

10 tips for finding buyers in the European fish and seafood sector

There are various ways of finding importers and trading partners in the European fish and seafood sector. The key to success starts with identifying your own strengths and weaknesses, your target geographical markets and a profile for your ideal buyer. If you can bind this into an entry strategy for this new market, you'll be heading in the right direction. Use the following tips to help you manoeuvre through this vast and varied sector.

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1. Analyse your own capacities, objectives, and strategies

Before you start looking for trading partners, it is important to get a clear idea about what you can offer them. How do you compare to or differ from the competition? What are your strengths or weaknesses? Do you provide outstanding quality or exceptional service? Perhaps you have access to raw materials when other sources have dried up.

Start by analysing your company, your products and your certificates, then develop a strategy for entering this new market.

Tips:

Management certificates ([ISO](#)), consumer labels (such as Marine Stewardship Council ([MSC](#)) or Aquaculture Stewardship Council ([ASC](#))) and buyer labels (such as [BRC](#), Global Standards programme for food safety and quality, and International Featured Standards ([IFS](#))) will give you access to a different range of buyers; for example, importers or retail and service organisations.

These certificates are very relevant in northern Europe; in eastern or southern European countries, they are helpful but do not have the same importance.

Tell a story about parts or aspects of your products or production which might differentiate you from others (regional aspects, labour/training aspects, how did you develop your most important product, and so on).

2. Find out which countries of the European Union offer the best preconditions to reach your sales targets

Europe has quite a variety of cultures and fish-eating habits. It is your job to identify which of the 28 Member

States has the highest consumption of fish and seafood. The ratio of fish/capita is different in each country.

Portugal, for example, has a small population but a high consumption of fish per capita. Germany, on the other hand, has a larger population but only eats on third the quantity of fish as Portugal.

In eastern Europe, land-bound countries such as Poland and Hungary do not have a great fish tradition, but they have developed an interesting growth in their consumption of fish since joining the EU.

Studying import figures will help you to identify the most interesting markets in terms of consumption. Make sure that you also look at growth developments. It is a good idea to consider smaller markets, since they can also provide interesting opportunities if your competition focuses on the larger markets.

Tips:

Read more information on fish trade statistics; for example, in our studies of [Trends](#). Study the import figures from your choice countries. Determine the most interesting markets based on market volumes for your particular products (be sure to look at growth developments or market loss values as well as absolute figures.). Also make sure that you consider inter-European trade. Small countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium buy a lot of tropical seafood, for consumption and for trade.

A great market overview can be found in “The EU fish market - 2017”, published by the European Market Observatory for Fisheries and Aquaculture Products ([EUMOFA](#)).

3. Understand your buyers' requirements

Which requirements do fish and seafood products have to comply with if they are to be accepted on the European market? This is an important question which you will need to answer if you want to be successful in Europe. Your country must be on the [list of EU-approved countries](#) (Section VIII) as a precondition for you to export fish to the European market.

Once you have selected your geographical markets, you will need to identify your buyers. One vital part of this activity is identifying and understanding their buyer requirements. You have to fulfil many requirements. There are traceability rules that require labels which provide precise information on the harvesting and production of the seafood. You also need to be able to provide catch certificates and health certificates.

Tips:

Read our [study of buyer requirements](#) to get an overview of legal, market and niche requirements.

Going to niche markets may be profitable but may also require special preconditions and investments. This may be a second step on a new market.

First guidance on niche markets may be provided by CBI's [Ethnic Market Study](#).

4. Choose your channel to market

Find out which market players operate in Europe. Look for partners that function as importers, wholesalers and producers – companies which process the imported products. These will offer you the most opportunities. Find

out how they fit into the supply chain and how they function in the market sector as whole, then select the most suitable type of partner.

Assess the cost of employing people to work for you and to help you move your products on new markets, compared to the cost of an agent who delivers to European partners. It is popular to cut out the middleman, while agents are paid according to their successes. They are therefore not a fixed cost.

Retail chains give the most direct access to the consumer. By selling to the retailer, you can expect the highest margins. However, be warned that retailers usually close contracts on a yearly basis. This kind of annual contract makes it difficult for you to manage price fluctuations. Retailers are also intolerant to problems with supplies. Defaulting on the terms of your contracts with retailers can lead to severe penalties. Importers, wholesalers and fish processors may be more viable partners for you. Your choices will depend on your company's maturity, your products, and your management and marketing capacities.

Tips:

Consider the costs of employing people to help penetrate your chosen market channel.

Weigh up the benefits of working through an agent.

5. Find your potential buyers online

Having gone through the steps above, you will have developed a company profile for your ideal buyer(s). You will have worked out what kind of company you are looking for; now, you need to find them!

The internet is a very important tool in this phase. The distance between you and your target market(s) is large, and there are many specialised fishery websites that can assist you. Remain focused on your buyer profile so you do not get lost on the web.

Several fishery databases make it easy for you to find names and addresses of buyers. Categorise these addresses/information according to your needs. Do not simply contact every address that you come across.

Fishery databases:

- [Globefish](#) – information on international fish trade from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO);
- [Sea-Ex](#) – seafood, fishing, aquaculture, marine and angling directory portal;
- [The Fish Site](#) – website for the global aquaculture industry;
- [FIS](#) – fish information and services portal;
- [STIP – Seafood Trade Intelligence Portal](#), which allows you to find need-to-know aquaculture and fisheries intelligence via company, sector and country profiles. It offers condensed information that you might otherwise spend a long time compiling when needed;
- [The Food World](#) – food exporters' and producers' directory;
- [FoodsTrade.com](#) – leading B2B marketplace for the food industry;
- [Europages](#) – multilingual EU B2B search engine which includes a Buy & Sell marketplace;
- [Greentrade](#) – largest marketplace for producers, manufacturers and distribution networks in the organic industry, good for research by country, category, product and buyer.

Tips:

Use specialised fishery websites to assist you in your search.

Remain focused on your buyer profile so you do not get lost on the web.

Use databases to find names and addresses of buyers.

Do not simply contact every address that you come across.

Try emailing and phoning people personally.

6. Look for contacts through sector associations

Start at the European level by looking for sector associations. The European associations such as the [EU Fish Processors and Traders Association \(AIPCE-CEP\)](#) put information on their websites about national association members. In turn, the national associations provide information on their websites about their members, which are the companies for which you are looking (see list below).

The European and national associations also organise trade fairs. On their websites, you will find lists of exhibiting companies specialised in your sector. Some lists will be divided by product category, which simplifies your search considerably.

The companies exhibiting at an event such as [Seafood Expo Global](#) will be of a certain size, age and standing. You can expect them to be a relatively good business contact. You will still have to evaluate carefully whom you do or do not contact.

European/International associations:

- [Seafood Importers & Processors Alliance \(SIPA\)](#);
- [EU Fish Processors and Traders Association \(AIPCE-CEP\)](#).

National associations:

Belgium

- Belgische groepering van de visindustrie - Fédération Belge de l'industrie du poisson (Belgian Fish Industry Federation).

France

- [Association Des Entreprises de Produits Alimentaires Elaborés \(ADEPALE\)](#) (Association of Processed Food Companies);
- [Syndicat National du Commerce Extérieur des Produits Congelés et Surgelés \(SNCE\)](#) (National Trade Union of Foreign Trade with Frozen Foods);
- [Union du Maréyage Français \(U.M.F.\)](#) (French Fish Trade Union).

Germany

- [Bundesverband der deutschen Fischindustrie und des Fischgrosshandels e.V.](#) (Federal Association of the German Fish Industry and Wholesale Fish Trade).

Italy

- [Associazione Nazionale Conservieri Ittici e delle Tonnare \(A.N.C.I.T.\)](#) (National Association of Canned Fish and Tuna);
- [Associazione Italiana Industrie Prodotti Alimentari \(A.I.I.P.A.\)](#) (Italian Food Industry Association).

Portugal

- [Associação Nacional dos Industriais de Conservas de Peixe \(ANICP\)](#) (National Association of the Canned Fish Industry);

- [Associação da Indústria Alimentar pelo Frio \(ALIF\)](#) (Association of the Cooled Food Industry).

Spain

- Asociación Nacional de Industrias de Elaboración de Productos del Mar (ANIE) (National Association of Processed Seafood Industry);
- [Asociación Nacional de Fabricantes de Conservas de Pescados y Mariscos \(ANFACO\)](#) (National Association of Canned Fish and Seafood Manufacturers);
- [Asociación Española de Mayoristas, Importadores, Transformadores y Exportadores de Productos de la Pesca y Acuicultura \(CONXEMAR\)](#) (Spanish Association of Wholesalers, Importers, Manufacturers and Exporters of Fish Products and Aquaculture);
- [Asociación Española de Importadores Mayoristas de Alimentos del Mar \(ALIMAR\)](#) (Spanish Association of Seafood Wholesale Importers).

United Kingdom

- [FDF – Food & Drink Federation – Seafood Group](#).

Tips:

Remember that associations have staff ready to answer any specific questions which you have.

[Seafood Expo Global lists exhibitors](#) divided by product category. Access is granted on registration as an attendee or exhibitor only.

7. Visit trade fairs for research and as a meeting point

Trade fairs are good places for you to meet buyers. It is normal for suppliers to arrange meetings at trade fairs in advance (see Tip 8 . Contact your potential buyers). If you have not done so, take the time to find out who is exhibiting and visit their stands. A trade fair is a great way of making that vital first impression.

Visiting and exhibiting are also good ways of increasing exposure for your company and your products. Do not forget that a trade fair is also the perfect place for getting to know your competition.

Be well prepared and do your research in advance on the online exhibitor lists. Focus on finding potential fits with your buyer profiles, geographical targets and market channels.

International trade fairs:

- [Seafood Expo Global](#) – the world's largest seafood fair, held every year in Brussels, Belgium in March/April;
- [Conxemar](#) – an international trade fair for frozen fishery, held every year in Vigo, Spain. Usually in October;
- [Fish International](#) – the most important German trade fair for the fishery business, with sustainability as a key topic. Takes place every two years in Bremen;
- [Anuga](#) – leading trade fair for the trade, food service and catering market in Cologne, Germany. Odd years in October;
- [Sial Paris](#) – alternates with Anuga on even years in October.

Tips:

[EventsEye](#) – general trade fairs search engine

Be well prepared and do your research in advance on the online exhibitor lists. Focus on finding potentials that fit your buyer profile, geographical targets and market channels.

8. Contact your potential buyers

Once you have found a number of potential buyers, you need to contact them. Do not send offers to every company that you find. Focus on companies that fit your buyer profile in your target market channels and try to find the right people within an organisation to increase your chances of success.

Tips:

Develop a priority list of companies that you found.

Note down the reasons why you think that these are particularly interesting.

Check out their websites in detail.

Try to find out a name of a person in purchasing. Try to get a personal email address (if you do not find the purchasing manager on the web, you can always call the company's switchboard and ask for the buyer in charge of your product to request their email address and telephone number – switchboards do not always hand out this information). However, you might get put through!

Send them an email, stating clearly what you offer, what your company's strong points are, what you would like the buyer to tell you, whether you can send them a sample or a trial container, and so on.

If you send an email, make sure to follow up with a phone call.

Propose a meeting when you are in their country or when they are in yours (consider offering airport/hotel transfers), or propose a meeting at a trade fair.

9. Be well prepared and listen well

When you meet your potential buyer for the first time, in person or on the telephone, you will create a first impression. They will have questions for you, and they will want you to verify details about your business, products and services. To make a good impression, remember the following tips.

Tips:

Be prepared. Know all about your present stock status, recent catches, and so on (if you are travelling, ask a colleague at home to stay on stand-by, ready to answer your phone call and to provide you with updated figures and prices when you need them). Know about freight rates, packaging, labelling, maximum weight of container loads, and so on.

Listen carefully. Allow your partner to talk first. You can usually ask questions in between. In Europe, this is seen as sign of being interested rather than interrupting.

Find out what their interests and difficulties are.

Find out where you can help.

Provide service to help solve their difficulties – this will give you an added benefit as a supplier, and make the transaction more than just about exchanging products and money.

Listening will be more beneficial than lots of talking!

When you present your Unique Selling Point (USP), remember that the market loves stories. If you can provide your buyer with an interesting story of your company, your value chain, your handling of materials or people, that may help him to differentiate your product on the market from others, which

may be a point of access.

10. Discuss price but time it carefully

You need to describe what you do, why you have such great access to raw materials and good supplier relations, and how you can provide traceability and reliability. You will also need to discuss product offerings and best prices, but a discussion of the price must always come last


Tips:

If you offer a service (faster logistics, interesting fillet cuts, special packaging), it is easier to ask for more than if you offer a commodity.


To work with a commodity may be a satisfactory business model. A precondition is that you need good access to raw materials. If you can differentiate yourself by service on the market, your buyer may not as easily be able to exchange you with competitors.

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