



Exporter Profile

Kevin Gilbert - Managing Director Thermflo Liquid Process Systems

Thermaflo specialises in the design and manufacture of stainless steel equipment for the heating, cooling, and processing systems within the dairy, juice, and general food processing industries, as well as the installation and commissioning of equipment such as boilers, air-conditioning and factory ventilation.

Kevin was born in the Hawkes Bay and now lives in rural Feilding. Having completed some engineering papers as part of his Degree, Kevin has a strong understanding of the needs of farmers and food process manufacturers. In 1996 he was taken on as a consultant, then offered the position of Commercial Manager at Thermaflo, eventually moving up to the role of Managing Director and a major shareholder in the company.



Born Global

From its inception, Thermaflo has had an export focus, initially in India, Sri-Lanka and Nepal in reaction to strong enquiries from those areas.

Today, given the company's considerable experience in 'tough markets', it is not surprising that Kevin and his team are not afraid of a challenge!

In a typical year Thermaflo will be involved in a range of small domestic projects, four or five Australian based projects, and one or two further afield in Malaysia, Pacific Islands,

Indonesia, Bangladesh or Pakistan and it is those far-off markets which make up between 60—70% of the business.

The kiwi advantage

Kevin considers himself lucky to represent a solid kiwi firm in a market where expertise, experience and high quality put Thermaflo at a competitive advantage. Overseas, the company is often preferred over cheaper Chinese competitors due both to its high reputation and also the positive regard in which New Zealand firms are held in target countries.

Despite the fact that Indian companies could undertake the same contracts for two-thirds of the cost, Thermaflo is successful in both Pakistan and Bangladesh, simply because the political environment favours more 'western' companies.

The need to mitigate risk

Coming from a relatively safe and stable environment like New Zealand, doing business in risky markets can be challenging, but the company does everything it can to mitigate those risks.

Whilst limiting financial risk is something which Kevin recommends in all markets, when there is a clear danger, it is especially important to consider the physical risk to personnel.

Avoiding the potential to blow up

Kevin talks of a project he was working on in Lahore at the end of 2008. His clients were keen to meet in a popular hotel in the CBD but "*fully aware of the potential to get blown up*", Kevin opted for a more low-key venue, explaining the risk to his clients.

Similarly, he doesn't use public transport, keeps away from crowded areas, avoids cities such as Islamabad and keeps his trips short, spending any 'down-time' in his hotel, rather than sight-seeing — always erring on the side of caution.

Kevin also suggests keeping away from risky countries prior to, or following political elections and tells the story of a colleague who was trapped in his car during the cross-fire between two opposing parties immediately following an election.

Dangers aside, just what is it that Kevin loves about his job?

"Learning about different cultures, especially the ways in which they communicate. Most Asian's for example, think differently, negotiations can be slower and they are not as up-front as kiwi's". Kevin also enjoys seeing projects through from start to finish, although it isn't easy discussing problems and finding solutions at a distance.

So, what frustrates him?

"Government needs a strategy to help exporters. NZTE do a reasonable job, but we do a lot of work in Australia and the help that companies get from Austrade is far greater than what we get here."

Kevin admires initiatives such as Better by Design but says *"we need more of this. We couldn't get funding for our R&D projects because the fund was over-subscribed and we've had to put this on hold; and it was a mistake to remove the R&D credit, we need more support"*.



Kevin also believes that there is a need for greater efficiency throughout the country: *"we're a small place, there is a proposal to establish a Food Innovation Centre up in Albany, as well as several other similar centres and research facilities, but they would all be competing for the same business - it needs*

to be centralized. Value added food is the key and we need a centre to promote this in the New Zealand".

Securing help and support

Kevin is keen to acknowledge the help he has received within the Manawatu region, particularly the Chamber of Commerce and EMA. He is also part of an informal group of like-minded business people who meet regularly to support each other through the rough and the smooth and he recommends all business people build a similar network.

How has studying of the Diploma of International Trade helped Kevin?

Now just one module away from finishing his Diploma, Kevin says that whilst he struggled with the International Trade Research module in particular, he found it highly practical as he was *"forced to fully investigate and test my gut instincts and to back them up with facts, which is a far better way of doing business."*

"International Marketing was really useful too, in that it helped the company to framework its market opportunities. Overall, the course has helped articulate and formalise what we do and provided a check on the way we do things".

Recognition of skills and experience

From a personal point of view, Kevin is glad that he will soon have formal recognition of his skills and experience in the form of a qualification, although he admits that studying has encroached on his private life and the last days before an exam can be frantic.

"It was great to get an extension on one of my assignments otherwise it would never have got done, the flexibility has been brilliant". Now there is light at the end of the tunnel, it won't be long before he can dedicate more time to his new love — diving.

