

Handmade Notebooks

Market Insight with focus on Europe

As a countertrend to a world where communication can be experienced as increasingly fast, digitalized and impersonal, consumers are turning to paper to write down their thoughts, and inviting others to do so as well. Combined with an increased interest in Fair trade and sustainable products, this has sparked the popularity of handmade paper notebooks. Notebooks with an interesting marketing story, green production or that demonstrate great craftsmanship are of particular interest.

Common Requirements

Social and environmental sustainability offer ways for companies to differentiate their products on the European market. Opportunities range from sustainable raw materials, production, certification and the use of labels. Buyers are increasingly demanding the following certification schemes:

The Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI) has been developed by European retailers to improve social conditions in sourcing countries. Suppliers of BSCI participants are expected to comply with the BSCI Code of Conduct, which can be proved with an audit at the importer's request.

The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) is a code of conduct developed to improve the working lives of people across the globe that make or grow consumer goods. ETI is particularly common in the UK.

Standards such as ISO 14001 and SA 8000 can be used to meet buyer demands for sustainability. However, compliance with these specific standards will only be demanded in niche markets.



You can expect compliance with the BSCI Code of Conduct to be considered a basic requirement as an increasing number of European importers are participating in BSCI. You are advised to think ahead by performing a self-assessment, which is available on the BSCI website because if you are far from complying with this initiative it can harm your position on the market. Look into the possibilities for improving your sustainability performance. Even if immediate compliance with certification is beyond your scope, familiarising yourself with issues included in these certification schemes will give you an idea of what to focus on in terms of sustainability.

Niche Requirements

Besides the social and environmental aspects of production, Fairtrade certification also covers a fair wage to labourers involved in the production of handmade paper and notebooks. Obtain Fairtrade certification to enter the fair trade segment. Compliance with Fairtrade norms will also make it easier to satisfy other social and environmental norms, as it is the most integrated system for sustainability. However, always discuss these options with your buyers. As handmade paper notebooks represent a small part of the market, compliance with certification may be too expensive. Alternatively, use the concept of fair trade production in your marketing story. As such, certification may not be necessary. FSC certification of timber is the most common label for sustainable wooden products, including (handmade) paper. This standard is used to certify forests that are sustainably managed. Wood from certified forests is labelled throughout the value chain and as final products. Exporters should integrate such values into their product range, even at the stage when they are optional in trade, to anticipate future demand. Please refer to the ITC Standards map database for more information on different voluntary standards and their requirements, including fair production. Certain certification applies to paper and paper products, such as Der Blaue Engel (Germany) for recycled paper. However, you need to determine if compliance adds value to your production, as often these certifications are deemed beyond the scope of small producers.



Market Trends

Me Time : Amid the rush to collect as many experiences and stories as possible, consumers want to embrace the here and now as well, by creating moments of reflection and introspection. As opposed to their digital counterparts, handmade notebooks offer the opportunity to commit thoughts to real paper. “Me time” moments are enhanced by the sensory effect of the materials and techniques used, as well as by using natural materials.

Triggering the Senses : Handmade notebooks can add a sensory experience to “me time” moments. The texture of natural fibres, accessories, embossed surfaces, or fabrics, as well as colour effects, such as gradient or marbled effects can all add touch and feel to the notebook. These elements intensify the experience of writing notes.

Closer to Nature : As can be seen in home decoration and home textiles as a whole, consumers want to feel closer to nature. This trend is also apparent in the home. Handmade paper notebooks can depict nature with the use of fibrous paper, notebook covers made of wood or fabric, or by using imagery from nature. When developing new ranges of notebooks, consider your options related to different colours and textures as these can be effective starting points. Use design components that add a sensory element to your notebooks such as embossing techniques, using fabric, combining materials with contrasting tactile qualities (e.g. warm and cold), layering, using colours that are either tranquil or expressive, or working the edges of your pages (e.g. fraying or gilding). Work with natural materials for the covers, add accessories from nature and refrain from coating your paper or cover. Use themes from nature to decorate your notebook covers. Biomimicry at any level often has a positive effect on the consumer.

Personalisation : As notebooks invite personal reflection, the choice of notebook is extremely individual too. Moreover, users of notebooks care about detail. Alternatively, consumers are invited to decorate their own notebooks on blogs and hobby websites. Offer choice in your product range of handmade paper notebooks, in terms of:

Type of use: as a notebook, notepad, or journal, whether it is lockable or not

Binding: stitched, casebound, spiral or wiro bound

Page type: ruled, plain, or grid

Size: A4, A5, A6 and so on

Eco-friendly aspects: for example in production

Design: offer choices within a specific theme, involving colour ranges or shapes. Consider supplying notebooks that can easily be personalised by consumers. Examples are plain notebooks that can be accessorised, or including accessories that can be attached by consumers .

Giving: Stationary as a whole and particularly notebooks has moved from a separate category, with a specific marketing mix, towards home decoration because of the potential it offers as gifts. Currently, retailers that offer general home decoration product ranges include some ranges of notebooks as well. Widen your search for new distribution partners beyond the paperware industry towards general home decoration importers. Be aware that by entering the arena of home decoration products, your notebooks will need to make attractive gifts. Therefore, accessorise your notebooks, incorporate your knowledge about home decoration or home textiles products and consumer trends into your design process, add stories about the materials, techniques or cultural decorations used and demonstrate real craftsmanship. Extend your range of notebooks to include related paperware products, such as colouring books or address books. Moreover, you can add an extra gift, such as a pencil or create notebooks specifically for children.

Sustainability- Planet and People : Sustainability is a growing trend in home decoration products on the European market and fits exceptionally well with handmade paper notebooks. There are numerous options for sustainable products ranging from raw material use (e.g. recycled paper, waste from cotton production, and animal dung and ‘fair trade’ notebooks, to sustainable production (e.g. using non-chlorine bleach). Handmade paper notebooks, produced by small-scale producers under fair working conditions have traditionally been used in the Fairtrade movement. Often, these products provide a clear visual impression of the place of origin. CFA: Revise your process to develop green values. These may be related to your use of materials (e.g. recycling, reusing, or reducing materials, local or renewable materials), the production process (e.g. health and safety, energy consumption, waste management, fair remuneration), distribution (e.g. reducing transport volume) and use and disposal of the product (e.g. biodegradable). Clearly communicate your green values to the importer, to ensure that the message is conveyed at the retail level. If, for instance, you produce handmade paper notebooks made from animal dung (e.g. elephant or panda), make sure to link the notebook to the animal’s welfare, as this creates additional interest. Determine your options for an environmentally friendly way of bleaching paper. ■ Source : CBI, EU