

Stan's Safari 20

STAN LOOKS AT THE PROBLEMS FACED
BY ANYBODY THINKING OF STARTING
A HI-FI COMPANY FROM SCRATCH

One of the joys of the high-end audio industry is that anyone can have a go, given a garage or a kitchen table. And indeed many, many enthusiasts do have a go and turn up at shows in the less expensive rooms demonstrating their often eccentric interpretations of good audio engineering.

Some have a brief moment in the sun, grabbing attention like a late dragonfly, while others return year after year and, from personal experience, corner you to whisper confidentially that they've managed to suppress that annoying resonance at 7kHz so now they've achieved virtual perfection. And I love it perhaps because I've never taken this industry too seriously and somehow retain the dry humour of the Yorkshire pig farmer.

Indeed I still suppress a wry smile and nod sagely when one of these part-time designers claims kinship with: "Of course you and I know that ceramic capacitors screw up the sound". Hmm; well maybe not says the man whose designs must be notching up well over a million units sold (one of the major benefits of designing a few budget priced products). Yet in many ways these companies are the future of our industry; every so often, aided by supportive funding and a huge dollop of luck, one breaks free to reach a critical mass and achieve a degree of success and permanence.

But with a few exceptions such opportunities become harder every year and I fear that we will in future see fewer of these would be Peter Walkers because there are so many obstacles in their path. First there is the general state of the hi-fi business. As sales become harder to find, the number of active retailers reduces, and those remaining have well established product lines with existing manufacturers, often sharing personal relationships with the principals or

founders that go back many decades. And such established companies are often able and willing to offer generous credit terms; terms which in many cases are all that keep these shops functioning.

But our intrepid inventor nonetheless turns up with a pair of his unknown loudspeakers; explains that they outclass everything else in the store and: "Ah well this is a bit awkward but could I have payment up front as I'm a bit strapped for cash?" Is it a surprise that in almost every case they are politely shown the door? However, these days there is always the internet and unbelievably some designers do manage to sell products direct by offering 'money-back if not completely satisfied' deals.

The next obstacle that comes to mind is the one that afflicts all start-ups in the EU, but electronics companies more than most. I refer of course to the plethora of regulations. The advent of regulation began for me with the CE Directive on electrical safety of domestic products which brought in the ubiquitous CE mark.

Before that time electrical safety seemed to be an optional consideration for most hi-fi manufacturers. Most owned a tired, probably out-of-date copy of British Standard 415 which was fairly easy to comply with, and in truth nobody really cared if you didn't. The customer of the 1970s and 1980s was well used to amplifiers blowing up and tape recorders emitting burning smells, so

products were returned for service without a detour to the local legal aid office along the way. But in recent years there has been a steady increase in the number of regulations that small businesses and electronics manufacturers have to comply with. Now you can either be an expert on the regulations and compliance or you can be an expert on the design of amplifiers, but it's unlikely you can be an expert on both. Most small companies therefore do little more than make a gesture in the direction of the rules, on the basis of the knowledge they have gleaned from others in the industry or from that most accurate of sources, the internet. The alternative is to spend approaching five thousand pounds on copies of all the relevant British Standards, then giving up your weekends and holidays in order to read them.

Assuming you manage to comply with the many and sometimes contradictory regulations, you will eventually enter the next challenge: 'The Supply Chain'. Sad to say, these days you can no longer build leading edge products based upon parts bought from

the RS Components catalogue. Some specialist parts or integrated circuits are usually called for, and if you want to buy these at anything like a reasonable price you are introduced to that major stumbling block the 'Minimum Order Quantity'.

It goes something like this. You can buy that powerful new DSP chip at £120 for a one-off sample, but the production price of £6 is only available provided you order the minimum quantity of 2000 pieces.

Now you may be one of

those optimistic souls convinced that everyone will want to buy your new amplifier so it's worth taking a gamble so all you've got to do is raise an order. Credit? Forget it. In these days of credit insurance, only the bluest of blue-chip companies get a decent account rating. But no problem: that's why credit cards were invented. Except that many of the larger companies will only supply if you have an account, and you won't get that account without that perfect credit rating over many

If you doubt my words just read Gilbert Briggs's autobiography of how an itinerant fabric salesman working at his kitchen table created Wharfedale Loudspeakers