

## An old tonic for today's drugstores Customers who have quaffed the elixirs of health and happiness tend to return

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These are exciting times in the US pharmacy sector. To use a technical term, I would say the Joe Klein way is coming back into style. Klein, who died close to a dozen years ago in Florida at the age of 93, is hardly a household name in the US. In fact, the only reason I heard of him was because he was my mother's father. But I have covered global business for decades, and when I think of pharmacies, I think of Klein – proprietor of a drugstore in the New York City suburb of Pelham, just north of the Bronx, which still bears his name even though he sold it in the 1970s (he was that kind of guy). My grandfather was a hands-on, up-by-his-bootstraps product of the old school. I can remember him leaving family dinners so he could deliver medicine to the homes of sick customers. I can also still hear him holding court in his store – his manner somehow recalling both King Louis XIV of France and the comedian Milton Berle of the NBC television network. I couldn't help but think about Klein last week when I read that a big US pharmacy chain, CVS Caremark, was going to stop offering cigarettes and other tobacco products at its 7,600 stores – the rationale being that selling stuff that kills people isn't compatible with the business of making them well. Klein was never a big fan of the chains such as CVS. With their overwhelming economies of scale, these corporate behemoths crushed many of my grandfather's comrades – old-style pharmacists who knew their customer by sight. Yet CVS's decision on the tobacco question struck me as being straight out of my grandfather's playbook. I don't think I'm giving in to sentimentality or nostalgia when I say that his business model was never based on pushing as much product as he could at any given time (I still hesitate to take drugs, for example, because he worried so much about the perils of overmedication). My grandfather's underlying goal was to keep his customers healthy (overmedication). My grandfather's underlying goal was to keep his customers healthy enough so that they would come back to his store. This benefited his bottom line – which was important because he liked to drive big American cars – and provided him with an audience to listen to all the bad jokes he learnt from the travelling salesmen with whom he regularly bantered. I somehow doubt the folks at CVS will ever enjoy serving the public quite as much as Klein did. I'm a CVS customer myself and I would describe the ambience at my local branch as bordering on funereal. But if CVS decides to go for the full Joe Klein approach, I would suggest they speak first to a rising star on the local pharmacy scene who relates to his customers today in the fashion of my grandfather. He is Stanley George, 40, owner of Stanley's, a pharmacy and "wellness bar" that fills prescriptions while offering coffees, teas, elixirs, tonics and homemade sodas on an otherwise forlorn corner of Manhattan's Lower East Side. Like my grandfather, Mr George is a first-generation American, only his parents came from the Indian state of Kerala (rather than Bialystok, Poland). He also shares my grandfather's theatrical tendencies, having played bass in several rock bands. Most importantly, Mr George shares my grandfather's concern with the customer's mental health. Klein knew nothing of the eastern remedies or the ambient New Age music that Mr George likes. But my grandfather would have been tickled by the soda fountain that Mr George had. Klein had one, too, back in the days when they were standard equipment for US pharmacies. "I felt that pharmacies had gone so far away from their roots that I needed to bring that back," Mr George told me. "I love to engage people – crack jokes and sing to them even, get to know them." Mr George served me two delicious sodas – a ginger concoction buttressed with citrus bitters, dandelion, gentian and burdock root to help with my digestion and liver toxicity, and a mint-flavoured drink with motherwort, rose extract and linden blossoms to make me calm and inspired. I drank both and smiled to myself. I had grown up on stories of my grandfather's soda fountain. But it was gone by the time I got to know his store in the 1960s – and it occurred to me that the first pharmacist to ever make me a soda was this downtown hipster with shaggy hair. I wondered if Klein would have been amused.