10 tips for finding buyers in the European apparel sector

The European apparel market is highly sophisticated, fast and very segmented. This means that randomly approaching the market as a garment manufacturer from a developing country will most likely lead to failure. Instead, you have to match your offer to a very specific segment, or even a niche. Below are ten tips about this and other vital aspects of finding buyers on the European apparel market.

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1. Determine your own ambition, strategy and unique selling points first

Before anything else, focus on your company strategy and unique selling points. Make sure you have clearly defined what your company wants and how you aim to achieve that. Investing time and money in finding buyers is a waste if after the investment you discover that the customer does not really match your company and where you want to go. Focus on your strengths and minimise your weaknesses.

2. Find out which segment offers you the best opportunities

The next step is to find out how the European market works and which markets or segments are best suited for your company and offer. Reserve time and money for market research. Look at different countries and their features in order to find out where your offer will fit best. Consider, for example, market segments, pricing, quality levels, volumes and trends.

There is a lot of useful market information on the Internet (see Tip 3). You can also make use of CBI’s many in-depth and up-to-date studies on the European market for apparel.
Tips:

- Invest in a shopping trip to investigate your target market and customers. This is the best way by far to understand a market and get a realistic picture of products, price levels, customers and much more.
- Focus on niche products that are likely to grow, like Islamic wear, home wear and pet wear.
- For more information, see our studies about trends on the European apparel market, Europe’s different apparel channels and segments and their characteristics, doing business on the European apparel market, or 3D Design.

3. Use online platforms to receive reliable information on fabrics, brands and innovation

Depending on the nature of your export product, you can choose from numerous websites to find the latest insights on fabrics, brands and innovation. Collecting this kind of information will enable you to better understand your buyers and adapt your offer to their needs and wishes. And that, in turn, will enable you to generate more business. Profile your company online and build a brand based on your company identity.

Market intelligence platforms widely used by European buyers include the following:

- Just-style, sourcing & procurement;
- WGSN trend forecasts;
- Fibre to Fashion, an online business-to-business marketplace;
- Fashion United, fashion trends and agendas;
- For news on fashion retail developments, see the AEDT, the European association of fashion retailers, Fab, the fashion association of Britain and the NYFRA, the New York Fashion and Retail Association;
- Sports Textiles and the WFSGI, or World Federation of Sporting Goods, covers the sports fashion segment;
- Leather Biz is a leader in leather information.

Tip:

- For the upcoming seasons, read CBI’s Fashion Forecast Winter 2018-2019 and Fashion Forecast Summer 2019

4. Visit the right trade fairs and events

Most buyers visit different trade shows and events. They do this to connect with other players, including suppliers, but also to stay in touch with trends, such as the next season’s colours, trimmings, techniques and fabrics. As a supplier, you, too, will find trade fairs a great place to meet buyers and to get a better understanding of market developments. Try to approach a buyer on the same level. Look for the right chemistry between yourself and buyers to ensure doing successful business.

You can attend trade fairs either as a visitor or as an exhibitor. Advantages of going as a visitor first
are that you can get a feel for the event, spend time talking with buyers and exhibitors, explore what others are offering and find out which halls attract most traffic (or the most worthwhile traffic).

**Tips:**

- If you want to exhibit, share costs with a partner factory exhibiting a different product.
- Find out in advance how many customers/visitor visited the fair last time. This can help you to select the right fair.
- Make an effort to build a new collection around this important promotional event that includes both samples and fabrics.
- Collect special fabrics from your different fabric suppliers; do not bring basic qualities.
- Collect different production samples and focus on special styles that will attract buyers, while also displaying your technical skills. Do not waste time on making samples.
- Hire a European designer to help you with your booth presentation. It needs to look special and eye-catching!
- Invite new and existing buyers to your booth and set clear marketing objectives. For example, measure the success of the fair by the number of new customers that visited your booth, or the number of sample orders you acquire, as compared to the target you set beforehand. The more clearly you think these objectives through, the better you will prepare yourself and your staff for the fair and the more likely you are to succeed.
- Attend some of the presentations organised during the fair. These can provide you with a lot of information and insights.
- Join a presentation as a jury member to create company exposure.

These are the most prominent trade events:

**Fabrics**

- [Premiere vision, Paris, France](#)
- [Tissu Premier, Lille, France](#)
- [Texworld, Paris, France](#)
- [Munich Fabric Start](#)
- [Intertextile Shanghai](#)

**Fibres**

- [Pitti Filati, Florence, Italy](#)

**Leather**

- [Lineapelle, Milan, Italy](#)
- [Istanbul Leather show, Istanbul, Turkey](#)
- [ILM International Leather Goods Fair, Offenbach, Germany](#)

**Manufacturing**

Buyers go to trade shows for manufacturing to check out what is trending in apparel production. These events are a great place to meet dedicated buyers as an exhibitor. The best-visited shows are:

- [The Sourcing Connection Premier Visio, Paris, France](#)
Brands and fashion retailer / fashion chain groups

There are many trade events for fashion retailers. Some cater to distinct niches, such as sustainable apparel. Here are the main ones:

- **Bread & Butter, Berlin, Germany**
- **Ciff & CPH, Copenhagen, Denmark**
- **Playtime Kids & Maternity show, Paris, France**
- **Ethical Fashion Forum, London, UK**
- **Copenhagen Fashion Summit, Denmark**
- **Panorama Berlin, Germany**
- **Green Showroom, Berlin, Germany**

Sports and outdoor

The ISPO event is by far the most important show in this segment. The other two listed below are also worthwhile:

- **ISPO, Munich, Beijing and Shanghai**
- **SportAir, Annecy-le-Vieux, France**
- **Eurovet, Paris, France, a.o. places**

**Tips:**

- A good way of staying tuned to trade fair news is to connect with trade fair organizers, such as **Première Vision Paris, Messe Frankfurt, ISPO, CIFF, Eurovet** and **Pitti Immagine**.
- Check out fashion forums, such as **FashionUnited** or **just-style**, to stay posted on which shows are being held in Europe or elsewhere.

5. Invest time and effort in following up trade fair contacts effectively

Exhibiting at a trade fair is exciting, enervating and tiring. Many less experienced exhibitors forget that most trade fair business develops after the fair, not during the event. Take time to ensure effective follow-up when a trade fair is over. Be quick to send promotional materials, samples or answers that prospects have asked for. Do all you can to get the most out of every lead you generated at the fair. After sending all the requested information and materials, do not wait for a reply, but plan a visit to the buyer’s office. In the meantime, the buyer can then use your information to prepare inquiries, developments or orders.

**Tips:**

- Send or display only fashionable sample offers. If necessary, hire designer to create a small sample collection. If your samples are not attractive, you will not get the attention of professional buyers – unless they are looking for price items only.
- Offer flexible quantities (300 pieces and up). Flexibility is a good selling point.
- If your focus is on low-priced items (T-shirts, bulk products), your production efficiency
must be very high in order to be able to compete on the long term.

- Make sure your samples and company story match the country culture and expectations of buyers.

6. Connect with the right trade associations

Another way of getting in touch with buyers and purchasers of fashion and apparel is to get involved with the trade associations and bodies they are affiliated with. This approach is ‘softer’ than cold-calling or hard-selling at a trade fair. Remember it may be advisable to focus on the countries with the highest demand for apparel products.

Tips:

- Try and connect with the association management. Such connections often prove very useful in the long run, while in the shorter term these leaders often function as a first entrance to a nation.

- Most associations send out monthly newsletters with relevant industry updates. Sign up for these publications to keep in touch with developments in the industry.

- A good listing with sector and industry associations in your home country can also be very useful in getting you in touch with European buyers. Some buyers may visit your country on a sourcing mission and one of their first steps will be to contact the sector and industry bodies in your country.

- Locate other organisations active in the apparel sector by searching for them on the Internet using the following search words: sector association fashion Netherlands/UK, textile association, fashion federation, apparel federation, textile institute, or the German Gesammtverband.

- Use these synonyms for fashion when searching for associations: apparel, garments, textile, mode. Synonyms for association may be: industry group, sector association, federation or institute.

- Contact your embassy in your buyer’s country to help you arrange meetings. Prepare your request to the embassy well, providing good and attractive company information, as an embassy will not plan a meeting for you on the basis of just an email request.

Most brands and fashion retailers are registered with chambers of commerce and industry in their nations, or members of branch associations or institutes. In Europe, every country has its own fashion trade and textile association. For example:

- The International Apparel Federation is the world’s leading federation for apparel manufacturers, their associations, apparel retailers and the supporting industry;

- Modint is the apparel association in the Netherlands;

- Explore this overview of fashion associations in Spain;

- Confindustria Moda brings together Italy’s fashion associations and companies;

- Dialog Textil und Bekleidung is an association of high-ranking German fashion brands;

- The Confederation of the German Textile and Fashion Industry represents Germany’s entire industry;
• The UK Fashion and Textile Association is the United Kingdom’s voice and meeting place for suppliers of fashion and textiles.

If possible, become a member of these organisations to access more information, such as membership lists containing potential customers.

7. Be active in branding on social media

The key to success in using social media is to present your company consistently as a transparent, reliable (and sustainable) brand. If you do this well, your company name will be seen by buyers to represent quality. Add a hashtag to products mentioning your company name to emphasise this.

Monitor customers switching from your business to new companies, for example using LinkedIn. The easiest way to attract a new customer is to follow a buyer from company A to company B.

There are many examples of strong branding. Two good performers are Filucci and Dupont Sorona.

Most buyers are active, or at least findable, on LinkedIn or Xing. These social media platforms for business have numerous groups related to apparel sourcing, apparel production, the latest fashion and other key words you can use to look for connections and communities. Facebook is also gaining ground as a business platform. For more information, see these Facebook marketing tips.

Tips:

• On social media, follow brands you are interested in working with. This will provide you with company updates and news on their latest collections and travel schedules.

• Post activities on your LinkedIn page, Twitter or Instagram, or use an email generator like MailChimp to run campaigns and increase traffic and connections on social media.

• For more information, see our study on trends in European apparel market.

• Sign up for fashion blogs, or link your website to suitable blogs. Fashion blogs attract a lot of traffic, some of which may be redirected to your website. Blogs are also a great way of learning about new developments and insights.

8. Build expertise by connecting with auditing & certification bodies

Compliance is more important than ever in the apparel industry. Be aware of (changing) standards and be prepared to comply, if you want to stay in business in Europe. This is especially the case since Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013, in which the collapse of a garment factory in Bangladesh killed over a thousand people and became the worst industrial accident in the country’s history. This incident changed the apparel production sector.

The cry for full compliance and corporate social responsibility, in combination with reduction of carbon footprint and environmental impact, has since become louder than ever. Among other initiatives, it sparked the Bangladesh Accord, an independent, legally binding agreement between brands and trade unions designed to improve the safety and health conditions in the country’s ready-made garment industry.

If you run a fully compliant, state-of-the-art factory and are eager to join the chorus, check the Accord web regularly to keep stock of its signatories. Your performance in this field is a vital promotional tool: the better your performance, the more you need to communicate about it with prospective buyers – and the more interested many of them will be in your offer.
Many bodies have expressed their dedication to compliance and are relevant for the garment industry. Connect with them and use your connection as a strong promotional tool. Here are some of them:

- **Better Work**, which partners with 30 brands to improve garment factory conditions;
- **MVO Nederland**, the Dutch association for corporate social responsibility;
- The **ILO**, the United Nation’s International Labour Organization;
- **The Sustainable Apparel Coalition**, a coalition of brands, retailers, manufacturers, government, NGOs and academic experts working to reduce the environmental and social impacts of apparel and footwear products around the world;
- **Intertek**, a world-wide group of testing laboratories for the textile and other industries;
- The **Clean Clothes Campaign**, an NGO working to improve labour conditions in the industry;
- **The Fair Wear Foundation**, which offers you the option of registering your company and getting in touch with buyers;
- **World Federation of Sporting Goods**, the sports(wear) industry’s leading authority and fair trade promoter;
- **The Good Trade**, which brings together entrepreneurs, products and ideas that are bringing social change;
- **Fair Indigo**, a fair trade clothing initiative.

**Tips:**

- Create a corporate social responsibility (CSR) development plan presenting a five-year strategy aimed at taking your CSR to the next level. A good CSR policy is a unique selling point and will open doors.
- Follow the main initiatives on chemicals and safety and try to implement these.
- For more information see our study on Sustainable apparel in Europe and our study on requirements on the apparel market.

9. Register with specialised platform groups to get more visibility

Focus on sustainability to reach a whole new client base. Sustainability-related platforms and bodies often use so-called vendor charting and vendor rating. This is a technique for assessing and comparing the performance of different suppliers on the basis of specific indicators. For instance, they might look at your reuse and reduce practices, the extent to which you use organic or recycled materials, and so on. Connect to one of these platforms; it will endorse you to a much larger audience than you could reach on your own.

Register with organic exchange or eco labels. Registration will give you more credibility in this field and you can use your certification as a powerful marketing tool: buyers will take you more seriously if you are certified by a scheme they are familiar with.

Here are some examples of worthwhile schemes:

- **Nordic Ecolabel**, the official ecolabel of the Nordic countries;
- **Organic Cotton**, the web platform for the global organic cotton community;
- **Solidaridad** a Dutch initiative focussed on co-launching sustainability initiatives with farmers and labourers;
- **SNV**, a Netherlands-based not-for-profit organisation aiming at poverty reduction and sustainable development;
• IDHS, the Sustainable Trade Initiative, which focuses on promoting sustainable trade.

10. Keep in touch: good communication is a key to success

Good communication is the basis for all successful cooperation, whether during or after a trade fair or at any other time. The more and the better you communicate with a buyer, the better you will understand one another’s needs, wishes and restraints and the more you will be able to collaborate successfully.

**Tips:**

- Always try to respond to emails or phone calls as quickly as you can, preferably within 24 hours;
- Be clear and honest about your company regarding its strengths and limitations;
- Don’t promise what you can’t deliver, be realistic (honesty is always the best policy);
- Try and build up more personal relationships, as this will put you in a more trusted and favourable position;
- If there is an issue or problem, for instance a delay in delivery or a technical problem, communicate this as soon as possible (don’t delay, as it only makes matters worse);
- Work together and develop an understanding of each other;
- For more information see our study on Tips on Doing Business with buyers on the European Apparel market.

Please review our market information disclaimer.

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