The Solution

by Benjamin Lund, Editor,
Dentaltown Magazine
Kuraray revolutionized aesthetic dentistry 30 years ago, and continues to evolve as it solves problems, not only in dentistry, but the world over.

Ask a dentist if he or she is familiar with Kuraray and you might see a shrug or a nod here or there, but the typical response is an overwhelming “no.” Perhaps it’s because the name “Kuraray” doesn’t quite roll off the tongue, or perhaps it’s because Kuraray has focused much of its marketing efforts on the branding of its products – not the company itself. Kuraray’s own research indicates that most dental professionals have very low recall and awareness of the company, but they’re very familiar with its products. Most dentists have heard of Kuraray’s Clearfil and Panavia brand names before, and while those products are representative of Kuraray, they are just the tip of the iceberg.

Kuraray is actually a specialty chemical company – primarily interested in the development of different kinds of polymers – with an annual revenue of $3.3 billion, and employs more than 8,000 people – 200 of whom work in the United States. Originally named Kurashiki Kenshoku Co., the company was first established in 1926 in Kurashiki, Japan, as a rayon fiber manufacturer (the company eventually changed its name to Kuraray, a combination of “Kurashiki” and “rayon”). Following World War II, the company became Japan’s first domestic producer of synthetic fiber, and a world leader in the commercialization of pival fiber under the Kuralon brand. Since the 1950s, Kuraray branched out into several new business ventures including contact lenses, artificial organs, medical materials, EVAL – a gas barrier resin, a non-woven fabric business, and in 1978 it started a dental business and introduced the dental adhesive system Clearfil Bond System F.

Thirty years ago, when the goal of dentists and patients alike aimed more for functionality rather than aesthetics, along came Clearfil Bond System F, the first total-etch bonding system with a phosphate monomer – and almost immediately, bonding and adhesive dentistry hit the stratosphere. Suddenly there became a new change in focus and the doors to cosmetic dentistry swung wide open. The dentistry of yesterday that was driven by fixing broken or painful teeth gave way to aesthetic dentistry and a new breed of consumers who not only required function, but also natural, beautiful smiles. Kuraray quickly focused its efforts on what would be good for dentists’ bottom lines, and also what would be good for the patients.

"Kuraray is connected to all things new for business, using pioneering technology and contribution to improve the natural environment and the quality of life," says Kuraray America, Inc. Dental Division General Manager Koji Nishida. “That is our corporate mission.”

continued on page 30
Fulfilling the Mission

Kuraray is a “big picture” company. The same polymers that are developed for contact lenses or kidney dialysis filters are then translated to create solutions for dental materials, adhesives, composite resins and more. “The strength of Kuraray is its development of unique proprietary and eventually copied products,” says Kuraray Senior Executive Advisor Michael R. Razzano, D.D.S.

Kuraray looks at where its technology and products best fit certain needs, implements them, and then continuously develops new solutions to improve upon them. If you’ve strolled around in an electronics store within the last five years, you’ve likely noticed the dramatic changes in big-screen televisions. The colors are more vivid and lifelike – almost like you can reach through your screen and touch what’s on the other side. Kuraray helped develop that technology and made some of the polymers in some of the screens of those televisions. The same polymers in those TVs were used in tightening up the development of its new Majesty Esthetic direct restorative that uses technology Kuraray has used in other areas. With this new restorative product, restorations will be more lifelike because of the special light and color properties of the material. Also, due to the strength of the material, it’s going to last longer, according to Razzano.

Kuraray also offers a number of bonding agents, and each one fills a unique purpose: Clearfil SE Bond is two-step. Of self-etching systems, it has more than 62 percent market share, according to Nishida.

“There are some dentists who would prefer a product that could be used in one step and one component,” says Razzano. “So Kuraray developed a sister product for that, the Clearfil S1 Bond, which is a single-component single-bottle system that is typically used on pedo patients or to minimize or eliminate root-surface sensitivity because it is quick for dentists to use. Clearfil S1 Bond has the same self-etching technology that Clearfil SE Bond has. Now, in addition to the Clearfil S1 Bond, Kuraray has an FDA-approved product called Clearfil Protect Bond. Clearfil Protect Bond is another sister product of Clearfil SE Bond, which includes an antibacterial cavity cleansing component and a fluoride release component. And then there has been a call from dentists for dual cure bonding. Clearfil SE Bond is a light-cure self-etching system, but there has been a market request for a dual cure; consequently we have the Clearfil DC Bond.”

When a company offers several versions of the same type of product, one of the drawbacks is that its customers aren’t sure which type is the best for them to use. Kuraray under-
stands that there is an incredible amount of confusion when it comes time for dentists to decide which products would be best suited for certain procedures. Up until recently, dentists were left to decide for themselves. Now Kuraray is making it easier by developing an adhesive bonding guide that presents a simplified way of looking at which bonding agents dentists should use in certain procedures. “You might be familiar with the cementation guide that Kuraray developed that addressed which cements dentists should use where,” says Razzano. “The cementation guide is a booklet written by university professors and clinicians explaining what cements dentists should use for certain procedures. We’re developing the same type of tool for bonding agents.”

The Marketing Challenge

It’s safe to say most dentists are committed to providing the best dentistry they can, and when they find a product that works and fits their needs, they typically don’t stray. “Whether it’s cements, bonding agents or direct restoratives, it’s very difficult for a dentist to change in any of those areas,” says Razzano. “The marketing challenge is in trying to figure out how you answer that and above all, in educating each individual dentist.” Kuraray’s strategy is to market directly to the individual dentist — particularly through continuing education. It’s through this education that Kuraray can identify dentists’ needs and then help dentists make decisions on what is best to solve problems and treat patients.

“We developed self-etching because there was a definite need for dentists and patients alike to alleviate post-operative sensitivity,” says Nishida. “Those fillings hurt! It was bad for the patient and bad for the dentist. Once the self-etching adhesive bonding systems were developed, Kuraray made it a goal to educate the entire dental profession about them.” What resulted was a 62 percent market share in the use of Clearfil SE Bond. But now, even with a majority share in adhesives, Kuraray is applying the strengths of new products like the Clearfil Majesty Esthetic toward the development of even newer adhesives.

For 30 years, the impact Kuraray has had on dentistry is nothing short of remarkable. With every passing day, the company continues to evolve itself and the products it develops for dentists and patients to address the growing need for dental aesthetics, while maintaining high strength and functionality.