

Beyond the Fern: Why purpose, not just provenance, sells New Zealand to the World

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Executive summary

New Zealand's global image—clean, green, and trustworthy—is a valuable asset. It opens doors in overseas markets and earns goodwill. But in a world of growing scrutiny, increasing complexity, and near-limitless choice, reputation alone won't close deals. Buyers are looking for more than provenance—they want purpose.

They want to know not just where a business comes from, but what it stands for, why it exists, and how it delivers value beyond the transaction.

This paper explores why purpose, when clearly defined and consistently embedded across the business, is the key to turning admiration into trust. Drawing on decades of real-world experience in international trade and strategy, it shows how New Zealand businesses can strengthen their offer, build lasting commercial relationships, and position themselves for long-term success on the world stage. Purpose is no longer an add-on. It's an essential part of how successful businesses compete.

Provenance opens doors, but doesn't close deals

New Zealand exports to over 200 countries, with total exports reaching NZ \$76 billion in 2023, representing more than 28% of national GDP. Around 27,000 New Zealand businesses currently export, ranging from primary producers and manufacturers to tech start-ups and service providers. In sectors like dairy, meat, wine, education, and high-value manufacturing, the strength of Brand New Zealand creates natural curiosity and opens doors. But interest isn't the same as intent.

Provenance gives Kiwi businesses an initial advantage—but it is rarely decisive. Overseas buyers want products and services that deliver measurable value. They are looking for innovation, performance, and alignment—not just scenic imagery. National identity is a story opener, not a business case. New Zealand's country brand may start the conversation, but it's what lies beneath the surface—strategy, quality, and clarity of purpose—that determines who succeeds and who stalls.

Trust comes through consistency and credibility

Trust is what sustains relationships, unlocks growth, and drives repeat business. And trust doesn't come from geography. It comes from delivery—on time, on spec, and in alignment with expectations. The most successful New Zealand exporters—whether in agritech, food and beverage, or advanced services—build trust by being reliable, relevant, and responsive.

Consider the trajectory of Palmerston North based Levno, a SaaS company that developed on-farm monitoring systems for the dairy industry. After capturing 75% of the New Zealand market, we put in place a global strategy to expand into Europe by leveraging its Fonterra partnership—but what built trust with overseas buyers wasn't

the brand or even the product alone. It was the proof of performance, establishing on the ground local support capability, and ability to solve a real operational problem.

Trust is earned through consistent, values-aligned performance. It's not what a business says that matters—it's what it does.

Purpose builds sustainable trust

Buyers today aren't just looking for suppliers—they're looking for partners. As ESG (environmental, social, governance) priorities reshape procurement, purpose becomes a key filter in decision-making. Across the EU, ASEAN, and other major markets, companies are being asked to demonstrate not just cost competitiveness, but societal contribution and long-term alignment.

Purpose helps meet this demand. It shows that a business understands its broader role—that it sees the relationship as more than transactional. And it reassures buyers that the company will continue to act in ways that are predictable, ethical, and future-fit.

This is particularly important in sectors where brand risk is high and supply chains are under scrutiny. Buyers want confidence that what they're purchasing—and who they're partnering with—aligns with their own commitments to sustainability, equity, and governance.

Purpose, when embedded across the business, strengthens the offer. It becomes a lens for decision-making and a reference point for accountability. It signals clarity of intent—and increasingly, that's what builds trust.

Purpose in practice: Fonterra's climate-driven advantage

Few companies illustrate the strategic value of purpose more clearly than Fonterra. Facing rising pressure from multinational buyers to address climate impact, the dairy giant introduced a climate-linked payout system that financially rewards farmers for lowering emissions. The initiative, which offers up to 25 cents per kgMS in performance-linked incentives, now reaches over 5,000 dairy farms nationwide.

This approach isn't just about environmental compliance—it's about market access. Fonterra's largest customers, including Mars and Nestlé, are demanding emissions transparency and tangible progress.

While Fonterra is adapting with purpose and pragmatism, some industry groups and companies have publicly resisted calls for emissions-reduction technology. This

divergence reveals the opportunity—and the cost—of action versus inaction. Purpose-led businesses are earning strategic preference in global supply chains, while those without clear alignment risk being left behind.

By proactively aligning with these expectations, Fonterra isn't just managing risk—it's increasing its value proposition.

Turning purpose into practice

It's one thing to define a purpose. It's another to live it.

The difference lies in how purpose is embedded—across leadership, governance, operations, and culture. Businesses that treat purpose as a communications exercise tend to struggle with credibility. Those that treat it as a core business strategy—integrated into systems, behaviours, and decision-making—gain consistency, agility, and trust.

Reputation is fragile. A clear purpose, properly embedded, helps maintain alignment and coherence as businesses grow, diversify, or enter new markets.

A well-structured framework for embedding purpose such as NG&A's Single Organizing Idea (SOI®) helps ensure that intent isn't lost in execution. It allows leadership teams to align on what matters, make better strategic choices, and assess performance through the lens of values as well as outcomes.

This discipline is becoming increasingly important as organisations face scrutiny not just for what they deliver—but how they deliver it.

Export success with purpose-led advantage

New Zealand is already home to world-class exporters with purpose at their core.

Consider:

- **Zespri**, the world's largest marketer of kiwifruit, which has embedded sustainability into its grower standards, research investments, and packaging innovation.
- **Fisher & Paykel Healthcare**, whose purpose — “improving care and outcomes”— guides its product design, customer support and partnerships in over 120 countries.
- **Garage Project**, a craft brewery that connects its creative product design with community storytelling, reducing environmental impact while standing out in saturated markets.
- **Comvita**, NG&A client whose ‘trust in natural performance’ coined purpose and investment in mānuka research, bee conservation and health education extends its brand far beyond honey.

In each case, the company doesn't just offer great products. It offers a purpose-led narrative that connects with customers, distributors, and communities—and that narrative is reinforced through consistent delivery and long-term commitment.

Building for relevance, not just reach

One of the most common mistakes among aspiring exporters is the assumption that what works at home will work abroad. Too many New Zealand companies take domestic success as proof of international readiness—only to discover that relevance, not reach, is what matters.

Successful exporters invest in market understanding. They adapt product formats, engage local networks, and—crucially—tailor their purpose narrative to resonate with local concerns. Whether it's water scarcity in the Middle East or carbon footprints in Scandinavia, the most compelling businesses are those that can connect what they do with what the market cares about.

Having a clear and embedded purpose that has relevance both at home and abroad gives businesses the confidence and clarity to evolve their offer while staying true to who they are. It provides strategic flexibility with operational discipline—ensuring that global expansion doesn't come at the cost of integrity.

Leveraging the Kiwi diaspora

One of New Zealand's often overlooked export advantages is its global diaspora. Across nearly every major market, there are Kiwis embedded in industries, organisations, and networks. These individuals often act as informal bridge-builders, opening doors and making introductions that commercial pathways alone cannot.

Exporters that succeed long-term often combine strategic clarity with personal networks. They're not just competing on product—they're building coalitions of support, advocacy, and local insight. Purpose gives these relationships substance. It turns "I know someone there" into "They trust what I stand for."

In a country defined by two degrees of separation, exporters can benefit enormously from tapping into these connections.

Practical takeaways

- Provenance opens doors, but it's purpose that builds relationships. Businesses must lead with substance, not sentiment.
- Trust is the real currency of global markets. It's built through consistency, relevance, and long-term alignment.
- Purpose creates clarity and cohesion—but only when embedded across the business.
- Structure supports integrity. A disciplined approach to embedding purpose helps businesses grow without losing who they are.
- Reputation is built through what you do, not what you say. Buyers are watching actions more than ever.
- New Zealand companies can win globally—but only if they move beyond "Brand NZ" and offer something deeper, clearer, and more enduring.

The SOI® framework helps New Zealand export businesses

- Clarify their long-term reason for being, beyond product features.
- Operationalise purpose across leadership, brand, and governance.
- Align internal systems and behaviours with external expectations.
- Enhance trust and reduce risk in complex international environments.

- Drive consistency across markets, platforms, and partnerships.
- Enable strategic agility while maintaining coherence and integrity.

About the authors

Lance Sheppard is a global market development expert who has spent 25 years helping New Zealand companies succeed in offshore markets. His experience spans sectors including Marine, agritech, ICT, Energy, Aviation, and food and beverage.

Neil Gaught is the creator of the Single Organizing Idea (SOI®) framework and founder of NG&A. He works with CEOs and boards around the world to embed purpose into strategy and governance.

Neil Gaught & Associates (NG&A) is a strategic consultancy that helps organisations align purpose with performance. Our proprietary SOI® framework enables leaders to embed purpose at the heart of strategy, governance and operations.

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