

7 tips on how to do business with European spices and herbs buyers

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To successfully export to the European market for spices and herbs, you must understand buyers' wishes and needs. These tips for doing business give you insights on key topics such as business culture, quotations and unique selling points.

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1. Adapt to European business culture

To export spices and herbs to Europe, you need to understand the business culture amongst European buyers. Though all companies have their own culture, they are generally professional, pragmatic and to the point. They value personal contact and expect you to be professional.

Communication style

European buyers generally prefer getting straight to the point, discussing the most important points first before talking about details, especially in countries like Germany, the Netherlands and Austria. Be honest and realistic, so they know what to expect and can act accordingly. When meeting new prospects, introduce yourself and your offer clearly and simply. An 'elevator pitch' works well for this.

How people express emotions is also an important part of communication style. Northern/western Europeans tend not to show much emotion when doing business and are reserved. However, eastern and southern European buyers may show more emotion, such as smiling or being more openly enthusiastic. You do not have to act the same way (which may come across as forced), but be aware of and ready for these differences.

Language

In general, you must speak English. This is usually enough to communicate with European buyers. However, some buyers prefer to do business in their own language, particularly Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese and German buyers. This is reflected in trade flows, with vanilla from Madagascar performing well in France and dried chillies from Peru popular amongst Spanish importers. Being able to communicate in a buyer's native language can therefore give you a competitive advantage.

Personal space

Different cultures also have different norms for greetings and how close you can stand to people. In the United Kingdom, people prefer to keep a distance from anyone they do not know well. In southern Europe, people may stand closer. A firm handshake is usually a good way to greet someone throughout Europe. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, some people prefer not to shake hands and bump elbows or fists instead, or avoid physical contact altogether, with [contactless greetings](#). Watch what others do and follow their lead.

Planning and organisation

European buyers generally like things to be well-planned and organised, especially in northern/western Europe. In the Netherlands and France, for example, meetings tend to be structured but not overly formal, beginning and ending with some small talk. In southern European countries such as Spain and Italy, they are more flexible. Nevertheless, always make sure to be on time. If you say you will do something by a certain day, make sure you do it. This shows you are reliable and helps to build trust.

Formality and workplace hierarchy

In larger European spices and herbs companies, purchasing managers usually have to consult with a superior on big decisions such as whether to buy your spices and herbs. In smaller companies, the owners or top managers are often in charge of imports and purchasing. The importance of workplace hierarchy differs from one company to another, but business is generally more formal and hierarchical in some countries, such as France and Germany, and less in others, such as the Netherlands. To be safe, address business partners from formal cultures with Mr/Mrs/Ms or their professional/academic title.

Tips:

See [Passport to Trade 2.0](#) for more information about European business cultures and etiquette in different countries. Be flexible and try to adapt to a buyer's preferences.

Communicate with your buyers in correct English. Or, if you speak the language of a European market, take advantage of this by targeting buyers in that market. For example, if your first language is French or Spanish, look for buyers in France or Spain.

Prepare an [elevator pitch](#) to effectively introduce your company and products to potential buyers.

If you want to give a buyer or potential buyer a gift, only do so after you have established a business relationship with them, and only give a small gift.

2. Define your unique selling proposition

To sell spices and herbs on the European market, you have to stand out from the competition and show what makes your products special. This means you need to define your unique selling proposition (USP). What makes your offer different? Incorporate your USP into your pitch and marketing materials.

Your USP can highlight various aspects, including:

Product variety and quality

You can base your USP on the characteristics of your product. For example, if you offer a particularly desirable or unique/rare variety, include this in your USP. Since quality is regulated by industry standards, quality-related USPs should focus on aspects like consistency and reliability rather than superiority. You can also highlight how you ensure your products' quality and safety, such as through the use of steam sterilisation or integrated pest

management. Ideally, back up your claims with certifications such as [FSSC 22000](#).

Examples of other unique selling propositions for spices and herbs include:

- Organically certified
- Fairtrade or otherwise ethically certified
- Allergen-free
- Alkaloid-free

Which USP you use depends on your knowledge of the competition in your market and the information international buyers share with you. For example, if you are exporting a spice that is hardly available in organic form from your region of origin, then it may make sense to obtain organic certification. However, this can also depend on how much competition there is from organic suppliers of that spice in other countries.

Several companies worldwide are working on developing a strong company brand with a set of strong USPs. One is [Cinnatopia](#) in Sri Lanka. Cinnatopia's USPs include a focus on high standards of quality and authenticity, strict adherence to food safety and sustainable production processes. The company supports local farmers and helped them establish the [Ceylon Organic Farmers' Association](#), thereby boosting their production standards.

Cinnatopia's certifications include [EU organic](#), [USDA Organic](#), [Rainforest Alliance](#), [Fairtrade](#), [BRCGS](#), [IFS Food](#) and [BSCI](#). Their state-of-the-art facilities accommodate custom requirements, reflecting their commitment to quality and innovation in the spice industry.

Origin

You can also focus on your product's origin. If your country is known for specific products or excellent quality, you can use your country's branding in your USP. An example of a country brand campaign is [Super Foods Peru](#), which includes products like turmeric and ginger.

In 2022, Sri Lanka received its [first-ever Protected Geographical Indication \(PGI\) certification from the European Commission](#) under [Regulation \(EU\) 2022/144 \(PDF\)](#). This differentiates Ceylon Cinnamon from lower-quality and less expensive cassia cinnamon on the EU market.

Figure 1: Taste Peru, Superfoods Territory

Source: [Marca Perú @ YouTube](#) (2019)

Sustainability

More and more European buyers are demanding social and environmental sustainability from their suppliers. This includes practices such as the use of sustainable farming methods, as well as providing good working conditions and paying fair wages. Ideally, support your claims with certifications such as [Fairtrade](#) or [Rainforest Alliance](#). You can also join initiatives such as [Sedex](#).

Price

If you can offer your product at a better price than your competitors, you can use this in your USP. However, if you choose to compete on price, take care to emphasise that your lower price does not mean lower quality.

Service

The level of service you offer can also be a USP. If your service is exceptional, if you are known for quick problem-solving or if you have a particularly skilled and professional team, highlight these points.

[Amazon Andes Export](#) focuses its USP on origin and quality, and on its products being organic, sustainable and fair trade. They have [certifications](#) to back up their claims and they tie in with their country's branding by emphasising their Peruvian origins and using Peru's official logo on their website. In line with the national campaign, the company markets its turmeric as a superfood

Figure 2: About Amazon Andes Export Sac

Source: [Amazon Andes Export Sac @ YouTube\[A1\]](#) (2021)

Be realistic and pro-active

Probably the biggest mistake you can make with European buyers is to make promises you can't keep. It is essential to be realistic and honest about what you can deliver. Failing to do so will hurt your business relationship, both in the early stage and later on in a partnership.

In particular, be sure to meet agreements on:

- Product specifications
- Delivery times
- Packaging requirements

Everyone knows that the quality of spices and herbs is subject to factors that you cannot fully control. At times, this can make it a challenge to deliver a product to your customers as agreed. If you expect there to be any problems with your product delivery, such as falling short of the sample quality, communicate this to your buyer as soon as possible.

Tips:

Get certifications to support claims you make in your USP, such as organic, fair trade, or quality certification (FSSC 22000).

Involve your employees in your USP to anchor it in your business as a shared value. This creates consistency in how your brand and products are presented and seen.

Carefully weigh the costs of developing your USPs and potential branding strategy against the potential benefits.

For more information about sustainability, see our [tips on how to go green in the spices and herbs](#)

sector and [tips on how to become more socially responsible in the spices and herbs sector](#).

Promptly inform buyers of any issues and help to find solutions.

3. Meet common buyer requirements

European buyer requirements for spices and herbs mostly relate to food safety and quality. It is very important to meet these requirements.

Legislation

[European food legislation](#) requires you to work in accordance with [HACCP principles](#). It also sets maximum levels for [pesticides](#), [plant toxins](#), [chlorate](#) and other [contaminants](#), and specifies [microbiological criteria](#) and regulates the use of [additives](#).

In addition, under European Union (EU) food law tracking and tracing requirements, the following must be provided on bulk packaging:

- Name of the food
- Lot identification number
- Date marking and storage instructions
- 'Not for direct sale to consumer' clearly printed. This is required on containers that are not clearly identifiable as non-retail containers.
- Exporter name and address

More specific [consumer packaging](#) instructions apply if you are selling your product to the European market.

Product quality and safety

European buyers usually expect you to meet more than only the legal requirements. Since product quality is a high priority in the spices and herbs sector, most will ask you to comply with the European Spice Association's (ESA) [quality minima](#). Increasingly, buyers are also requiring laboratory test reports on microbiological, chemical and physical conditions from accredited institutes such as [SGS](#) and [Eurofins](#). To be sure of product safety, importers may ask for food safety system certifications recognised by the [Global Food Safety Initiative](#) (GFSI), such as [FSSC 22000](#).

Sustainability and fair trade

More and more European buyers are demanding social and environmental sustainability from their suppliers. Often, this means you must commit to the buyer's code of conduct. Such codes of conduct may be based on ESA's [sustainability code of conduct](#) and/or the [Sustainable Spices Initiative](#). You can strengthen your sustainable proposition by obtaining certifications from organisations like the [Rainforest Alliance](#), [Fairtrade](#) and [B Corp](#). You can also join initiatives such as [Sedex](#), whose SMETA auditing standard assesses social, ethical and environmental working conditions.

Organic

If you want to sell your spices and herbs as 'organic' in Europe, you must comply with Europe's [organic legislation](#). Your facilities have to be audited by an accredited certifier. If you qualify, you can apply for certification and use of the [EU organic logo](#).

Tips:

Make sure your products meet European quality requirements. If your country's quality infrastructure falls short, find out if you can send samples to a European or other foreign laboratory with a strong spices and herbs expertise.

Ensure correct bulk labelling and follow the international [Codex CSX-346-2021 General standard for the labelling of non-retail containers of foods](#).

For more information about legal and buyer requirements, see our study on [buyer requirements](#). It provides tips on complying with European legislation and identifying the right certification for you. Our [product-specific studies](#) provide information on individual products.

4. Make a successful quotation

Strong, clear quotations are key to growing your business and building good business relationships with European buyers. Quotations must include information such as your product specifications, prices and terms.

Product description

Your quote should include basic details such as variety, size, colour, grades and quality information. Send your complete product specification, which may also be called a 'Technical Data Sheet', 'Product Specification Sheet' or something similar. This document lists the specific characteristics of your product. Your buyer will ask for it in order to assess your product. Have a look at this example for [organic nutmeg](#). It is also a good idea to add a certificate of analysis from an accredited laboratory showing that your product complies with European legislation.

Shelf life

State how long your product lasts. This is usually based on what you know from experience, as there are no industry standards. Buyers generally want products to last at least one year after import, often two.

Price

Prices for spices and herbs depend on production in the main supply countries. They change often, especially if a small number of countries dominate production. Keep track of what the big suppliers are charging. Updating your buyers about any potential future price changes can make you a better partner.

If you are trying to enter the market, offering a slightly lower price than the main suppliers can help. Later, once you know the market better, you might add a small margin. However, be realistic: buyers who are willing to pay more will also be more demanding on quality, logistics and service. Try working with other suppliers from your country to collectively improve the quality of your spices and herbs. If buyers see that your country's products are consistently good, you may be able to charge more.

Make your quotation using the best currency for you, but know that European buyers may prefer to see prices in euros. Be sure to specify the unit (usually net weight in kilograms or tonnes) and delivery terms. Our [product-specific studies](#) provide information about prices for individual products.

Delivery terms

When comparing your prices with competitors, use delivery terms ([Incoterms](#)) that include shipping and insurance costs. However, when making a quotation, pick terms that are best for you. For example, if your

export volume is substantial (many containers per year), you may get a better deal on shipping and insurance. This lets you offer a good price that includes these costs (such as CIF: cost, insurance and freight). If you are new to exporting, you may want to use simpler terms that do not include these costs (such as Ex Works or FOB).

Certifications

European buyers are increasingly concerned about the sustainability of their supply chains. Having certifications is a big help, and sometimes necessary to sell in the European market. In your quotation, specify any certifications or sustainability credentials your business has.

Packaging

Describe the packaging (type, size) and specify how many cargo units (such as pallets) can fit into a container.

Payment terms

You can state how you want to be paid up front, or you can talk about your payment terms later. For example, if a buyer wants to pay later (deferred payment), you can ask for a higher price to cover the insurance costs. The CBI study on [tips for organising your spices and herbs export to Europe](#) provides more information about payment terms and insurance.

Validity

Your quotation should specify how long your offer is valid, but you don't always need to state an expiration date. The more expensive the spice and the more market prices are fluctuating, the shorter the validity of the quotation. Sometimes, you can say it applies for as long as you have the product, but then do make it clear that your price may change in line with market prices. To be safe, state that the offer remains subject to final confirmation from your side as well.

Figure 3: Building blocks of a quote for spices and herbs



Tips:

Tailor your quotation to address your buyer's specific needs or preferences. If you know they are particularly interested in sustainable sourcing, emphasise your environmental practices. Personalising your quotation shows that you understand and value the buyer's business.

Find a reliable trader who can keep you informed about price changes. Some brokers provide this information (such as [Van der Does Spices](#), which provides regular product market updates) or multinational producers/traders (such as [Nedspice](#), which provides regular spice market updates covering several individual spices). You can also consult sector association platforms (such as the [International Pepper Community](#) or the [Spices Board of India](#)), or newsletters sent out by exporters such as APL Vanilla & Spices' [Gianna Palermo](#).

Read up on the different types of [Incoterms](#) and your and your buyer's rights and obligations. Use them to clearly define what is and is not included in your price.

5. Provide representative product samples

Presenting your product samples to European buyers is a crucial step in building successful business relationships. Your sample is more than just a product: it represents your business and your commitment to quality. By carefully selecting, preparing and sending your samples, you show your professionalism and dedication.

Do: always send a sample that accurately represents the product and quality you are offering. If your buyer asks for a sample, use the lot from which you plan to supply them.

Don't: never send a sample of higher quality than the rest of your production. This can be seen as fraud. Samples should reflect what you can realistically supply.

Follow these six steps to send samples correctly:

Ask for your buyer's specifications: before sending anything, ask the buyer exactly what they need. This saves you time and ensures your sample meets their expectations.

Take a representative sample: take small quantities from different parts of the lot to create a sample of 50-200g (standard size) of dried spices and herbs. The packaging should be similar to what you use for regular orders, but smaller. Give the sample a code that can be traced back to the lot, so the buyer knows they will get the same quality when they order.

Attach a technical data sheet: provide any relevant product parameters, including the standards or regulations your product meets, certifications and laboratory test results.

Attach a proforma invoice: assign a symbolic value of zero to the sample to avoid customs charges.

Ship your sample: agree on shipping costs with your buyer beforehand. Offering to pay shows goodwill. Use a shipping service that offers tracking, so you and the buyer can follow the sample and confirm its arrival.

Follow up: After your sample has been received, ask the buyer for feedback. This is an opportunity to address any questions or concerns they have and can give you valuable insights into the buyer's needs and preferences.

Tips:

Use sampling methods that comply with the [ISO 948:1980](#) and [ISO 2825:1981](#) standards, specifically for spices.

Follow the Codex Alimentarius [General Guidelines on Sampling](#).

Have an independent institute, such as [SGS](#) or [CIS](#), take your samples to ensure they are prepared properly.

6. Meet buyers at trade fairs

Visiting European trade fairs allows you to showcase your products, meet existing and new buyers face-to-face, and build trust in a competitive market. Participating in these events requires strategic planning and an understanding of how to effectively engage with your audience.

Prepare

Follow the steps below to prepare to participate in a trade fair:

Define your goals: start with a clear vision of what you want to achieve, such as lead generation, market research or direct sales. Knowing your objectives will guide all your preparation efforts.

Select a fair: make sure the event aligns with your goals so your visit is worth the investment. Consider the fair's reputation, the type of visitors it attracts and the success stories of past exhibitors. Relevant trade fairs in Europe include [Anuga](#), [SIAL](#) and [Food Ingredients Europe](#). [BIOFACH](#) can be interesting if you export certified organic products. The [Spices & Herbs Global Expo](#) in Italy is a relatively new event with the objective to become a meeting place for the international spices and herbs industry.

Announce your participation: use your website, social media and direct email marketing to share details such as the event name, location, dates, your stand number and why visiting your stand is a must.

Schedule meetings in advance: use trade fair matchmaking services and tools like the [BIOFACH digital event platform](#).

Design your stand: use clear, attractive branding and visuals reflecting the quality and uniqueness of your spices and herbs. Ensure your stand is accessible, with open spaces for easy interaction.

Prepare marketing materials and samples: create attractive and professional brochures, product sheets and business cards. Also prepare plenty of well-packaged and labelled product samples for tasting and inspection.

Know your pitch: practice delivering your pitch confidently and clearly so you are ready to engage with potential buyers. Be prepared to answer questions and discuss in more detail how your spices and herbs are produced, processed and packaged, as well as any certifications you have.

Participate

To attract buyers during the trade fair, you need to:

- Be proactive and engaging: actively engage with your booth visitors and deliver your pitch concisely to make a strong first impression. Ask relevant questions about their business to show interest, learn about their needs and discuss how your products can benefit them.
- Be organised and professional: keep your stand clean and organised, as it represents your company. Use business contact forms to keep track of your interactions and record information your visitors give you.

Sri Lanka's [Cinnatopia](#) produces and processes high-quality whole and ground spices for export. The family business has a strong USP: 'Organic – Ethical – Sustainable'. They support it with a range of certifications, including [EU organic](#), [Rainforest Alliance](#) and [Fairtrade](#). Their food safety is verified with [FSSC 22000](#) and [IFS](#) certifications. Cinnatopia regularly exhibits at trade fairs like [BIOFACH](#).

Figure 4: Cinnatopia @ BIOFACH in 2023

Source: [juliamalcher765 @ YouTube @ YouTube](#) (2023)

Capitalise

The real work begins after the fair. Now you have to make sure your investment was worth it and turn leads into sales:

Prioritise your leads: use the information from your business contact forms to decide which are the most promising leads.

Follow-up: reach out promptly, within no more than two weeks. Send a personalised thank you message, highlighting key points from your discussions and next steps. If you promised samples, follow through as soon as possible.

Tips:

See CBI's [tips for finding buyers on the European spices and herbs market](#) for an overview of the most relevant trade fairs.

Attend as a visitor first. If the trade fair is a good fit for you, you can consider exhibiting at the next edition.

Begin your pre-fair preparation well in advance in the months before the event and follow the seven

steps described above.

Learn from examples and see this [business contact form template](#) by GEPA Ghana.

7. Look for organisations that can support you

Business support organisations (BSOs) can often help you with your export, for example providing training in export-related skills. They may also facilitate export-related activities such as market research, matchmaking and trade fair visits.

Start by checking if organisations such as export promotion agencies and chambers of commerce in your country or its embassies in target markets offer export promotion support. These organisations may facilitate trade fair pavilions, export missions or market research. Sector-specific organisations such as the [Spices Board India](#) may also offer support.

Well-known international BSOs include:

- [Centre for the Promotion of Imports from developing countries](#) (CBI) – offers export coaching programmes and market intelligence to strengthen the social, economic and environmental sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in developing countries.
- [Import Promotion Desk](#) (IPD) – facilitates durable, long-term trade relations between European companies and trade partners in developing countries and emerging markets, focusing on a range of sectors including [spices and herbs](#).
- [International Trade Centre](#) (ITC) – United Nations agency that aims to bring prosperity, inclusiveness and sustainability to developing countries through trade-related development assistance, including [publications](#) and an [SME Trade Academy](#).
- [Enterprise Europe Network](#) (EEN) – the world's largest support network for SMEs with international ambitions, with many [local contact points](#).
- [Open Trade Gate Sweden](#) – helps companies in developing countries export to the EU, with information on rules, procedures and markets.
- [Swisscontact](#) – an independent non-profit development organisation offering customised consultancy and capacity development services.
- [Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy](#) (IATP) – works to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems, and advocates for international policy reforms.
- [World Trade Centers Association](#) – stimulate trade and investment opportunities for international businesses and economic development agencies.

Figure 5: We are CBI

Source: [Agentschap CBI @ Youtube](#) (2022)

Taking part in an export coaching programme such as that offered by CBI can help to increase your chances of doing business with European buyers. These programmes help you build your capacity to meet common buyer/market demands and provide market entry assistance through training, coaching and other export-related activities.

Tips:

Contact international donor organisations active in your country to find out what they can do for you. You can also ask your country's export promotion organisation, as they may have a good overview as well.

Check current and upcoming [CBI projects](#) for the spices and herbs industry. Also check if other BSOs offer projects suitable for your company.

Enrol in free courses that are suitable for your company at ITC's [SME Trade Academy](#).

For more tips on exporting to Europe, see CBI's [tips for finding buyers on the European spices and herbs market](#). It gives step-by-step guidance on your journey to finding buyers that match your offer. When you are ready to export your products, CBI's [tips for organising your spices and herbs export to Europe](#) give practical tips on topics such as logistics and payment terms.

Please review our [market information disclaimer](#).