

Veg Sourcing and Trading

Much of this guide can be applied to ambient lines and commodities – really to all areas of grocery – and may be a starting point if your group lacks trading experience.

Initial information

First, settle logistical details with any potential new supplier.

- Departure and delivery days/times: UK supply most commonly means morning harvest, afternoon collection, and delivery the following morning. European transport varies, e.g. 24 hours from Holland or six days from Sicily.
- Transport costs and who pays: Listed prices can be ‘delivered’ or ‘departure’ depending on volume and value. Haulage is mostly chilled but ambient is possible in winter and with certain crops, e.g., summer tomatoes.
- Minimum orders: For example, some European suppliers require two or more pallets. We try to order at least £150 of produce from very local suppliers to make field-time and transport costs worthwhile.
- Make-up of pallets: Some European wholesalers mix no more than four different products on a pallet, others provide as many as you need. Unicorn orders full layers where possible.

A good background may be useful as well. Consider:

- History and company structure
- Ethics and farming approach
- Size and other customers
- Scope of production or supply throughout the year
- Who and where the growers are, for wholesalers
- Proximity to other growers
- Organic certification

Relationships

Unicorn works to establish a friendly and trusting relationship, both in the bigger world of supermarket suppliers, and with smaller UK growers who depend on us.

A good supplier provides a good standard for quality and freshness, knows our needs (e.g., growing or looking out for crops we prefer) and goes the extra mile to ensure availability and quality. On the other side, the seller trusts our opinions on prices and when products are not up to scratch. Unicorn may claim against poor or un-sellable goods (always perform the ‘would I buy this?’ test!) that need to be sold at a reduced price or put straight into the compost or ‘free box.’ Bad claims can damage the trading relationship, while good claims and useful feedback (positive or negative) gain respect and trust over time.

Negotiating

Price negotiation tends to be a daily task with European wholesalers and monthly or seasonal with UK growers. Unicorn buyers work hard to know the market, ensure margins stay healthy, compare different suppliers’ offers and be firm but judicious.

Ordering

The best, most competitive fresh produce section requires reading the offer lists of a range of farms and wholesalers, and shopping differently every week. Unicorn bases this juggling act on the following considerations.

- Price, first & foremost
- Quality, based on previous orders or a trusted recommendation
- Freshness: how local, when harvested, perishability in transit, packaging, at start, end or height of season
- Importance of product to range if something is not available
- Shelf-life
- Volume and value
- Ethics

Each order effectively places a bet on upcoming customer and sales trends – accurate ordering is difficult and mistakes are costly. Good presentation and pricing may encourage people to buy overstocked products, but the golden rule is to run out rather than have too much fresh produce.

A successful buyer, therefore, must possess a high attention to detail of over 100 different products, good numeracy, and the ability to learn from mistakes, react to sales trends, build trusting relationships over the telephone, and absorb and weigh up of a complex array of information. Language skills are helpful but not essential.