

Small Business Spotlight:

Don Freschi, CEO

Fenix Advanced Materials. Est. 2015

Life Story

Don Freschi studied chemical engineering and started his career in B.C. doing research for Teck – Cominco, a Vancouver-based mining and mineral development company known today as Teck Resources Limited. He became fascinated by semiconductors and all the specialty materials that were needed to create them. His career flowed from working as a researcher, to a consultant and then he became an entrepreneur producing those specialty materials. Fenix Advanced Materials is his second venture in the field of advanced manufacturing after he successfully grew and sold his first business (Firebird).

What motivated you to start your own business?

The first time I started a business as a logical next step in my career. The second time I did it because clients came to me and asked me to start the business. There is no better rationale, as there was a market, a demand and people wanted us to serve that demand.

How has your business been impacted by, and adapted to, COVID-19?

It was crazy. The biggest effect for us was on shipping, as we ship worldwide to Europe, Asia and the US, which became much more complicated with COVID-19. The impact wasn't the market, our market grew. We produce materials that are used in medical imaging and other advanced technologies, so our market doubled.

The other impact was on our supply chain of raw materials and consumables. We use gloves and personal protective equipment in our production facility and those were harder to source. We import raw materials from China, Russia and other parts of the world which curtailed our exports. COVID-19 forced us to diversify our supply chain. We have been partnering with Teck Resources Limited to divert some of their B.C. mining by-products from their waste stream to be used in our products. Many of the materials that we use to create our high purity metals are mined in B.C. but require sophisticated technology, like ours, to make it into a profitable product.

What has been your greatest reward to date as a small business in your industry?

It took us two and a half years to get our facility up and running and to get our products qualified for use internationally. But we did it and five products were qualified for international distribution. The products are all oxide-free and high purity metals that are hard to find on the market.

What challenges did you encounter while growing your business? How did you overcome these?

One of our challenges was getting the right people. Fortunately, when the company that I previously sold moved out of Trail, B.C. they left all my old staff. So, I was able to rehire many of the people that I worked with before. My advice to other entrepreneurs facing similar challenges is that you have to be competitive with wages and offer the right fit for the job. Also, advertise your location, and if somebody is looking for engaging work in a small-town setting with access to hiking, camping and the amazing natural world, this could be a great fit.

What advice do you have for companies who want to sell their products overseas/enter international markets?

Use the government programs to support you in getting all the paperwork in order and making the right connections. The programs are really helpful. I have a great shipper who takes care of all the details. You have to have the right people to work with.

The Bottom Line:

- Fenix Advanced Materials employs eight people and has two established product lines.
- Fenix Advanced Materials is in the process of hiring new people and expanding its product lines.
- In the next five years, they will expand to at least five product lines, move into a new facility and capitalize on the expanding markets for their products, especially in medical imaging. The possibility of a battery product could expand their markets even further.