

## Chapter 22

# Saffron marketing: challenges and opportunities

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## 22.1 Introduction

Saffron is one of the most expensive agricultural and medicinal products in the world. Specific features of saffron, such as family labor requirements, low water requirements, ability to grow in clay and sandy soils, minimal machinery needs, and the potential acceptable income for farmers have led to an increase in the cultivation and production of saffron continuously in countries such as Iran. Iran, Greece, Morocco, Spain, and Italy are the largest saffron producers in the world, and beginning in 2015, the neighboring countries of Iran such as Afghanistan entered this market. Saffron is a strategic product in the southern Khorasan and Khorasan Razavi provinces in Iran, as it can help create seasonal and permanent employment for people, prevent migration, generate income, and expand nonoil exports. Iran accounts for more than 90% of the world's production of saffron and 80% of Iran's production of saffron comes from these two provinces.

Iran exports more than 80% of its saffron to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Spain, France, and Italy. The mentioned countries reexport Iranian saffron to targeted countries after making modest changes such as processing, but capturing huge value-add. [Torkamani \(2000\)](#) reported that production, processing, and marketing problems in Iran have encouraged raw saffron to be exported without important value-adding features.

Iran tends to export saffron in bulk, minimizing its value-add. This phenomenon is characteristic of many Iranian raw materials, such as oil and gas, but also basic agricultural products like medicinal herbs. Raw materials export reduce profits as well as decreasing the competitiveness of the country in the world markets. Countries like the UAE and Spain, by importing bulk Iranian saffron and then packing, grading, and producing related products, achieve more value-add from Iranian saffron than the originating country.

## 22.2 Problems of exporting and marketing of saffron

[Hashempour \(2009\)](#), [Hosseini and Aho-Ghalandari \(2007\)](#), [Pezeshkirad and Feali \(2010\)](#), and [Torkamani \(2000\)](#) noted several issues facing the exporting and marketing of saffron. The most important factors include:

1. Noncompliance with hygiene standards as the product is harvested, processed, and packaged. Most saffron consumers are looking for a high-quality, safe, hygienic product, so it is important to observe hygiene throughout the various stages of saffron production and processing. Saffron is used as a food ingredient, natural color agent, herbal

medicine, and many other applications in various industries. Therefore, it is essential to observe health and safety protocols for this product that are compliant with international standards.

2. Bulk exports of saffron. In order to increase exports of high value-added saffron products, saffron-related industries must compete with other countries that buy and reexport the saffron with their own brands and packaging.
3. The saffron industry should pay attention to customer wants and needs in target markets. Consumers buy saffron for different uses, including pharmaceutical, health, and food industries. The saffron industry in producing countries might do a better job of meeting customer needs if more of the product was processed in their countries. Saffron producers and marketers could produce and handle the product in a way that generates and preserves its most desirable characteristics, which can create more value.
4. Marketing costs can change consumer expenditure, so efforts to reduce marketing and production costs will increase consumer welfare and producer revenues. [Hosseini and Aho-Ghalandari \(2007\)](#) reported that the marketing margins for saffron are directly related to its retail price and that marketing costs such as wage and transport costs increase retail prices.
5. The lack of mandatory standards for production and processing of saffron is a problem because there is too much variation in quality. The lack of well-equipped laboratories and specialized workers to enforce mandatory standards for production and procession of saffron are a requisite for producing high-quality saffron products.
6. The presence of educated and knowledgeable people in the saffron trade can play a significant role in improving markets and exports for this sector. Most of the companies that are active in the saffron industry use their own experience without using scientific marketing and trade principles. Therefore, their results are disappointing and countries export raw product instead of highly processed items, reducing profits significantly.
7. The lack of enough knowledge about potential foreign market opportunities for saffron and its products is another problem in the marketing of saffron.
8. Saffron is widely used in the food, sanitary, and cosmetics industries as well as in the dye and chemical industry, in addition to others, but there is lack of knowledge and technology in some producing countries to turn raw saffron into these high-valued subproducts.
9. There is no prestigious brand for saffron in some producing countries. This makes it difficult to establish further processing and leads to difficulties in e-commerce.

[Mosavi et al. \(2013\)](#) argued that Iran has been the largest producer of raw saffron in the world for the past two decades, but there are doubts about its ability to maintain this position in the future. Due to its special climate, Iran is suitable for saffron cultivation in its arid and semiarid regions, like South Khorasan, Khorasan Razavi, Fars, Kerman, and Yazd provinces, despite being water scarce. There are some problems with saffron production and processing methods because it is still performed in a very traditional structure and manner, but most of the problems involve exportation of this valuable herb.

Lack of attention to international standards, antiquated distribution systems, and lack of a central organization to monitor and production, advertising, and exporting of saffron create several challenges. Currently, a handful of countries distribute this product to global markets. These countries mainly purchase saffron at a low price from producing countries, provide some low-level processing, gain a high value-add, and reexport it to global markets under their brand names. Some producing countries have failed to capitalize on their role as exclusive producer of raw saffron and have suffered as a result. One factor that prevents these countries from gaining more benefit from saffron (and allows other countries to gain), is its inappropriate packaging and bulk export of the product to global markets. Spain and UAE mainly purchase saffron in bulk, repack it, and distribute it to the global markets under their brand names, enjoying a rich margin ([Aghdaie and Roshan, 2015](#)).

[Pezeshkirad and Feali \(2010\)](#) investigated the challenges of saffron marketing, processing, and exporting, and concluded that the main challenges include:

- Lack of suitable packaging industries
- Noncompliance with international standards
- Lack of reliable and global brands for saffron
- Traditional production and processing methods
- Inadequate exporters training
- Poor promotional practices in global markets
- Lack of effective marketing organizations
- Weakness earning power of saffron growers
- High presence of unnecessary brokers in the saffron market

- Lack of information on world markets
- Fluctuations in saffron prices
- Government policies and regulations
- Lack of research funding and failure to conduct research on the properties and subproducts of saffron
- Incidence of fraud
- Entry of new competitors such as Afghanistan and China
- Weakness in electronic commerce

Furthermore, they suggest that the most important strategies to improve the marketing and exporting of saffron include developing:

1. Government policies to provide loans and support producers and processors to create standardization of packaging for saffron exports
2. Commercial and business training courses for exporters
3. Research specializing in the production, processing, creating high value-added products and marketing of saffron
4. Specialized marketing organizations
5. Target markets and consumer preferences
6. Special brands of saffron for global markets
7. Improved producing and processing of saffron
8. Information center and saffron exchange market
9. Value chain of saffron products
10. Identify products better in order to prevent fraud from bulk exports
11. Accredited exhibitions to introduce saffron products in international markets
12. Saffron products and promotion through reputable media sources throughout the world
13. Internationally recognized standards for producing, processing, and exporting Iranian saffron
14. Legal barriers to prevent bulk export of saffron and rewards for the export of higher value-added products

According to [Torkamani \(2000\)](#), saffron growers are not able to deliver their products continuously throughout the year, but the demand for their product is continuous. Some organization must be developed to process and store saffron to meet these needs throughout the year. There is no alliance among saffron producers that organize, buy, sell, distribute, package, and offer marketing services to them. Farmers lack knowledge of market conditions and are subject to large price fluctuations due to supply and demand changes. The formation of local, regional, and national unions for the production, marketing, and exporting of saffron will not only allow additional buyers for saffron but can also help reduce fraud.

Saffron producing unions would be responsible for purchasing and collecting saffron from different production centers and delivering services to their farmer members including the provision of fertilizers and credits and promotion of improved production, harvesting, and processing methods. These unions are involved in collecting saffron products and shipping them to packaging, marketing, and exporting centers. Saffron is graded in these centers in a fully sanitary and standardized manner with advanced technologies as value-added products and are packaged and delivered to domestic and foreign markets. In addition to controlling all product standards in the production and packaging processes, the union also carries out other product marketing activities inside and outside the country. This would include appropriate advertising, creating reputable brands, and identifying the desires and needs of consumers. The unions could also segment the market to respond to different demands throughout the world.

[Hashempour \(2009\)](#) argued that the most important export problems for saffron are the lack of adequate and appropriate packaging and standardization, the lack of pricing strategies to prevent excessive fluctuations of prices, the lack of extensive and up-to-date advertising on global markets, and the lack of attention to fraud issues. Furthermore, lack of a selection of popular and well-known brands in the global markets, the low use of e-commerce and online sales methods, and inexperienced export service providers are other problems for Iranian saffron.

There is the potential to create a powerful brand for saffron. Creating a distinct identity and a credible brand for saffron can increase the bargaining power of traders, increase the price of their products by providing a high-quality product to the world market, and increase the income of producers and traders. Meanwhile, improved, direct connections of producers and traders to the global consumption markets and the elimination of intermediaries can lead to higher producer incomes because markets will be better understood.

A review of the literature and related studies indicate that marketing problems are the most important obstacles for increasing the value of saffron export. Therefore, it is necessary to have better insights about marketing methods and challenges for agricultural products such as saffron.

Jalali et al. (2011) showed that promoting fair competition and reasonable pricing, facilitating access to agricultural markets, providing appropriate infrastructure for agricultural marketing, and establishing agricultural marketing cooperatives play an important role in improving agricultural export markets.

In many developing countries, poor marketing strategies make it difficult for agricultural products to thrive (Carter, 1997). This shows the necessity for attention to appropriate marketing strategies in the export of agricultural products. A well-designed marketing strategy has the fundamental goal of increasing sales and achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. Sustainable competitive advantage, as defined by Porter (2008), is achieved through cost management, differentiation of products and services, and a focus on a particular market segment that targets a special group of consumers. While the aim of these strategies is to maximize profit, each of the various strategies applies a different method of maximization. Marketing strategies for achieving competitive advantage involve market penetration, market development, product development, and diversification (Porter, 2008). The application of appropriate marketing strategies to promote agricultural exports is crucial for increasing foreign trade for developing countries. Research suggests that export organizations and companies have found that they can be successful if they use appropriate marketing strategies to achieve sustainable competitive advantage in international markets (Wu et al., 2010).

Kashefi et al. (2019) constructed marketing strategies for market penetration, market development, product development, and product differentiation using appropriate indices and investigated their effects on an export performance index of saffron. Their results showed that company experience, the number of employees (or firm size), marketing cost, R&D costs, market development strategy, product development strategy, and differentiation strategy have a significant effect on the export performance of saffron companies. They argue that product development strategy has a higher effect on the export performance index than other variables, and it is recommended that saffron-exporting companies develop and improve their export performance by developing products that are consistent with market demand and conditions. Moreover, developing new product features through R&D and improved technology for production and export of saffron are others recommendations.

Due to the positive and significant effect of market development strategy on export performance of saffron companies, developing new markets and partners for exporting saffron is another strategy that could increase saffron exports. Expanding the potential market through new users or new uses of saffron by appropriate marketing and R&D efforts could be very successful. Further, creating value and brand loyalty for saffron could be used as parts of a product differentiation strategy. Moving toward producing healthy and organic saffron products that are matched to international standards can also play an important role.

Saffron is produced in a few countries, although more countries have started cultivating saffron. Iran is still the biggest exporter in the world, exporting around 100 tons of saffron each year. The major importers of Iran's saffron are UAE and Spain. Spain imports Iranian saffron due to its high quality, although they are the second biggest producer of saffron. Table 22.1 shows the exports of different countries during 2011–16.

Iran accounted for 78% of saffron exports in 2011, but its share was only 42% in 2016. New competitors such as Afghanistan and Portugal, and a large increase in Spanish exports in 2011, have exposed Iran's lack of powerful marketing and effective export strategies. Abbasi (1999) showed that Iran's saffron exports have decreased due to poor marketing efforts and product packaging.

In this period, the Spanish share of saffron exports went from 13.4% in 2011 to 29.5% in 2016. Saffron exports by Afghanistan have been increased more than sevenfold between 2011 and 2016, bringing it to third place as its exports are about 20% of Iran's exports in 2016. Afghanistan is a new and serious competitor for Iran. Aghdaie et al. (2012) showed that firm strategy, structure, and rivalry are important barriers to Iran's saffron export into international markets. Furthermore, they proposed using appropriate marketing strategies in order to enter international markets with the help of research organizations. Table 22.2 shows saffron imports by the main countries during 2011–16.

As shown in Table 22.2, Spain is the leading importer of saffron, and in 2011, its share was 14.5% of total world saffron imports, while in 2016 its share increased to 24.6%. As noted, Spain is also the second largest exporter of saffron in the world accounting for 29.5% of total world saffron exports. Becoming the leading importer and the second leading exporter of saffron, despite producing very little saffron, shows that Spain creates more value-added products in the saffron industry in comparison to other countries. UAE, Italy, and United States are in the next ranking of saffron importers in the world. In the next section, the most important concepts for saffron marketing saffron are reviewed.

### 22.3 Marketing concepts in the saffron industry

Marketing is about identifying and meeting human and social needs. One of the shortest and best definitions of marketing is “meeting needs profitably.” Managers sometimes think of marketing as the art of selling products, but selling is

**TABLE 22.1** Exported value of saffron by different countries during 2011–16 in USD.

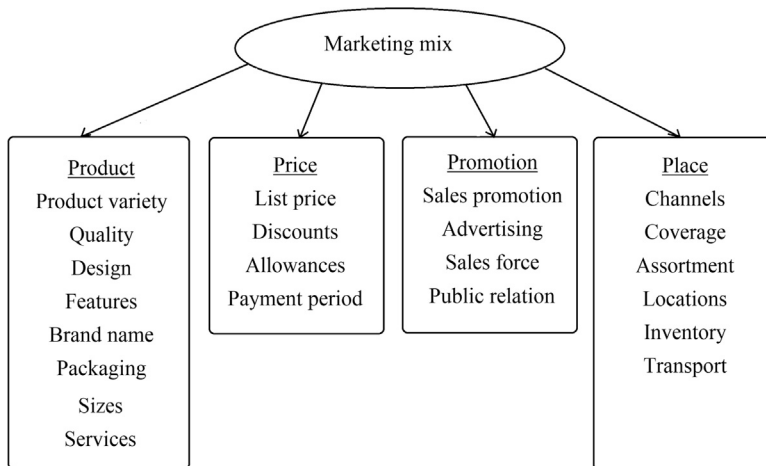
Exporters	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
World	374,688	194,304	179,045	196,425	215,056	222,781
Iran	292,432	106,000	90,290	99,083	110,432	93,043
Spain	50,283	51,423	47,315	47,516	47,160	65,811
Afghanistan	2225	3824	940	3645	3305	16,948
Portugal	4435	3849	10,770	18,056	21,782	11,243
France	6257	2368	3973	7100	6205	6584
Hong Kong, China	107	209	281	92	894	5208
Netherlands	1034	6589	4222	1067	3231	4097
Greece	928	928	696	1440	1766	3187
China	1204	840	1061	1415	2857	3151
Germany	3391	2645	3353	3038	2177	2033
Switzerland	3316	2159	1498	663	209	2005
India	1516	2171	1885	1850	1605	1386
Other countries	7560	11,299	12,761	11,460	13,433	8085

Source: Data from Trademap, 2015. Trade statistics for international business development. Available from: <<https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>>.

**TABLE 22.2** Saffron Imports by leading countries during 2011–16 in USD.

Importers	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
World	266,817	192,336	180,831	196,461	211,938	214,834
Spain	38,715	42,644	38,809	40,139	51,583	53,033
Italy	21,564	19,050	18,365	15,889	17,200	17,446
United States	14,007	14,715	12,553	13,733	13,434	14,938
India	8353	6133	6944	10,820	9673	14,912
France	10,650	8669	9427	13,801	10,239	13,319
Sweden	7921	7188	5988	6754	9228	11,097
Argentina	5101	5519	7672	5224	7198	10,922
Saudi Arabia	6733	7946	8286	10,851	11,370	9555
Hong Kong, China	2127	2749	3162	2106	2317	8419
United Kingdom	5353	3764	5844	7325	8174	7003
Switzerland	6910	5603	4812	4183	5287	5327
United Arab Emirates	–	30,255	21,094	24,286	27,601	5180
Germany	5199	5358	5203	5165	4679	4502
Portugal	2067	1008	1985	4895	4195	3960
Japan	3535	2668	3192	2967	2773	3898
Kuwait	1736	2102	2338	3171	2835	3888

Source: Data from Trademap, 2015. Trade statistics for international business development. Available from: <<https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>>.



**FIGURE 22.1** Marketing mix and their elements. Based on Kotler, P., Keller, K.L., 2011. *Marketing Management, thirteenth ed.*, Prentice Hall Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.

only the tip of the marketing iceberg. Marketing involves ten main types of things/activities that include goods, services, events, experiences, persons, places, properties, organizations, information, and ideas (Kotler and Keller, 2009).

In theory, the marketing planning process consists of analyzing marketing opportunities, selecting target markets, designing marketing strategies, developing marketing programs, and managing the marketing efforts. However, in highly competitive markets, marketing planning is more fluid and is continually refreshed. Companies should continually develop new marketing programs and innovating products, considering customer needs and seeking new advantages and opportunities rather than relying on past strengths. This is especially true when incorporating the Internet into marketing plans.

McCarthy classifies various marketing activities into marketing-mix tools, which he calls the four Ps of marketing: product, price, place, and promotion (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). The marketing variables under each of these are shown in Fig. 22.1.

According to Ghodoosi et al. (2016), although Iran is the largest saffron producer in the world, the lack of marketing efforts has left it in a disadvantaged position in this highly competitive market. Iran's saffron production figures show that in 2012, about 200 tons of saffron was produced in Iran, and that figure increased to 250 tons in 2013. Despite increasing saffron production in Iran, exports of saffron decreased. One of the main reasons for decreasing exports, despite production increases, is the lack of attention to the principles of marketing in the production and export of saffron. This lack of attention has greatly reduced Iran's share in the global markets. Hence, it is necessary to follow proper marketing principles in this industry if Iran wants to increase saffron export and increase its role and share in global markets.

Ghodoosi et al. (2016) examined the role of various marketing dimensions on Iranian saffron exports. They identified the factors affecting saffron exports with an emphasis on marketing mixes. Using the McCarthy model (1964) and the four Ps of marketing, researchers defined each of the marketing mixes for saffron and ranked these elements. They concluded that the saffron product element includes quality, features, design, brand, and packaging. Promotions include advertising, trade fairs, export awards, increased communications, and direct sales that stimulate customer sensitivity and attraction buyers to the product. Place is a set of actions that target the product to the market, including the decisions of marketing managers for the distribution channels of the products. Finally, price is an important feature for saffron buyers.

Mohammadi et al. (2017) emphasized that in today's competitive world, employing marketing concepts and methods while prioritizing the marketing mix approach for products can play an important role in increasing sales and ensuring greater success in the marketplace. Based on the study of Mohammadi et al. (2017) and Ghodoosi et al. (2016), the indices and components of each marketing mixes for saffron are as given in Table 22.3.

## 22.4 Marketing management tasks for saffron marketing

According to the special features of saffron, Ghorbani (2008) recommended the creation of a regional marketing board for coordinating production, marketing, and exporting activities. The results of saffron marketing board are:

- Increasing farmer income and production
- Decreasing production risk

**TABLE 22.3** Marketing mix criteria for saffron exports, including subcriteria.

Product	Price	Place (distribution)	Promotion
Saffron products	Price compared to competitors	Quality of transferring the product	Having sale agency in aboard
Organic product	Final price	Extensive distribution network	Special exhibition
Production capacity	Discounts	Distance to importers	Direct selling
Product quality	Inflation	Timely delivery	Sales promotion
Product type	Price list	Importers income	Advertising
Exporter consumption		Inventory levels	Trade regulation
Brand		E-commerce	Number of competitors
Packaging		Type of distribution channels	Classifying customers
Fraud in production		Intermediaries management	
Guarantee		Market segmentation	
Diversity			

Source: Data from Ghodoosi, M., Mohtashami, T., Motavalli-Habibi, M., Sheddati, S., 2016. Identification and prioritization of marketing mix elements affecting the export of saffron from the perspective of experts. *Saffron Agron. Technol.* 3, 285–296 (in Persian); Mohammadi, H., Saghaian, S., Alizadeh, P., 2017. Prioritization of expanded marketing mix in different stages of the product life cycle: the case of food industry. *J. Agr. Sci. Tech.* 19, 993–1003.

- Decreasing marketing (price) risk
- Creating insurance products for saffron
- Creating income stabilization
- Creating circumstances for a more successful processing industry and better marketing services
- Controlling more of the saffron market and processing of products
- Decreasing marketing costs
- Increasing bargaining power
- Better attention to preferences and needs of consumers in markets
- Creating a suitable and up-to-date information system for production and marketing
- Increasing investment in the agricultural sector especially for saffron

The main tasks of a regional marketing board or saffron marketing group (SMG) are:

1. Developing marketing strategies and plans: The first task of a SMG is to identify potential long-term opportunities, given its market experience and core competencies. It must develop concrete marketing plans that specify the marketing strategy and tactics going forward.
2. Capturing marketing insights: A reliable marketing information system to monitor the marketing environment so it can continually assess market potential and forecast demand. Its microenvironment consists of all the players who affect its ability to produce and sell to customers, and competitors. Its macroenvironment includes demographic, economic, physical, technological, political-legal, and social-cultural forces that affect sales and profits.
3. Marketing research system: There needs to be a dependable marketing research system and the SMG could coordinate this.
4. Connecting with customers: The SMG must consider how to best create value for its chosen target markets and develop strong, profitable, long-term relationships with customers. To do so, it needs to understand consumer markets. Who buys saffron and why? What features and prices are they looking for? Where do they shop? The SMG also sells saffron to business markets, including large corporations, professional firms, retailers, and government agencies, where purchasing agents or buying committees make the decisions. The SMG needs to gain a full understanding of the preferences and behaviors of organizational buyers. It needs a salesforce well trained in presenting product benefits. The SMG will not want to market to all possible customers, but instead it must divide the market into major market segments, evaluate each one, and target those it can best serve.
5. Building strong brands: The SMG must understand the strengths and weaknesses of Iranian saffron brands as foreign customers see them. Are its products suitable for each market? Suppose the SMG decides to focus on the consumer

market and develop a positioning strategy. Should it position itself as a prestigious brand, offering superior products at a premium price with excellent service and strong advertising? Should it build a simple, low-priced product aimed at more price-conscious consumers? Something in between? The SMG must also pay close attention to competitors, anticipating their moves and knowing how to react quickly and decisively to stay competitive. It may want to initiate some surprise moves, in which case it needs to anticipate how its competitors will respond.

6. **Shaping the market offerings:** At the heart of the marketing program is the product, which includes the product quality, design, features, and packaging. To gain a competitive advantage, the SMG may want to provide leasing, delivery, advising, and training as part of its product offering. A critical marketing decision relates to price. The SMG must decide on wholesale and retail prices, discounts, allowances, and credit terms. Its price should match well with perceived value; otherwise, buyers will turn to competitors' products.
7. **Delivering value:** The SMG must also determine how to properly deliver the value embodied in its products to the target market. Channel activities include those the company undertakes to make the product accessible and available to target customers. The SMG must identify, recruit, and link various marketing facilitators to supply its products and services efficiently to the target market. It must understand the various types of retailers, wholesalers, and physical-distribution firms and how they make their decisions.
8. **Communicating value:** The SMG must also adequately communicate the value embodied by its products and services to the target market. It will need an integrated marketing communication program that maximizes the individual and collective contribution of all communication activities. The SMG needs to set up mass communication programs consisting of advertising, sales, promotions, events, and public relations. It also needs to plan more personal communications, in the form of direct and interactive marketing, as well as hire, train, and motivate salespeople.
9. **Creating successful long-term growth:** Based on its product positioning, the SMG must initiate new-product development, testing, and launching as part of its long-term view. The strategy should take into account changing global opportunities and challenges.

In addition, the SMG should answer some questions for better marketing of saffron such as the following:

1. How can we choose the right market segment(s)?
2. How can we differentiate saffron offerings?
3. How should we respond to customers who buy exclusively based on price?
4. How can we compete against lower-cost, lower-price competitors?
5. How far can we go in customizing offerings for each customer?
6. How can we grow business?
7. How can we build stronger brands?
8. How can we reduce the cost of customer acquisition?
9. How can we keep customers loyal longer?
10. How can we tell which customers are more important?
11. How can we measure the payback from advertising, sales promotion, and public relations?
12. How can we improve salesforce productivity?
13. How can we establish multiple channels and yet manage channel conflict?
14. How can we get the other company departments to be more customer-oriented?

## 22.5 Conclusion

In many developing countries, agricultural exports cannot find their appropriate markets due to lack of appropriate marketing strategies. Marketing strategies have the fundamental goal of increasing sales and achieving a sustainable competitive advantage for a product.

Iran accounts for more than 90% of the world production of saffron but Iranian exporters mainly tend to export saffron in bulk, which minimizes its value-add. The lack of attention to international standards, antiquated distribution systems, and the lack of a central organization that can monitor and cover all the steps of production, advertising, and exporting of saffron creates several challenges. Despite increasing saffron production in Iran, exports of saffron have decreased. One of the main reasons for decreasing exports, despite production increases, is the lack of attention to the principles of marketing in the production and export of saffron that in turn has greatly reduced Iran's share in the global markets. Hence, it is necessary to follow proper marketing principles in this industry if Iran wants to increase saffron exports and increase its role and share in global markets.



Creating a regional marketing board for coordinating production, marketing, and exporting activities of saffron is a recommendation for policymakers to export more value-added saffron products into the global markets.

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