



[8 tips for doing business with European buyers of fresh fruit and vegetables](#)

The European fresh fruit and vegetables sector is a dynamic world full of opportunities. However, it is also a complex and highly professional world, with requirements and expectations you will need to comply with to be successful. These tips for exporters from developing countries will help you prepare yourself for doing business in Europe.

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1 . Ensure quality above all else

Quality is your top priority in this sector. Anything less than the best quality, is simply not good enough.

To monitor quality, there are European quality and marketing standards that your products have to comply with. On top of these, each buyer has his/her own specific quality requirements and expectations.

Quality requirements are not open for discussion!

Tips:

- Make quality your top priority. Anything less than the best, is simply not good enough.
- Study and implement [European quality and marketing standards](#).
- Don't overlook a buyer's additional quality requirements.

2 . Implement food safety protocols and certification

A minimum requirement for doing business with European buyers is [GlobalG.A.P.](#) certification. Your products and processes must therefore be certified. It is also vital that you comply with the European Union (EU) food safety laws and standards as described by the [EU Export Help](#).

On top of this, retail organisations, especially in Northern Europe, have additional demands with respect to the maximum residue levels allowed on products. The levels demanded by retail organisations are in fact much stricter than the European food safety law requires. They are also stricter than the certification from GlobalG.A.P. requires. Chemical spray programs and records will be demanded next to the GlobalG.A.P. certification.

Next to the GlobalGap food safety protocol, there are also buyer requirements for hygiene in the processing and packaging. [HACCP \(Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point\)](#) certification is a minimum requirement.

Many European supermarkets call for compliance with BRC Standards from the [British Retail Consortium](#) (BRC). There are other certification bodies and international protocols like those from the [IFS \(International Featured Standards\)](#).

Tips:

- Check the requirements well with your potential buyer. Keep in mind that most retail organisations have their own, stricter requirements for food safety.
- Work with your agronomist and GlobalGap consultant on production methods lowering the use of chemicals. (IPM)
- Get certified. [GlobalG.A.P. certification](#) is a minimum requirement for doing business with European buyers.
- Acquire HACCP as a minimum standard for hygiene if your company is involved in processing and packaging.
- Consider extra hygiene certifications: [BRC \(British Retail Consortium\) audits and certifies hygiene and quality protocols commonly required](#) by European supermarkets. IFS may be an alternative.
- Read the CBI survey on [buyer requirements](#) for an overview of essential buyer requirements.

3 . Match supply with demand

Whether or not you are a producer or an exporter, you will need to find buyers that demand the quantities you can supply. It makes no sense to approach a buyer who is looking for 200 tons of a product per week, when you can only supply 10 tons. Similarly, if you can produce or supply large quantities, it makes no sense to approach small, niche importers.

Always verify your available volume of exportable quality product, and then find a buyer to match.

In this sector, volumes are considered bulk when they reach at least one container per week in exportable quality and condition during a production season.

In terms of smaller exotics which can be air freighted, you need to be able to produce or supply a minimum workable volume per week.

Tips:

- Find buyers that demand the quantities you can supply.
- If your products fall into the exotics category, look for specialistic importers trading in these kind of products and check what the minimum workable volume per week is for them.
- See also the CBI survey on [how to find buyers in the European fresh fruit and vegetable sector](#).

4 . Sustainability is becoming a key requirement

Sustainability is becoming a key requirement and is demanded by consumers and retailers across Europe. This is because consumers have become more aware about the origins of the products they buy. They are concerned about the environment, the social circumstances, labour rights, fair trading practices and the general wellbeing of the people and places products are produced in.

In turn, supermarkets have sharpened sustainability requirements in their sourcing and procurement. By doing so, they hope to mitigate these concerns, improve working conditions and protect the environment.

Major buyers demand compliance with sustainability protocols. There are currently a number of sustainability protocols and systems available such as the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), the Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI), the Supplier Ethical Data Exchange (SEDEX), the GlobalG.A.P. Risk Assessment on Social Practice (GRASP), Fair for Life and Fair Trade for you to comply with. It is expected that these will be refined in the future and consolidated into only a few major protocols.

Especially the Northern European supermarkets increased their demands for social compliance; without one of the social protocols it is almost impossible to come into business with them.

You are advised to implement one of these sustainability protocols.

Tips:

- Research and implement a sustainability protocol, for example: [ETI](#), [BSCI](#), [SEDEX](#), [GRASP](#), [Fair for Life](#) and [Fair Trade](#).
- Read the CBI survey on [buyer requirements](#) for an overview of additional market standards.

5 . Provide reliability and continuity

The competition in this sector may be fierce, but buyers are not eager to hop around from supplier to supplier. They want to build reliable partnerships with trustworthy suppliers, and provide continuity for their businesses.

This means that you must always respect the agreements you make with buyers. Only so called 'acts of God' (for instance floods, hail storms, drought, etc.) are acceptable reasons for a breach or deviation of an agreement. Poor planning or other management errors on the other hand, are

unacceptable.

Plan your production, buying of inputs, packaging materials, your processing, logistics et cetera, very thoroughly.

Tips:

- Never promise more than you can fulfill: European buyers want to build reliable partnerships with trustworthy suppliers.
- Always respect the agreements you make with buyers.
- Plan your production, buying of inputs, packaging materials, your processing, logistics, etc., very thoroughly.

6 . Optimise communication and timing

Generally speaking, the business communication in the world of fresh fruit and vegetables is straightforward, short and direct. Buyers have little patience for unnecessary communication, so you need to be clear and to the point. You must not leave any room for interpretation or doubt.

A European buyer expects you to be available according to his/her timezone. They will make some allowance for time differences, but make sure you are working to their business operating hours.

Buyers will expect you to answer emails (and any other types of messages) the same working day. This calls for good internet access.

Communicate in good times and in bad times. Do not hide from delivering bad news. If something goes wrong, communicate this with the buyer directly. Then look for possible solutions together and discuss the consequences openly.

Tips:

- Maintain excellent and direct communications. Business communication in the world of fresh fruit and vegetables is straightforward, short and direct.
- Europeans have many different communication styles. Read this overview provided by [Passport to Trade 2.0](#) for insights into the different business cultures across Europe.
- Communication must be clear and to the point.
- Answer emails (and any other types of messages) the same working day.
- Work to the buyer's timezone as much as possible.
- Communicate in good times and in bad. Do not hide from delivering bad news. If something goes wrong, communicate this with the buyer directly and openly.

7 . Provide logistics solutions

Some buyers are willing to pay the freight costs. However, they will expect you to find out the best transit schedules and the best rates. You are also responsible for the correct documentation for exporting to Europe.

Working with a good logistics agent and freight forwarder will help you to provide the best logistics solutions, and make sure you have the correct documents that have been drawn up by experts.

Tips:

- Provide your buyers with freight rates, transit times and arrival schedules so s/he can calculate the costs and plan further trade.
- Find the best transit schedules and the best rates.
- Work with a good logistics agent and freight forwarder.
- Make sure you have the correct documentation drawn up by experts.

8 . Offer clear and workable agreements

When you find an interested buyer, make sure your offer them clear, complete and workable agreements. Be very concise about what you offer and include information on: product, variety, sizes/counts, volume, certification, season, packaging, boxes per pallet/container, etcetera.

Cash and credit are important working tools for your buyers. Expect attempts to push the payment deadlines or payments right at the very last moment. It is therefore very important to make sure the terms of your agreements are clear and include Inco terms, trading and payment terms.

Tips:

- Your agreements must be clear and comprehensive.
- Include [Inco terms](#), trading and payment terms.
- Expect attempts to push the payment deadlines or payments right at the very last moment. Make sure you maintain flexibility in your financial position.
- Be strict on your agreed terms and communicate in time in case of non-compliance in order to find solutions with your client.

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