

Exporting stools and side tables to Europe

As China dominates the lower ends of the European market for stools and side tables, the mid and higher-end segments offer you the most opportunities. To supply these segments, you need to add value to your products through design, use of material or craftsmanship. Increasingly, sustainability can also give you a competitive edge.

Contents of this page

1. [Product description](#)
2. [Which European markets offer opportunities for exporters of stools and side tables?](#)
3. [What trends offer opportunities on the European market for stools and side tables?](#)
4. [With which requirements must stools and side tables comply to be allowed on the European market?](#)
5. [What additional requirements do buyers often have?](#)
6. [What are the requirements for niche markets?](#)
7. [What competition do you face on the European stools and side tables market?](#)
8. [Which channels can you use to put stools and side tables on the European market?](#)
9. [What are the end-market prices for stools and side tables?](#)

1. Product description

In home decoration, stools and side tables are categorised under Indoor Furniture, although they also becoming outdoor items. They are small pieces of furniture that can be moved around the house for temporary seating or for placing an item on. Despite the trend to declutter the home, consumers often use side tables and stools to display accessories (from figurines to vases) or books and dinnerware.

In today's market, stools and side tables are extremely popular with both consumers and makers (designers and brands). They are not part of a fixed furniture arrangement but single pieces, often stylistically different from the main style in a room. The stool in particular is found all over the house, from living room or bathroom to outdoor spaces.

Consumers need flexible spaces in the home that they can effortlessly adapt to various functions like eating, lounging, socialising and working. By moving a stool or side table around, spaces can change function. In addition, modern consumers want to be more diverse in their style choices. Rather than choosing one coherent style, they combine different styles into their own composition.

Quality

Functionality

To be functional, stools and side tables need to be sufficiently solid. Both items can have different heights, depending on their application. Stools can range from around 30 cm to 45–50 cm in height, while side tables can go up to 70 cm. Too low will not work, as Europeans are generally taller than people in the countries of origin.

The tops can have any shape and dimension, but round and square are the most common. You should study average dimensions of stools and side tables in your European target countries and communicate with buyers about their needs.

Stools are for active but short sitting moments, rather than for lounging. This means they are functional and need not be comfortable. The aesthetic value of stools and side tables is high, especially in the upper segments of this product group.

Material

Literally any material goes when it comes to side tables and stools. The tops and frames come in metals, wood

types, synthetic materials, glass and even ceramics. Price differentials are often achieved by how special the materials are and how solid. For instance, a veneered stool will be less pricy than a solid teak piece.

Design

Stools and side tables add highlights and diversity to the home. Especially in the upper segments, consumers appreciate supreme craftsmanship and design. They choose stools and side tables for their individual character, as an eye-catcher. These can be offered as independent items, without clearly forming part of a coherent line or style. In the lower segments however, where value for money counts, side tables often come in sets of two or three nesting or stackable elements.

Labelling

- Information on the outer packaging of stools and side tables should correspond to the packing list sent to the importer.
- External packaging labels for stools and side tables should include the producer, consignee, material, quantity, size, volume, country of origin and caution signs. They should also show the number of pieces, bale/box identification, total number of bales or boxes and net and gross weight.
- EAN or barcodes on the product label are common in Europe.
- Your buyer will specify what information they need on the product labels or on the item itself, such as logos or “made in...” information. This is part of the order specifications.
- Use the English language for labelling, unless your buyer indicates otherwise.

Packaging

Importer specification

You should pack stools and side tables according to the importer’s instructions. They have their own specific requirements for the use of packaging materials, filling boxes, palletisation and stowing containers. Always ask for the importer’s order specifications. These are part of the purchase order.

Damage prevention

Properly packaging stools and side tables minimises the risk of damage by shocks. How an item is packaged for export depends on how easily it can be damaged. Packaging should ensure the items inside a cardboard box cannot damage each other. It should also prevent damage to the boxes when they are stacked inside the container. Packaging therefore usually consists of outer and inner cardboard boxes filled with protective materials like bubble wrap or paper.

Dimensions and weight

Packaging must be of easy-to-handle dimensions and weight. Standards are often related to labour regulations at the point of destination, specified by the buyer. Boxes are usually palletised for air or sea transport. Make maximum use of pallet space.

Cost reduction

Stools and side tables can take up much container space. Nesting, stacking or flat-packing them inside the container reduces costs. While packing has to provide maximum protection, you must also avoid using excess materials or shipping “air”. Waste removal is a cost to buyers.

Material

Importers are increasingly banning wooden crating and packaging due to their unsustainability and high material and disposal costs. Economical and sustainable packaging materials are more popular. Using biodegradable packing materials can be a market opportunity. For some buyers, it can even be a demand.

Mould prevention

Wooden furniture can mould or crack, so you need to properly dry the wood after production. Condensation inside the container during transport can cause mould, due to humid air becoming colder at night and warmer during the day. You need proper air ventilation inside the container to prevent this. Before shipment, you must inspect containers for air holes. You can also place products to reduce humidity amongst the cargo. Make sure to follow the importer's instructions.

Consumer packaging

At retail level, small furniture is usually supplied without any packaging. This allows consumers to try out the item and feel the material. If the items are flat-packed, you are generally expected to supply appropriate packaging. You must provide your chain partners with detailed product specifications (material, dimensions, etc.) to facilitate communication to the consumer about health and safety issues, as well as selling points (like sustainability, cultural or design features).

2. Which European markets offer opportunities for exporters of stools and side tables?

There are no specific trade or production data available for stools and side tables. According to industry experts, stools and side tables have become staple items for any home across Europe.

The mature markets such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium and Scandinavia widely offer stools and side tables in any value segment. The emerging European markets for home decoration, such as Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltic States, largely lack a premium end and consumers are fairly price-sensitive.

Manufacturing of stools and side tables takes place worldwide, with China dominating. Vietnam, Indonesia and India are strong in the production of stools and side tables in natural materials such as wood and woven natural fibres. Eastern Europe has emerged strongly as a manufacturing location for both industrialised and hand-made stools and side tables, and as such could be your direct competitor.

Tip:

Compare your products and company to the competition from China, Indonesia and India, as well as from Eastern European producers. You can use [ITC Trademap](#) to find exporters per country. You can compare on market segment, price, quality and target countries.

Real private consumption expenditure

- 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. This means that 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. What trends offer opportunities on the European market for stools and side tables?

Continued segmentation

The European market for stools and side tables is characterised by broad lower, middle and upper segments. Especially the latter two will have sub-segments where suppliers can distinguish themselves from the competition and offer added value. This segmentation offers opportunities for new entrants with a strong identity (material, techniques, cultural or societal values) who have studied the target segment well. Untargeted offers will not make an impact.

In the lower ends of the market for stools and side tables, functionality and affordability is the determining factor. Affordability can be achieved through: low cost due to efficient production processes; low price realised by low margin/high volume strategies; or effective logistical services and logistical product properties (like flat-pack, nesting or modular products). As China dominates in this segment, you can achieve product differentiation by using local materials (such as teak wood).

At mid-market, stools and side tables need to fit in with the well-known styles (such as romantic or cottage style). Extending your collection with larger furniture, wall decoration or storage in the same style offers opportunities, as buyers prefer one-stop-shop suppliers.

In the upper segments, stools and side tables as individual furniture items are more emotional and meaningful to the consumer. They function as eye-catchers, providing status and aesthetic pleasure to the homeowner. Designers and brands welcome products that are innovative in the use of materials and techniques and make a style statement. Often premium stools either go into a minimalist, bare style, or make an expressive statement by the use of extreme shapes or colour.

From upper-mid to premium, there are many different sub-segments, for example:

- novelty shapes (deviating from the basic cylinder and cube forms)
- luxury materials (for example precious metals)
- fun
- supreme craftsmanship (like hand-blown glass or wood bending)
- natural materials
- timeless design, in the form of (modern) classics that are predicted to have lasting appeal
- urban, industrial looks (like minimalist metal side tables in bright hues).

Tips:

Note that the European market for stools and side tables is not a single undivided market. Study the market using the internet, home decoration and interior design magazines and trade fairs.

To play a role in the lower ends of the market, you need to develop functional and affordable products.

For the mid-market players, you need to be familiar with the style characteristics of this segment. Offer a broad furniture range within a style to allow for one-stop-shopping.

To target higher-end segments you need to present yourself convincingly, both online and offline. Communication is key: you must know and communicate your offer's selling points and take initiative in sourcing and approaching potential buyers.

Interest in sustainability is increasing

Social and environmental awareness continues to grow among consumers and within the industry. This can be expressed by the use of natural materials, by reducing the ecological footprint, by certification, and by designs that visibly take a cue from sustainability (such as recycled products). Eco-friendly small furniture is a growing niche in different forms across the low, middle and high ends of the market.

In stools and side tables, sustainability is generally not emphasised in communication. Instead, it is reflected in product specifications or initiatives such as [IKEA's PS Collection](#) where old designs are re-issued in a more eco-friendly version. As in many other home decoration product groups, material innovation leads to higher perceptions of aesthetic quality and value. The trend of combining materials (e.g. in tableware or vases) is also apparent in stool and side table design.

Traditional fair trade wholesaler-importers fit into the mid-mid segment. They offer stools and side tables of ethnic origins (like an African stool). Although ethnic touches are widely mixed with contemporary styles, purely ethnic styles are quite niche.

Tips:

To appeal to eco-aware buyers and consumers, develop eco-friendly stools and side tables. Their sustainability can be visible (recycled materials) and/or invisible (flat-packed products, certified materials or community-based production concepts).

Combine materials to add value to your offer.

For more information, see our special study on [sustainability](#).

Merging indoor and outdoor

The traditional home is opening up: indoor and outdoor are merging and rooms are multifunctional. This trend further encourages the popularity of flexible furniture such as stools and side tables. Demand for stools and side tables that can be used indoor as well as outdoor is growing in all segments. Outdoor stools and side tables are common now.

Tips:

Develop weather-resistant options, or use materials that can also be used both indoors and outdoors.

For more information about outdoor home decoration, see our special study on the [garden](#).

Scandinavian design

Scandinavian design dominates European home decoration, including stools and side tables. It covers the lower, middle and upper ends of the market and is now offered by original Scandinavian brands as well as northern European wholesalers and retailers.

This type of design offers values that are widely embraced in the mature European home decoration markets, especially in Nordic countries. Core values of the Scandinavian style are (mainly undecorated) natural materials, functionality, and accessible (simple) design and craftsmanship (the maker is as important as the designer or

brand).

Tips:

Become acquainted with the Scandinavian style influence.

Emphasise important elements like craftsmanship, natural materials and simple styles. Use them in an individual way, influenced by your own context.

Invest in design by allocating time and resources to your designers, maintaining a close relationship with the developers of importers, or a combination of these. To build the necessary levels of sophistication for the mature European market, design must be an integral part of your overhead and cost price.

The project market offers opportunities

Stools and side tables have their place in the consumer market as well as in the project market. The project market seems to be growing, especially in emerging economies. It also contains lower, middle, and premium segments. Designers and wholesalers from mature European markets are entering this market and will need appropriate suppliers.

Tip:

If you supply stools and side tables to the consumer market, also consider the project market. You can source distribution partners online and at trade fairs.

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

4. With which requirements must stools and side tables 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 stools and side tables. 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.

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](#).

Restricted chemicals: REACH

The [REACH](#) regulation lists restricted chemicals in products that are marketed in Europe. For example, REACH restricts the use of arsenic and creosotes as wood preservatives.

Tip:

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](#).

Wildlife Trade Regulations and the Timber Regulation

The [Wildlife Trade Regulations](#) restricts the international trade in specimens of wild animals, plants and derived wildlife products. This is the European Union's strict implementation of the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species](#) (CITES). According to the [Timber Regulation](#), you must prove any timber used was harvested legally. This also applies to wooden stools and side tables. Products with a [FLEGT](#) or [CITES](#) licence comply with the Timber Regulation.

Tips:

For more information, see the [Reference Guide to the Wildlife Trade Regulations](#) and the [Frequently Asked Questions about the Timber Regulation](#).

For more information on CITES permits, you can contact your [National CITES Management Authority](#).

For more information about [FLEGT licensing](#), see the [FLEGT licence information point](#).

5. What additional requirements do buyers often have?

Sustainability

Social and environmental sustainability make your products stand out on the European market, such as by using 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](#).

6. 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 stools and side tables is labour-intensive, 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.

FSC certification

[FSC](#) (Forest Stewardship Council) certification is the most common label for sustainable wooden products, including wooden stools and side tables. The FSC label guarantees that a product's source material comes from responsibly managed forests. These products are especially popular in western European markets.

Tip:

For more information, see the [three steps towards FSC certification](#).

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

7. What competition do you face on the European stools and side tables market?

The competition for stools and side tables does not differ significantly from the sector in general. Refer to our [10 tips for doing business with European buyers](#).

8. Which channels can you use to put stools and side tables on the European market?

The market channels and segments for stools and side tables do not differ significantly from the sector in general.

Market channels

In the European market, stools and side tables are distributed quite intensively. They are sold both offline and online through the big supermarkets, garden centres and Do-It-Yourself outlets, as well as at furniture and general home decor retailers.

E-commerce

E-commerce in home decoration is increasing and can help you reach a broader range of customers. It offers interesting opportunities for the small furniture market, where e-commerce occurs both at the lower and higher ends of the market. Clearly, the idea that consumers want to see and try out a piece of furniture does not apply to stools and side tables. This may be because this type of furniture is less about ergonomics and more about the look.

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
- [EFIC](#), European Furniture Industries Confederation

- [FENA](#), European Federation of Furniture Retailers
- [IMM](#), Cologne, January
- [Maison et Objet](#), Paris, January (main event) and September
- [Tendence](#), Frankfurt, August
- [UEA](#), European Federation of Furniture Manufacturers

Market segments

Because of their mobile character, a stool or side table can form a functional basic and lack any visual impact, or be a statement piece that draws attention. This describes the lower-end and premium markets, respectively. Mid-market, stools and side tables need to fit into the dominant styles of that market (such as rustic, classic or romantic). Especially in the premium market, there is lots of innovation when it comes to stools and side tables.

9. What are the end-market prices for stools and side tables?

Due to the fact that materials can differ enormously, prices of stools and side tables can also go anywhere. In the premium end, side tables or stools can cost over €1000 when special materials and techniques have been used, and brands are at play.

As a general rule of thumb though, the lower end of the market prefers affordable items. For around €50 the consumer will buy a mass-produced item without too much quality in terms of construction and design.

The mid-market opportunities for stools and side tables are fairly broad and items here are trendier and have more decorative value. The mid-high end at mid-market offers considerable craftsmanship, with prices going up to €200 for stools and around €300 for a good side table.

The premium end can range into thousands of euros. Such prices are underpinned by innovative design, special materials and in many cases designer or retailer brand communication.

Table 2 gives an overview of the prices of stools and side tables in the low, middle and high market segments.

Table 2: Indicative consumer prices of stools and side tables

	Lower end	Middle end	Premium
Stools	Under €50	Up to €200	Over €200
Side tables	Under €50	Up to €300	Over €300

Consumer prices depend on the value perception by the consumer in a particular segment. This is influenced by your marketing mix: product benefits, promotion (brand or not, communication of product benefits), points of sale (reseller positioning), and a matching price.

Shipping, import and handling add 25% to the price of your stools and side tables. Wholesalers account for a further 100% markup. Finally, retailers may add another 100–150% to the price.


Tips:

The value perception of your product in the chosen segment determines its price. The quality and price of your stools and side tables must match what is expected in your chosen target segment. To determine your price, study consumer prices in your target segment and 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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