WADHWANI FOUNDATION

Expert Insights

Shelf-Ready or Shelf-Rejected?

Are You Making These Common Export Mistakes?

Discover why most Indian food products fail in international markets before they even reach the shelf—and how to ensure yours succeeds.

Keep scrolling to unlock the proven export strategy helping food founders thrive globally.



Knowledge Source

Wadhwani Foundation Expert Session | Apr 30, 2025

This session was designed to help Indian food SMBs understand export barriers, align with global standards and confidently enter international markets.

About the Expert: Tazul Haque

Tazul Haque is a market research expert with 13+ years of experience helping Indian food brands become export-ready. At Solution Buggy, he focuses on go-to-market strategy, compliance, and mentoring entrepreneurs through export-focused training programs.

> In this session, Tazul uses a real-world case study to show how market research helped an Indian food brand shift from product ambition to market alignment—and successfully break into global markets.

💼 The Case Scenario

A founder in the clean-label snack category spent over a year developing millet-based puffs—high in protein, free from additives, with a 6+ month shelf life. The product performed well in India, but all export interest dropped off.

Despite domestic success, her brand failed to move forward internationally due to basic export readiness gaps.

Where It Fell Short



Missing USDA or EU Certification

Lacked the certifications required to access premium markets in the U.S. and Europe



Non-compliant packaging

Packaging didn't meet single-use plastic regulations, causing retailers to reject the product



Missing allergen codes

Ingredients not labeled with international allergen codes made the product unsafe and unqualified for export

🚫 The Missing Link in Export Readiness

The founder wasn’t alone—many Indian food entrepreneurs succeed locally but face rejection abroad. Export readiness means more than a good product; it requires **certifications, compliant packaging** and **clear labeling**.

ⓘ Founder and brand details anonymized to protect privacy.

🔍 Root Cause Breakdown

Below are the common mistakes and their consequences that stop Indian food brands from going global:

Common Mistakes	Real-World Consequences
Exporting without market research	**80%** of Indian food entrepreneurs target premium markets without understanding buyer requirements, resulting in failed outreach
Assuming "healthy" = "exportable"	Buyers don't trust or understand the product because the health claims aren't clear or accepted in their market.
Inadequate packaging design	Product rejection by global retailers
Missing essential certifications	Exclusion from platforms requiring verified standards
Non-compliant ingredient labeling	Import blocks due to improper labeling
Premature scaling of production	Inventory buildup and financial strain
Unfocused market targeting	Diluted marketing impact and buyer confusion
Overlooking regional compliance	Market entry barriers due to non-compliance

Recommended Solution

Based on the expert's guidance, founders were encouraged to do the following:

Market Focus

Choose one product that clearly fits your target export market.

Instead of pushing all SKUs, founders narrowed focus to a single high-potential product-market match.

Compliance First

Study export regulations like non-GMO, recyclable packaging, and shelf-life rules.

Exporters took time to understand the compliance needs of their target countries before launching.

Strategic Partnerships

Partner locally to reduce production, packaging, or labeling gaps.

White-label arrangements helped overcome manufacturing or certification limitations.

Export-Specific SKUs

Adapt your label, packaging size, and product story to fit the export buyer's needs.

Brands redesigned their SKUs for international shelves with clearer claims and compliant designs.

> *"Smart exporting isn't about speed. It's about alignment with your buyer, your market, and your message." — Tazul Haque*

The Expected Result

Following this expert guidance may lead to meaningful improvements in how your business approaches exports, based on patterns seen with similar MSMEs

Clear Product-Market Fit

Focusing on one product–market match rather than broad export attempts will lead to quicker buyer interest and better traction.

Compliance and Packaging Readiness

Aligning your packaging, labeling, and certifications with global norms will result in smoother customs clearance and faster shelf approvals.

Smarter Buyer Discovery

Using verified trade data platforms (like Eximpedia, Seair, Volza) and attending targeted expos will open doors to genuine buyer connections and reduce back-and-forth.

Digital Presence & Supply Chain Visibility

Building a strong digital catalog and adopting inventory tools will help position your brand as reliable and globally ready.

Insight

> Every founder believes their product deserves global shelf space. But in exports, it's not about what you make—it's about what the shelf accepts.

Global markets don't grade on effort or intention. They have strict, often unspoken rules about what can enter their supply chain. Your product might be revolutionary in India, but if it doesn't meet international standards, it remains invisible.

Even exceptional quality can't overcome basic compliance issues. The most nutritious millet snack will be rejected if its packaging violates local regulations or if its ingredients list doesn't follow international labeling norms.

✅ Founders Please Check

Shelf-Ready or Shelf-Rejected?

Before exporting, assess if your product meets global standards with these four critical questions:

Are you building for foreign buyers—or just pitching to them?

Buyers expect products already aligned with their market's packaging, claims, and category norms.

Will your product make sense abroad—without explanation?

Foreign customers should instantly understand what your product is and how it fits their needs.

Does your product have proper certifications—not just quality?

Quality alone isn't enough. Secure required export certifications (USDA, FSSAI-Export) and ensure label compliance.

Have you tested before scaling?

Pilot your product on small B2B marketplaces or through partners before going global to avoid costly setbacks.

⚠️ Every great export story starts with honest prep. If you're unsure on any front, it's the perfect time to sharpen your strategy

Learn more

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