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# Podcast Interview Transcript

*Guest: Noel Navin, Director of International Sales, Southeast Asia, Agropur*

*Host: Anastasia Ufimtseva, Senior Program Manager, International Trade & Investment*

*Topic: Agropur's expansion into Southeast Asia*

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## Introduction

**Anastasia:** I'm excited to have Noel Navin here, Director of International Sales, Southeast Asia, for Agropur, joining me on our podcast. Agropur is one of the biggest dairy processing companies, based in Quebec, operating a cooperative of over 3,000 dairy farmers and processing and marketing high-quality milk. Beyond its large operations in Canada, the company has established a sales office and an innovation center in Southeast Asia, currently based in Singapore.

**Anastasia:** So welcome, Noel, to the podcast. I'm glad we finally have you here. Just a quick note — I met Noel two years ago, when we were both in Singapore for the first Canada in Asia conference.

**Noel Navin:** Thank you for having me, Anastasia. It's always a pleasure talking to you. I hope that since two years ago we've both grown in different ways, and that you've gained good insight into Asia Pacific — or at least specifically the ASEAN region. It continues to be an exciting place for us, and I can't wait to share more in today's call.

## What Motivated Agropur's Expansion into Southeast Asia

**Anastasia:** Wonderful. As we chatted before the recording, the region is evolving so fast. So, to start: what motivated your company to set up a branch in Southeast Asia back when it did, and how has that changed since?

**Noel Navin:** Agropur, like most companies, was looking and seeking growth, and growth can come in many forms. Specific to our business, it was really about where we'd see greater — or sustained — adoption of proteins and dairy ingredients across different populations. If you look at the metrics and demographics around the world, they all point to the Asia-Pacific region, and more specifically to the ASEAN region.

**Noel Navin:** You've got somewhere between five and six hundred million people spread across an interesting geography, and then of course you have China to the north. That whole contingent presented an enormous, exponential, long-term growth opportunity for dairy ingredients, and it's been a genuinely interesting space.

**Noel Navin:** Back in 2014, when we decided to branch out into this area, we were a bit nervous because a lot of it was hypothetical — based on some guesswork, since we were one of the first dairy companies to make that move at the time. But ten years on, I can tell you it's been absolutely the right choice, and that's why Agropur continues to win in this region.

**Anastasia:** That's a fascinating story, and I'm glad you framed it in terms of growth and momentum — that's really important. Thinking about when you first went into the region: what challenges are you most proud to have overcome? And what would be on your wish list to make the Singapore location an even bigger success story?

## Challenges Overcome in the Early Years

**Noel Navin:** When we first entered the market — or markets, I should say, and that's the first clue — many of us, myself included, tended to look at Southeast Asia as a single block. There are real intricacies: cultural differences between countries and markets, and most definitely different regulations.

**Noel Navin:** One of the first challenges we had to navigate was the differences in free trade agreements — some countries had certain agreements in place, others didn't. Some markets were highly protective of their dairy industry, simply because they were positioned to grow their own local milk supply. All of that caused us sufficient grief in the early years, which is why we leaned heavily on government agencies and key enablers to work through it.

**Noel Navin:** Likewise, as we started developing in this region, we quickly understood that because everything was culturally so different, there was never a one-size-fits-all approach. There's a whole spectrum of dairy derivatives and ingredients, depending on how you fractionate the product, each with different valuations.

**Noel Navin:** Just because something worked in Indonesia at a given time didn't mean it would work in Malaysia. Conventional thinking might suggest otherwise, but we realized quickly that wasn't the case. It was navigating all of that nuance — all those differences — that we're genuinely proud to have overcome.

**Noel Navin:** Although we're a global company — the 15th largest dairy company in the world — we operate in a highly localized, highly tactical way in this region.

**Anastasia:** I love the phrase 'one size does not fit all' — I completely agree. In Asia, the vibrancy and the food culture are entirely different from one place to the next.

## The Wish List: Sustaining Leadership and Looking Ahead

**Anastasia:** So, what about the wish list? Is there anything that could be done to make the experience even better for Agropur in the region — anything you'd still like to check off the list?

**Noel Navin:** I'd describe our market position as that of a leader, specifically in whey ingredients, and increasingly in cheese ingredients as well. Having earned that position, the priority now is sustaining it — building a moat around it, so to speak, to borrow from Warren Buffett. A lot of what I do today as director in this region is about looking forward.

**Noel Navin:** That means asking what's next for this region. What I can tell you is that Southeast Asia is growing significantly in education, disposable income, and, most notably, technology. Nearly every business here is at the cusp of what's often called Industry 4.0.

**Noel Navin:** There are various waves of technology being adopted by businesses, in the spirit of pushing efficiency and ensuring that certain intellectual property stays within a business while remaining transferable across its regional branches. Agropur is looking closely at that complexity and how we can add value going forward.

**Noel Navin:** The other critical area for us is that, despite growing dairy demand and consumption at the consumer level, dairy science here is still relatively young. I don't say that as a criticism of local institutions — but many agricultural and business schools are partnering with established know-how from elsewhere in the world. Canada is one of those partners, and I think you're quite familiar with that flow. This is another area where Agropur is adding value.

**Noel Navin:** We're big on dairy education. We recently commissioned the Agropur Innovation Center — a virtual center, but one with access to different laboratories, and we work with institutions in their pilot-scale labs. We also started an internship program bringing food science students into agriculture; they join our office, work on specific projects over about six months, and that's part of how we differentiate ourselves in this market. We're more innovation-led today, and a large part of that innovation is dairy education.

**Noel Navin:** The way I'd frame it: we want to make the pie bigger for everyone in dairy first, and then carve out our own niche with high-quality ingredients. That's what we've been doing — it's our way of giving back to this region and helping people improve their lives through dairy nourishment.

## Opportunities, Gaps, and Market Entry Strategy

**Anastasia:** I'm so encouraged by the education and technology components — I think those are the two driving factors, and I'm glad they're a priority for Agropur. That leads into my next question: what are the current opportunities and gaps in the sector, and what can Canadian and Asia-Pacific companies do to make a difference?

**Anastasia:** You mentioned technology and education — is there anything outside of those two?

**Noel Navin:** No, I think those two are the big drivers today and the most relevant. Beyond that, there are the hygiene factors — simply understanding the market you're operating in. When we first started in 2014, we rightly avoided trying to go after the entire ASEAN region at once.

**Noel Navin:** We cherry-picked based on our comfort level — depending on which distributors we had and how much knowledge we'd already gathered — and decided to pick one or two markets and really dominate there, reaching a certain depth before moving on. In my network, including outside our industry, I've seen companies come in and ask for advice, and I'll say, 'You're strong in this market — why don't you focus there?' But often they insist on going after the whole space at once, from Myanmar to Laos to Singapore and everywhere in between.

**Noel Navin:** A year later, I catch up with them and they admit, 'You were right — we should have focused earlier.' There's a fair amount of preconceived thinking about what the ASEAN region is.

**Noel Navin:** Part of that is because ASEAN was designed to present itself as a single block — the member states came together partly to negotiate collectively and have more voting weight at a global level, such as at the UN. But the downside is that after this long period of the grouping's success, businesses tend to view ASEAN as one block. It isn't. I know I'm laboring the point, but it needs to be made: pick where you think you can enter and win, and then expand from there. That would be my advice.

**Anastasia:** That's wonderful advice, Noel. Thinking back to when you were entering in 2014 — what factors went into your calculation of which markets to pick and what resources to use to tackle them? And if you had to point businesses toward an external contact when entering the region, who should they reach out to?

**Noel Navin:** I'd say talk to organizations like the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service — that's one, and you yourself have been a great source of insight and help to us. We also work closely with Export Development Canada (EDC), and we're members of the Canada ASEAN Business Council. I sit in on several roundtables, and all of this is valuable — from a government advocacy standpoint and from a business-matchmaking standpoint — because it keeps us within that network.

**Noel Navin:** That enabling network is highly important — both to help you avoid pitfalls and to give you a way to cut through and find opportunities. As a Singaporean myself, I've appreciated how closely the Canadian government-linked agencies work together — a bit like how Singapore operates — with a real focus on helping companies and exporters win in specific parts of the world. I'd strongly encourage any Canadian company to reach out and build those relationships; it also lends a level of credibility, which matters a great deal.

**Noel Navin:** One of the ways this network helped us was in getting access to larger, multinational companies. Agropur is a fairly large company, but back in 2014 we weren't very well known in the region. Partnering with agencies like these and getting a seat at the table was phenomenal — we wouldn't otherwise have been part of those conversations. Ten years later, we're supplying some of those larger companies, and we've firmly established our position. So yes, that network is very important.

**Anastasia:** That's wonderful advice, Noel. I hope companies listening pick up on that — build the network and the connections first, and then scale up.

**Noel Navin:** I'd also add: talk to fellow companies like ours — give me a call. The community of Canadian companies out here is very supportive. We get together informally, in a pre-competitive spirit, just to talk about the market and how we can make a difference. I'd encourage others to foster that as well.

**Anastasia:** That's very generous of you, Noel — thank you for offering to be a resource. I'd love to take you up on that.

## Advice for Companies Entering Southeast Asia

**Anastasia:** If I were a young company thinking about entering the Southeast Asian market right now, what should I keep in mind? You've mentioned looking at differences across regions and countries — is there anything else I should be aware of as I enter?

**Noel Navin:** I'd say work with someone already in the market who knows the space you're trying to win in — otherwise you could end up spinning your wheels for far longer than necessary, or it'll simply take you much longer to gain traction.

**Noel Navin:** That's exactly what we did. When we first entered the market, Malaysia was one of our strongest and earliest markets. We didn't try to do it alone — we worked with a local distributor who helped us understand the different customer tiers, how they buy, what they buy, and the regulations around importing Canadian dairy products, as well as the relevant free trade agreements. That can sound simple, but I can assure you it gets quite complex, especially once you multiply it across several countries, each with different requirements — it becomes a real headache. So I'd say: partner with someone who already knows the market. That partnership could take many forms — a distributor, a joint-venture partner, a supply agreement — but work with someone who knows, and grow from there.

**Anastasia:** I completely agree, especially when you have that insider knowledge — it speeds up the process significantly, as you said. If they know the ins and outs, it's much easier for you: this is my market, this is what I want, and here's who on the other side can help me get there. That's fantastic advice, thank you, Noel.

## Skills for Success in the Region

**Anastasia:** And just to wrap up the interview — I wanted to ask about skills. If I'm a business trying to break into the region, are there any particular skills or abilities I should cultivate to be successful?

**Noel Navin:** Soft skills are very important, and that's because of the cultural differences — it's just a different way of working, even within the region itself. You go from Singapore to Malaysia to Vietnam, and it can all feel a little intimidating for someone starting out in Southeast Asia.

**Noel Navin:** Generally, the executives I've seen succeed have been open-minded — open enough to accept that there are differences between countries in the region, and between the region and Canada, including a different business cadence. Negotiation style is a bit different too, and you have to figure that out. That soft-skill side has to be there.

**Noel Navin:** It also really helps to learn another language — bring another language to the table. Even attempting a bit of Bahasa can help you build a much deeper relationship. People here are friendly — if you move half a mile toward them, they'll meet you the other half.

**Noel Navin:** So I'd strongly suggest that before you get on a plane, pick up some basic Mandarin, or some basic Bahasa if Vietnam or Indonesia is your target market. Just being able to try speaking a little of the language really warms people up — it shows that you're genuinely trying and serious about the market.

**Noel Navin:** To be clear, it's not that you'll actually use it in negotiations — the business community here is fluent in English; many have attended American, Canadian, or Australian universities, and even the local universities largely teach in English. So you'll be fine either way. But if you can pick up a second language, it really sets you apart.

**Noel Navin:** For what it's worth, I speak four languages, and it's helped me throughout my time in the region. I'd say that's been the single biggest factor in my success over a 16-year career. At every step, being able to speak some Mandarin and a bit of Bahasa has set me apart — even though I'm not fluent in all of them.

**Noel Navin:** So I'd highly encourage it.

**Anastasia:** I'm learning so much from you, and I relate to so many of the points you've made — the importance of localizing, learning the language as a soft skill, and being open and adaptable to different cultures at the table. Such important advice.

## Closing

**Anastasia:** I'm really grateful you joined us today, and thankful for your time and your support for businesses out there. I wish you and Agropur continued success in the region. Thank you, Noel.

**Noel Navin:** Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed this as well. Let's hope we can keep working together and continue building our influence in this region.