

What's a Product Life Cycle Anyway?

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I was thinking about product life cycles recently. For example, it is reported that the life cycle for a Windows computer is between 3 and 6 months. After that, it is generally replaced by a newer machine that is some combination of cheaper, faster, thinner or lighter weight, etc. Intel, I know, assumes chip architectures and manufacturing technologies are leading edge for 18-24 months, then they're not. In many companies, product life cycle management or PLM to those on the inside (development - introduction – growth - maturity – decline) is a designated discipline.

In my case, my thoughts were provoked by my looking for a particular non-mobile shop tool and perusing some of the customer reviews posted on various sites. Nice that people will do that. I observed some of the reviews for the very same tool I was considering were written ten years earlier. Wow, what a contrast to the electronics market. Then I remembered when Powermatic introduced a new line of table saws, the PM series, a few years ago to replace the PM66. The PM66 was aptly named because it was introduced in 1966 – check it out. Other research led me to a September, 2009 article in FWW, which noted, “The Delta Unisaw, a 10-in. cabinet saw, was introduced more than 70 years ago. Many woodworkers would argue that for most of those seven decades, it was the gold standard against which all other cabinet saws were judged. Over that time, the Unisaw remained essentially the same. Now, perhaps prompted by a 2008 regulation from Underwriters Laboratories (UL) that requires manufacturers to include a riving knife on all new saws by 2014, Delta has introduced a completely new model.” Lastly, I recently purchased a Dewalt 735 planer on sale, but noted that the product was reviewed in April 2008, if not earlier.

So, if nothing else, I came to recognize that product life cycles in my hobby industry (woodworking) look nothing like the cycles in my professional life (high tech). So be it. I guess power tools would fall into the general category of industrial goods (long cycle) and not consumer goods (short cycle). This is probably second nature to any experienced woodworkers who fear not that a purchase they make this week will be obsolete by next week. In fact, many have opined that “they don't make them like they used to” and the old USA-made power tools continue to have a viable life because so many of the newer tools are made elsewhere at far lower quality levels. Hats off to the old days!