

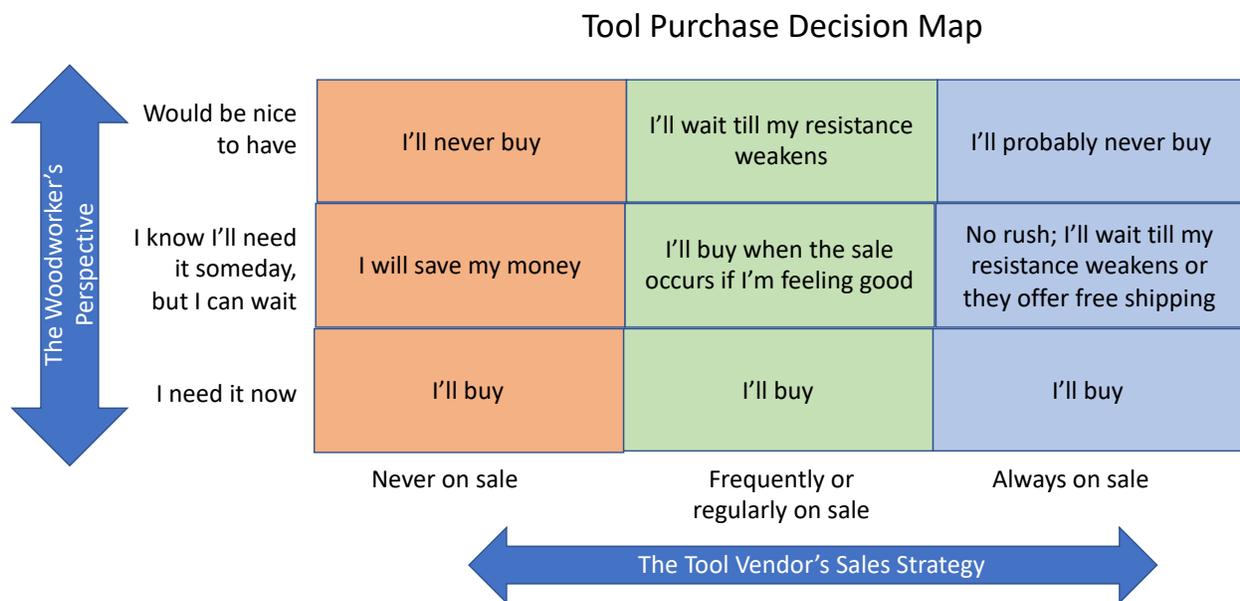
Bevel Cut June, 2006
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Tool Shopping

I've always been interested in the business side of things, and as someone who receives more than five email offers a day to purchase some type of tool or woodworking supply item, it quickly becomes apparent that there are different schools of thought in play by the various manufacturer and retailers. In business school I learned that if you can't define a market, industry, or problem in a 2x2 array, then you haven't thought hard enough.

I tried my best to sketch the purchasing decision for woodworking tools into such a scheme, but the best I could come up with is actually a 3x3 matrix. Let me know if this diagram makes sense to you. It is based on my own experience and observations.

I classify vendor sales strategies in three buckets.



The product never goes on sale: Festool is the prime example. Festool's only exception seems to be for discontinued items. I think Leigh, Oneida, Tormek, fall in this category as well. The tipoff is when you get a 15%-off-any-item coupon with an asterisk listing the exceptions – those vendors don't allow discounts. It always amazes me that companies can control their sales channels and thereby maintain list pricing – some would argue that it violates anti-trust laws, but I will leave that to the lawyers in the guild. One side effect of this: if every retailer sells the product for the same price, you might as well find one who offers free shipping and no sales tax – looking on-line and out-of-state can lead to a significant savings.

The product is frequently (or regularly) on sale: Laguna, Powermatic, Jet 15% sales – is it my imagination or do these sales occur with each new moon? Somewhere in the middle comes Sawstop – while the saws themselves never go on sale, the company runs a special offer once a year where you can buy a saw and get a free accessory such as a mobile kit. Knowing this was coming, I waited about 6 months to buy my Sawstop (I had a Rigid contractor saw that I later sold). Sojberg seems to have a similar strategy for its benches. I’ve watched them bundle in a free cabinet with their Elite 2000 (too long for my shop) and Scandi Plus 1425 (not heavy enough) benches for no additional cost over the price of the bench; I am still waiting for a similar package on the Elite 1500, in which case I might weaken. Some drawer slides, chisels, and router bits fit this category as well.

The product is always on sale: The penultimate examples here would seem to be a zillion items from Rockler and Harbor Freight. The number of products that fit this category is too large to name, but the list would include bench cookies, box joint and spline jigs, dust connectors, hoses, and separators, glue brushes, some drill bits.

From the customer’s perspective, the purchase of woodworking tools (or supplies) can be viewed in three categories:

I need it now: This is how I bought my table saw and bandsaw. I needed them to get started on projects. Later purchases included a track saw for cutting up sheet goods (I know this can be done with a circular saw, but truth be told I have found the track saw to be one of my prized, useful possessions – trimming doors, slabs, etc.

I know I’ll need it someday, but given the frequency of different vendor offerings, I’ll wait till it goes on sale: In a pinch, I will call a retailer and ask if and when the sale might be coming. I’ve also constructed searches on Craigslist Boston and Cape Cod and even Philadelphia. If you think you might want a gizmo, but you are not in a hurry and will buy only if the price is right, Craigslist is the place to shop.

Would be nice to have. I don’t know if I’ll really need this tool or supply, but if I see a good sale price or a random Craigslist posting, I often weaken. This is a particularly high-risk situation for me since I get so many emails promoting the “special of the day” or “deal of the week.” I often think there should be a woodworker’s anonymous organization to help people like me, perhaps with a ten-step program.

And of course there is always a fourth category: yard sales

Aside: A shout-out to Ken Zoller, the only guild member to notice that I had inverted the golden ratio equation to give an impossible result in last month’s Bevel Cut. What does that say about me – perhaps I shouldn’t do math via Microsoft Word or shouldn’t write articles while the vodka bottle is nearby; and what does that say about Ken?