

# Colombia clothing sector eyes European market

By Toni Sekinah | 29 January 2013

Colombia's clothing export sector is eyeing Europe as a key market for diversifying its sales away from a reliance on the United States and neighbouring South American countries.

Senior industry officials speaking at the major Latin America textile and apparel trade fair, Colombiatex, staged last week in Medellin, said they would pro-actively seek out European sales.



**Colombia's clothing exporters are seeking out new opportunities**

The vice president of Proexport, the national export body in Colombia, said his organisation was helping local exporters gain a better understanding of European needs. Ricardo Vallejo said teaching Colombian exporters about the requirements for their products to enter the EU is key, as markets there are very "demanding."

Proexport is also attending fairs and expos abroad with the aim of publicising the advantages of importing from Colombia.

Colombiatex was organised by Inexmoda, the Colombian Institute for Exports and Fashion. The president of Inexmoda, Carlos Eduardo Botero, said he was aware that Colombian exports of textiles and apparel to the EU are currently "shy" at less than 2% of total exports.

However he said that while Europe takes the time to get into better shape economically, Colombian businesses can start to get a better understanding of what is going on in Europe; understanding the needs of the European consumer.

The trade show, which took place in Colombia's fashion capital, welcomed the head of the European Union's (EU) delegation to Colombia, Maria Antonia Van Gool, as the guest of honour in an effort to begin working more closely with the EU.

She said at the conference: "Colombian business is not making the most of all the possibilities in the European continent due to a lack of understanding of the needs of the market."

According to figures from Colombia's national statistics agency, in 2011, 22% of Colombian textile and apparel exports went to the US, 18% to Venezuela, and 16% to Ecuador.

"We are still very close to our neighbours, but we need to go further because there are lots of opportunities in other countries," Botero added.

### **Export challenges**

Indeed, Colombia's exports have declined sharply in recent years, falling 50% by value for textile exports and 47% for apparel exports between 2008 and 2011.

Countries that are targets for future Colombian exports are those with free trade agreements in place or pending, such as Canada, South Korea and Turkey as well less traditional trading partners such as the United Arab Emirates.

Colombiatex, which brought together 1,700 international buyers and 475 exhibitors, had an international flavour as visitors from 27 countries participated. Buyers and exhibitors from Turkey, Brazil and India were particularly well-represented.

This is partly because Colombia (population 46m) is viewed as a healthy import market as well as an exporter.

Esra Turan, of the Istanbul Textile and Apparel Exporters' Association, said "We are looking for new markets. It is very hard to sell in Europe because of the Euro. Colombia is the main market for South America."

She added that it is an attractive market because "it is not yet very well known."

And the shape of domestic demand for textiles and apparel is strong, helping the Colombian industry deal with the fall in exports.

Indeed, despite this, there was a general feeling of optimism at the expo, which attracted over 32,000 visitors, on the back of growing total sales within the Colombian textiles and apparel sector. These have grown from 2000 to 2011 at a compound annual growth rate of 8%.

Manufacturers took pride in their fast turnaround times from as little as two days "from first cut" to 45 days, and Botero spoke of the sector's focus on innovation and investment in technology as well as the reliable nature of the Colombian business community.

Better branding and learning new channels of communication are two strategies Colombia needs to employ to diversify its export markets, according to David Sierra, assistant director of Medellin Chamber of Commerce's textile, apparel, fashion and design group.

He also stressed the need for the industry to really research overseas markets in depth, "to understand the importance of knowing the customer and exactly what he or she needs."

Organisers said the show facilitated the negotiation an estimated US\$152.5m worth of textile and clothing industry deals.

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