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A lawyer who reads a book and doubles his income; a corner chemist's store that outperforms all other businesses and lessons to be learned from the demise of the home organ business. Stan Curtis pulls together these disparate strands.

It is often said that the British army always makes its future plans based upon re-fighting the last war or major operation. Actually that is not true of the generals who have mainly been open to new ideas but it is true of the civil servants at the Ministry of Defence or War Department, as it was previously and more correctly called. Indeed the same rigour seems to inflict any organisation which has existed in the same environment for too long; they look to the past, not the future. Nothing surprising about that since few and far between are the individuals who will clamber to the top of the greasy pole then declare that they are out of their depth; their experience is no longer relevant and they can't cope with the new world order. So it is that most of the world bumbles along; making it up as they go whilst fervently hoping that things will go back to how they were; back in the "good old days".

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It happened that some weeks ago I enjoyed a very pleasant dinner in Ocala with an American lawyer who proved to be far removed from the popular image of a shark in wolf's clothing. He told me how reading a book had transformed his thinking; caused him to "let go" half his senior staff; and resulted in a near doubling

of his company's earnings. Now people who know me well also know that I'm not too impressed with the majority of business "self help" books with their unremitting tendency to state the bleeding obvious. I probably come from the Yorkshire mill-owner school of management; a tendency towards the benevolent dictatorship style of Joseph Rowntree and his Victorian contemporaries. None the less I was impressed. American lawyers are amongst the richer members of society and if one of them could double his money he must certainly be doing something right.

According to the book "Good to Great" by Jim Collins; there are businesses out there which greatly exceed the average levels of performance and have done so for decades. Such companies consistently deliver high growth; high profits; indeed exceptional performance in every industry measure. Yet there is something odd about such business; the chances are you've never heard of them. The best performer of all is Walgreens; a chain of small pharmacy stores which you see all over the USA but which is hardly ever mentioned in the media. The secret of its success appears to be good yet modest leadership; a good team and following through on a simple concept without distractions.

Would this book's advice work for our hi-fi retailers? It seems that currently there are two schools of thought developing; the first being a view eloquently expounded by Ian Anderson in his BADA days; that a retailer should seize the high ground; offer only the best products at top dollar pricing whilst investing in good staff and providing a level of service and support that attracts the quality customer. And they should make no apologies for taking such a stance. The other approach is one increasingly promoted by some of

the more pressured retailers. A belief that competition from the super-markets and the internet-only retailers has fatally damaged the old High-Street business model and that the only way to go is to cut costs; offer minimal service and to reduce prices to the bone; a sort of hi-fi "Argos" store. The theory goes that the increased turnover resulting from the lower pricing will compensate for the lower margins. Inevitably some retailers find themselves somewhat betwixt and between these alternatives and have finished up offering reasonable service, lower prices and have been rewarded by achieving much the same turnover with severely reduced earnings.

Then there's the Third Way. Some years ago the electric organ industry was devastated by the arrival of cheap plastic keyboards and organ showrooms virtually disappeared from the High Street. Yet there is still a reasonably strong trade in these instruments but through what I might term, "organ boutiques". Small; usually one or two-men businesses housed in low-cost accommodation sometimes even converted farm buildings and always attractively furnished inside. The running costs are minimal whilst marketing is limited to word-of-mouth; the internet and the one or two specialist magazines. There is no passing trade with one or two customers visiting each day so each will receive a lot of undivided attention with plenty of hands-on "demonstration" time. The organs are sold at what was once called "full list price" albeit with generous part-exchange allowances. Now consider the same type of store handling half a dozen really high end A/V lines. Sell one good £30,000 hi-fi or home cinema system each month on full margin and you'll make a very good living without too much stress or investment. Just do the sums.

Three possible business models; so which is the one that will succeed? If you know the answer to that one perhaps you should write a book. It could be a more lucrative use of your time than trying to sell hi-fi.