It’s a new year, but I’m ringing it in with an old message, one that I’ve hammered on from time to time, and one that keeps needing to be hammered until we all finally get it.

Everyone who focuses on practice management (I’m talking about consultants, business gurus, office managers and even practice-management software providers) says dentists who own their own practices spend way too much time on clinical dentistry and that they don’t spend enough time on the business of their practice.

Is that you? See if you can answer any of the following questions (without asking someone in your office):

• What was last year’s return on asset?
• What was last year’s return on equity?
• How many incoming calls did you have?
• What percentage of your calls went straight to voicemail?
• What percentage of your calls were answered in the first few rings?
• What percentage of cavities you diagnosed last month were scheduled to be done? How many got done?

Ask a dentist any of those questions or any question pertaining to the business of his or her practice and you know what? Most of the time they have absolutely no idea. These are questions you need to know the answers to!

You got As in calculus, physics, chemistry and biology and you consider yourself to be a good dentist. But I could stroll into your practice, jump on whatever practice-management software you may or may not be using to its full potential, run a report and find out something like: for every 100 fillings this practice diagnoses, it’s only doing 38 of them. Would a fireman be considered a great fireman if he only put out one in three fires? Would the sheriff of your town be considered great if he only caught one in three criminals? Despite missed fillings you still might be a great dentist, but how great are you in business?

Some people are amazing at the business of our profession. After all, dentistry has its own billionaire. His name is Rick Workman. He’s the man behind Heartland Dental and he does everything you may or may not feel like doing. Rick has 600 offices, employs 1,000 dentists and 2,000 hygienists, and he hasn’t seen a patient or done clinical dentistry in more than 25 years. This is an example of corporate dentistry. Do you like corporate dentistry? Maybe not. Is corporate dentistry a threat to small practices? Sometimes, yes. Are corporate dentistry leaders paying a lot of attention to their businesses? Yes, and so should we.

On that note, take a look at Stephen Thorne from Pacific Dental Services. Steve spent so much time focusing on the time and money factors of running a dental practice that he didn’t even spend time going to dental school to learn how to practice dentistry. He thought it was easier to hire a dentist than become one. These men are success stories in the dental profession and they only focus on the business of a dental practice. I’m not saying that you should do everything the way they do it or that you shouldn’t care about being a super dentist—I’m saying you should be a strong business person too.
I’m a dentist and I’d rather pull four wisdom teeth than play golf any day of the week. I’d rather do a molar root canal than go water skiing. I love clinical dentistry. But, I don’t spend all my time doing clinical dentistry. What I often see in the profession is all the continuing education you take and that most hours of your day are spent focusing on clinical. And then you recite the same old story that, “Friday I’m only going to do a half-day and then Friday afternoon I’m going to do the business side of things, run reports, have a staff meeting and all that stuff.” But every single Friday at noon, what do you say? “I’m trashed, I’m exhausted, I had a rough week, I’m going to go hit some golf balls and I’m going to go to happy hour, and I’m going to go to lunch with my spouse.” Is that you?

You know what the definition of insanity is? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Why not make the business the first four hours on Monday? Think differently. Treat your practice differently. There are several leaders in dentistry who follow through on the business side of dentistry and have done things differently and are ultimate success stories.

My consultant friends all concur that half of the incoming calls coming into a dental practice come in when you’re not even open, and half the calls that come in when you’re open go straight to voicemail, and if you’re lucky, one in 10 leave a message. I don’t know too many dentists who track this stuff. Every consultant I know (even the consultants who work for practice management systems), tell me that when they visit an office, 85 percent of the reports have never been run. But even after you read this, you’re going to sign up for a course on doing root canals, and then you’re going to go on Dentaltown.com to find the ultimate bonding agent. That’s important, and I understand those motivations. After all, everyone knows what they’re good at.

However, it’s the truly successful people who can focus on the things they’re not so good at. The only reason you’re not good at something is because you’re not interested or you don’t spend enough time on it. Everybody knows that when you go to a concert and you watch a professional violinist perform, that person wasn’t born with a different brain—he or she probably just chose to play the violin four hours a day since childhood. And when you leave the concert that night, you don’t wake up the next morning and decide you’ll play the violin four hours a day. But you can decide to devote more time to your practice. If you’re not interested in the business, go find a support team, an office manager, someone who can focus on the business 24/7 so you can go back to doing what you love: clinical dentistry.

If you’re not interested in the business of your practice, you’re not going to work on it and you’re never going to be good at it. Doing things you’re not interested in for money usually leads to dysfunction, depression, disease, drinking or something else horrible. You should not get up every day and do something you don’t want to do all day long for money. That’s just a really bad idea. So if you truly don’t like this stuff, you need a right-hand man or woman and that’s going to be your office manager. And if you are interested in this stuff, then let’s move some clinical time over to the business time.

You know what, gang? It’s a new year, time to really turn over a new leaf and start focusing on the business of your practice in 2015. If you’re not going to focus on it yourself, at least hire help to make sure the doors to your office stay open a very long time.