

Exporting apparel for 50-plus consumers to Europe

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European customers aged 50 and older represent an interesting and somewhat overlooked market opportunity for apparel exporters from developing countries. The average European 50-plus consumer generally has a higher disposable income than younger shoppers and can afford quality products. The number of 50-plus consumers in Europe is relatively high and growing. The most promising markets for apparel for this age group are Germany, Italy, Austria and the Netherlands.

Contents of this page

1. [Product description](#)
2. [Which European markets offer opportunities for exporters of apparel for 50-plus consumers?](#)
3. [What trends offer opportunities in the European market of apparel for 50-plus consumers?](#)
4. [What requirements should apparel for 50-plus consumers comply with 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 is the competition like in the European market of apparel for 50-plus consumers?](#)
8. [Through what channels can you get apparel for 50-plus consumers on the European market?](#)
9. [What are the end market prices for apparel for 50-plus consumers?](#)

1. Product description

Apparel for 50-plus consumers is a broad group of products that includes:

- tops
- bottoms
- outerwear
- bodywear and underwear
- sportswear

Quality

Functionality

European 50-plus consumers are often still working and therefore require suitable clothing for the office space. In addition, they are generally active and interested in their appearance. This requires apparel for 50-plus consumers who want to be comfortable yet fashionable.

Material

European 50-plus consumers prefer comfortable, natural-feeling materials. Organic cotton is a material that is growing in popularity. Cotton shortages and the high waste of water resources in producing regular cotton have been stimulating the use for alternative materials. The current focus is on cotton blends such as luxury blends with silk or new varieties with rami, hemp and different types of sustainable viscose. In certain markets, such as

Germany, merino wool, cashmere and alpaca are also relatively common.

Size

The European apparel industry is pushing for standard sizing legislation, but so far sizing systems vary across Europe. [The European clothing standard](#) EN 13402 can provide you with some direction. This is a European sizing designation of clothes based on body dimensions and intervals.

The following table shows an example of differences in sizing within Europe. Each column represents the same size in a different system.

Table 1: Sizing across Europe

United Kingdom	Belgium and France	Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Netherlands and Denmark	Portugal and Spain
Size 12	Size 40	Size 38	Size 42/44

A growing trend in sizing is the consumer demand for more personalised sizing. Sizing and shaping are important factors in the appeal and wearability of apparel, particularly to 50-plus consumers who consider a good fit important. This means that it is acceptable to slightly amend a standard pattern size 38 garment to fit the body shape of this age group, yet it can still be considered a size 38.

Colour and design

The 50-plus consumer group is very diverse. Fashion consciousness and perceptions of what is fashionable may vary with age. Generally speaking, these shoppers purchase casual and comfortable clothes, professional wear and elegant clothes. Classic shapes such as shirt-dresses, trench coats, pea jackets, medium length coats, denim jackets and jeans are popular among 50-plus consumers.

Another aspect is that these shoppers are often caught between a desire to remain young and trendy on the one hand and a need for clothing that fits their changing body shape on the other hand. Their changing body shape can result in them wanting to cover up more than younger consumers do. Because of this, clothing designed for this group needs to have a different fit from clothing aimed at younger consumers.

Labelling

The most important information on the product label of apparel is:

- size
- origin
- wash and care instructions

The care labelling system developed by [GINETEX](#), the International Association for Textile Care Labelling, is widely used in European countries. The [GINETEX symbols](#) are also very common, but you can only use them under contract with the association.

According to GINETEX, labels should cover the following topics:

- general care and warnings
- washing
- drying

- ironing
- professional textile care or dry-cleaning

Ecolabelling is largely unregulated in the clothing industry. There are several voluntary labels that have their own defined set of standards for producers to follow.

Tips:

- Study common care labelling practices in Europe on the [GINETEX](#) website.
- If you produce eco-apparel, clearly indicate this with at least one of the available label schemes, such as the [EU Ecolabel](#), to attest the sustainability claims of your product.
- For more information on labelling, refer to the [section on buyer requirements](#).

Packaging

Documentation

External packaging documents for apparel should include: producer, consignee, composition, size, number of pieces, box identification, total number of boxes, and net and gross weight.

Importer specification

Each order should be packed 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, which make part of the purchase order.

Damage prevention

Properly packaging apparel minimises the risk of damage. Packaging usually consists of each article being packed in a polybag to protect the fabric from humidity, water, solar radiation and staining.

Dimensions and weight

Packaging must be easy to handle in terms of size and weight and ideally fit together on Euro pallets. Standards are often related to labour regulations at the point of destination, specified by the buyer. When in doubt, check the dimensions and weight of boxes with your buyer.

Cost reduction

European buyers are constantly trying to reduce packaging materials. Less packaging means improved sustainability, but it also reduces costs and increases margins. While packing has to provide maximum protection, you must also avoid using excess materials and 'shipping air'. Waste removal of packaging materials generates additional costs to buyers.

Material

Importers have been steadily banning certain packaging materials for sustainability reasons, as well as to reduce costs with purchasing and disposing of packaging. Economical and sustainable packaging materials are growing more popular. Using biodegradable packing materials can be a market opportunity and, for some buyers, it can even be a requirement.

2. Which European markets offer opportunities for exporters of apparel for 50-plus consumers?

There is no relevant trade or production data available for apparel specifically targeting 50-plus consumers. Nevertheless, the leading manufacturers and exporters of general apparel to Europe are China, Bangladesh and Turkey, all developing countries. These countries are likely to be the main suppliers of apparel for 50-plus consumers in Europe too.

As the European population gets progressively older, the European market of apparel for 50-plus consumers offers interesting opportunities.

The largest consumers of general apparel in Europe are Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands. Specifically in relation to age demographics, high-potential markets for 50-plus apparel include Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Austria (also a large consumer), which are in [the top 10 most elderly populations in Europe](#).

Tips:

- Study your options in Germany, France, the Netherlands and Austria, as well as the United Kingdom, Spain and Italy.
- Compare your products and company to leading apparel exporters from China, Bangladesh and Turkey. You can use the [ITC Trade Map](#) to find exporters per country. You can compare by market segment, price, quality and target countries.

Real private consumption expenditure affects European demand

Private consumption expenditure is an important indicator for the European apparel market, a sector closely linked to economic conditions. When money is tight, consumers postpone buying non-essential items until they have more disposable income.

Over 2017 and 2018, European private consumption expenditure increased. This trend is expected to continue in 2019. This means that consumption of clothing is likely to rise, especially in emerging markets such as Poland, where the expected private consumption expenditure growth for 2019 is 3.3%. Consumers in mature markets already spend a fair amount of money on apparel, so consumption growth in these markets will be moderate.

For more information on general apparel trade statistics, see our study about [which European markets offer opportunities for exporters of apparel](#).

3. What trends offer opportunities in the European market of apparel for 50-plus consumers?

E-commerce is on the rise

Online shopping is growing rapidly in Europe. Consumers aged 50-plus are catching on to this trend, though less actively than younger shoppers. They increasingly buy online due to the conveniences of home shopping, delivery and price comparison. Consumers in the younger cohort among the 50-plus group actually shop for apparel online as much as the European average. This means supplying e-commerce retailers can offer good opportunities.

Tips:

- Study your options in online retail. For example, identify the popular online retailers in your European target countries.
- Target online business-to-consumer retailers.

Sustainability is increasingly more important

There is a growing group of conscious consumers in Europe who value social and environmental responsibility, making it an increasingly important aspect of the mid-high to high-end market segments. Using and promoting sustainable natural materials or recycled fibres is a key way to meet this demand, as well as obtaining certification and operating in a transparent way.

Tips:

- Use sustainable materials and production processes and consider developing sustainable concepts.
- Promote your sustainable values to increase your credibility and to boost your marketing.
- For more information, see our study on [sustainable apparel](#).

Oversized clothing for the 50-plus market

Demand for plus-sized or oversized clothing is expected to increase in the coming years. For many years now, the average body measurements of the general European population have been showing a tendency towards larger sizes. This development is also relevant for the 50-plus segment.

Tips:

- Read more about [the challenge of overweight and obesity](#) in the European Region in this overview from the World Health Organisation.
- Take a look at our study on [shapewear in Europe](#).

Few retailers are targeting the 50-plus segment

Developing the right concepts for each life stage is a common challenge for apparel retailers, as many rethink their strategies to meet consumers' changing needs. So far, relatively few retailers target the European 50-plus segment, meaning that there are good opportunities available.

One reason why retailers might be hesitant to target 50-plus shoppers with specific marketing may be that consumers do not want to be seen as old. [Singling out your consumers by their age may make this kind of marketing counterproductive](#).

Tips:

- As long as there is no EU-wide legislation on sizing, use a recognised standard for your products.
- Research sizing and shaping for the 50+ consumer group.

For more information, see our study about [which trends present opportunities and threats in the European apparel market](#).

4. What requirements should apparel for 50-plus consumers comply with to be allowed on the European market?

What are the legal and non-legal requirements for your product?

General product safety

The European Union's [General Product Safety Directive](#) applies to all consumer products, including apparel. It mandates all products marketed in Europe must be safe to use.

Tips:

- Read more about the [General Product Safety Directive](#).
- Use common sense to ensure normal use of your product does not cause any danger.
- The [Safety Gate database](#) lists products that the European Union has rejected at the border or withdrawn from the market. Check the database for similar products to yours to consider issues that may arise.

Packaging legislation

Europe has specific [packaging and packaging waste legislation](#). These requirements aim to prevent the production of packaging waste, promote the reuse of packaging and thereby reduce the final disposal of such waste.

Restricted chemicals: REACH

The [REACH](#) regulation lists restricted chemicals in products that are marketed in Europe. For example, REACH restricts the use of azo dyes and certain flame retardants in textile products.

Tips:

- The European Chemical Agency provides useful information and tips on REACH. See for instance [REACH Annex XVII](#) for a list of all restricted chemicals. Check also the [Information on REACH for companies established outside Europe](#) and the [Q&As on REACH](#).
- Follow new developments in the field of flame retardants, as new alternatives are being developed. See for instance the [European Flame Retardants Association](#) (EFRA).

Textile Regulation

According to the European Union's [Textile Regulation](#), textile products should be labelled or marked to indicate their fibre composition in the language of the country where you are selling your products. These labels should be durable and tear resistant, securely attached, easily legible, visible and accessible.

Tip:

- For more information, see the [Frequently Asked Questions on the Textile Regulation](#).

5. What additional requirements do buyers often have?

Sustainability

Social and environmental sustainability make your products stand out in the European market. Think of sustainable raw materials, fair working conditions and production processes. European buyers increasingly demand the following certification schemes and programmes:

- [Amfori 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 is 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 review standards such as [ISO 14001](#), [Sedex](#) and [SA 8000](#) to read up on sustainable options. Check with your potential buyers which certifications they require.

Tips:

- Optimise your sustainability performance. Reading up on the issues addressed by these initiatives will help you focus on the requirements that apply specifically to your product and your business.
- Buyers appreciate a well-grounded story. Showing that you value your company's environmental and social performance may provide you with a competitive advantage.
- Use a self-assessment tool such as the [BSCI Self-Assessment for Producers](#) or a code of conduct such as the [BSCI Code of Conduct](#) and the [ETI base code](#) to evaluate your performance.
- For more information, see our special study on sustainability in the apparel sector.

6. What are the requirements for niche markets?

Fair trade

The concept of fair trade involves fair pricing and improved social conditions for producers and their communities. Especially when the production of your apparel is labour intensive, fair trade certification can give you a competitive advantage.

Common fair-trade certification awarding organisations include:

- [World Fair Trade Organisation \(WFTO\)](#)
- [Fairtrade International](#)
- [Fair Wear](#)

Tips:

- Ask buyers what they might be 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.

Sustainable textile certification

Sustainability is gaining ground across the apparel sector and so is interest from buyers for sustainable textile certification.

The [Global Organic Textile Standard \(GOTS\)](#) certifies environmental and social responsibility throughout the production chain. To qualify, textile products must have more than 70% organic fibres.

The [OEKO-TEX Standard 100](#) certification ensures responsible use of chemicals, while the [Sustainable Textile Production \(STeP\) by OEKO-TEX®](#) certification ensures that textile manufacturing and processing takes place in a sustainable manner. Textiles with the [MADE IN GREEN by OEKO-TEX®](#) label are:

- made from materials that have been tested for harmful substances;
- manufactured using environmentally friendly processes;
- produced under safe and socially responsible working conditions.

The [EU Ecolabel](#) for textiles focuses on minimising environmental impact at the manufacturing stage.

Tips:

- Read more on [GOTS](#), [OEKO-TEX](#) and the [EU Ecolabel](#) in the ITC Standards Map.
- Determine which certification programme would be the best fit for you and apply if possible.

For more information, see our study on [buyer requirements for apparel](#).

7. What is the competition like in the European market of apparel for 50-plus consumers?

The field of competition in the European market of apparel for consumers aged 50 and older is comparable to that of the overall apparel market. However, competition is less fierce, as there have been fewer players targeting this group. See our study about [competition in apparel](#) for a general overview. Refer also to our [10 tips for doing business with European buyers](#).

8. Through what channels can you get apparel for 50-plus consumers on the European market?

Market channels

Clothing for 50-plus shoppers is mainly sold via physical shops — especially boutiques — or retailers, but online sales are growing. In Europe, catalogue shopping is an important purchase channel.

In general, apparel retailers make up the most commonly used channel for apparel sales in Europe. This channel accounts for 40% to 60% of distribution in most European countries. Some retailers appeal more to young audiences while others target older consumers.

Shoppers aged 50-plus are less interested in large, out-of-town superstores that offer near-endless choice and cater to big-basket shoppers. Greater opportunities exist for smaller, local shops with a good name, good service and collections catering to the styles and preferences of this age group.

Minimum delivery volumes and terms of payment vary greatly and need to be requested on an individual basis.

Trade associations and fairs

These trade fairs can be useful sources for finding trading partners in Europe:

- [Apparel Sourcing](#), France, February
- [Asia Apparel Expo](#), Germany, February
- [Fashion SVP](#), United Kingdom, January
- [Pure London](#), United Kingdom, February

The European Apparel and Textile Confederation, [EURATEX](#), and the International Apparel Federation, [IAF](#), can also be helpful for finding trading partners in Europe.

Market segments

In the low-end segment, simple and inexpensive apparel is common. The middle segment puts more emphasis on design, material and finishing, while prices are still reasonable. In the high-end segment, designer quality is common and private labels are the standard. This is also the segment where more expensive raw materials are used. Product quality in terms of fabric, fit and finishing must be in line with customer expectations.

The middle and high-end markets offer the most opportunities in the 50-plus consumer segment. Most Europeans aged 50-64 are still working and are relatively wealthy. They have the highest disposable income of all age groups. This makes them a promising target group for luxury products, including fashion and fashion accessories.

Tip:

- To supply the middle and high-end segments you need to pay particular attention to design and quality.

9. What are the end market prices for apparel for 50-plus consumers?

The European consumer price for your apparel will be around four to six-and-a-half times your selling price or even more if you would cater to the high-end segment. Shipping, import and handling add 15-20%. Wholesalers account for a further 40-70% markup. Retailers may add at least another 100-150% to the price. Finally, European VAT rates range from 18% in Malta to 27% in Sweden.

Your original selling price depends heavily on the availability and cost of raw materials. For example, the average prices of cotton fluctuated considerably in recent years. Occasional increases in the price of raw materials are not directly passed on to the consumer, but do put pressure on exporters, importers and retailers' margins.

Tips:

- The perceived value of your product in the chosen segment determines its price. The quality and price of your garments must match what is expected in your chosen target segment. To determine your price, study consumer prices in your target segment and adjust your prices accordingly. Use top-down calculation to determine your maximum selling price.
- Understand your segment. Offer a correct marketing mix to meet consumer expectations. Adapt your business model to your position in the market.

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

