

11 tips for finding buyers in the European apparel market

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European buyers will only connect with you if you can offer something better than the suppliers they already have. This means you need to find buyers that match perfectly with your company and products. Randomly approaching companies with a generic offer in Europe's highly segmented market will result in failure. This report will not guarantee that you will find new buyers in Europe, but it will help you understand where you can find interesting prospects and how to approach them.

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1. Determine your unique selling points before targeting buyers

Before approaching potential buyers, you need to determine your unique selling points (USPs). Ask yourself: What makes your company, your products, your service level or your CSR strategy special? What is your sales strategy? For instance, do you want to be the cheapest supplier in your country? Do you want to compete by being the most sustainable factory? By developing innovative materials and concepts? Or do you want to focus on a niche?

Successfully finding and engaging with new buyers is a continuous process. It takes large investments in time and money. If you do not prepare well by determining your own USPs, any match will likely fail.

Tips:

Read our studies on [buyer requirements](#) and [doing business with European buyers](#) to learn what buyers require from a supplier and what extra services they appreciate.

Read our [study on Covid-19](#) for tips on how to respond to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on European fashion retail.

First research the potential export market and buyer before you spend time and money on connecting with the buyer.

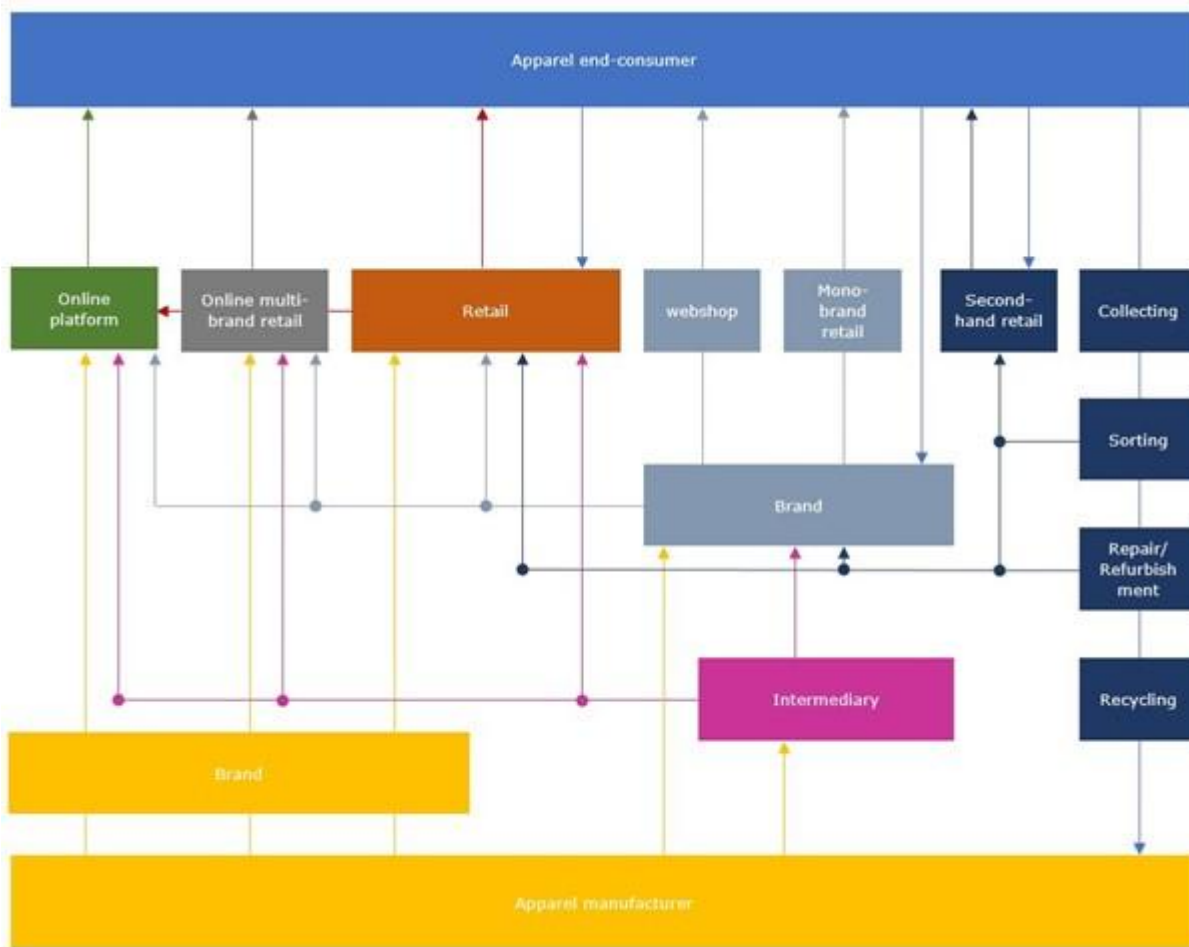
Different buyers in the value chain

The most important distinction you should make between potential buyers is their place in the value chain, because this will determine how they do business with you (see figure 1). Within each part of the value chain, you will find buyers of different market size, with different requirements regarding MOQ and price (see table 1).

Each type of buyer needs a specific approach. Always try to find out in what part of the value chain your buyer is operating, what challenges they face in the market and how you can contribute to their company strategy.

- If you want to target European end consumers directly, try selling via [Alibaba](#), [Wish](#), [Amazon](#), specialised platforms such as [Depop](#) or [Wolf & Badger](#), or via social media platforms such as [Instagram Shopping](#). Always combine selling via a platform with a professional website. Most online consumers [can be found in Europe's northwest](#). You will need to invest in a web shop, stock, order management and customer service. Your biggest challenge will be return policies and a lack of brand awareness.
- Online multi-brand retailers such as [Zalando](#), [Asos](#), [Yoox](#) or [Aboutyou](#) sell existing brands and may develop their own private collections, mostly value brands. They can detect market interest very fast and will immediately react to sales data. Usually, such companies will place a small test order first. If the item is selling well, they will place the actual production order. Fast delivery is a must. Online multi-brand retailers have benefited from increased online sales during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- If you want to sell to fashion retailers, [Zara](#), [H&M](#) and [Primark](#) are some of the biggest names in Europe, in addition to the many smaller fashion boutiques you will find there. Retailers are under pressure from the massive growth of online sales via online multi-brand-shops. These shops can place an order relatively easy as they only need one development sample for order confirmation. Order quantities range from large (for big players) to very small. Price pressure is high.
- If you want to service fashion brands, such as [Petrol Industries](#), [Kaporal](#), or [Superdry](#) be aware that they typically develop a collection six to 12 months in advance. You will need a large sample room, as brands require salesman samples (SMS) of each collection style. Every sample needs to be 'actual': looking exactly like the product will in the shop, with branded hangtags and accessories. It may take months before orders are placed.
- Intermediaries (agents or traders/importers/private label companies) resell your product to buyers higher up the value chain. They are price focused and require flexibility in quantities and qualities. Some are located near or in the production countries and primarily do sourcing and logistics, such as [Li & Fung](#). Others, such as [Dr. Rehfeld](#) and [Trademarktex](#), work from Europe and also focus on market research, design and stock keeping.

Figure 1: The apparel market value chain



Search for buyers that match your size, MOQ, quality and price level

Any type of buyer can be a good match if you can comply with the requirements the buyer has. You need to study them, decide if you match and possibly develop your proposition if you want to have a chance of doing business. Always try to find out what challenges your potential buyer has and try to offer a solution.

If you are a small to medium-sized manufacturer in a developing country, intermediaries are likely the most interesting type of buyer for you, followed by small to medium-sized (niche) brands and retailers in the medium to high-price segment.

Bigger factories may focus on larger orders for multi-brand online platforms and big value brands and retailers, but only if they have the right certifications and production efficiency.

End consumers are an interesting target group, because of increasing opportunities to reach them via online channels and potentially high profit-margins. However, this market comes with complicated customer service demands (return policy, for instance).

Covid-19, transport costs and its effects on buyer preferences

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, much of the European fashion industry has been in crisis mode recently. Buying closer to the market, keeping stock as low as possible, smaller orders and faster delivery are a few of the solutions that European buyers have been looking for. The end of the pandemic has not changed this trend, because global freight logistics are still expensive. If you are close to Europe and can deliver flexibility, you should advertise this.

Find a niche

Niche markets are relatively stable and will have less competition from other suppliers. Be aware, however, that

niche buyers have very specific product requirements. An interesting niche in the retail market can be multi-product stores and sales points, such as gas stations, supermarkets, gift stores, tourist stores and DIY stores. Another interesting niche are specialised buyers, for example, in workwear, performance wear, adaptive wear and promotional wear.

Tips:

Before you approach any buyer, determine your USPs and define your ideal buyer.

Do thorough research of the market your ideal buyer is operating in and adjust your proposition to their requirements and ambitions.

Read [this article on Ecommerce News](#) for a comprehensive overview of the European ecommerce market, regional differences and opportunities and risks of selling online to European end consumers.

Read [our studies on different niches](#) in the European apparel market.

2. Create a representative website and company profile

Many manufacturers in developing countries, and in Europe for that matter, still think a website or online company profile has no priority. They are wrong. Being untraceable online is not only a missed promotional opportunity, it is also a first hint to potential buyers that you run an unprofessional organisation. Because building a professional website doesn't require large investments, this is an excellent opportunity to distinguish yourself from competitors.

Tips:

Hire a specialised company or freelancer that can design and build a professional website for you. Ask for a design that can cross borders and cultures. For inspiration, check for example, [Denim Expert Limited](#), [Crystal Group](#) or [Bitopi Group](#).

Any website is as good as the content that is published on it. Hire a professional copywriter for the texts and a photographer for company and product photos.

If you do not want to spend a lot of money on a new website, [YouTube offers tutorials](#) on how to set up a simple but nice WordPress website for free. Note that a website requires maintenance. Designate an employee or freelancer to update content regularly.

Don't forget to advertise your USPs. Selling your company is even more important than selling your product, so focus on certifications and CSR. For more information, read our report on [trends in the European apparel market](#).

Create a company profile. This is a short version of your website showing your company's USPs and sales strategy.

3. Promote your company online

Promoting your company online is one of the cheapest and most time efficient ways of connecting to potential buyers. After you have created a representative website, it is important to direct potential buyers to it. There are several ways of doing this.

Social media

The most popular website for buyers in Europe to connect with other professionals is [LinkedIn](#). If you don't have a profile yet, sign up and make one. Use the company profile that you created (see above) to make a LinkedIn company profile. Post articles or videos about new (product) developments in your company or directly approach potential buyers. Find apparel professionals by typing in 'apparel', 'fashion', 'design', 'sourcing' or related terms in the search bar. You can also request to join specific sourcing groups, such as the Apparel Sourcing Group or Global Apparel and Textiles Sourcing.

Successful company webpages on LinkedIn include:

- [Denim Expert](#) (44,000 followers)
- [Raymond Limited](#) (175,000 followers)
- [Arvind](#) (128,000 followers)

Online search engines

Relatively few buyers use online search engines to find new suppliers. To attract the buyers that do, make sure your website contains the term 'manufacturer' or 'supplier' plus the apparel items that you are specialised in and the country you operate in. Do a Google search for the keywords mentioned above and see which companies from your country are at the top of the search list. Try to analyse why the content on their websites makes them attractive for Google and draw inspiration for your own company website.

Paying for ads to promote your company

Before you decide to pay for adds on LinkedIn, Google or other online platforms, always do your math. Find out what results you can expect, set specific targets and start with small amounts of money. Websites like LinkedIn, Google and Facebook will let you target very specific groups based on very specific keywords, which is great. The problem with paid adds is that the cost per click for the most effective adds can be substantial. That is because the most popular terms are the most expensive, because they attract the most competition.

Advertorials

An effective form of paid advertising is using advertorials to promote your business. Many popular online industry websites such as Fashion United or country-specific websites such as Textilia (Netherlands) will let you publish paid articles on their website or on their newsletter. These articles can include photos of your company and products, or online videos, for example, about your company's ambition or vision of the apparel manufacturing business.

Tips:

Create an online profile on [LinkedIn](#), [YouTube](#), [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#) and post articles, photographs and videos to draw attention to your company. Do not just publish uninteresting pictures of factory buildings. Remember that online viewers are interested in new developments in your products, company strategy, innovation, sustainability and people.

Hire a professional copywriter, photographer or video editor to help create and publish engaging content. Use [Upwork](#) or [Fiverr](#) to find suitable marketing professionals.

Hire an online marketing professional to do a 'keyword research' for you. This will generate ideas for articles and videos. Again, use [Upwork](#) or [Fiverr](#) and search for an SEO (search engine optimisation) specialist.

Follow brands, retailers and people on social media you are interested in working with. This will provide you with company updates and news on their latest collections and travel schedules. They might also follow you in return.

Approach popular international trade media in your market segment and ask for the possibilities of

publishing advertorials.

Create unique content that is not only focussed on promoting your company but also on sharing your ideals and vision on the industry and global environmental developments.

4. Find potential buyers in online databases and on matchmaking websites

Several websites will let you search for potential buyers in a database of companies. Finding the name of a retailer or brand is not the biggest challenge, however. Connecting to the right sourcing manager in that company is. A great way to do this is to search on LinkedIn for sourcing managers at the companies that you have discovered in an online database. Other websites are specifically built to connect supply and demand in the apparel industry.

- [Retail-Index](#) is an online database with profiles of major apparel retailers in Europe.

The following websites are among the most used matchmaking platforms by European buyers. Here you can sign up and connect with buyers that publish request for quotations. All websites let you sign up for free. Some also have a paid membership service. In addition to promoting your offers, these websites let you browse inquiries from buyers as well.

- [Alibaba](#) – The world’s largest online B2B marketplace and one of the most popular platforms in Europe. It lets buyers search for suppliers of many different products, not only apparel, by country, product category, MOQ, total revenue and certifications. Alibaba supports many different languages besides English.
- [Foursource](#) – Together with Alibaba, Foursource is the most used platform in Europe, specifically for apparel sourcing. It has over 30,000 factories from more than 90 countries. Foursource lets buyers search for suppliers by country, product category, MOQ and certifications. It also offers manufacturers the opportunity to present their products in a virtual showroom.
- [Indiamart](#) – Considered the world’s second-largest online B2B marketplace after Alibaba, specifically built for suppliers from India.
- [Fibre2Fashion Marketplace](#) – Started in 2000, Fibre2Fashion is one of the oldest and biggest online B2B portals specifically for the apparel industry. Next to matchmaking services for products ranging from fibres and fabrics to accessories and machinery, it offers analysis reports, consultancy services and a magazine.
- [Sewport](#) – launched in 2017 as an online B2B matchmaking platform to help designers and emerging brands find apparel manufacturers that can handle small to medium-sized MOQs, it allows buyers to upload their sketches, tech packs and order quantities. Sewport has more than 18,000 active brands and almost 1,200 manufacturers in its database.
- [Apparel Buyer Contact](#) – Not a matchmaking platform but a consultancy service selling comprehensive lists of European apparel buyers, the actual people responsible for sourcing apparel within European apparel companies, with their contact data.

Tips:

Always fill out all the required fields in your company profile on an online matchmaking platform. At the very least, mention the products you are specialised in, your target group (men’s, women’s or children’s fashion, for example), segment (active, casual, formal wear), product categories (such as top wear, knit wear, skirts, suits), the average MOQ and any management or CSR certificates you may hold.

Invest in good product photography. Check, for example, how [Zalando](#) does it. Apparel items should always be photographed in the same manner. Never present an expensive item in a cheap manner.

If the platform offers the possibility of writing an elaborate company profile, mention your company’s






history, USPs and growth strategy.

If you are not competent in writing in English, hire a translator to fill out your company profile for you.

Regularly check the buyer inquiries on your matchmaking platform to discover what buyers are looking for and what their requirements are. If possible, activate automatic notifications for inquiries that match your offer.

Other interesting databases are the member lists of organisations concerned with sustainable production. Clicking on the logo in the table below will take you to the members list of the organisation.

Table 1: Sustainable textile industry organisations and their members

5. Visit the right online and offline events and come prepared

Trade fairs used to be the most important events for buyers and suppliers to meet and do business. They are not that important anymore, as many buyers and suppliers have found other, more time and cost-effective ways to connect, for instance online. However, physical trade fairs can still be an interesting way to find potential buyers, if you do it right.

The following trade shows offer the best opportunities for connecting with European buyers. Every fair has a specific target group.

Figure 2: Since the end of the Covid 19-pandemic, most trade fairs have gone back to physical events, such as Texworld Paris in July 2022. Visitor numbers are not yet back to pre-Covid levels, however.



Source: FT Journalistiek

Fibres

- **Pitti Filati**: fibre and yarn fair in Florence, Italy.

Fabrics

- **Première Vision**: Europe's most important international fair for yarns, fabrics, accessories, leather and trends in Paris.
- **Texworld**: fair for fabrics, trims and accessories, held simultaneously with Première Vision in Paris.
- **Munich Fabric Start**: fair for fabrics, accessories and innovations in Munich.
- **Intertextile**: fair for fabrics and accessories in Shanghai.

Leather

- **Lineapelle**: fair for leather, synthetics and accessories in Milan.
- **ILM**: leather goods fair in Offenbach, Germany.
- **Gallery**: shoes in Düsseldorf, Germany
- **ACLE**: fair for leather, footwear and accessories in Shanghai.
- **APLF**: fair for leather goods, accessories and fabrics in Hong Kong.

Apparel manufacturing

- **Apparel Sourcing**: the biggest garment sourcing fair in Europe, with nearly 30,000 visitors in Paris.
- **Interfilière**: fair for lingerie and swimwear in Paris.
- **ISPO**: fair for sportswear in Munich.
- **A&A**: fair for workwear in Düsseldorf, Germany.
- **AFSW**: biggest apparel sourcing fair in Africa, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Remember that participating in a trade fair can be a costly business. You need to hire a booth, prepare a collection, pay for transport, travel costs and working hours for yourself and your staff. To avoid disappointments and lost investments, always come prepared.

Tips:

For a comprehensive overview of online and offline fashion trade shows and fairs, visit [Fibre2Fashion](#) or [FashionUnited](#).

Research the target group before you participate in a trade fair or an online matchmaking event. Check the fair's visitor numbers and main market segments. This will help you decide which event you want to attend.

Try to participate in trade fairs and online events that offer one-on-one matchmaking sessions with buyers. Also create a list of potential buyers and inform them about your participation. Do the same for current buyers.

If you attend a physical fair, advertise your USPs clearly in your booth. Do you offer low MOQs? Super short lead times? Specific certifications? Put that on a sign and show it to visitors.

If you attend a physical fair, try sharing a booth with another company to lower costs or connect with [an export coaching programme, for instance with CBI](#).

Develop a new collection that includes both samples and fabrics. Collect special fabrics from your different fabric suppliers. Do not use basic qualities. Collect different production samples and focus on special styles that will attract buyers, while also displaying your technical skills.

6. Follow up on new contacts immediately

Your work as an exhibitor at a trade fair, online trade show or matchmaking event does not end when the event is over. It has only just begun. Be quick to reconnect with potential buyers you have met. Send them promotional materials, samples or answers that they have asked for.

Tips:

After sending all the requested information and materials, do not wait for a reply but plan an online meeting, or a visit to the buyer's office, if the situation allows for it and you both feel comfortable travelling and meeting in person. In the meantime, your prospective buyer can then use your information to prepare inquiries, developments and orders.

Read [our study 'Doing Business with European Buyers'](#) to learn how to effectively follow up on new contacts.

As online meetings will replace physical contact during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is wise to invest in a reliable WI-FI connection and the right software. Many popular online conferencing programmes such as [Google meet](#) and [Zoom](#) are free to download.

Figure 3: If you get questions via email, always confirm within a day, even if it is just to announce that you will respond in more detail later.

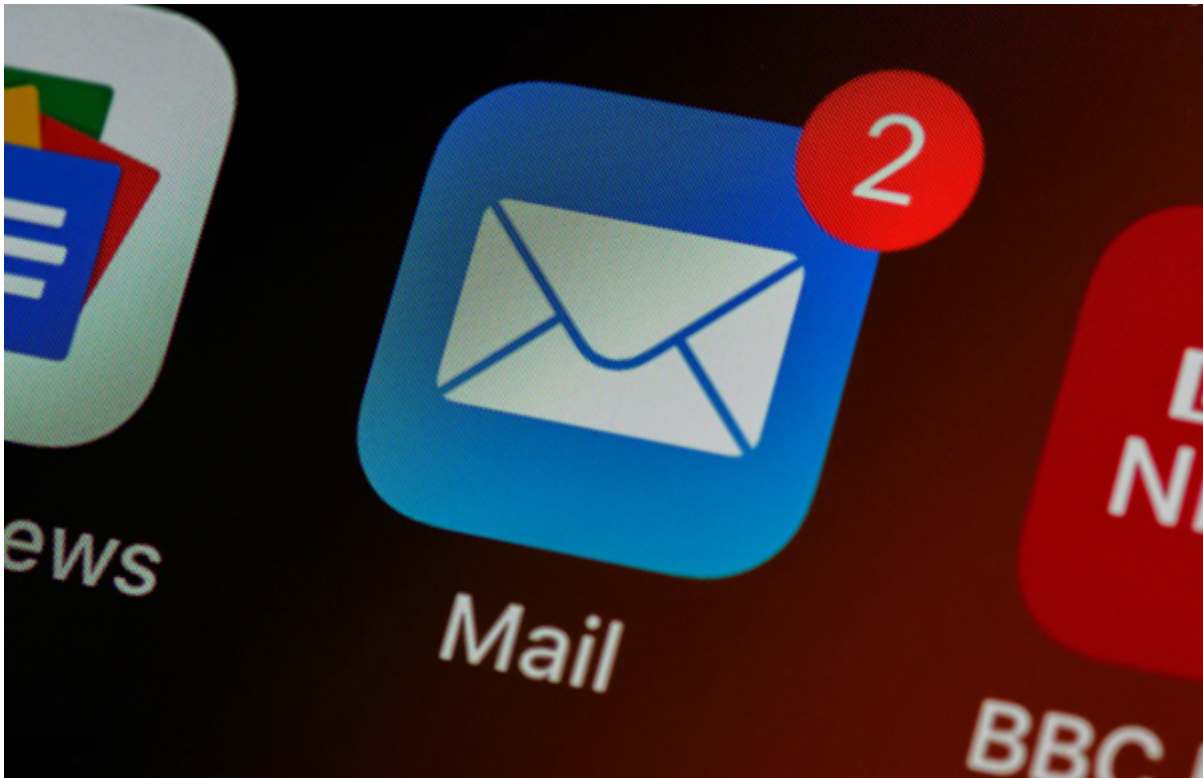


Photo by [Brett Jordan](#) on [Unsplash](#)

7. Use your existing network to find new buyers

If you have a good personal relationship with a buyer at a company, sharing your ambitions can open new doors. Buyers often have a large local network in the industry and will usually be happy to refer you to a friend if they are satisfied with the business relationship.

When a buyer moves from one employer to another, stay connected via LinkedIn. This will help you follow up on any career changes your contact might make and will let you see your buyer's network.

8. Find buyers via sector associations

Sector associations in the apparel industry represent and support member companies. In many cases, this includes providing information on sourcing issues, so this means opportunity for you to connect with potential buyers. Select a sector association for the companies you want to target and ask the association for possibilities to publish an introduction in their newsletter, or to participate in a matchmaking event. Most associations publish a list of members online, which is an easy way to gather data on potential buyers.

The following sector associations are the most important in Europe. They represent different international and national markets and market segments.

- The [International Apparel Federation](#) represents [sector associations, brands and manufacturers](#) in trade and sourcing issues.
- The [European Branded Clothing Alliance](#) represents [more than 60 member companies](#).
- [Eurocommerce](#) represents the interests of [31 big retailers and wholesalers](#) and [13 retail federations in Europe](#).

National sector associations:

- [German fashion](#) represents the German fashion industry and the interests of its [350 member companies](#).
- The [Fashion Council Germany](#) is another German association, supporting [more than 100 German fashion](#)

brands and retailers.

- The [FHCM](#) is the French sector association for [high-end apparel brands](#).
- The [UK Fashion and Textile association](#) represents more than 400 fashion brands and designers in the UK.
- [Mode Suisse](#) represents the interests of [companies in the Swiss textile industry and retail market](#).
- The [Association of Swedish Fashion Brands](#) represents the interests of [70 Swedish fashion brands](#).
- [Modint](#) is the sector association for Dutch apparel companies focusing on wholesale and manufacturing.

For an overview of national sector associations, check the [member page of Euratex](#), the European confederation of textile and apparel associations.

The following are sector associations for specific apparel markets or niches:

- [PCIAW](#) is the international sector association for workwear.
- [COTANCE](#) is the representative body of the European leather industry.
- [Children's Fashion Europe](#) promotes the interests of children's fashion companies in Europe. It is formed by [several national children's fashion associations](#).
- [United Fashion](#) is an independent platform connecting manufacturers to independent European designers and start-up fashion labels.

Tips:

Contact the sector associations in your target market or market segment and ask about different service models for matchmaking.

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

Search for sector associations that cater to your needs by searching online for your niche, using terms like 'industry group', 'federation', 'platform' or 'institute'.

A good listing with sector and industry associations in your home country can also be very useful in connecting with European buyers. Buyers may attend a(n online) sourcing mission to your country and one of their first steps will be to contact the sector and industry bodies in your country.

9. Let support organisations help you find buyers

Several international support organisations support the apparel industry in developing countries with export coaching. These organisations are funded by different governments and deploy sector experts. Participating in developing programmes is a good way to develop your business potential in the European market. Because of Covid-19 travel restrictions, many support organisations have set up online matchmaking events and coaching programmes. Register for such online events. For the time being, they are the only way of connecting.

Tips:

In addition to market intelligence reports, CBI offers export coaching, including marketing advice and matchmaking to SMEs in 35 countries. Check CBI's website for an [overview of current apparel programmes](#).

Other organisations that regularly offer coaching programmes for apparel exporters in developing economies are the [UNDP](#), [FCDO](#), [DANIDA](#), [ITC](#), [GIZ](#), [SIPPO](#), [ICCO](#) and [Solidaridad](#).

[PUM](#) is a Dutch NGO that offers practical support by senior apparel industry experts on anything from business process management to arranging your exports.

Investigate if your country has a support organisation for exporting apparel to Europe, such as India's [AEPC](#), Egypt's [ETDA](#) and Ethiopia's [ETIDI](#). Check also your local chamber of commerce. Buyers interested in sourcing apparel from your country will approach them for factory information.

Connect with different NGOs active in your country and ask if you can join an export coaching programme.

10. Set up a dedicated marketing and sales team

In many factories in developing countries, marketing and sales is done by one person: the CEO. This should be avoided. Developing and executing a successful marketing and sales strategy is too much work for one person. Secondly, marketing and sales require expertise and experience. Marketing is promoting your organisation. Sales has a clear focus on business development and buyer relationship. Both disciplines are highly specialised.

Tips:

Create a clear marketing strategy that is in line with the company strategy and that supports your sales targets.

Don't think you can represent and promote the company on your own if you also have other managerial tasks in your company. Marketing and sales is a continuous effort. You will most likely lack the time to do everything by yourself.

Hire a specialist to help develop and execute both your marketing strategy and your sales strategy. As online marketing is becoming more important, search for a specialist with expertise in online marketing.

Marketing can be outsourced to a marketing agency, but always discuss and define clear targets to make sure your expectations will be met.

11. Hire a sales agent or representative

Developing and maintaining relationships with new buyers is a continuous, long-term process. A good way to do this is to employ a local sales agent or representative. The trend is that more and more manufacturers invest in sales offices and showrooms in Europe and employ representatives, and Covid-19 travel restrictions have made this extra urgent. Don't think, however, that anybody with a large network in Europe will get you easy orders. There is no such thing as an easy order. Prepare for a long-term investment in sales.

Figure 4: Because sales is a long-term process, having a local representative can make it easier for you to find new buyers.



Source: Photo by [LinkedIn Sales Solutions](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Tips:

Find sales agents or representatives on [LinkedIn](#). Search for 'sales' plus the term 'apparel', 'fashion' or the particular apparel item that you want to export. Try to find a sales representative for each country you want to export to, because most sales agents have a network limited to one country.

Another good way to find a sales agent is to approach a European headhunting company and ask them to connect you to any apparel sales agent that has recently retired. These people often have a large network, and plenty of spare time. With a compelling story, you might get them to work with you. Dutch NGO [PUM](#) is another good source for finding senior apparel industry experts with a large network that can help you.

In case you consider setting up a local office or showroom or employing a sales agent, but the costs are too high, try creating a collective with other exporters so you can share the expenses.

Train your sales agents in both manufacturing and cost calculation. This will make it easier for them to negotiate successful business deals.

Define clear and realistic sales targets that you can measure and guide.

Further Reading


The [CBI study '10 Tips for Doing Business with European Buyers'](#) will help you understand what is needed to successfully approach a potential buyer and how you can develop a long-lasting business relationship with them.

The [CBI study '10 Tips for Organising Your Exports'](#) will give you quick answers to the most pressing issues that come into play when organising shipments to Europe.


This study has been carried out on behalf of CBI by Frans Tilstra and Giovanni Beatrice for [FT Journalistiek](#).

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