

Acadian Seaplants president Jean-Paul Deveau holds beakers containing rehydrated edible sea vegetables at the company's Burnside offices. Deveau hires employees working in target markets abroad rather than relying on trade representatives. (PETER PARSONS / Staff)

Get up close, personal

When it comes to export markets, best to deal with customers face to face

By **MARTHA WILSON**

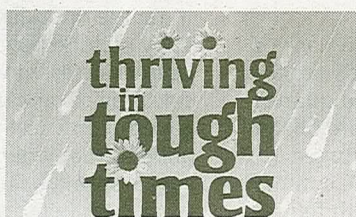
How can you build your export business? Jean-Paul Deveau, president of Dartmouth-based **Acadian Seaplants**, has some tips.

"Get on the plane," he says. "I certainly have believed from the beginning that there's absolutely no substitute for being in front of your customer and meeting them face to face." He is adamant that other

methods of communicating, whether you're sending email or using social media, on the phone or on Skype, are second-best compromises during the crucial phases in building relationships.

"Face-to-face time is irreplaceable," affirms Eric Crowell, director of the Saint Mary's University Business Development Centre.

"When you can manage it, going in person shows your



commitment and your level of engagement in the relationship. It communicates respect and seriousness. Of course, it's not always going to be possible but look on it as an investment."

Focusing intensely on being the best supplier for their export markets has boosted the company over the years, Deveau

says, with the relationships built over time.

Acadian Seaplants uses seaweed in innovative ways, making products like fertilizers and feed supplements, along with numerous applications for food and health markets. Its products are sold in over 70 countries.

In the early stages, the company dealt with international trade representatives, who helped them identify potential new market possibilities and new customers.

After their days of relying on trade representatives for

See **THRIVING** / C8

Thriving

continued from / C7

contacts, Deveau says, "we found ways to make sure we had dedicated staff, with their full-time responsibility being to develop relationships in those areas."

The next stage was hiring workers — typically younger people, not long out of university — from parts of the world where the company was interested in deepening relationships.

"You could very quickly leapfrog yourself into a market" by using this hiring method, he notes.

Finally, the company reached the stage it's at now: hiring employees who are already living and working in the target markets. And at every stage, Deveau says, it's been important to make those periodic trips abroad.

"The customers very much appreciate the fact that you made that effort."

Additionally, Deveau says, at his company they like to encourage customers to come to Canada. It's another way of cementing the relationship, and it gives you a chance to play host.

He offers some suggestions for how to make clients' visits to Nova Scotia enjoyable ones.

Pick up your customers at the airport and take them back at the end of the visit, he says.

"And, in between, make sure they have a great opportunity to see a range of things."

He shows visiting customers the company's facilities, of course, including the research and development labs working on potential new projects. Additionally, he likes to let visitors meet people at organizations that are research partners.

It's a chance to explain both how the company has developed products in the past and what is being planned for the future. At the same time, Deveau says, visitors should be exposed to the lifestyle and culture of Nova Scotia.

Cook lobster in an informal setting, he suggests. Take your guests around some of our rural areas, and be sure to get them out on the water. In many parts of the world, it's hard to have access to those kinds of attractions.

Will your guests love it? They will.

"I have never seen anybody leave Nova Scotia disappointed," Deveau says.

Thriving in Tough Times is a series developed by the Saint Mary's University business development centre, which has been helping Nova Scotia entrepreneurs for 20 years. Visit smubdc.ca.