



CHAPTER FIVE

Importance of Supplier Visits

Supplier visits exist to strengthen relationships and improve decision making. Ideally their purpose should not simply be for inspection, certification, or content creation but to better understand the ground reality in order to facilitate responsible trading.

A good visit helps buyers and suppliers see the full context behind quality and price, bring up constraints that don't appear in contracts or audits, align expectations before problems show up in the market, and build a shared sense of responsibility for outcomes.

At their best, visits move trade from transactional to relational.



Matt Richards, Organic Herb Trading, and Ellie Thorne, Blue Sky Botanics, visiting suppliers.
Slide from Matt and Ellie's presentation on Partnerships and Relationships at the SHI Primary Processing Learning Lab (2026)

What success looks like

A supplier visit has been successful when:

- **Both sides leave with a clearer picture of each other's realities.** This includes technical constraints, financial pressures, seasonal limits, and regulatory demands.
- **At least one concrete change follows the visit.** This could be a spec adjustment, a pricing conversation, shared testing costs, different timing, or new support.
- **Trust increases between the partners.** Suppliers feel safer naming problems early. Buyers feel more confident in long-term commitments.
- **Knowledge is carried forward inside the buying company.** What was learned does not disappear when staff change.
- **The supplier would willingly host another visit.** This is often the clearest signal that the visit created value rather than burden.

Supplier Visits

The herb industry runs on relationships. But most relationships are "paper relationships." Herbs move through remote landscapes and change many hands. The people doing the harvesting, drying, and early processing often stay invisible to the buyer. Certifications, audits, and lab results matter. But they can't show the full reality on the ground.

When a buyer visits a supplier it signals genuine commitment. An SHI member noted that when a company is willing to spend money and allocate time to visit suppliers, it demonstrates a level of commitment. This is particularly important when proposing an innovation or new product project with the supplier.

Why Visits Matter

1. They build trust that paperwork can't

Trust grows when both sides share context. An SHI member described why transparency matters: "We have nothing to hide... we are very transparent with origin and names." A buyer visit can send the same message: we're here to understand and not here to extract.

2. They make hidden costs visible

A visit shows the work behind quality and compliance: drying, cleaning, sorting, storage, paperwork, permits, transport constraints, and the time pressure that sits at the start of the chain. This makes it easier to understand why the price-per-kilo often fails to reflect reality (especially in wild harvest systems where permits and management plans can be major work). "We've found consistently that once buyers see what goes into producing clean, compliant material, the conversation about price shifts."

3. They prevent quality problems upstream

Many failures happen before the lab. Visits help buyers and suppliers align early on: drying time and humidity control measures available; cleaning and sorting for foreign matter removal; microbial risk points; and where testing is most useful and where it is wasted effort.

4. They support better resource stewardship and community protocols

In many origins, building relationships with harvesting communities takes time. One SHI member described meeting with traditional leadership and community councils before they began actually meeting with and training harvesters. A buyer who visits and follows local protocol signals respect.

5. They create the conditions for transparency and traceability

A broader definition of "quality" includes social and ecological conditions. Visits are a practical way to strengthen this broader understanding.

When Visits Do Harm

Supplier visits can also damage relationships. Common failure modes:

- Surprise inspections. They create fear and performance anxiety.
- New demands with no support. You add requirements but keep price and lead times unchanged.
- Disruption during peak season. A visit can pull people away from harvesting and processing when every hour matters.
- You "audit" what you already decided to buy, then leave.
- Photo extraction. You take images and stories without consent or benefit.

If a supplier says "not this season" treat that as valid. If they say "not at all," ask for an explanation.

Plan the visit with the supplier, not for the supplier

AGREE ON PURPOSE

A good visit has a shared purpose. Examples:

- Troubleshoot a recurring quality issue.
- Understand true costs and constraints.
- Review post-harvest handling together.
- Discuss longer-term forecasts and investment needs.
- Align on what "good" looks like for both sides.

AGREE ON TIMING

Ask what timing reduces burden. Wild harvest and small farms often have narrow windows. Even travel seasons matter (for example, access during rainy seasons).

PAY ATTENTION TO BURDEN AND COST

Hosting takes time, transport, staff attention, and sometimes special preparation. Treat this as real work.

Options:

- Offer to cover local travel costs for the supplier team who must accompany you.
- Keep the visit short to be respectful of their time.
- Avoid last-minute requests for meetings, documents, or demonstrations.

HOW TO SHOW UP

Arrive as a partner, not an inspector

Framing the visit as a learning conversation, not an assessment, can change what suppliers may feel safe sharing. Use language that invites joint problem-solving: *Instead of "Can you meet this standard?" ask, "What would help you meet it?" Instead of "Why is this expensive?" ask, "Which costs are you carrying that we don't see?"*

Practice two kinds of seeing

Zoom In | Eagle Eye: Critical control points that affect safety, identity, and specifications.

Step back | Owl Eye: Labor conditions, decision-making, stress points, and the health of the system. Both matter. Many visits lean too hard into compliance and miss the context that explains the compliance.



Discussion with buyer from Gaia Herbs, CEO of Doselva, and farmer in the Doselva farming network

Transparency Goes Both Ways

Suppliers often get requirements without understanding the "why." Transparency that goes both ways helps provide a broader understanding of the context for decisions and expectations. As a primary processor asked it bluntly: "Why are buyers not audited?" Processors are often asked to be open about costs, constraints, and problems – and they should be. It helps when buyers share what's driving a spec change, what pressure they're facing, or where their forecasting is uncertain. This provides a context for solving problems together.

SHARE:

- What you test for and why.
- What your regulators or customers require.
- Where you have flexibility (and where you don't).
- What you are willing to change if a constraint is real.

This balances the power dynamic and makes it easier to solve problems together.

Story, Photos, and Consent

If you want stories or images, treat them as a shared asset, not a byproduct of access.

- Ask for informed consent in plain language.
- Be clear where content will appear and for how long.
- Offer a right to review and to say no.
- Share value back (credit, payments where appropriate, supplier-led messaging, or support for their own materials).

If the best outcome of a visit is "we learned a lot but we won't publish anything," that's still a successful visit.

Tradeshow and Event Meetings

Not all relationship-building happens at origin. Tradeshows can be important opportunities for establishing and deepening these relationships. They are not a substitute for supplier visits but they serve a distinct purpose: maintaining relationship momentum, opening conversations about current business and potential future directions, and spotting opportunities that would not surface in email. The face-to-face time at a tradeshow can open to deeper conversation.



Buyer from Gaia Herbs visiting suppliers in Nicaragua - Building the relationship

What Must Happen After the Visit

Just as buyers visit processors, processors visit their suppliers. It is important to note that a visit creates responsibility. If you "see" the burden, the next step is action.

1. CLOSE THE LOOP

Within a short, agreed window: send a summary of what you heard (not just what you observed); confirm priorities together; agree who does what, by when.

2. CONVERT INSIGHTS INTO COMMERCIAL CHANGES

Common examples:

- Adjust specs that don't match end use (reduce wasted work).
- Share testing costs or shift testing earlier where it prevents failures.
- Change lead times to match seasonality and logistics.
- Consider partial pre-payment or different payment terms where cash flow is a real constraint.
- Revisit price when you now understand true costs (many processors said buyers only understand pricing after seeing the process).
- Communicate order cancellations as early as possible. These can harm processors and the farmers they work with. If an order is at risk, flag it immediately rather than waiting for certainty.
- For new product development, be prepared to share a price range or indicative commitment before asking suppliers to invest in a trial. Without some signal of commercial intent, suppliers cannot responsibly commit resources.

3. DOCUMENT LEARNING SO IT SURVIVES STAFF TURNOVER

Several processors noted that relationships require repetition, especially when purchasing staff change. Build an internal "supplier relationship file" that includes:

- What matters to the supplier.
- Seasonal constraints.
- Agreed non-negotiables (on both sides).
- What support has been effective.



Essential oil distillation, northwest Nepal