

# Business Extra

## It's quality down to the last

Who knew? Japanese celebrities are helping keep people in work in Whangarei.

An astute business move a couple of years ago saw Neville Brunker of 50-year old Lastrite Footwear acquire a small Christchurch footwear company with a client list which included a Japanese contract to supply traditionally-made leather shoes to a top-end market.

The acquisition was mostly about netting the overseas contract but also served to stop rival companies from scooping up the footwear company.

Neville Brunker says the Japanese company has an up-market clientele in the Japanese retail industry looking for durable, double-soled dress boots with a street look.

Lastrite now supplied between 1000 and 1500 pairs of boots a year to the client's shops in Japan, with the prospect of increased orders going through to the United States. Forty sample pairs are going to the US through the same Japanese company, which sends a representative to Whangarei twice a year to discuss new designs, colour changes and innovation in boot uppers.

The high New Zealand dollar has not been a problem, he says.

"As soon as the boots leave us they become the responsibility of the client and we get paid in New Zealand dollars . . . so the great thing is I don't have to worry about what the dollar is doing otherwise it would be a bit of a nightmare."

Samples had also been prepared for an American living in Auckland — "he's a man with a passion for hand-crafted manufactured footwear who feels there is a niche market out there for quality men's fashion boots". This client was supplying his own patterns and lasts; Lastrite would make the boots on a contract basis.

Neville Brunker says he has quite a few ideas to develop within the traditional processes, and has already redesigned some old patterns and added some innovative features to create a boutique range for the New Zealand market.

"Multiple designs can be de-



**BOOT BUSINESS:** Whangarei business Lastrite, owned and operated by the Brunker family for 50 years, is still using lasts which go back to the earliest days of trading.

veloped off each last . . . it can cost about \$10,000 to change patterns and lasts and we need to play to our strengths anyway. You have to stick to your point of difference," he says.

He says the business has changed continually to adapt to changing demand. When he joined his father Jack in the business in 1973 Lastrite specialised in a wide range of boots for all work sectors but was also producing golf shoes which were sold around the country, and had started making jandals. Golf shoes have been discontinued but the company does a steady trade in school sandals, and recently began making orthotic-style sandals in colourful leathers.

A major client was the Pilkington glassworks in Port Rd (now the site of the Okara Shopping Centre). When Pilkingtons

shut down, Lastrite was forced to downsize, and moved from Commerce St out to Onerahi. Then the company landed a contract for boots for the Rotorua forestry industry and got so busy it had to move back into town and take on more staff.

The firm still makes forestry boots but the peak years were 1997-2002.

Boots are still the mainstay of the business and the ranges now included dresswear boots for women in a variety of colours, sandals and casual jodhpur boots for men, work, tramping and farm boots. The firm sells direct from the retail shop/factory in John St and on-line, and at all the North Island field days.

He really believes farmers deserve good, durable, comfortable boots and has a strong clientele from the sheep and beef

sector, and horticulture (dairy farmers wear gumboots).

"They are the backbone of the country and don't deserve to have to buy crap which doesn't last," he says.

Space could become an issue if manufacturing increases.

Neville Brunker says there's room to expand out the front of the building and he'd like to incorporate some sort of public viewing area so the public could see traditional methods of making boots.

"Nobody knows about it these days."

He also feels it could be a small move towards keeping the central city retail area alive, and help connect the waterfront area with the inner city.

"At the moment there's total disconnect."

He says the Lastrite's newly-

redeveloped website is proving a huge asset and the overseas trade has so far been "awesome in hard times".

But he is not putting bets on the economy improving any time soon.

"I tend to think the country is going to bounce along the bottom for the next five to six years, with a few highs and lows along the way."

Neville Brunker says business survival will depend on

- maintaining the best quality possible

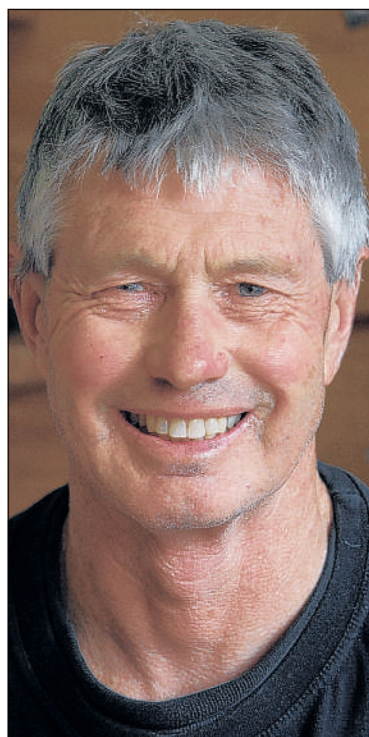
- maintaining personal service, back-up services

- be prepared to go the extra mile for your customers

Lastrite has taken on extra staff during recession and now has five working full-time and four part-timers.



**ORIENTAL SOLE:** Neville Brunker showing the shoe designs for the Japanese market.



**Neville Brunker**