



[Exporting cushion covers of natural fibres to Europe](#)

The European market for natural fibre textile furnishing articles (including cushion covers) is growing strongly. Most imports originate from developing countries, which offers you interesting opportunities. The middle to high segments have the most potential. To appeal to these consumers, you need to add value to your product. Good ways to do so include focusing on craftsmanship, design and sustainability.

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1 . Product description

A cushion cover is a fabric case that covers cushions. Cushion covers function primarily as decoration, providing an inexpensive way to express your personal style. They can be used both in the living room and as decoration in the bedroom. At the same time, they are used as protection for cushions, since the cushions themselves are not frequently washed or replaced.

This study uses the following codes to indicate trade in natural fibre cushion covers:

Table 1: Product codes

Harmonised System (HS)	Prodcom	Description
6304 92		Other textile furnishing articles, of cotton, not knitted or crocheted, of cotton
6304 99		Other textile furnishing articles, not knitted or crocheted, of other (non-synthetic) materials

	13 92 16 60	Other textile furnishing articles
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Quality

Functionality

Cushion covers serve primarily as decoration for the sofa, couch and bed.

Material

Cushion covers are available in a wide variety of fabrics. Natural fibre cushion covers consist of cotton, linen, wool, silk, jute and leather.

Size

Sizes of cushion covers vary, matching the sizes of the cushions. The most common sizes on the European market are:

- 40 x 40 cm
- 40 x 65 cm
- 45 x 45 cm
- 50 x 30 cm
- 50 x 50 cm
- 65 x 65 cm

Other sizes are also available, depending on the target country. Ask your European buyer which specific sizes they may be looking for in the early stages of collaboration.

Design

Cushion covers come in a variety of designs, depending on their origin and the targeted market segment. Various cushion shapes are available in Europe, including round, heart shaped and cylindrical bolster cushions.

Labelling

External packaging labels for cushion covers should include the producer, consignee, composition, size, number of pieces, box identification, total number of boxes, and net and gross weight.

The most important information on the product or packing labels of cushion covers: composition, size, origin and care labelling. For more information, refer to the chapter on buyer requirements.

Packaging

You should pack cushion covers according to the importer's instructions. Packaging usually consists of plastic wrapping to protect the fabric from water, solar radiation and staining. It should be easily manageable in terms of size and weight, and ideally fit together on (Euro) pallets. When in doubt, check the dimensions with your buyer.

Cushion covers are usually displayed in stores without any packaging. However, especially in the high-end segment they come with gift wrap. For the middle and low-end segments, consumer packaging can be simple in design, like simple paper or plastic wrapping.

2 . Which European markets offer opportunities for exporters of natural fibre cushion covers?

European imports of natural fibre textile furnishing articles are growing strongly, most of which come from developing countries. Europe's main importers of natural fibre textile furnishing articles are Germany and Spain. Their strong imports from developing countries make them especially interesting focus countries.

Note that because no specific trade data are available for cushion covers, these statistics cover textile furnishing articles.

Also note that since the production and consumption data do not distinguish between natural and synthetic materials, these statistics cover textile furnishing articles in general.

Where is consumer demand?

- European demand for textile furnishing articles increased between 2012 and 2016. With an average annual growth rate of 0.8%, it reached €1.7 billion in 2016.
- European demand for textile furnishing articles is highest in Spain (€202 million) and the United Kingdom (€197 million). Italy and Romania follow at €185 million and €182 million respectively.

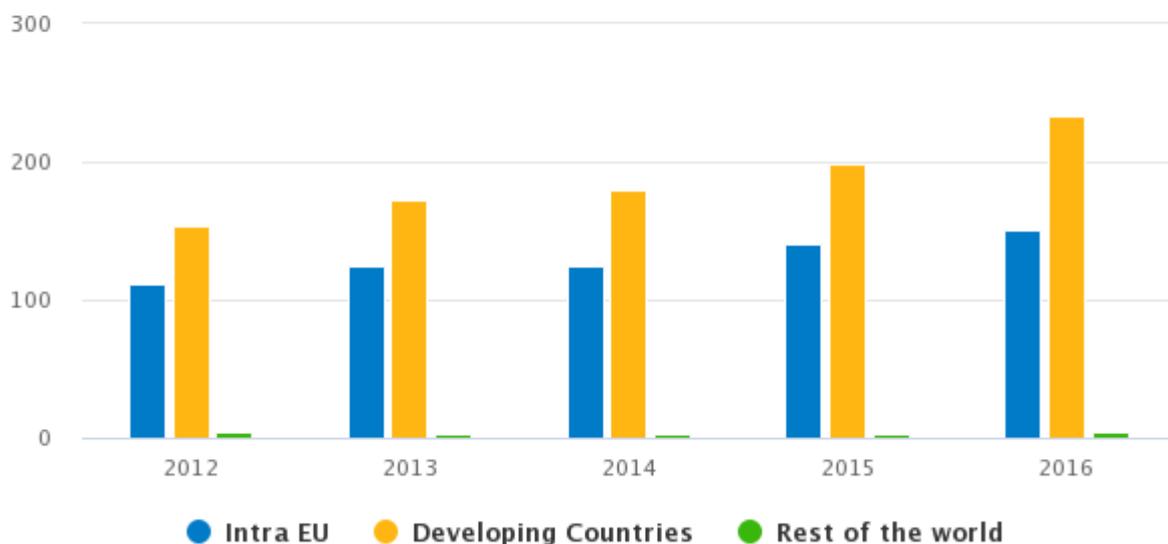
What is the role of European production in supplying European demand?

- Europe's demand for textile furnishing articles is considerably larger than its production. This drives the need for imports, making Europe an interesting market.
- European production of textile furnishing articles decreased between 2012 and 2016. With an average annual growth rate of -1.7%, it fell to €1.3 billion in 2016.
- Romania is responsible for 19% of Europe's textile furnishing article production. Italy and Poland follow with 13% million and 12% respectively. Eastern European production generally supplies the low-end market, whereas Italy produces for the high-end market.

Which countries are most interesting in terms of imports from developing countries?

Figure 1: European imports of natural fibre furnishing articles 2012–2016

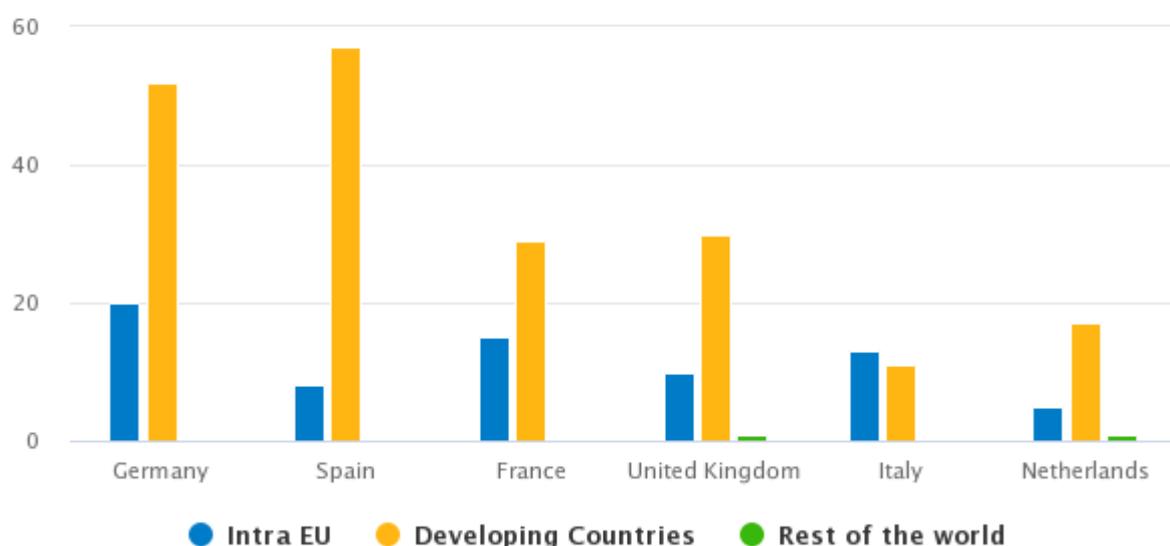
in € million



Source: Trademap

Figure 2: Main importers of natural fibre furnishing articles 2016

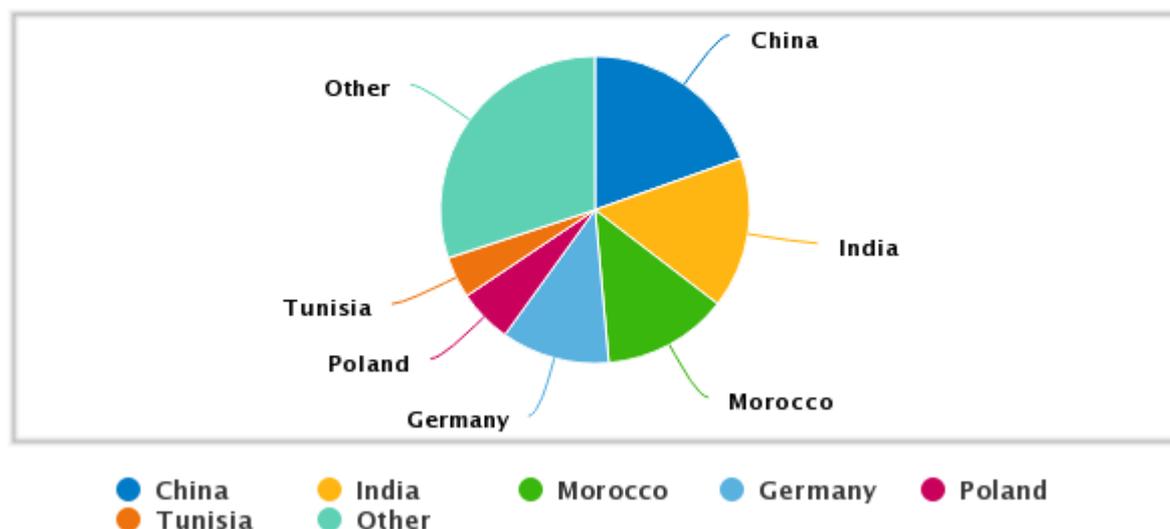
in € million



Source: Trademap

Figure 3: Leading suppliers of natural fibre furnishing articles 2016

in %



Source: Trademap

- European imports of natural fibre textile furnishing articles increased from €269 million in 2012 to €388 million in 2016. This resulted in an average annual growth rate of 9.6%.
- In the coming years, European imports are expected to maintain this growth.
- Developing countries are Europe's main source of natural fibre textile furnishing article imports. They supply 60%, amounting to € 233 million in 2016. This share is predicted to increase slightly in the coming years.
- In reality, much of the cushion cover imports from western European countries concerns re-exporting products manufactured in developing countries.
- Germany is Europe's leading importer of natural fibre textile furnishing articles, at €72 million

in 2016. Spain follows with €65 million.

- These countries also lead when it comes to imports from developing countries. Germany sources 73% of its natural fibre textile furnishing articles from developing countries, Spain 88%.
- The strong performance of developing country suppliers in Spain and Germany is evidenced further by strong increases between 2012 and 2016. These countries upped their imports from developing countries by €49 million and €16 million respectively. Together, they are responsible for 81% of the total European increase in imports from developing countries.
- Europe's leading suppliers of natural fibre textile furnishing article imports are mainly developing countries. China led with 20% in 2016, but is not as dominant as in this sector as elsewhere. Morocco and India followed closely with 16% and 13% respectively. Tunisia (4.4%) and Turkey (3.6%) are also considerable players.

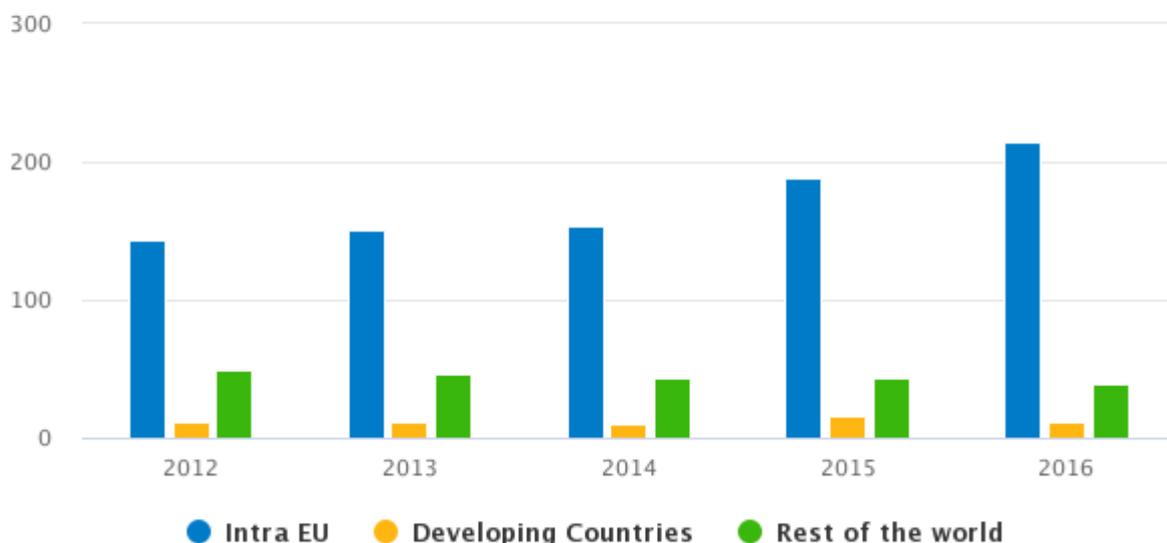
Tips:

- Study your options in Germany and Spain. Their strong imports from developing countries make them especially interesting markets.
- The upcoming [Brexit](#) (Great Britain leaving the European Union) has decreased the value of the British pound. As a result, more British buyers have started importing directly from developing countries rather than buying from European importers. However, as the situation is still fluid and insecure, you should keep a close watch on developments.
- Compare your products and company to the strong competition from China, as well as from Morocco, India, Tunisia and Turkey. You can use [ITC Trademap](#) to find exporters per country. You can compare on market segment, price, quality and target countries.

What role does export play in supplying European demand?

Figure 4: European exports of natural fibre furnishing articles 2012–2016

in € million



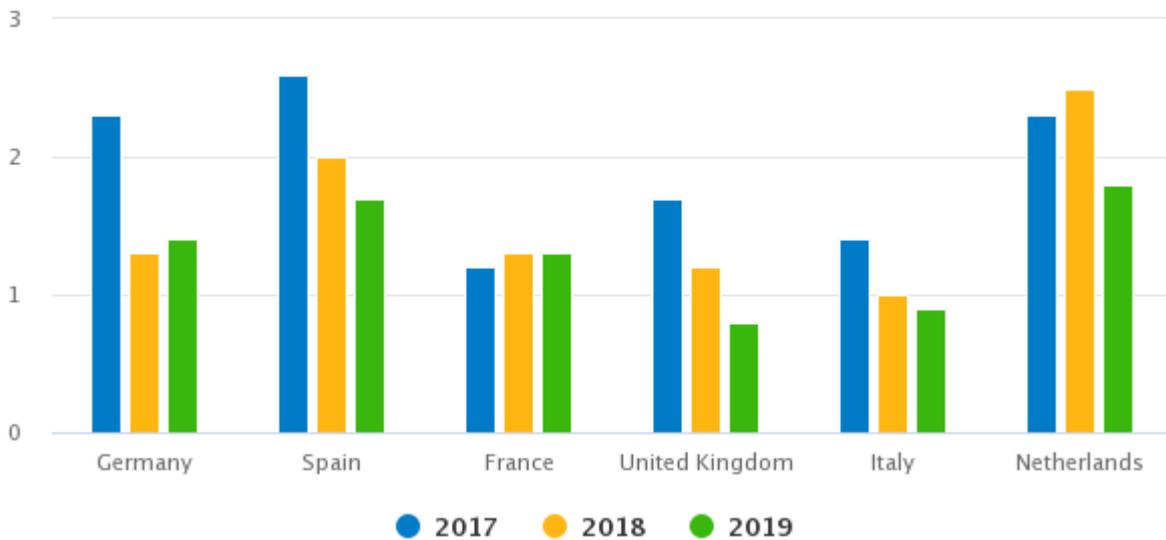
Source: Trademap

- European natural fibre textile furnishing article exports consist mainly of trade within Europe and with developed countries.

- Romania (€61 million) and Germany (€52 million) are Europe's leading natural fibre textile furnishing article exporters.

What is the effect of real private consumption expenditure on European demand?

Figure 5: Real private consumption expenditure growth
2017–2019
in %



Source: Eurostat

- Private consumption expenditure is an important indicator for the European home decoration market. The sector is closely linked to economic conditions. When money is tight, consumers postpone buying non-essential items until they have enough disposable income.
- Between 2017 and 2019, European private consumption expenditure is expected to increase, so consumption of decorative products is likely to rise. Especially in emerging markets, consumers will have more money available to spend on decorating the home. Consumers in mature markets already spend a fair amount of money on decoration, so growth in their consumption will be moderate.

3. Which trends offer opportunities on the European market for natural fibre cushion covers?

Natural look

The feeling of wanting to escape to nature, combined with a lack of time in busy city life, inspires designers to merge outdoor imagery with indoor decoration. Flowers or leaf patterns, green colours and print combinations that relate to natural habitats are becoming increasingly popular.

Tips:

- Offer cushion covers with a natural look by using natural colours and patterns that resemble nature.
- Consider using elegant materials and designs, especially when you target the high and middle-high end of the market.

Ethnic patterns

Ethnic motifs and traditional craftsmanship are popular (long-term) trends on the European market for cushion covers. Consumers are interested in the story behind the product, which adds to its uniqueness. Kilim cushion covers are a successful example of the influence of tradition. Hand-woven and made of wool, these Turkish cushion covers are a unique product with a story.

Tips

- Promote your culture's traditional production method, adding a background story to your product. Make sure that it comes across clearly to the consumer, for example by including a card describing the product's unique story.
- Consider experimenting with your traditional designs and reinventing them in a more contemporary manner.

Sustainability

Consumers and designers are shifting their preferences towards more sustainable choices. There is an increasing concern and awareness of the negative impacts of production and consumption. This is driving the popularity of sustainability labels and commitments in the textile industry. For cushion covers, this can include sustainable raw materials like organic cotton, wool and silk, as well as relatively "new" fibres like bamboo and hemp.

Tips:

- Consider sourcing sustainably produced fabrics for your cushion covers, especially when you target the higher segments.
- For more information, see our special study on [sustainability](#).

Range and concept development

More and more buyers (especially in the middle-high segment) are selling concepts to their clients, rather than single products. They do this for marketing and positioning purposes and to push their sales. To benefit from this trend, cushion covers can be sold as part of a wider range of similar products, including different materials and techniques. Combinations with bedspreads and throws are also a possibility.

Tip:

- Consider developing a small range of cushion covers with a similar look and style using different techniques and materials.

For more information, see our study about [trends for Home Decoration & Home Textiles](#).

4 . With which requirements must natural fibre cushion covers comply to be allowed on the European market?

With which legal and non-legal requirements must your product comply?

General product safety

The European Union's [General Product Safety Directive](#) applies to all consumer products, including cushion covers. It states that all products marketed in Europe must be safe to use.

Tips:

- Read more about the [General Product Safety Directive](#).
- Use your common sense to ensure normal use of your product does not cause any danger.
- The [RAPEX database](#) lists products that the European Union has rejected at the border or withdrawn from the market. Check the database for similar products for an idea of what issues may arise.

Restricted chemicals: REACH

The [REACH](#) regulation lists restricted chemicals in products that are marketed in Europe. For example, REACH restricts the use of azo dyes and certain flame retardants in textile products.

Tips:

- The European Chemical Agency provides useful information and tips on REACH. See for instance [REACH Annex XVII](#) for a list of all restricted chemicals. Also check out the [Information on REACH for companies established outside Europe](#) and the [Questions & Answers on REACH](#).
- Follow new developments in the field of flame retardants, as new alternatives are being developed. You can do so for instance through the [European Flame Retardants Association](#) (EFRA).

Textile Regulation

According to the European Union's [Textile Regulation](#), textile products should be labelled or marked to indicate their fibre composition. These labels should be durable and tear-resistant, securely attached, easily legible, visible and accessible.

Tip:

- For more information, see the [Frequently Asked Questions about the Textile Regulation](#).

Packaging legislation

Europe has specific [packaging and packaging waste legislation](#). It for instance restricts the use of certain heavy metals. Europe also has [requirements for wood packaging materials](#) (WPM) used for transport, such as packing cases, boxes, crates, drums, (box) pallets and dunnage.

Tip:

- Read more in the [overview of EU rules on wood packaging material](#).

What additional requirements do buyers often have?

Sustainability

Social and environmental sustainability make your products stand out on the European market. Consider sustainable raw materials and production processes. European buyers increasingly demand the following certification schemes.

- [Business Social Compliance Initiative \(BSCI\)](#): European retailers developed this initiative to improve social conditions in sourcing countries. They expect their suppliers to comply with the BSCI Code of Conduct. To prove compliance, the importer can request an audit of your production process. Once a company has been audited, it is included in a database for all BSCI participants.
- [Ethical Trading Initiative \(ETI\)](#): This initiative is an alliance of companies, trade unions and voluntary organisations. It aims to improve the working lives of people across the globe who make or grow consumer goods.

You can use standards such as [ISO 14001](#) and [SA 8000](#) to read up on sustainable options. However, only niche market buyers demand compliance with such standards.

Tips:

- Optimise your sustainability performance. Reading up on the issues included in the initiatives will give you an idea of what to focus on.
- Buyers appreciate a good story. If you can show that you value your company's environmental and/or social performance, this may be a competitive advantage. Consider a self-assessment like the [BSCI Self-Assessment for Producers](#), or a code of conduct such as the [BSCI Code of Conduct](#) or the [ETI base code](#).
- For more information, see our special study on [Sustainability in the Home Sector](#).

What are the requirements for niche markets?

Fair trade

The concept of fair trade supports fair pricing and improved social conditions for producers and their communities. Especially when the production of your cushion covers is labour-intensive, for example hand-knitting, fair-trade certification can give you a competitive advantage.

Common fair-trade certifications are from:

- [World Fair Trade Organisation](#) (WFTO)
- [Fairtrade International](#)

- [Fair For Life](#).

Tips:

- Ask buyers what they are looking for. Especially in the fair-trade sector, you can use the story behind your product for marketing purposes.
- Check the [ITC Standards map database](#) for more information on voluntary standards and their requirements, including fair production.

Sustainable textile certification

Across the home sector, sustainability is gaining ground. Although the actual use of certification is still not widespread in home textiles, there is an increasing interest from buyers.

The [Global Organic Textile Standard](#) (GOTS) ensures environmental and social responsibility throughout the production chain. To qualify, textile products must contain over 70% organic fibres.

[OEKO-TEX](#) Standard 100 certification guarantees no hazardous chemicals were used in production.

The [EU Ecolabel](#) for textiles focus on minimising environmental impact at the manufacturing stage.

Tips:

- Read more on [GOTS](#), [OEKO-TEX](#) and the [EU Ecolabel](#) in the ITC Standards Map.
- Determine which certification programme would be the best fit for you and apply if possible.

Woolmark

[Woolmark](#) certification provides consumers with guaranteed wool fibre content and an assurance of quality. It contains specific standards for several product groups, including furnishing fabrics.

Tip:

- If you supply woollen products, study [how to become a Woolmark licensee](#) and consult the Woolmark specifications for [furnishing fabrics](#).

For more information, see our study about [buyer requirements for Home Decoration & Home Textiles](#).

5 . What competition do you face on the European natural fibre cushion covers market?

The competition for cushion covers does not differ significantly from the sector in general. See our study about [competition for Home Decoration](#) for a general overview. Also refer to our [10 tips for doing business with European buyers](#).

6 . Which channels can you use to put natural fibre cushion covers on the European market?

The market channels and segments for cushion covers do not differ significantly from the sector in general. See our study about [market channels and segments for Home Decoration & Home Textiles](#) for a general overview.

Market channels

Cushion covers can be found in a wide variety of shops, ranging from low-end discounters to high-end boutiques. A lot of shops that are not specialised in home textiles also sell cushion covers, since they are very popular as accessories, including gift shops and garden centres. In the low-end segment even supermarkets and drugstores sell cushion covers.

The channels through which cushion covers are put on the market follow the traditional patterns: import via importers and/or wholesalers that supply retailers, and larger retail chains that import themselves. E-commerce is still gaining in importance, and more and more smaller retailers have started buying directly from the supplier, especially the more high-end cushion covers.

Tip:

- For more information about trading directly with smaller retailers, see our special study about [alternative distribution channels](#).

E-commerce

E-commerce in home decoration is increasing and can help you reach a broader range of customers. Retailers often combine online and offline channels. Consumers research and purchase products online, shopping around and comparing prices on home decoration items. To supply e-commerce retailers you must be able to work with individual packing and labelling, as well as limited minimum orders.

Tips:

- See our special study about [E-commerce in Home Decoration & Home Textiles](#) for more information.
- Target online business-to-consumer retailers if you can meet the additional requirements.

Trade associations and fairs

The following trade associations and fairs are useful sources for finding trading partners in Europe.

- [Ambiente](#), Frankfurt, February
- [EURATEX](#), European Apparel and Textile Confederation
- [Heimtextil](#), Frankfurt, January
- [Maison et Objet](#), Paris, January and September

Market segments

In the low segment, simple and inexpensive cushion covers are common, often made of man-made fibres. In this segment it is very hard to add value since the price is the main aspect. In the middle segment, cushion covers are manufactured with sustainable raw materials like organic cotton and

hemp. In the high segment, designer quality is common and private labels are the standard.

The middle and high-end markets offer you the most opportunities. To supply these segments you need to pay particular attention to design and quality. You can add value through special techniques such as printing, applique and embroidery, and combining different materials or adding accessories such as fringes, pompoms or tassels. Instead of using woven fabrics to make a cushion cover you can also knit or crochet them.

7 . What are the end-market prices for natural fibre cushion covers?

Prices for cushion covers vary depending on composition, manufacturing technique, size, design and brand.

Table 2 gives an overview of the indicative prices of natural fibre cushion covers in the low, middle and high market segments. “Indicative” is key here, since prices for cushion covers vary depending on composition, manufacturing technique, size, design, brand and other forms of value addition.

Table 2: Indicative consumer prices of natural fibre cushion covers

	Low-end	Middle-low end	Middle-high end	High-end
Cushion covers	€4-10	€10-15	€20-50	€60 or more

The European consumer price of your cushion covers is around 4 to 6½ times your selling price. Shipping, import and handling add 15-20%. Wholesalers account for a further 50-90% markup. Retailers may add another 90-150% to the price. Finally, European VAT percentages range from 18% in Malta to 27% in Sweden.

Your original selling price depends heavily on the availability and cost of raw materials. For example, the average prices of cotton fluctuated considerably in recent years. Occasional increases in the price of raw materials are not directly passed on to the consumer, but do put pressure on exporters, importers and retailers’ margins.

Tips:

- The value perception of your product in the chosen segment determines its price. The quality and price of your cushion covers must match what is expected in your chosen target segment. To determine your price, study consumer prices in your target segment. Adjust your cost accordingly.
- Understand your segment. Offer a correct marketing mix to meet consumer expectations. Adapt your business model to your position in the market.

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