

JUDE AND DAVID: FIRST TIME IMPORTERS OF NATURAL WOOD PRODUCTS

Jude and David much preferred personal contact by phone or in person as it enabled relationship-building, especially for subsequent followup. For first-time importers, it was hard to know what the right questions were to ask, and what pieces of information they might be missing out on.

Their experience with State Services

The Customs Codes were complex and difficult to navigate: "Customs blatantly cut to the chase. They know exactly what tariffs and... how to break it down; they know how to explain it to you in kiwi lingo. But the PDF file was horrible. The Custom Codes themselves are actually horrible to go through. It's like a categorised roll. It's not specific enough... they could have a better search machine in there that you put in bamboo rattan lamps and it goes in there but it's all just pages and pages. It's a PDF file so it's not web friendly, user friendly, kind of manipulative."

The customs brokers were very helpful, but did not provide a comprehensive set of services like the commercial logistics company, "They have everything in a package."

They saw the business.govt.nz website as helping, rather than hindering business, and presenting a kinder face of Government: "BIZ info is bloody brilliant mate. They have a booklet and all sorts of stuff too. IRD recommends it and sends out their booklets with their Smart Business Pack. That's like the government is setting something up that's softer and more user friendly than IRD because IRD is focussed on getting the money in but BIZ Info will help you."

Jude and David were charged a duty on importing natural wood products, which then had to be fumigated. They felt that MAF was "too stringent". They were unclear why their international fumigation certification was not acceptable, and felt that the guidelines were not obvious. The goods in quarantine were damaged, but there was no documentation on the state of goods before the damage: "We learnt a lot about what we imported after we imported it... Nobody knocked us over the back of the head with a blunt stick and told us not to import natural wood products. We brought in stuff that they were going to check and going to fumigate, but nobody said that."

On occasion, they needed to repeat previously given information: "you can find a human face there... just keep talking to them and making sure that they understand that they are dealing with a human being and not a number and getting them to acknowledge that. They're a faceless bureaucrat and that's what they're trained to do for obvious reasons. They're bloody effective, they're meant to [be]. They're focussed on their job, they do their job. But you have to be specific about what you want to know and they will specifically help you. If you ring up... are they going to be like, huh what did you ring for again?"

"To be treated like a human being. For them to recognise you as a person and to be polite, to know their stuff, know what questions to ask you so that you know what the questions are for them to help you in the process... I mean you have to be responsible for yourself but at the beginning you know nothing."

Their needs as business people

Business mentoring was essential to setting up the new business: "We went and saw a 68 year old that has imported for 38 years or something like that. He just sat with us for two and half hours and shared his knowledge... like MAF's behaviour... You can get smart business packs and you name it. You can get the whole shebang from the IRD, they send it out you read through it, you feel like you're confident and know everything but there's so much little things that nobody really ever discusses; it sort of slips into the cracks. I wanted [to know] what I was missing, what I wasn't doing and, if my systems were right."

Jude and David felt that the courses from New Zealand Trade and Enterprise were too broad: "You sit through most of the seminars and go to sleep mate because honestly, they don't teach you bugger all. If you don't have common sense then you need to go to those courses. If you use your business mind and run the business you don't need to appear in those courses."

However, they found courses specific to their needs through a local business trust. The courses also provided networking opportunities which they valued: "You can... join their seminars and he will teach you through specific things that you need to know whether it's GST, PAYE, how to deal with your employees... it was brilliant... You got to go in and share your story and learn a lot from other small businesses around the area. He gave me specific knowledge so that was good for me in regards to the roofing company."

