

Case study:

Richard Hopkins – Houston’s Farm (Cambridge, Tasmania)

Richard Hopkins is the CEO of Houston’s Farm in Tasmania. In this case study, Richard explains the business and how the Export Facilitators Project assisted in its export market preparations.

As a national supplier of salad leaves and salad bowls in Australia, Houston’s Farm places significant emphasis on all sections of its business to ensure that product is delivered to major retailer outlets across the country. Maintaining high levels of efficiency throughout its activities, Houston’s Farm continually monitors developments in overseas markets to ensure that its products and business operations are in line with the world’s best.

As its executives regularly travel and undertake training overseas, Houston’s Farm is well-placed to understand international trends and the nuances of how overseas markets adapt to changing consumer preferences and the best way to introduce new products and categories.

Richard says maintaining market share in a highly competitive domestic market requires an “everyday commitment” to quality, safety, innovation and reliability.

“Critical mass underpins our business and we are continually striving to bring new products to our customers and our consumers,” Richard says.

To build critical mass, Houston’s Farm has also looked at export opportunities that may complement current activities and future growth plans.

“We will always support our key Australian customers because, in many ways, they are our partners, and have been for over a quarter of a century.”

Seizing opportunities

Export market development was an activity that Houston’s Farm commenced 18 months ago when it reached out for export guidance and support from the Tasmanian Fruit & Vegetable Export Facilitation Group (TF&VEFG). After talking through options and initial export planning, the next step was for two of Houston’s Farm staff to attend a two-day AUSVEG export readiness workshop.

“The advice and participation clearly demonstrated that research and preparation were two key activities in developing an export strategy,” Richard says.

In addition, the Tasmanian representative of the Export Facilitators Project provides additional support and guidance as Houston’s Farm quietly prepares and refines its export strategy. The strategy focuses on how the business can best utilise its history, high quality and safety standards, and how it controls the supply process, from seed to harvest through to manufacturing and logistics.

“Progress has been cautious, and it has been great to have the support of the Tasmanian export facilitator who provides the network and links to build our own capabilities and engage with the retailers in south-east Asia,” Richard says.

Research is key

Coupled with advice and guidance from other exporters and facilitators, Houston’s Farm took advantage of visiting markets, checking retailer shelves, price positioning for its domestic and imported product, and meeting with in-market specialists.

“It was critical that we knew who our competitors were, where we could find niche markets and how the consumer segments spent their money on food,” Richard says.

“Our first market visit was purely to better understand the supply chain, the stakeholders, the logistics and build the research necessary before entering export markets.”

For Houston’s Farm, understanding any export market necessitates a renewed focus on pricing, logistics, cool chain management, shelf life, product coding, category positioning and consumer taste profiles. No two markets are the same and it has to make sure it fine-tunes each offering to suit each export market’s needs.

Having long-term experience in Australia provides Houston’s Farm with intellectual capital, and a great ability to study and appreciate how it may successfully take product innovation and proven market promotion experience to retailers to drive its sales.

“Some markets don’t have specific categories for our products, so we have to help them to better appreciate how we can increase their sales,” Richard explains.

Houston’s Farm has attended a number of trade shows with support from the Tasmanian Government, AUSVEG and importantly, the Export Facilitators project. While the initial focus has

been on Hong Kong and Singapore, the important high-level strategy has been to bolt exporting onto the existing Australian business. Australia is where efforts remain closely focused even though it does come with strong summer demands. However, this may make way for another opportunity.

“Counter seasonal markets such as those in south-east Asia enable us to have two summers a year. What more could you ask for?” Richard says.

Through the export journey, Houston’s Farm has sought support from the export resource provided by the Export Facilitators project in Tasmania. No one company works in isolation, and assistance from AUSVEG, Hort Innovation and other exporters has been important and rewarding.

While the Tasmanian operations of Houston’s Farm are based at Cambridge, this year it has invested in new production areas near Hobart Airport. This allows for direct delivery to customers and with international connections coming on stream in 2019, more export opportunities may soon eventuate.

“We are excited about bringing our healthy, highly convenient products to customers internationally,” Richard says.



Find out more

To contact a representative of the Export Facilitators project, please see below.

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