, once it was accomplished, they got rewarded.

Chris Griffin: It's anything you want to do in the practice that's what we do now to move things forward. As far as the measureables it's really me and two team leaders looking at that.

David Phelps: You're empowering different members of your team with these objectives, with the implementation goals. You try to make sure everybody gets a chance to participate in something, some objective right?

Chris Griffin: Absolutely, even the hygienist.

David Phelps: There's no hygienists listening to this so you're safe. No there probably are, I hope there are some. Because you have embellished great leadership and empowering a team. I love the decision you talked about making, and again this is not right for everybody, but when you looked at the DSO model some years ago, the multiple practices and you saw your friend who had these 25 or 27 practices in but how hard he was working and you made a very

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concerted decision that you were actually going to go the opposite direction. That's the way I look at things too. I like working with a smaller team of highly valued people, you don't have all this management you have to deal with, and I personally think you can have a better quality of life.

David Phelps: But again, that's going to be for each individual to decide but I think the bigger is always better is not a mantra that you can hang a hat on. In fact I think more people that go that direction regret it and actually turn back the other way. Not everybody but most people do. Would you agree in your years of working with other dentists?

Chris Griffin: Yes I have. Now the problem is they won't admit it publicly. Sometimes in a private setting you're sitting around at a hotel after a conference. They might say, "Man, I so..." I've heard this before, "Man I envy you not having to deal with all this headache." I'm like, "But you're making a lot more money than I am," and he's like, "Yeah, but man I don't know if it's worth it." I've had that conversation a dozen times in the last few years. It's great, if you need to make some money and cash out and you're a smart dude or a gal, whatever, you can do it. There's no doubt about it.

Chris Griffin: But I want to practice until maybe I'm 75. That's my goal at least, and I like dentistry. If I don't want to quit dentistry I didn't see any point in pushing myself that hard. I felt like I needed to pace myself. It is sad that some people have fallen victim. There are people out there that promote the corporate model like this is the only way you can make money in dentistry, and then they get into it and David it's not that easy to jump back out because then you've acquired a lot of debt possibly, you've got a lot of mouths

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to feed, you want to have those conversations about cutbacks all the time?

Chris Griffin: Good grief, one of the things that changed my mind, the guy in Louisville told me that one day he came home from work, and he still worked two days a week been managing all those practices. He came home from work and he turned on the TV. The local news had one of his clinics on the news with one of his best friends who was an associate doctor being perp walked out of the building because he had written 2,000 opioid prescriptions or something crazy. I was like, "My goodness." I don't want any part of having to have that many irons in the fire.

David Phelps: Growing bigger has complexity and complexity definitely has it's down side. Yeah, I think the message here is be aware of what you may be walking into before you walk in and get too deep into any particular growth model.

Chris Griffin: Do your research.

David Phelps: Do research, yeah. Get the real story, don't listen to social media because in social media world everything's good, everything's great.

Chris Griffin: Have you noticed? The only people on Facebook are amazing dentists. I feel so insecure, inadequate when I go on Facebook. It's like, "Wow, that's amazing." Then when I go to a dental meeting people are telling me numbers that are maybe a third of what I see on Facebook so I don't know who's right. Maybe it's where I'm going to meetings at.

David Phelps: Yeah, got to change your environment Chris. You need to get with the real winners.

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Chris Griffin: I know, I know.

David Phelps: For you, associate, do you have an associate? Consider an associate? Where does that fall into play for you in any particular time or does it?

Chris Griffin: Listen, so here's the deal. I agree, I need an associate. There's no doubt about it. It would monetarily make sense. I probably need the help covering the clinic on the weekends when I don't work and stuff. But I've learned, I had what I would consider one of the greatest associates you could have for about a year and a half and she was amazing. She was smart, she was funny, she was great with kids. I hate doing kids fillings anyway. I hate doing chrome crown, I don't want to do that. She did all the kids, she did a lot of the fillings. At the end of the day, even as great as she was, it turns out that I must have such a problem in my brain, I mean I have to have things my way so much and I have to call all the shots for some crazy reason. It bothers me, even though I was super nice and polite to her it would hurt me inside because I was not being able to make decisions exactly like I wanted to.

Chris Griffin: It wasn't because I wasn't the boss. It was because I'm sitting here trying to make decisions to make her life better. In the meantime it's making my life worse. The dynamic didn't work for me. I don't know if I'll ever have an associate. None of my kids want to be a dentist at this point, so unless I practice long enough to have a grandkid it's probably not going to happen. We'll see, who knows what the future holds but right now I like it the way I've got it.

David Phelps: You have to live the life that you want and that fits for you. That's what it comes down to, and again I think too many

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people watch through other people's eyes what they think is working for them, and as you said many times, those aren't true stories and they run down that road and they're in the same place. It's like, "Why did I do this?" Nothing's magic, there's always a cost to everything. The cost of doing something, the cost of not doing something. It's not right or wrong, you've got to be able to weigh those out and be real to yourself and decide what you want in your life. I think that's the key to everything.

David Phelps: Chris, in your opinion what's the number one way you can protect your practice, independence, and grow bigger fee for service cases? Did we allude to that a little bit or is there-

Chris Griffin: A little bit. I really think if you haven't already built an in-office membership in some way, shape, or form go do that. That's an instant pool of automatic fee for service patients, it's a no brainer. David I don't know if you know any dentists or not but they're a little different. People that in my membership I teach them how to build a membership. You get questions like, "But my hygienists are on commission. How are they going to get paid if somebody's paying a monthly fee and it's not?" I'm like, "Okay, well there's a way. You can come up with a number in your software and let them still get the commission. Whatever's fair, what you think is fair." I've heard, "Well gosh, if they're fee for service already why would I give them a discount to be a member?" I'm like, "You control your fee one fees, so if you feel like you need to you can raise fee one a little bit. It's your practice."

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Chris Griffin: Dentists will come up with a million reasons not to do something. Well let me tell you man, having over \$10,000 a month in membership fees before I pick up the drill is not a bad thing, and having people that I know are coming into the practice so I can look at their teeth is not a bad thing. I don't see how you can function in a PPO dominated world without some safe harbor. The safe harbor that you know that these are my folks. I encourage everybody to do that.

David Phelps: Really, really good tips, good insights Chris. All right well listen, we covered some good ground today and I think really dispelled a lot of the myths, a lot of the myths and misinformation about what you can, should, can't do. Look, everybody's got self-limiting beliefs. We all do and I think it's really important that every dentist or entrepreneur listening to this today you take some advice, you take some insight from you and don't take no or you can't for an answer.

David Phelps: If you want to do something, if you want to create a practice, a lifestyle that you want then there's a way for you do it. Somebody else has done it. Find that person, find those people, change your environment because changing your environment will change the way you think, what you believe, and that will change your actions, what you will be willing to do and try and not be afraid of something not working perfectly because everybody on Facebook says your an idiot or something for trying it. Be true to yourself is really what I would say, right?

Chris Griffin: Absolutely. Hey, there's a million ways you can practice dentistry. That's one of the reasons I love the profession, that's one of the reasons I love it. You can find a way that

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suits you. Don't throw your degree away because you're unhappy doing what you're doing now.

David Phelps: Best way to connect with you, follow up, glean some more of your knowledge and expertise and experience. What's the best way?

Chris Griffin: I have all my podcasts and stuff at drchrisgriffin.com, drchrisgriffin.com. We talked about that team implementation bonus system, there's a book right here. If you guys are interested in this book that explains pretty much how to do the whole things. You can go to dentalbonusbook.com, you get it for shipping and handling, it's \$4.95.

David Phelps: We'll put that in the show notes as well. Dr. Chris Griffin it is always a pleasure. I love connecting with you whether we do it virtually or we get to do it in person.

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