

South Africa's fresh fruit industry:

optimising export performance
and securing sustainable
exporter-importer relationships

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White paper

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South Africa's fresh fruit industry needs to be applauded for being the largest contributor to the country's agricultural export sector and a major source of employment. Its export sector particularly deserves scholarly attention to secure economic viability and facilitate a business culture that fosters mutually beneficial relationships among all stakeholders.

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Abstract

The fresh fruit industry in South Africa is considered the biggest contributor to the agricultural export sector (by value) and a major source of employment. Fresh fruit exporters operate in a challenging environment, juggling the financial challenges of competitive pricing and foreign markets' regulatory requirements. Although exporter-importer relationships are key in driving export performance and sustainability, empirical research in this area is unfortunately sparse. This white paper reports the findings of a recent study that explored the interpersonal dynamics among 65 fresh fruit exporters in South Africa and investigated export performance, considering quantitative targets and measures. Results revealed that the key inter-firm relationship behaviours that drive export performance differ from those driving sustainable exporter-importer relationships. According actions recommended for the way forward include securing the economic viability of local fresh fruit exporters' relationships with foreign buyers, considering the new business formula; adopting a long-term view of export markets and buyer relationships; ensuring regular, open communication with buyers; and creating a business culture that facilitates sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships among all stakeholders.

Keywords: Fresh fruit; exports; export performance; sustainable exporter-importer relationships; inter-firm relationship behaviours

Introduction



South African fresh fruit exporters operate in an extremely competitive environment, dealing with multiple challenges. Apart from ensuring that their highly perishable fresh produce – which typically travels long distances to export markets – reaches retail shelves in the expected good condition (Cordes, n.d.), fresh fruit exporters must also navigate the regulatory landscape, guaranteeing that their consignments meet relevant phytosanitary, marketing, and other standards. All these measures increase exporters' expenses. Unexpected external factors frequently complicate matters even further. For example, in 2022, the industry had to manage the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on supply chains globally, new phytosanitary regulations imposed by the European Union (EU), and the consequences of the war between Russia and Ukraine that emanated in soaring fertiliser and fuel prices. On the home front, fresh fruit exporters continue to be tested by ongoing infrastructure deficiencies, bottlenecks at South African ports, the escalating electricity crisis (manifesting in increased loadshedding), droughts, and unexpected weather conditions (Fresh Produce Exporters' Forum [FPEF], 2022).

The fresh fruit industry is a major player in South Africa's agricultural sector, as it:

- Is the biggest contributor (by value) to agricultural exports (Uys, 2016);
- Generates (together with the vegetable industry) more than US\$3 billion in foreign exchange (FPEF, 2023);
- Provides 28% of the jobs in the agricultural sector (Chisoro and Mondliwa, 2019; Fruit South Africa, 2022); and
- Displays the largest multiplier effect in the agricultural sector (through backward and forward linkages), providing in excess of 400 000 employment opportunities across the broader agricultural sector value chain (Van Dyk and Maspero, 2004; Uys, 2016).

Therefore, according to the National Agricultural Marketing Council (2022) driving strong and sustainable export performance in the fresh fruit industry is imperative for the South African government, as per the newly released Agriculture and Agro-Processing Master Plan (AAMP). Apart from being critical for those working directly or indirectly in the fresh fruit industry (and their dependents), the AAMP also positively impacts the broader agricultural and agro-processing value chains, with important spillover effects for the economy as a whole. One way to successfully navigate the many twists and turns characterising the fresh fruit industry and achieve sustainable exports is for exporters to focus on building sound, long-term relationships with their foreign buyers (Hasaballah et al., 2019) to reduce uncertainties due to higher levels of trust and information sharing (Aykol and Leonidou, 2018).

Benefits derived from a sound exporter-importer relationship include:

- Enhanced trust and reduced uncertainty among parties that subsequently willingly share information (Alteren and Tudoran, 2016);
- A buyer orientation develops following the exporters' deeper understanding of the import market's needs, enabling them to adapt promptly, whenever necessary (Narver and Slater, 1990; İpek and Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci, 2020);
- The exporter, having earned a reputation for being reliable, receives progressively larger orders, increasing economies of scale in production, a competitive (price) advantage, and increasing profitability (Aykol and Leonidou, 2018; Morjaria and Macchiavello, 2019); and
- Importers, working with a reliable supplier, can maintain or even grow their market share (İpek and Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci, 2020).

Aim of the white paper

This white paper provides an overview of a study that was inspired by the sparse scholarly research on export performance measures that acknowledge relationship marketing constructs and relationship-building behaviours (Alteren and Tudoran, 2016). The export performance of the fresh fruit export industry in South Africa is discussed from a perceived financial and strategic performance perspective, attending to the perceived sustainability of the relationship between fresh fruit exporters and their foreign buyers. The study was particularly interested in the extent to which inter-firm relationship behaviours predict export performance and the sustainability of an export relationship.



Related concepts explicated

What is export performance?

This paper considers *export performance* from two different perspectives (Sichtmann and Von Selasinsky, 2010):

- *Financial performance*, referring to the extent to which an exporter believes a particular export venture is generating high-sales volumes, is profitable, and is growing; and
- *Strategic performance*, referring to the extent to which an exporter believes a particular export venture has bolstered its strategic position, significantly contributing to its global competitiveness and market share.

Exporting is considered a key driver of countries' economic growth and prosperity (Racela et al., 2007). Moreover, export sustainability is regarded as a prerequisite for export growth. Therefore, unsurprisingly: *the quality of the underlying relationships between exporters and their foreign buyers plays a major role in export success.*

When is an exporter-importer relationship sustainable?

A sustainable exporter-importer relationship is one that has lasted longer than two years, from experience that the risk of the exporter exiting the foreign market thereafter decreases significantly (Esteve-Pérez et al., 2013). In behavioural intention literature (Dagger and Sweeney, 2007; Cassia et al., 2021), a sustainable exporter-importer relationship is described as one in which:

- The exporter believes there is *continuity in the relationship*;
- The relationship is *worthwhile and not hampered by any obstacles*; and
- The export venture is *expected to grow* in due course.

Accordingly, Carrère and Strauss-Kahn (2017) proclaimed that the ability of an exporter to survive is linked to their experience.

What does an inter-firm relationship imply?

Inter-firm behaviours at the heart of the sustainable relationships between exporters and importers involve three elements: (1) *relationship marketing*; (2) *relationship building*; and (3) *channel behaviour*. These elements are depicted in Figure 1 and explained below.



Figure 1: Inter-firm relationship behaviours in an exporting context

Source: Authors' compilation

Relationship marketing

Relationship marketing relies on social exchange theory, focusing on retaining customers by establishing and maintaining strong relationships among role players (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). Three aspects are important in an exporting context (Vesel and Zabkar, 2010), as outlined below.

- *Satisfaction* concerns the outcome of an appraisal process where an exporter compares expectations concerning a relationship with a foreign buyer with the reality experienced (Van Vuuren et al., 2012), both from an economic and a non-economic perspective. Economic satisfaction relates to the financial

benefits derived from the relationship, while non-economic satisfaction culminates from positive feelings associated with the working relationship (Geyskens et al., 1999; Sanzo et al., 2003).

- *Trust* encompasses the expectation that foreign buyers can be relied upon to meet their obligations and to act/negotiate fairly, even amid opportunities of opportunistic behaviour (Zaheer et al., 1998).
- *Commitment* signals a lasting desire and dedication to retain strong exporter-importer relationships (Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Relationship building

Relationship building involves nurturing and strengthening the relationship between sellers and buyers to enhance business performance. Four elements are noteworthy, namely:

- *Communication*: the exporter and a foreign buyer openly share information, aptly dealing with cultural differences (Alteren and Tudoran, 2016);
- *Buyer orientation*: the exporter seeks to understand and prioritise the foreign buyer's needs to create greater value (Narver and Slater, 1990);
- *Relationship proneness*: a conscious tendency to continually engage with organisations for mutual benefit (Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2003); and
- *Level of conflict*: any negative behaviours that could compromise the exporter-buyer relationship (Hunt, 1995; Høgevoid et al., 2021).

Channel behaviour

Channel behaviour encompasses both positive and negative behaviours associated with a transactional-cost analysis (Heide and John, 1990; Mpinganjira et al., 2015), including:

- *Cooperation* reflects the willingness of an exporter and a foreign buyer to work together, chasing mutual goals (Payan and Svensson, 2007);
- *Coordination* refers to the well-orchestrated alignment between an exporter's and an importer's behaviours and business processes (Gulati et al., 2012);
- *Specific assets* refer to resource-related investments made by an exporter to shape and give substance to their relationship with the foreign buyer (Mpinganjira et al., 2015); and
- *Opportunism*, which has a negative connotation, implying the transgression of acceptable norms in an exporter-importer relationship, such as evading contractual obligations, abusing contractual loopholes, and demanding unfair concessions in a tough market environment (Ganeson et al., 2010).

Benefits of a sound exporter-importer relationship:

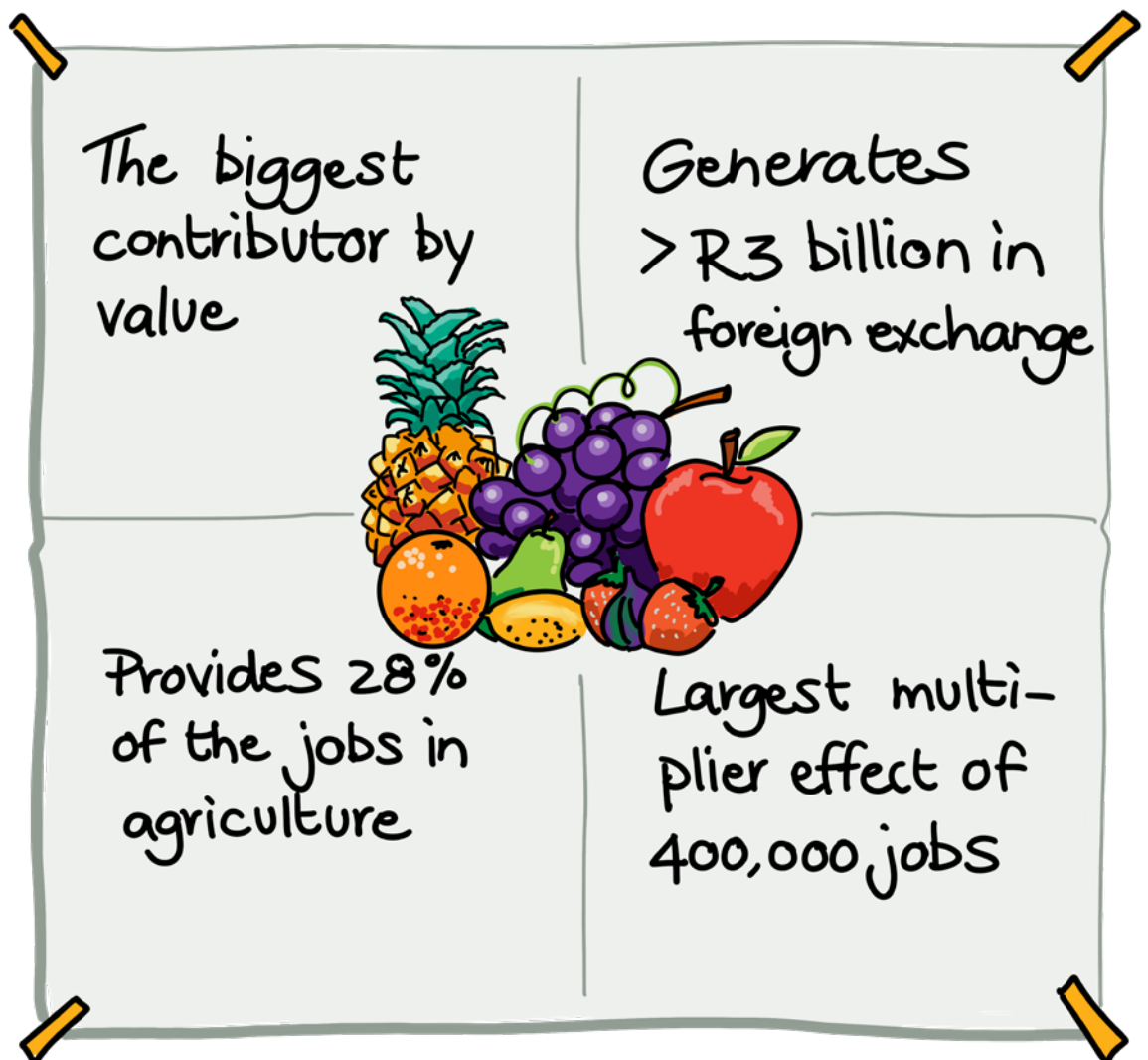


- Co-operation leads to greater trading efficiency
- Reduced uncertainty
- Efficient process changes
- Greater profitability
- Growing market share

South Africa's fresh fruit export sector

The export scenario

South Africa is the largest fruit exporter (per metric ton) in the southern hemisphere (contributing 36% of total fruit exports), followed by Chile (contributing 22%) and Brazil (contributing only 3%). However, Brazil is the largest fresh fruit *producer* in the southern hemisphere, followed by South Africa, which exports 90% of its total production, making it almost exclusively export-orientated (Phaleng, 2017). The fruit is exported to more than 100 destinations around the world. Figure 2 indicates the 2020/2021 shares of its main export markets.



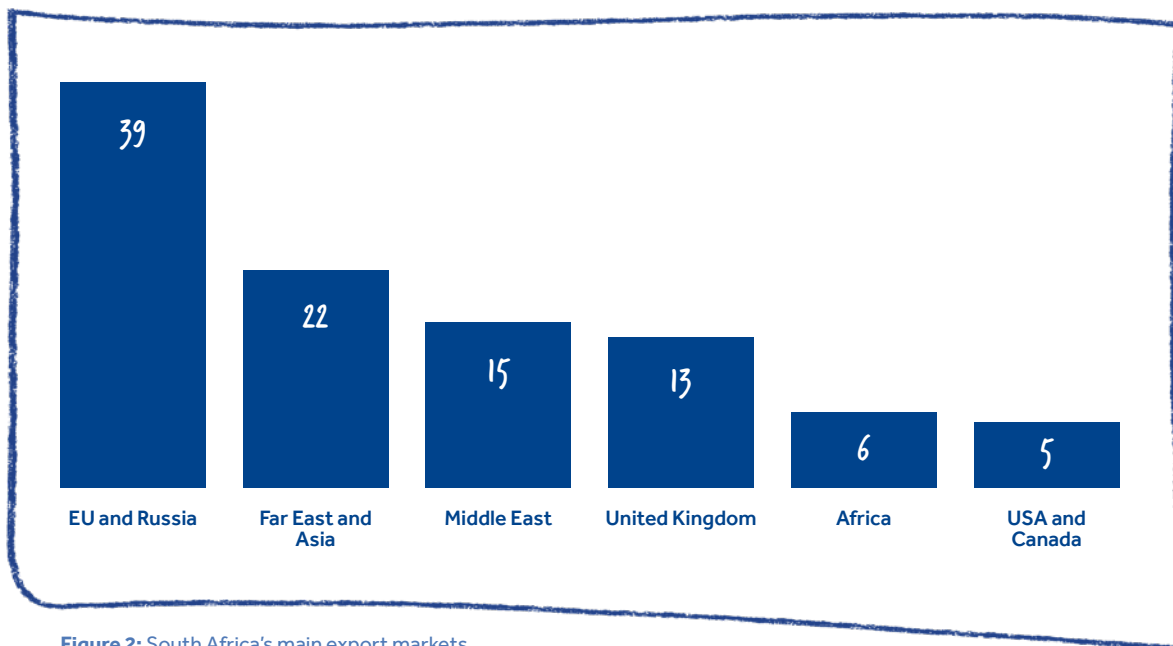


Figure 2: South Africa's main export markets
Source: Adapted from Fruit South Africa (2022)

Potentially, high-growth markets for South African fresh fruit exist in East and South Asia, including China, Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea, and India (Chisoro and Mondliwa, 2019). Details about the percentage composition of South Africa's fresh fruit exports are indicated in Figure 3.

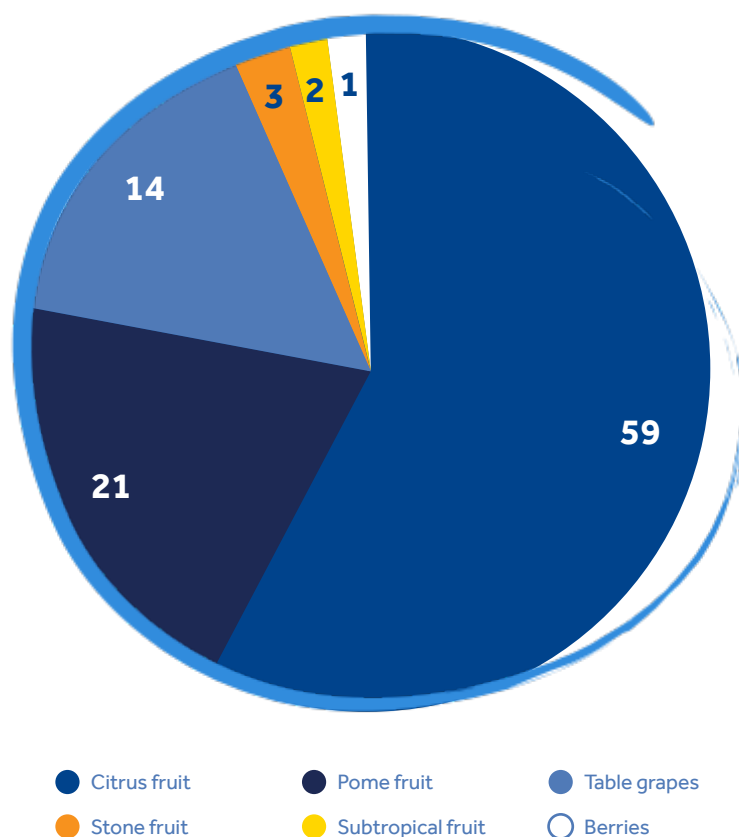
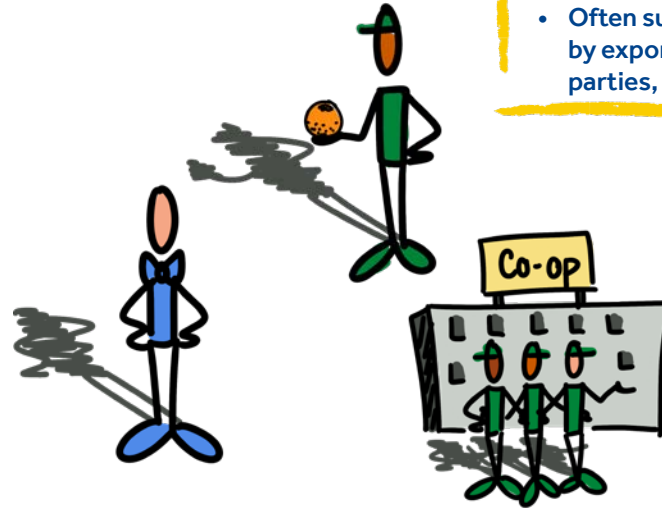


Figure 3. Percentage composition of South Africa's fresh fruit exports in 2022
Source: Adapted from FPEF (2023)

Distribution channels

According to Vickey de Villiers (personal communication), fresh fruit producers in South Africa use a combination of distribution channels to export their produce. The most prominent distribution channels are *grower-exporters* (also known as producer-exporters), *marketing agents/organisations*, and *cooperatives* (refer to Figure 4).



1 Grower-exporters:

- Either own or manage their own farms or own shares in the company
- Often supplement their shipments by exporting the produce of third parties, especially smaller farmers

2 Marketing agents/organisations:

- Do not produce fresh produce
- Do not have producers as shareholders
- Act on behalf of producers and earn a commission or fee, paid by producers, for services rendered

3 Cooperatives:

- Accept multiple growers' produce at a single pack house
- Export growers' produce on their behalf

Figure 4: Prominent distribution channels

Source: Adapted from Agricultural Produce Agents Council (2023); Vickey de Villiers (personal communication)

It is common for grower-exporters and marketing agents to export small producers' produce on their behalf, as the former are better placed to meet importers' requirements with respect to product variety, volume, and continuity of orders (Vickey de Villiers, personal communication). Grower-exporters and marketing agents often possess greater bargaining power, economies of scale in production, access to a global client base, long-standing relationships with clients (including contracts with retail operations), accumulated expertise, and the willingness and capacity to share the transactional risk. By offloading some of their marketing responsibilities, small producers can focus on production. Unfortunately, related disadvantages might include additional transport and handling costs, less control over the export operation, limited exposure to export markets, and difficulty developing their own identity or brand.

The study

A survey targeted direct exporters of fresh fruit in South Africa, aiming to: (1) describe the fruit export scenario; (2) establish the nature and quality of the exporter-importer relationships, considering those they shipped most of their fresh produce to; and (3) determine 'behind-the-scene' inter-firm relationship behaviours that are significant predictors of export performance and sustainable exporter-importer relationships, respectively.

The survey instrument

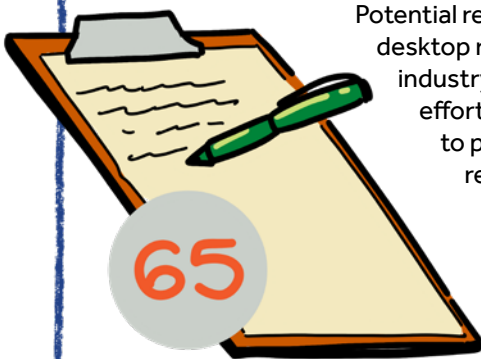
A questionnaire comprising of both open- and closed-ended questions was designed to collect data from eligible respondents. The preamble explained respondents' rights and responsibilities, including three screening questions to confirm that respondents qualified to participate in the study. The following section captured details about the respondents' direct exporting behaviour. Thereafter, respondents' perceptions of their export performance and the sustainability of their relationships with their foreign buyers were quantified using seven-point Likert-type scales where 1 is 'strongly disagree' and where 7 is 'strongly agree'.

Eligible survey participants

To participate in the survey, exporters had to:

- Produce or market fresh fruit in South Africa;
- Be engaged in the direct exporting of fresh fruit to other countries; and
- Deal directly with foreign buyers of fresh fruit harvested in South Africa when the survey was conducted in 2022.

Data collection



Potential respondents were recruited by conducting comprehensive desktop research and reaching out to representatives of various industry associations. Strategies used to maximise data-collection efforts included the distribution of a survey link via email to prospective respondents; asking industry association representatives to forward the link to their members; through telephonic contact; and administering the survey online via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Sixty-five completed surveys were produced for analysis. This was deemed significant and representative of the target population, considering the estimated size of the direct fresh fruit export community in South Africa.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the direct exporting behaviour of respondents. Cronbach's alpha coefficients calculated for the study's constructs all exceeded 0.6, supporting the measurement scales' reliability (Hajjar, 2018). Mean scores were calculated for selected constructs and, finally, linear regression served to determine the key inter-firm relationship behaviours that were perceived to drive export performance and sustainable exporter-importer relationships. Cut-off levels for the linear regression were set at the 95% confidence interval, with a p -value below 0.05 indicating statistically significant relationships.

Results: the scenario

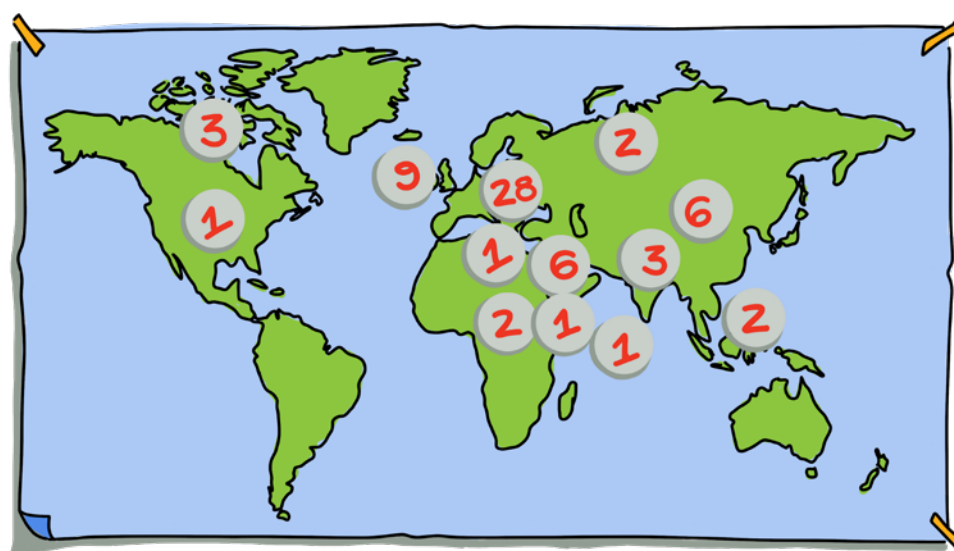
An overview of respondents' direct exporting behaviour is followed by outcomes concerning exporters' perceptions of the sustainability of exporter-buyer relationships, export performance, commendable relationship-building behaviours, and sustainable channel behaviours.

Direct exporting behaviour

Details of direct fresh fruit exporters' activities are summarised in Table 1. On average, they had been exporting their fresh fruit for 15 years, exporting to their largest foreign buyer for 12 years. Just over 81% of their fresh produce sales were derived from directly exporting to 35 buyers and exporting nearly 27% of their products to their largest foreign buyer. Exporters devoted an average of 14 hours per week to business affairs and communication with their largest foreign buyers.

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Average
Duration: directly exporting fresh fruit	8 months	40 years	15 years
Duration: exporting fresh fruit to their largest foreign buyer	8 months	40 years	12 years
% sales of fresh fruit: from direct exporting	15%	100%	81.33%
% exports of fresh fruit: to the largest foreign buyer	3%	100%	27.1%
Number of foreign buyers: exporting directly	1 buyer	150 buyers	35 buyers
Time spent: per week on the largest foreign buyer	1 hour	60 hours	14 hours

Table 1: Exporters' direct exporting behaviour



The EU was the leading export destination amongst the respondents (28 respondents), followed by the United Kingdom (nine respondents), China (six respondents), and the United Arab Emirates (six respondents). Canada and Bangladesh had three respondents each; followed by Russia, Malaysia, and African countries with two respondents each; and lastly the Maldives, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the United States with one respondent each. Details of the fresh fruit categories exported to the exporter's largest foreign buyer are presented in Figure 5.

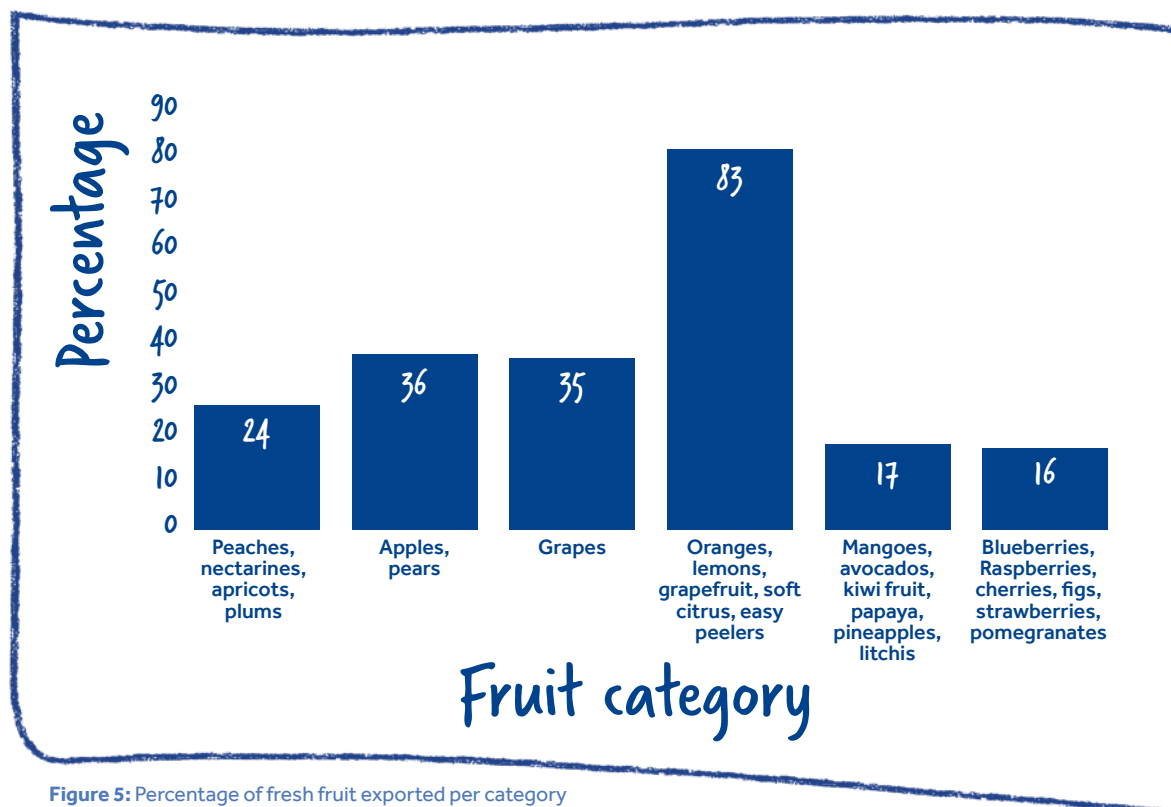


Figure 5: Percentage of fresh fruit exported per category

Sustainability of relationships and export performance

All the perception measurements were calculated out of 7. Accordingly, exporters' perceptions of the sustainability of their relationships with their foreign buyers were very favourable (mean score of 6.37). Their perceptions of their export performance (financial and strategic) were slightly less favourable (mean score of 5.49), while their perceptions of financial performance (mean score of 5.53) had a slight edge over their perceptions of strategic performance (mean score of 5.45). Overall, exporters' perceptions exceeded the mean score ($M \geq 3.5$) and were positive.

Relationship-marketing

Based on a similar interpretation, exporters' perceptions of their relationships with their foreign buyers indicated strong commitment (mean score of 6.53). However, their perceptions of non-economic aspects of their relationships (mean score of 6.20) were more satisfying than their perceptions of economic aspects (mean score of 5.51). Although positive, exporters' level of trust (mean score of 5.76) trailed somewhat behind their perceptions of commitment and non-economic satisfaction.

Relationship-building behaviours

With a maximum score of 7 in mind, exporters demonstrated a rather high level of relationship proneness (mean score of 6.61), while mean scores for buyer orientation and communication were equally encouraging (6.55 and 6.45 respectively). Particularly inspiring was the low level of conflict experienced with exporters' largest foreign buyer (mean score of 2.31), which could extend to their other foreign buyer relationships.

Channel behaviours

Following the same interpretation, positive behaviours were reported when exporters reflected on issues concerning cooperation (mean score of 6.25) and coordination (mean score of 6.08). It is fortunate that opportunism, which is fertile ground for conflict, hardly featured in the exporters' relationships with their foreign buyers (mean score of 1.91). The mean score of 4.0 calculated for specific assets, was disappointing, as it suggests that exporters' resource-related investments by an exporter that were supposed to shape and give substance to their relationship with the foreign buyer only delivered mediocre results.



Takeaways from the fresh fruit export scenario

The exporters who participated in the survey:

- Generally spread their business risk across a range of foreign buyers, as well as fresh fruit categories;
- Largely run successful export operations;
- Perceive their export performance as satisfactory;
- Perceive their relationships with their foreign buyers as highly sustainable;
- Wish to develop and maintain relationships with their foreign buyers, 'to go the extra mile' for them, as well as to supply them regularly;
- Are keen to understand their foreign buyers' needs, keep them happy, and promptly address complaints;
- Are very committed to their relationships with their foreign buyers;
- Agree that the non-economic aspects of their relationships with buyers are satisfactory;
- Perceive communication with foreign buyers as open and productive, with low levels of conflict;
- Although satisfied, admit that the level of trust in and the profitability of their relationships with buyers could improve somewhat;
- Agree that their cooperation and coordination with foreign buyers is satisfactory;
- Experience limited levels of opportunism from their foreign buyers, with low levels of self-interest, even though operations are not always geared to their buyers' needs;
- Concur that more time and energy could be devoted to their largest foreign buyers, who invariably enjoy a sizeable market share and may hold the key to long-term export sustainability; and
- Agree that resource-related investments that were supposed to shape and give substance to their relationships with foreign buyers were disappointing.

Results: behind the scene

Conducting linear regression and guided by the respective correlation coefficients and level of significance, conclusive evidence emerged concerning inter-firm relationship behaviours. These are outlined below.

Inter-firm relationship behaviours that are significant drivers of export performance

The clear winners in terms of driving export performance that repeatedly emerged from the statistical analysis were *economic satisfaction* (a relationship marketing behaviour) and *relationship proneness* (a relationship-building behaviour). Interestingly, none of the channel behaviours (cooperation, coordination, and opportunism) emerged as significant drivers of export performance.

Inter-firm relationship behaviours that are significant drivers of sustainable exporter-importer relationships

Non-economic satisfaction and *commitment* (both relationship marketing behaviours) consistently emerged as the most significant drivers of sustainable exporter-importer relationships. Runners-up were *relationship proneness* and *communication* (both relationship-building behaviours) as well as *cooperation* (a channel behaviour).

A summary of the key inter-firm relationship behaviours that drive export performance and sustainable exporter-importer relationships is presented in Figure 6.

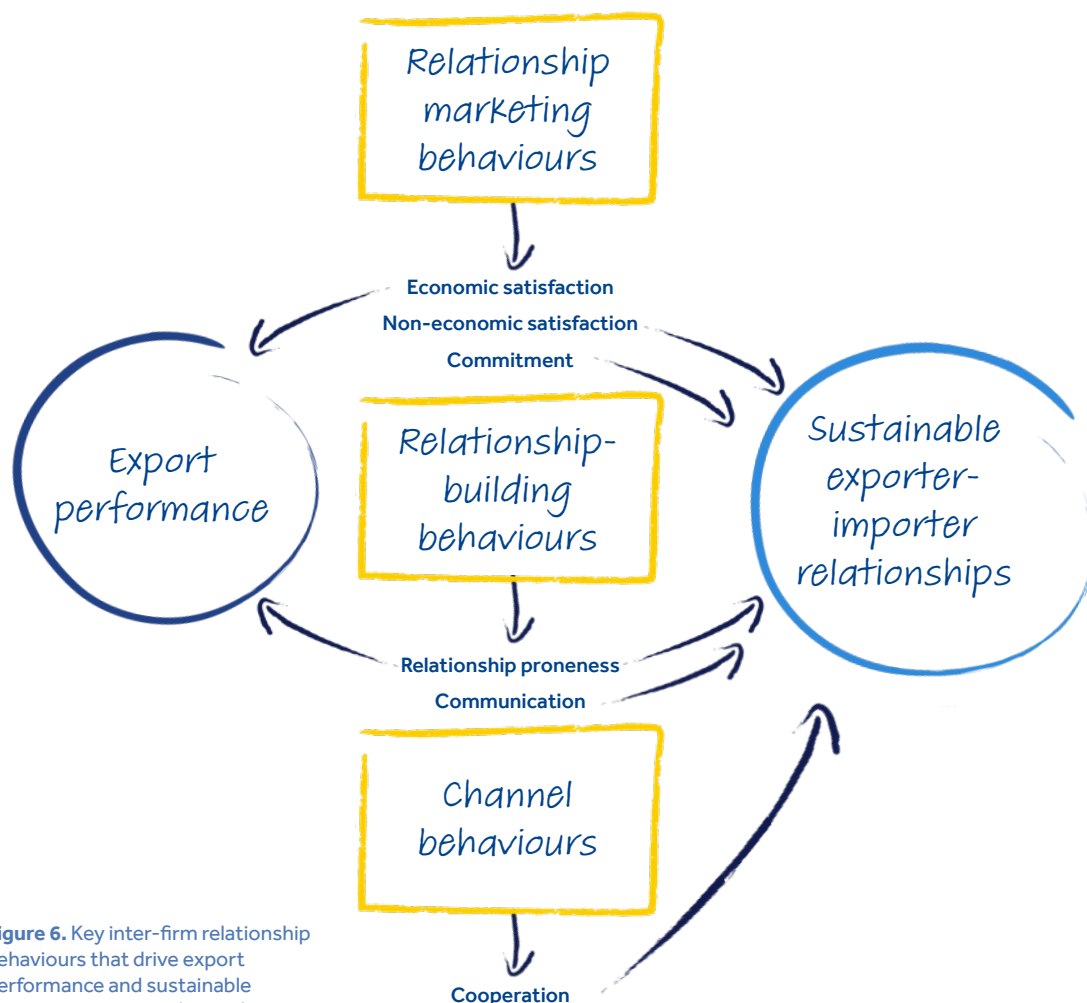


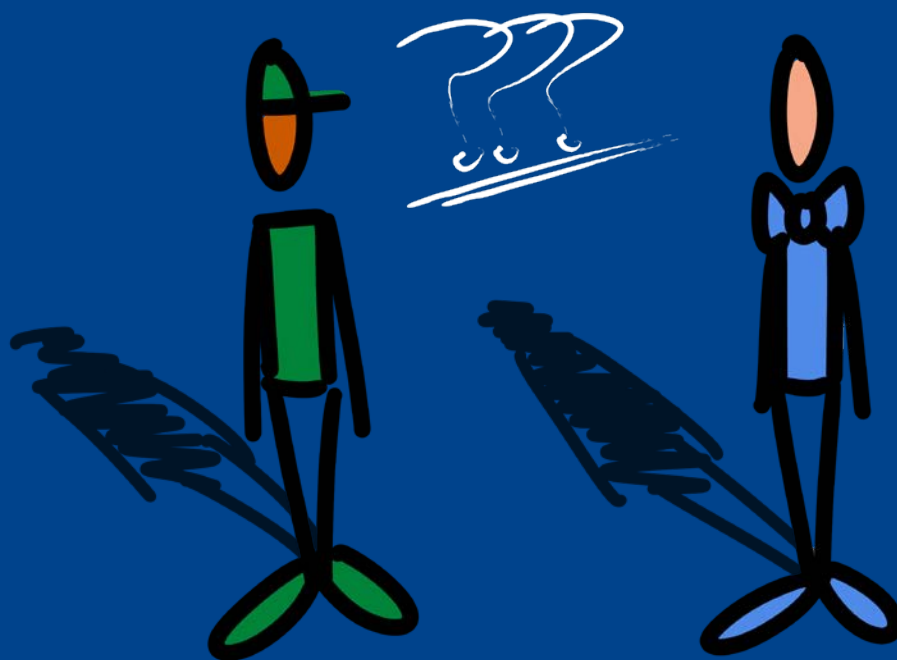
Figure 6. Key inter-firm relationship behaviours that drive export performance and sustainable exporter-importer relationships

Source: Authors' compilation

Takeaways from 'behind the scene' insights

- The inter-firm relationship behaviours that drive export performance are, on the whole, quite different from those driving sustainable exporter-importer relationships.
- Whereas export performance is significantly influenced by economic satisfaction, non-economic satisfaction is a key driver of sustainable exporter-importer relationships, as are commitment, communication, and cooperation – all signalling the importance of human interaction and openness in the pursuit of a successful, long-term export venture.
- The only key inter-firm relationship trait that drives both export performance and sustainable exporter-importer relationships is relationship proneness, which could logically be linked to economic and non-economic satisfaction.

The clear winners in terms of driving export performance that repeatedly emerged from the statistical analysis were economic satisfaction (a relationship marketing behaviour) and relationship proneness (a relationship-building behaviour).



Recommendations to enhance export performance and sustainable exporter-importer relationships



Based on the study's results, several recommendations are made for fresh fruit exporters in South Africa to enhance their export performance and strengthen their relationships with foreign buyers. These recommendations are outlined in the subsections that follow.

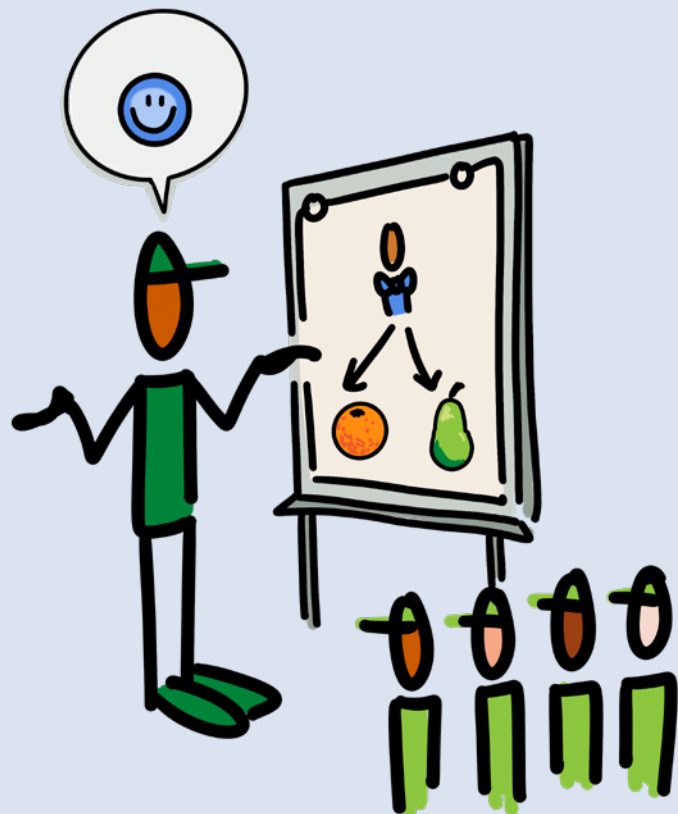
Prioritise the economic viability of all exporter-buyer relationships

As discussed, export performance covers both financial performance (sales, profit, and growth) and strategic performance (competitive position and market share). This study distinguished economic satisfaction as a key driver of export performance. However, in terms of future planning, the reported lower levels of economic satisfaction compared to non-economic satisfaction deserve attention.

Exporters' relationships with foreign buyers should be economically viable, guarding sales targets and prioritising profitable endeavours. This requires a solid understanding of a business's monthly expenditure and the revenue that needs to be generated to cover and/or exceed expenses in the long term. The recent COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that it is crucial to keep in mind possible challenging conditions that role players have little control over.

Exporters also need to compare the potential and actual revenue flowing from their business transactions with the costs of doing business with foreign buyers. If the financial analysis suggests that the economic viability of a particular business relationship seems questionable, an exporter may need to engage with the foreign buyer to frankly discuss minimum order quantities and frequency of orders.

As such, a discussion may test exporters' relationships with their buyers, the point of departure should be common ground or mutual interests, being reminded that foreign buyers are equally concerned about profitability and the viability of their business relationships. Once exporters and foreign buyers have articulated their respective goals relating to economic viability (which are hopefully mutually reinforcing), it becomes easier to determine how best to accommodate each set of goals in their business relationships.

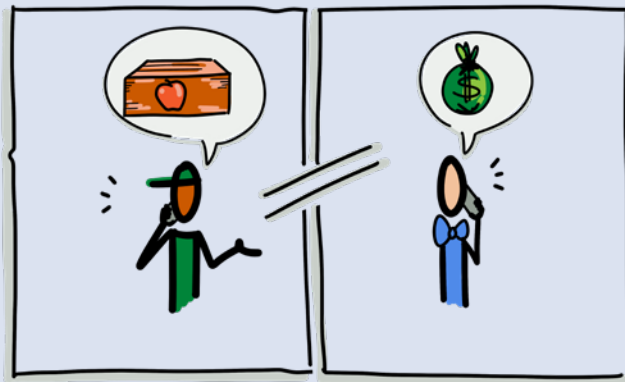


Take a long-term view of relationships with foreign buyers

An economically viable exporter-importer relationship suggests a committed, long-term arrangement – not a quick entry into and exit from a market in pursuit of short-term opportunities. Even if certain opportunities appear lucrative at some point, insufficient time and investment devoted to nurturing relationships with buyers and establishing a market presence could jeopardise export performance and profitability down the line.

Retain open communication with foreign buyers

The importance of communication in the exporter-importer relationship – evidenced by frequent and candid information sharing and consultation – is crucial. The value of informal communication supplementing formal connections, should not be underestimated. Likewise, cooperation is one of the cornerstones of an enduring exporter-importer relationship, indicating that both parties are willing to listen, share, act, and adapt.



While the importance of money (economic satisfaction) is non-debatable, people also matter, as they bring all-important resilience and continuity to a business operation. This study's conclusion that exporters' non-economic satisfaction is very favourable suggests fertile ground for future interaction.

Unlike export performance, which centres on quantitative targets and measures (such as sales and overall profitability), sustainable exporter-importer relationships are more likely to be seen as the outcome of comfortable, pleasant and satisfying interpersonal encounters.

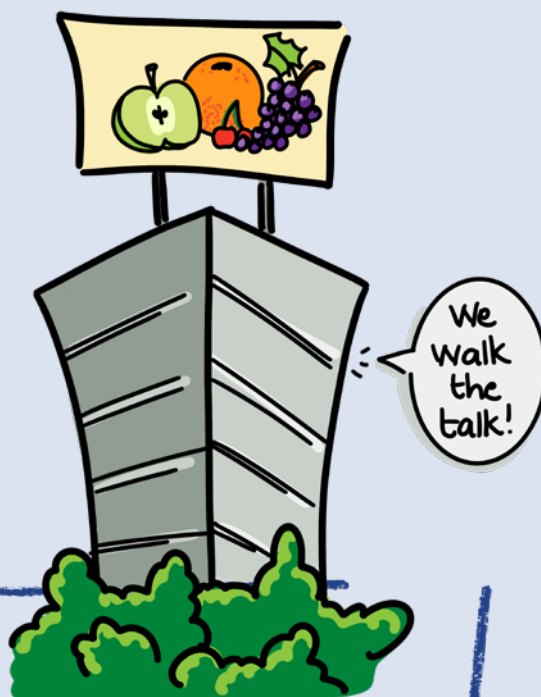
Screen and/or train staff to ensure high levels of relationship proneness

A key driver of both export performance and sustainable exporter-importer relationships is relationship proneness. Some exporters are more naturally inclined to build relationships with their foreign buyers. Therefore, exporters must take conscious steps to nurture relationship proneness both in themselves and in their employees. Potential employees should be screened for relationship proneness before being appointed, while all existing employees could benefit from relevant training. For example, 'soft skills' and emotional intelligence workshops could be arranged to boost employees' desire and ability to forge mutually beneficial relationships with foreign buyers.

Cultivate a relationship-centred business culture

Notwithstanding the benefit of training programmes for employees, relationship proneness must be an integral part of the business culture and upheld by management to ensure that it becomes a widely practised and enduring behaviour. In other words, those with authority and influence in the firm need to 'walk the talk'.

It is particularly noteworthy that non-economic satisfaction, commitment, communication, and cooperation emerged as key drivers of sustainable exporter-importer relationships in this study. This is a testimony that the respondents value working closely and effectively with their foreign buyers in the interests of both parties. Building relationships that lead to strong export performance requires long planning and investment both in financial assets and human capital.

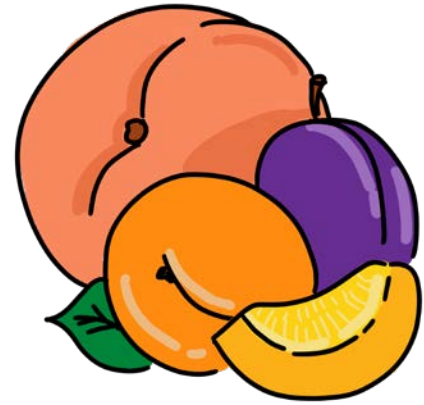


A useful action checklist for exporters

Although the endeavours of the fresh fruit export industry in South Africa, as examined in this study, created a favourable impression, the following checklist may be useful to increase their momentum of success in the future:

- Assess the economic viability of the relationship with a foreign buyer, objectively using sales and profitability measures.
- Do not be swayed by short-term gains that could compromise long-term stability and profitability.
- If the economic viability of a relationship (old or new) is in question, negotiate a better business formula.
- Ensure that the lines of formal and informal communication with foreign buyers remain open to regularly engage in listening, sharing, planning, and problem-solving.
- Encourage high levels of relationship proneness amongst employees by screening candidates at the recruitment stage and introducing relevant training programmes for existing employees. On a management level, individuals should 'walk the talk'.
- Foster a relationship-centred business culture with top management leading the way in words and actions.
- Remember that building a successful and sustainable export operation involves investing in financial assets and in people.

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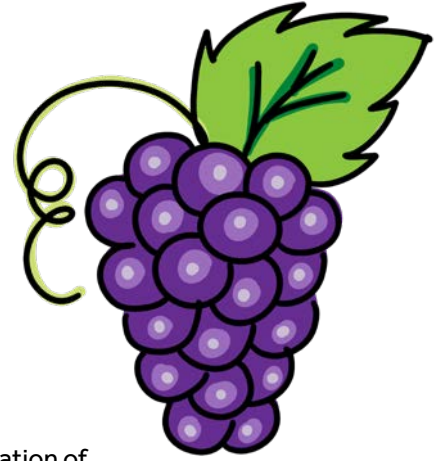
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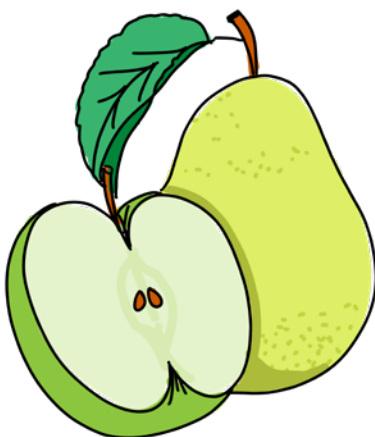
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South Africa's fresh fruit industry:

**optimising export
performance and securing
sustainable exporter-importer
relationships**





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