



Client services for dried mangoes

Finding the right buyers is a very important part of the export process. Your challenge is to find the right trade partner that is suitable to handle your product and to whom you are able to supply. The essential element of any trading relationship is trust. If you choose to export, you must find a common understanding - even if your cultures are different - and speak a 'common language'. In making your selection, the best advice is to invest some time to ensure you find the most suitable trade partners (buyers). Your own judgement and instincts are most important in this respect.

This module gives an overview of:

1. Punctuality, reliability and transparency
2. Knowing your trade partner
3. Being service-minded
4. Dealing with claims

1. Punctuality, reliability and transparency

In a dynamic international business environment, it will be necessary for you to be practical, be experienced and be prepared for unforeseen situations in your export business organisation to EU buyers.

Following tight delivery schemes is particularly complicated for African SME managers which understandably is closely related to a different business culture and unforeseen events occurring.

Most African managers struggle with a well-organised, efficient and increasingly fast way of doing business in Europe. This is exacerbated by problems in infrastructure, communication equipment (slow internet connections) and larger information gaps. These problems and cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings, delays, awkward decisions or unclear behaviour.

However, the times are changing and the increasing globalization of the large exporting companies and the expansion of the Chinese on the African continent, is forcing all African stakeholders to improve their competitiveness. A pro-active way of doing business and better organization is becoming essential to survive.

Punctuality, reliability, transparency → do's

- **A good preparation in your organisation** for export is necessary. There are still many companies who lack the necessary departments (e.g. overseas sales, customer service, and logistics) and personnel to establish an export business.
- **Check your own infrastructure** internally such as order control/pads, shipping, customer service, the right sales and marketing people, English or

French language skills, capability of your own suppliers or other stakeholders in the chain.

- **Pay attention to punctuality** is a priority even for social events (weddings, ceremonies). Business comes first.

Example. The dried mango product unit is located 50 km from where you are. Suddenly, the chief dies and business must be closed during the funeral events. In this case, think about the consequences and inform your client immediately. Try to re-negotiate a new deadline with him or to try to contact another mango supplier who could help you out. Note that the mango quality should be identical to yours and agree with him not to become your competitor !

- **Establish some preventative measures** (e.g. by a back up team) so that they could be able to offer alternative solutions if you are faced with an urgent situation. *This is also something to mention when prospecting buyers!*
- **Traceability** is a must for food safety and part of a fair trade policy. Use this tool to improve your transparency and reliability! This helps to build up customer loyalty and a relationship that is more sustainable. If traceability and quality management systems are missing, you can integrate some traceability procedures to improve the quality of your operations on an ongoing basis.
- **Nowadays the expansion of fair trade** is an opportunity for the value chain actors to grow in a sustainable way by offering tracking and tracing possibilities to the client → Make this opportunity yours!
- **EU people value order, privacy and punctuality.** They are hard working and also expect this from their suppliers. Once they are convinced that you take the cooperation very seriously, there will be a strong desire for belonging, as well as a sense of common purpose to enter the market successfully.
- **Your loyalty-building strategy** should look for ongoing ways to communicate with and educate your client about the benefits of the cooperation and an open relationship. You could do this through building trust and openness in your mango production, or in your country, newsletters or incentives. A newsletter, especially by e-mail on a regular basis is a very popular and cost-effective way of doing this.

Punctuality, reliability, transparency → don'ts

- Avoid an attitude that might be interpreted like fatalism unless your clients have a similar attitude. Otherwise, buyers could think you cannot keep your business under control.
- **Don't share your contract details** with supermarkets or retailers but stay confidential about this.
- **Don't be late** to a meeting with the importer. If the meeting is held in Europe, carefully check before the '**d date**' how to get to the meeting point or how long it takes to get there. Try to be there 15 minutes in advance to be on the safe side and to allow for transport delays. If so, call him and tell him about your delay.
- **Do not sell merchandise, which in fact you are not able to supply.** Even if you are relying on your local business partner/small holder for supply, make sure first of all what quality/quantity of goods are available, and when exactly they are able to supply this.
- **Don't bypass** importers/wholesalers by dealing direct with retailers or with supermarkets unless they approve this. This counts as part of your reliability.

2. Knowing your trade partner

African exporters have had several training sessions from NGOs and Trade Promotion Organizations in partnership with the local authorities. However, the gap in business culture is still significant. If you choose to export try to know your business partner better and stay up-to-date by keeping connected.

Business culture

Talk the right language. For Francophone exporters, the English language is still a big barrier for EU market access. The best option is to learn English. If this is really impossible employ someone who speaks good English and use a professional translator during business meetings or presentations.

Appointments and greeting. Business cards in English are usually acceptable. Appointments must be made 1 to 2 weeks in advance. Punctuality is taken extremely seriously. A firm handshake is the traditional greeting. Wait to be introduced.

Business culture is different. For each EU country you can find more information on business culture (etiquette, customs and protocol) and some advice on the site of [kwintessential](http://kwintessential.com)

Presentations

Make sure you have the appropriate information to back up the points you are making. A clearly argued presentation is preferred to a lively one.

Keep the language simple and direct. Europeans often look for faults and highlight them openly. Do not take such comments personally, as they are objective comments based on information they are presented with. Try to anticipate potential criticism, otherwise your negotiating position could be undermined.

Stay connected

- **Get connected with your sector-specific networks** (BSO) to keep up to date on the regulations or on what's happening in discussion groups (LinkedIn), or start up a discussion yourself. Look at sites of relevant conferences.
- Try to gather as much relevant information as possible from your connections such as consultants, colleagues who also export or BSO institutions.
- **Take some time to find market intelligence** and read the documents, or hire a marketing staff who can select the most relevant insights for you.

3. Being service-minded

The export services include instructions given to packers and road, rail and sea carriers, including all related documentation and correspondence. Exporters do not usually have such proper export services. This customer service is crucial-even if you have this service carried out by a special team.

Being service minded → do's

- When you are in charge of providing cardboard boxes, they must meet all importers' and logistical specifications (size or weight).
- All documentation that must accompany the fruits must be compliant with international rules and trade regulations. If the documentation is wrong or missing - but the cargo has been already loaded on the ship - your commercial partner will spend time and probably money to resolve the paperwork. This will be with your involvement!
- These documents are (non-exhaustive list): invoice, packing lists, certificate of origin or phytosanitary inspection reports. Documentation must be completed accurately.
- Traceability and quality management systems are necessary to provide better client service. KPI (Key Performance Indicators) could be applied to: growers, harvesters, technical trainers, brokers and carriers. Give them incentives to keep their service aligned with your export market needs.
- Ask your client's opinion about how they use your service and how you can improve this for them.
- Stay in control of your delivery service by checking regularly the updates on the non-tariff barriers e.g. on the CBI site or the WATH (West African Trade Hub - www.watradehub.com)
- The best thing is to anticipate any potential problems and warn the clients. You will feel appreciated and this will improve the business atmosphere.
- Do raise infrastructural issues with your nearest BSO; they are your 'bridge' to the ministry of commerce that finances road, warehousing and multi-modal service centres.

Being service minded → don'ts

- Don't sell the packaging of a specific client to someone else, without prior approval.
- Have someone speaking English to discuss logistical or customer service issues with your client.
- Never hesitate to demand that the forwarder updates you on the shipment status (even in case of FOB) and inform the client. E.g. vessel is delayed because of weather etc.

4. Dealing with claims

Returning goods to the buyer is not common in the fruit and vegetable business. Either the lot is good and it is sold as it is - or it is deemed of lower quality and sold cheaply or next to nothing to cover transport costs. Transport costs are 'very' expensive. When an exporter is not sure of the quality he should not be exporting.

In the case of air transport fruit arrives ready to eat, but if the quality is not good then there is no need to pay extra transport costs to send it back. Paying for the return trip would exceed by far the value of the consignment. The importer would rather pay for its destruction (a certificate is delivered in such case).

In the case of sea transport, the reasoning is the same, as the fruit will be so old after being returned that nobody will pay for this.

Claims → do's

- Make sure you have mentioned in the sales contract how non-compliant orders are carried out - refund, destruction, alternative uses, offering a discount? In case of no contract, you can discuss this with your client.
- Reserve some money for covering discount sales or loss so that you can maintain your cash flow.
- Have an appropriate carriage insurance policy.

Claims → don'ts

- Never act other than according to what the sale contract indicates or what you have agreed with your client.
- Don't forget to act quickly in case of dispute in order to find a common ground.

This survey was compiled for CBI by **Searce**
in collaboration with Aziz Dabo

Disclaimer CBI market information tools: <http://www.cbi.eu/disclaimer>