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As 2010 is the start of a new decade no doubt there will be many commentaries on the last miserable decade. It started with the dotcom down-turn, continued with the unspeakably dreadful destruction of New York's World Trade Centre, which in turn led to the shameful and ill thought out invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Nature also intervened with disasters such as the Indian Ocean Tsunami. Finally, we had the greatest financial melt-down anyone has ever seen, and chaotic failure in the Copenhagen "Climate Change" conference.

The human spirit is however, by nature, generally optimistic and as we look into the next year and decade we look forward and not back, we make plans for future projects, we try not dwell on past failures, we look forward to successes. That is not to say we do not learn from the past, unless, sadly, we are political animals. Thus it is with our business. Merger-Broking at the SME level is of course partly dependent on macro-economics but it is influenced, far more, by personal desires and plans. Few companies are second or third generation family businesses and even less beyond that. Family energies are eventually exhausted. Families move on; for example, the metal worker or paper delivery boy who creates a successful venture and then is able to educate the next generation to a higher level may find that, as the family's financial and intellectual fortunes develop, his progeny may have less and less interest in the family business. They become at one extreme, surgeons, lawyers, or other professionals and at the other sybaritic lotos-eaters. Whichever way they develop, their interest in the family business falters or may be extinguished.

Foresighted SME owners will see this state of affairs developing and take appropriate action to safeguard the business and the corps of employees for whom, even in this non-paternalistic epoch, they feel a sense of responsibility. Some firms are sold to MBO teams; some to trade buyers for whom the sentimental aspect of the situation is minimal and others to financial acquirers be they private equity or indeed listed companies (generally AIM listed). This last option is often characterised by cash-and-shares transactions and may, for better or worse, result in the family continuing to have an interest in the business.

Even the best preparations for an eventual sale may however be turned upside down by external events. Over the last few months businesses we have been assisting have had their plans postponed, or otherwise complicated by external commercial factors or, a more vexatious turn of events. External commercial factors (such as late-running manufacturing programmes) are an understandable element in the cut and thrust of business; Government regulation or the threat of Government regulation is an unwelcome and invariably unhelpful element. Indeed such regulation often fails to control the very matter it was intended to control, simply spawning further bureaucracy. So, on top of the complex and psychologically uncomfortable process of selling a privately-owned business, one can be faced with the added nuisance factor generated by politicians. A year or two ago we counselled against planning an exit in anticipation of a break generated by a change in the tax regime. Our view remains unchanged. As the opportunity to sell under the best conditions comes but rarely, it should, in general, be pursued and completed without second thoughts about imponderable issues like tax or regulatory changes. Postponement runs the risk of not simply delaying the deal but possibly losing the entire opportunity. And who is to say what the future effect of new regulation (good or bad) might be?

We see 2010 as the year where, with a change in Government and where, despite the dismal state of the country's finances, opportunities will present themselves. We invite readers considering a sale to call us for a confidential, no obligation, conversation.