

# Tony Christiansen calls it a day

*One of the most familiar faces in the woodworking industry in New Zealand is calling it a day. Familiar to most in the North Island and many in the South, Tony Christiansen has been the face of Jacks in the showroom, at events, field days and exhibitions for many, many years. For the past twenty years alone Tony has been the Product Manager in the Trade Equipment division at Jacks, playing a key role in sourcing the most appropriate machinery for NZ's domestic joinery market.*

It was 1975 when Tony Christiansen started at Jacks Holme Street branch in Wellington, in a half showroom half warehouse role. "I remember I took a huge pay cut" says Tony, "but I was looking for a career. Home Street was the Head Office at the time, so it was a good place to learn about woodworking machinery." Eighteen months later Tony was moved to Hastings with a sales territory covering Gisborne to Taupo, central Hawkes Bay and down to Featherston.

The brand-names of the machines at the time are still well known on Trade Me: Dyco, Tanner, Mackenzie, Trojan and Evanson. Most were locally made, but with manufacturing mired in restrictions then customers could be faced with a two-year waiting list to get hold of a machine! "Local manufacturers were in a strong position, well protected from imports through licencing and high import tariffs. Effectively they had no competition. So there was no need to rush, and therefore the customer had to wait."

Jacks were selling brands such as SCM, Calpe, Codam, Onga, Omece, Weinig and Genini to NZ's busy furniture-making industry. With often just a few import licenses a year available to the industry's main players then second hand machinery was an extremely popular alternative to the hassles of buying new – if you could get your hands on something. "If it moved we bought it" says Tony. "The few technicians in the Company at the time were working in second hand machines."

During the 70s and 80s the life of a Jacks sales rep was very different to today. You could set your watch

by a rep's calling schedule, which usually worked on a six-week rotation. "7.30am on a Monday morning I'd be having a cup of tea with the funeral director in Wairoa" says Tony, discussing his Gisborne circuit. With Jacks offering a saw-doctor service, powertools, and consumables such as sandpaper and tooling, then a visit from the Jacks rep often provided much needed supplies. Service technicians were a rare thing back then too so sales rep was often called on to offer advice or assistance with problems or repairs.

As a Jacks sales rep Tony was often the primary source of information about new technology for a customer. "There was no such thing as going online" says Tony. "We were our customers' window on the world of new machines - and therefore opportunity. They'd almost always take the time to sit down and hear about what was new, and discuss how a new machine or technology could benefit their workshop."

After a few years in Hastings Tony moved to Palmerston North, where his two bedroom flat became the local Jacks office. "My front bedroom was the showroom, and 'warehousing' was scattered around. This was the era of the hugely popular TKU building site saw, and many a demo was run in that front room" he says. Tony's car was still fully stocked: "the Electra Beckum mitre saw was always in the car" he remembers. It was in Palmerston North that Tony met Sandra (on a badminton court), a local dental nurse. They were soon married, and Sandra has been a pillar of strength for Tony and their family ever since.

Around 1984 Tony moved to Auckland, and with the growth of CNC machinery became more involved in Product Management and became involved in establishing Morbidelli CNC machines in NZ. "Our service was far better than anyone else's so Morbidelli was soon top of the heap when it came to CNCs" he explains. Edgebanders and beamsaws were also gaining popularity, and it was around this time that Tony made his first trip to LIGNA, the woodworking industry's showcase of technology held every two years in Hanover, Germany. Since then Tony's been a regular traveller to Europe, helping to develop and maintain Jacks' relationships with supplier.

When Tony looks back at over 40 years at Jacks he can point to plenty of changes. "Our customers have changed as the industry has evolved" Tony says. "I remember how crucial the furniture industry used to be. We'd have customers running three Weinig moulders, Rye copy shapers, all sorts of technology, and all just to keep up with the domestic demand for furniture. Imports have certainly changed all that."

Communications have also changed beyond recognition. "Everything was done with letters when I started" says Tony. "Phones were of limited use, and we needed written permission from upstairs to make a toll call. You had to justify why you needed it because calling beyond the local area was an expensive business." Personal contact with customers was also less frequent, and on a different scale. "When I was on the road then most nights I'd be having dinner with a customer, often at their house" says Tony. "Smaller customers in particular were very loyal – we'd often be the only rep they'd see and at times we were the lifeblood of their business, putting urgent parts onto a Newmans bus or a local train."

The 70s and 80s were a more rough and ready time too. "Health and safety was nowhere near the factor it is today" says Tony. "When I called on a sawmill I'd often have to walk through knee deep mud through the log yard, into the shed and across the live deck to talk the owner who was often working in the headrig. There was no high vis back then so you had to have your wits about you."

When asked about what he'll miss, Tony thinks for awhile. "People, mainly" he says. "Although many have retired from the industry now. But I've met many of my best friends through working here. I'll also miss the thrill of a big sale – the adrenalin you share with a customer when they make that decision that's going to make such a big difference to their business. I think I'll also miss the feeling of satisfaction when you turn a customer from a competitor."

Such a feeling, a mixture of personal achievement and the associated success for the Company and its product offering, will not be entirely lost for Tony. While he's moving



*Top: Tony Christiansen at work at the Central Fielddays recently and a younger Tony in the Jacks Station Road branch circa 1970.*

out of Auckland and retiring from the industrial machinery market he's not hanging up is gloves just yet – instead taking up a role with Robertson and Sinclair. He'll be partly in the Hamilton showroom and partly calling on customers, including the network of resellers who distribute tooling, Lamello and Festool.

At Jacks, Tony will be sorely missed, but in his usual unstinting fashion he's made it clear he's always around if he's needed. And given his extraordinary length of service there will undoubtedly be times when he is!

