



**Fabienne Buzon**

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[www.chefs-hat.com](http://www.chefs-hat.com)  
 Year Founded: 1996  
 Employees: 12  
 Export Sales: 80%  
 Years Exporting: 4  
 Export Markets: United States, Europe, Asia

*“Attending trade missions and conventions allows us to keep in touch with our international clients.”*

**Business Description:**

Chef's Hat Inc. started with one great idea — supplying disposable chef's hats that were lighter than paper (they're made of a breathable viscose material instead) and lasted 15 days instead of one. The hats also incorporated adjustable Velcro straps for a comfortable fit, eliminating the need for staples, glue and clips. These innovations have spawned a business that, six years later, supplies international hoteliers and distributing companies with everything from their chef's hat on down — including neckties, jackets, aprons and pants.

**Exporting Tactics:**

The company bolsters its presence at annual chef's conventions, including Hostex in Canada, as well as shows in the United States, Europe and Hong Kong. Rigorous follow-up with contacts made at these events, combined with sending free samples to them, results in an order success rate of three out of every five contacted.

“Although sending samples can be expensive, it helped us secure a lot of clients because they were able to try out our product, recognize its quality and ask us for more. We also invested time and effort into our brochure and Web site, which are important to our profile abroad.”

Fabienne also reads *CanadExport* for news on the latest industry shows, trade missions and conventions. She finds the contact information listed useful in registering for events, and relies on the content to help her find, and appropriately deal with, new markets.

**Networking Strategy:**

Exporting was an obvious progression for The Chef's Hat. The nature of the food service industry sees chefs moving about the country as well as internationally, and when they did, the company simply followed. “When clients we had in Canada moved to the United States, we just started shipping our product to them there.”

**Customer Care:**

“Of course, we always try to remember faces and names, but we don't always see our customers face-to-face on a regular basis. That's why it's important for us to attend the conventions, it's a way to keep in touch and bring in new business at the same time. We contact our larger clients on a regular basis, not as a sales call, but a personal call from either my business partner [and husband] Claude or myself. That can't happen with every client, so we also send out a lot of e-mails, letting them know we are there for them.”

**Greatest Challenge:**

“Our biggest challenge was educating potential customers on the idea of non-paper chef's hats, but once the advantages were understood, it was easy to sell the product.”

**Biggest Benefit:**

“In first exporting, the strength of the U.S. dollar was definitely a benefit, but it was also the amount of volume that we could achieve by penetrating the U.S. market that was attractive.”

**Export Tip:**

In order to compete in the international arena, it was essential that Chef's Hat Inc. establish a presence on the Internet.

► “My advice for young companies just starting to expand to new, foreign markets is to remember that your corporate profile is very important. We've found that Americans like to deal with large, corporate entities, and our Web site conveys that image.”

**Future Plans:**

“We just started marketing to Europe in 2001, so we anticipate our sales will rise in that area by next year. Ideally, we would like to establish a branch in Europe and one in the United States, which would enable us to provide faster service to our clients in each of those markets, at a reduced cost to us.”



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...o site:  
[www.manrex.com](http://www.manrex.com)  
 ...r Founded: 1973  
 ...ort Sales: 30%  
 ...rs Exporting: 20+  
 ...ort Markets: England,  
 ...nd, France, Spain,  
 ...many, South Africa,  
 ...a, United States

Prov. \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

...MM  not currently exporting

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...re information.



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**Export Tips:**

When selecting partners, get to know them on both a business and personal basis. Choose people with the same mindset, and ensure regular communications, such as teleconferences, because you can't be on a plane every week.”

- “Get export receivables insurance, especially if you are a small company.”
- “Once you've done your homework — and that is critical — take a leap of faith and begin exporting. You can't have all the “i's” dotted and “t's” crossed; you may make mistakes, but you'll learn from them.”

**Future Plans:**

“Our ongoing goal is to export brand awareness of Manrex as a leader in medical delivery systems. We will focus on the market niche of aged care, a demographic that is increasing internationally. As everyone becomes more Internet savvy, the world is becoming smaller. It's exciting to get calls from around the world.”

building contacts and picking up information about new markets. “Establishing a relationship with someone who understands the market and health care system in their country and shares our ethical philosophy has been a key success factor in our international expansion.”

**Networking Strategy:**

Fiona is active in industry associations of pharmacists and nurses, sits on the Board of the Health Care Products Association of Manitoba and the Women's Enterprise Centre in Winnipeg, and is a member of Women Business Owners of Manitoba. She is also involved in the Business Council of Manitoba and sits on several community boards. “It's important to belong and support them and to expose yourself to a wider range of people.”

**Favourite Exporting Moment:**

“The relationships you develop are very special. Because we focus on that, we've made friends — not just found business partners — and that personal side is very interesting and gratifying.”

...systems to retail pharmacies, nursing homes, hospitals and community care centres. Fiona and her brother, John Webster Jr., bought the business (which was started by their father in 1973) and took over its operation in 1991.

The company's broad range of products include fixtures for storing and organizing medications, packaging systems, distribution carts plus charting and record-keeping systems. The efficiencies of the systems and the time-savings they offer to health care workers, combined with their cost effectiveness, make the products popular with nurses and pharmacists around the world. “Our goal is to ensure the right drug in the right dosage is administered to the right patient at the right time.”

**Exporting Tactics:**

Because of the small size of the Canadian market, exporting is a big focus in Manrex's growth strategy. “When you compare Canada's population of 31.4 million to 817 million in Europe, it only makes sense to move in that direction.” There are over half a million nursing beds worldwide using the company's innovative