

Downside to tool bonanza

There's something mysterious going on with our local economy.

We hear constantly Taranaki is in the middle of a rare phenomenon, a double-downer in the dairy and oil/gas industries, so we've been bracing ourselves for the effects. Surely, any time soon, there will be widespread collateral closedowns and paralysis, most likely in that perennial indicator of things good and bad, the building industry.

But no. Despite the downturn, which is real enough - and in spite of the health and safety industry's best efforts to make building unnecessarily expensive - New Plymouth District Council continues to be overwhelmed by demands for land memorandum reports and building consents. You can't get a builder, a plumber or a sparky inside weeks, or months even.

Okay, you know all that stuff. Old news, eh. So let me alert you to something else that's happening, that's related to this, and that's both wonderful and shocking, and sometimes just bloody irritating.

I have no formal evidence to prove what I'm about to tell you; I haven't seen anything on the business pages about it; there's been no government pronouncements, nor political posturing. No pressure groups waving banners in the streets.

But I do have incontrovertible evidence of another kind - it's right there on the shelves of our hardware stores, places that are so attractive to unreformed do-it-yourselfers (those of us undeterred by new rules that ban tradies from working on ladders).

It's cheap tools. Insanely cheap tools.

Consider this. When I bought my first top-of-the-line cordless drill a decade ago (can't mention the brand here) it cost about \$600 and had twin 12-volt batteries the size of small suitcases that had to be replaced every couple of years.

The other day I spotted the same brand with a twin pack of drill and impact screwdriver, and two tiny 18-volt batteries, priced at an unbelievable \$240. I bought it, of course. And while there I grabbed a new fold-up workbench for a ridiculously cheap \$42.

The tool shops are chocker with such bargains, items so inexpensive that you have to wonder whether we have become the dumping ground for overseas manufacturing industries that are vastly over-producing.

The low prices are a godsend for those captured by any sort of home improvement gig, and judging by the queues at the big outlets, there's still plenty of us around.

So that's the wonderful side. But here's the annoying side. While the drill and its companion have so far performed admirably, the workbench became a saga. Aside from being made of

metal so thin you could use it to carve a roast, the winder on one side had some kind of deformity. It broke almost at once.

I painstakingly dis-assembled it (assembly took an even more pain-filled hour or three, given the incomprehensible instructions; but that's another story), got everything back in the box and returned it. No problem, said the shop attendant, just grab another. I did. Assembly was quicker, but the same problem emerged.

I dis-assembled again, packed again, went back, was given a third. Same thing happened. I didn't bother with dis-assembly or repacking that time. I just took it back a shade grumpily and got a refund. The attendant expressed surprise. This had never happened before, she said.

I still needed a workbench, so I went to another outlet. Their model was twice the price, but I was in no position to argue. Imagine the surprise when I discovered it was exactly the same product, rebranded with another name. And, you guessed - it had the same winder problem. So, another return, another refund, the same disbelieving look on the shop person's face.

I tried a third outlet, which had a familiar brand. It was three times the price, which meant it had to be more reliable, surely. Ah no...it had a similar problem. Back we go for a replacement. Number six workbench has been fine. So far.

What can be learned from this hilarious-but-vexatious experience?

That the apparent bonanza of el cheapo consumer goods has its obvious downside, and while we may be doing our bit for various free trade agreements every time we buy a \$9 desk lamp or a \$59 wifi-capable printer-scanner (whose replacement ink cartridges cost more than the machine itself), in the end we're probably just hastening the day the Colson Rd rubbish dump fills up, thus incurring a lot of extra civic debt before its time.