



New Zealand Outside 2008

The Government has launched a three-year campaign to encourage Kiwis to buy locally made products and support New Zealand manufacturers, but as well-intentioned as the scheme may be, there are detractors among the very manufacturers the campaign aims to support, writes Diana Zadrave.



“It also represents a recognised element of that Kiwi desire to get inside things, and to figure out what customers really want,” says Simon Smuts-Kennedy, general manager of Hills Hats in Petone, Wellington. “This is our point of difference – China just does not have the same passion for perfection.”

Smuts-Kennedy has got a contagious enthusiasm for all things hat, not surprisingly perhaps as he too was born into the textile industry (his grandfather established the family company Eskay that in its earlier years specialised in manufacturing neckties and dressing gowns). His involvement in the family business began in 1998 when his father Pieter bought Hills Hats, a family business established in 1875 but experiencing trouble at the time. The staff decided to stay on only because of Pieter Smuts-Kennedy’s credibility in the textile industry. As part of the package, the staff also inherited “an overzealous son who knew nothing” but was prepared to learn and was also able to see the potential for the use of laminated technical fabrics he had become familiar with through his previous involvement with the ski industry. Today, Hills Hats are well known both here and overseas for their quality leisure hats made of technical fabrics, as well as a variety of fabric cloth hats along with traditional structured hats that are still shaped on blocks and steam presses from around the 1920’s.

“You can’t be in it to just make money,” says Smuts-Kennedy. “You have to do it for the passion of being creative and being close to the finished product. And have a sense of pride and sense of loyalty to your employees and the local community,” he says. “I’m sad to see some companies go off-shore but I’m not critical. It’s about who’s making the decisions: a family, or a board of directors.”



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NEW ZEALAND