

## CONNECT: the key connection for Northeast shippers

The Coalition of New England Companies for Trade, better known by the acronym CONECT, is the most important international trade association in the Northeast.

The Southborough, Mass.-based nonprofit is composed of importers, exporters, manufacturers, traders, trade associations, customs brokers, freight forwarders, non-NVOs, logistics and transportation providers, financial institutions, law and accounting firms, warehouses and distribution centers.

Incorporated in 1991, CONECT was founded by 10 Massachusetts business people involved in international trade, including its first president, Joan Paddock, who was employed by Reebok at the time. The catalyst for its creation was the filing of an apparel and footwear quota bill in Congress in 1989. Peter Friedmann, Reebok's attorney, told senior management that if the bill passed Reebok's ability to import footwear would be compromised. He suggested that the company contact Bay State congressmen and inform them that the quota would negatively affect many Massachusetts importers. Senior management supported the idea, sending Friedmann and Paddock to Washington.

In DC Friedmann and Paddock found that the New England congressmen were shocked to hear from constituents in favor of imports. They told Paddock and Friedmann that they had typically only heard from the other side of the fence; from the labor unions lobbying to impose quotas. It was evident to the Reebok representatives that this was not just a quota issue — it was a trade policy issue. There was a widespread misunderstanding by congressmen who believed that manufacturing was still strong in New England, when in fact, that scenario had changed over the prior decades.

The footwear bill was stopped and the need for an international trade group made obvious. Peter Friedmann became counsel for CONECT and monitors trade related issues for the group. He's instrumental in organizing CONECT's annual Federal Trade and Transportation Policy Briefing in Washington that enables members to meet their legislators and discuss trade issues.

Since the beginning CONECT has become the voice of

New England's shippers with its pro-trade advocacy. Many of the importers and exporters are high profile companies like Reebok, Staples, Christmas Tree Shops, Eddie Bauer, Genzyme, CVS Pharmacy, Franklin Sports, Ocean Spray and International Forest Products. However, others represented include smaller shippers in need of expert knowledge and a forum for discussing trade issues. Although it is associated with New England, over 20% of the membership is from outside the six-State region, a testament to the importance of CONECT's voice in Washington.

Carol Turner, who was hired in 1999 as CONECT's executive director, said "Some of our distant members might attend only one or two CONECT programs in a year, but they find their membership worthwhile for all those extra benefits."

Geoff Giovanetti, managing director of Reston, Va.-based Wine and Spirits Shippers Association, uses his CONECT membership well. "I certainly believe in combining forces within a cooperative effort and feel that CONECT does an excellent job of educating and representing companies involved in international trade, no matter where they are located," he said. "Being a member of CONECT has kept us 'connected' to the concerns of our own New England membership better than any other means we have available. It also provides us an outstanding forum to address concerns with decision-makers involved in transportation and port services, legislation and regulations."

CONNECT's formula of trade advocacy coupled with networking and education has helped it grow to more than 700 members, representing basically every facet of international trade. A 21-member board of directors governs the organization, and a board member who serves as a state chair represents each of the six New England states. Currently Rick Bridges, Vice President of Roanoke Trade Services, Inc. located in Boston, is President. Karen Kenney, one of the founding members of CONECT, is Chairman. Kenney serves as Chief Operating Officer of Liberty International, Inc, a national Customs Broker and international logistics service provider based in New England.