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Distribution channels, retail logistics and the last mile

Direct sales, agents, distributors, wholesale, retail and marketplaces; retail distribution centres and shelf-ready packaging; e-commerce facilities, the last mile and reverse logistics

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Online interactive version: **https://ozgurkonakci.com/en/guide/distribution-channels-last-mile/**

SHORT ANSWER

A distribution channel is the path a product follows, changing hands, from producer to end user: direct sales, an agent or representative, a distributor, a wholesaler, a retailer or a marketplace. The deciding question is who takes ownership of the goods and holds the stock; an agent does not buy the goods, a distributor buys and stocks them. In the store channel, goods move as cartons and pallets from a distribution centre or cross-dock to the store. In e-commerce, orders are picked one by one in a fulfilment centre and carried to the door. According to the sources, that last leg, the last mile, can account for 13% to 75% of total logistics cost. Because consumers have a 14-day right of withdrawal, the returns flow must be planned from the start.

What is a distribution channel?

A **distribution channel** is the path your product follows, changing hands, from where it is made to the end user. A channel answers two questions: who sells the goods to whom, and which warehouses and vehicles the goods physically pass through.

These are not the same question. The retailing course material of Türkiye's Ministry of National Education (MEB) also lists "building the distribution channel" and "planning physical distribution" as separate tasks. A sales representative abroad, for example, may close the sale without ever seeing the goods, which travel straight from your warehouse to the buyer. Here the sales channel and the flow of goods part ways. You cannot plan the logistics without knowing where they part.

Intermediaries make the channel longer. Each one takes on a task (holding stock, knowing the territory, carrying the collection risk) and earns a margin or commission for it. In a short channel those tasks stay with you; in a long one they are shared.

Channel types: direct, distributor, wholesale, retail, marketplace

Channel types differ in who takes ownership of the goods and who holds the stock:

Channel	How it works	Ownership of the goods
Direct sales	The producer sells to the end user itself: its own sales team, its own website or a direct contract with a business buyer	Passes from the producer straight to the buyer

Channel	How it works	Ownership of the goods
Agent or representative	Finds customers or concludes contracts on your behalf in a territory on a continuing basis, for a commission	The agent does not buy the goods; ownership passes from you to the buyer
Distributor	Buys the goods from you, holds stock and resells in its territory; often also provides after-sales service	Passes to the distributor
Wholesaler	Buys in large quantities and sells to retailers or other businesses	Passes to the wholesaler
Retailer	Offers the goods in small quantities to final consumers, in store, online or both	Passes to the retailer
Marketplace	An online environment where sellers sell their own products; the platform is an intermediary and the sales contract is between seller and consumer	Passes from seller to consumer; as a rule the platform does not take ownership

The definitions in the table rest on these sources:

- **Agent:** Turkish Commercial Code, Art. 102.
- **Wholesaler and retailer:** MEB's retailing course material. The same material separates out the **commission merchant**, an intermediary who only brings buyer and seller together without taking ownership.
- **Distributor:** the US Department of Commerce's export guidance. According to it, a distributor buys the goods, carries inventory and provides support and service for the product.
- **Marketplace:** Turkish Law No. 6563 on the Regulation of Electronic Commerce, with the definitions added by Law No. 7416 in 2022. In the law's wording, an *electronic commerce marketplace* is the environment in which an intermediary service provider offers its intermediation services.

Link to the marketing mix: Distribution is one of the four Ps of the marketing mix (place). That side is covered in **Marketing basics in logistics**. This page focuses on the logistics side of the channel.

Choosing a channel abroad: what each one asks of an exporter

A business that starts selling abroad first has to answer one question: who will buy the goods abroad, who will stock them and who will get them to the consumer? The US Department of Commerce's export guidance lists the factors that shape the choice: company size, risk tolerance, resources available for market development, type of product, export experience and conditions in the target market. It also notes that many companies start with indirect sales and move to more direct involvement as they gain experience.

Channel abroad	What it asks of your logistics	Watch out for
Representative or agent	Each order ships separately to the buyer the representative found. Delivery terms, customs and payment are agreed with each buyer.	The contract should state clearly whether the representative can commit you. The US Department of Commerce warns that the word "agent" can imply that power.
Distributor	Fewer but larger lots: full or groupage loads on a regular schedule. The distributor usually handles import clearance.	If you grant exclusivity, Art. 122(5) of the Turkish Commercial Code extends the agent's indemnity claim on termination to sole-distribution and similar exclusive contracts, unless that would be inequitable. Take legal advice when drafting the contract.

Channel abroad	What it asks of your logistics	Watch out for
Foreign retail chain	Delivery usually goes to the chain's distribution centre. Booking slots, labelling, pallet and packaging rules are set by the buyer's supplier requirements; shelf-ready packaging may be required.	Short or non-compliant deliveries can turn into rejections or deductions. Get the requirements in writing before the order.
Direct to end user (business buyer)	Shipping, collecting payment and servicing the product are all yours.	High profit potential, high management load.
Marketplace abroad or your own online shop	Many small shipments and a returns flow. There are two routes: ship each order from Türkiye by parcel, or place stock in a warehouse in the target country in advance.	Consumer sales bring withdrawal rights and tax rules into play; see the sections below.

The channel definitions in the first column rest on the sources. The "What it asks of your logistics" column is derived from those definitions. Every contract is different: the sales contract and the **Incoterms® 2020** rule you choose decide who does what. For document and inspection requirements in the target country, see **Destination country guide: import requirements**.

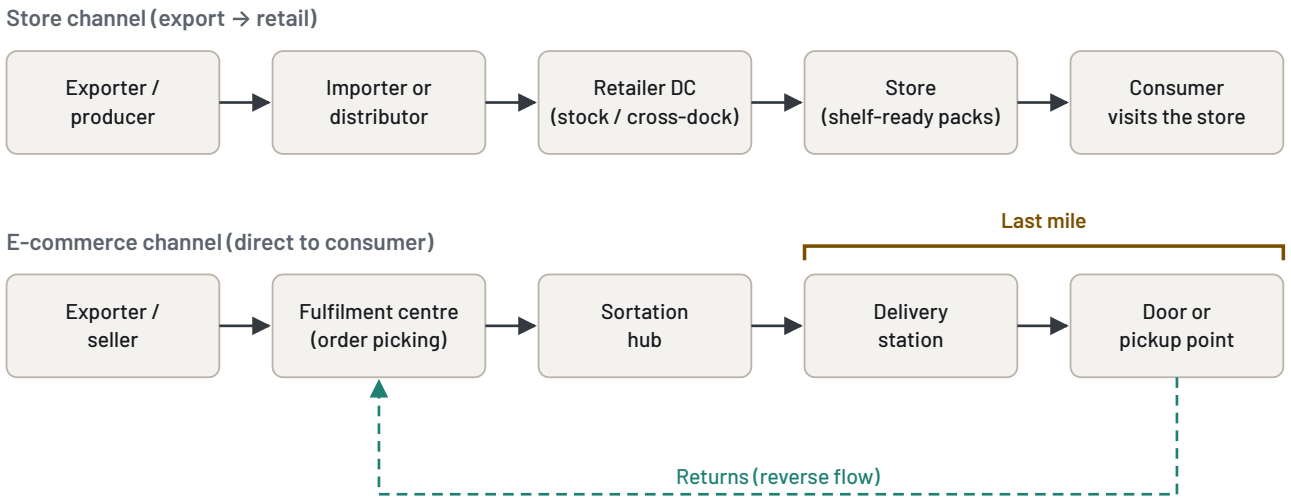
Marketplaces and VAT in the EU: The EU e-commerce VAT rules that took effect on 1 July 2021 treat a marketplace as the supplier for VAT purposes in certain sales (the "deemed supplier"). There are two cases:

- Distance sales to consumers, through a marketplace, of goods imported from outside the EU in consignments worth no more than EUR 150.
- Sales through a marketplace, by a seller established outside the EU, of goods already inside the EU to a consumer in the EU. There is no value threshold in this case.

So for a Turkish exporter who places stock in an EU warehouse and sells on a marketplace, the marketplace collects and pays the VAT. The customs route for shipments leaving Türkiye (the BGB or a standard declaration) and the latest EU changes are covered in **E-export and micro-export**.

Two flows in the supply chain: the store channel and e-commerce

The same product can reach the consumer by two different routes. In the store channel, goods move as cartons and pallets; the consumer takes the last step by visiting the store. In e-commerce, orders are picked one by one and the parcel is carried to the door. That last leg, the last mile, is a cost item of its own.



Simplified diagram. In real networks, steps can merge or be skipped. Where the last mile starts varies between sources; some definitions start it when the goods leave the seller's or logistics provider's warehouse. Facility types: Rodrigue, *The Geography of Transport Systems*.

Retail logistics: distribution centres, cross-docking and store replenishment

Retail logistics is the path a product takes from the supplier to the store shelf. Rodrigue's *The Geography of Transport Systems* summarises how that path changed in retailing in four stages. Each stage added to the previous ones rather than replacing them:

Period	Model	What changed
1970s	Direct replenishment	The supplier or wholesaler delivers to each store separately; each store holds its own stock
1980s	Regional distribution centres	Retailers build regional distribution centres that sort goods from many suppliers to their stores; cross-docking facilities emerge
1990s	Global sourcing	Imports grow; import centres near container ports unload containers and prepare goods for domestic shipment
2000s	E-commerce	Orders are picked individually and shipped as parcels; fulfilment centres, sortation hubs and local delivery depots join the chain

Distribution centres (DCs) and cross-docking: In a conventional distribution centre, goods are stored and shipped as store orders come in. In a cross-docking facility, each item already has a destination store when it arrives. Inbound freight is sorted and several suppliers' goods are combined on the same outbound vehicle, so most outbound loads are full truckloads. According to Rodrigue, shipments typically spend less than 24 hours in the facility. Storage types, the WMS and picking order (FIFO, FEFO) are covered separately in **Warehousing and inventory management**.

Store replenishment: The distribution centre supplies stores at regular intervals. When goods reach the store, they are received, unpacked and placed on the shelf. Rodrigue stresses that this in-store work adds labour and cost for the retailer. Shelf-ready packaging was developed to reduce that cost.

Shelf-ready packaging (SRP): The transport carton is designed to go straight onto the shelf with the product in it. A 2009 guide by GS1 Germany, based on ECR work, expects five functions from shelf-ready packaging:

1. **Easy to identify:** the product is recognised quickly and without error during palletising, shelf filling and shopping.

2. **Easy to open:** opens without tools or much force; the opening point is marked.
3. **Easy to shelve:** goes onto the shelf in one step, with products facing forward and stable.
4. **Easy to shop:** product, brand and variant are easy to see; items come out of the tray easily.
5. **Easy to dispose of:** the packaging separates and is thrown away easily, ideally made of a single material.

What this means for an exporter: if a foreign retail chain asks for shelf-ready packaging, agree the carton design with the buyer before shipping. Carton size sets the pallet pattern, and the pallet pattern sets how much fits in a truck or container. For vehicle dimensions, see **Road vehicle types and loading metres**.

E-commerce and omnichannel: warehouse models

E-commerce orders are small, numerous and go all the way to the door. That calls for facilities different from the store channel's distribution centre. Rodrigue lists seven facility types that support e-commerce:

Facility	What it does
Inbound cross-dock	Near ports and rail terminals; unloads import containers and sends the goods in full truckloads to fulfilment centres
Fulfilment centre	Holds stock, picks and packs orders one by one; often high-rack and automated
Fast delivery hub	In large cities; keeps a limited range of high-demand items close by for quick delivery
Air hub	Next to an airport; transfers parcels to and from air services
Sortation hub	Sorts parcels by region or postcode; works on the cross-docking principle
Delivery station	Splits parcels into local delivery routes; vehicles leave from here for the last mile
Pickup point and locker	A small point where consumers collect parcels themselves: a shop counter or a locker that opens with a code

Dark stores: Another form of fast delivery is a small urban warehouse that is closed to customers and used only to pick orders. According to Buldeo Rai's urban logistics work, these sites are typically 200–400 m^2 and aim to deliver within 10–20 minutes over a radius of about 2 km. The same work notes growing local opposition over noise, space and safety.

Omnichannel: managing channels such as stores, website, mobile app and marketplaces as a single whole. The academic literature treats this as a shift away from multichannel retailing, where each channel was run separately (Verhoef, Kannan and Inman, 2015). Its most visible logistics effect is that the store does more than one job. According to Rodrigue, an omnichannel retailer's store can at once be an outlet, a distribution point, a showroom and a pickup point.

Which warehouse model should an exporter choose? When selling to consumers abroad, there are three basic routes:

- **Ship each order from a warehouse in Türkiye:** every order goes by post or express courier under the micro-export route. You keep the stock; delivery takes longer.
- **The marketplace's fulfilment service:** according to the US Department of Commerce, some platforms offer distribution centres abroad and handle logistics for a fee. You ship stock in bulk; the platform runs order handling and the last mile.

- **A 3PL warehouse in the target country:** stock is held in a logistics provider's warehouse, and several sales channels can be served from the same warehouse. For the 3PL concept, see **The parties in trade and logistics**.

Türkiye's e-export support for overseas warehouse rent was abolished in January 2026. Details are in **E-export and micro-export**.

The choice is one between push and pull. Holding stock in the target country means sending goods ahead on a forecast. Shipping per order means waiting for actual demand. The distinction is explained in **Supply chain basics**.

The last mile: parcel, courier and pickup points

The **last mile** is the final delivery leg in which a consignment reaches the recipient, at home or at a collection point. The last-mile study by Gevaers, Van de Voorde and Vanelslander starts this leg when the goods leave the seller's or logistics provider's warehouse.

Why is it expensive? The same study lists the main cost drivers:

- **Customer not at home:** the parcel has to be taken back two or three times. An older study it cites (Fernie and McKinnon, 2004) puts the average share of failed deliveries at around 30%.
- **Narrow delivery windows:** the courier covers more miles for the same number of deliveries. A 2001 study it cites put the average cost at EUR 2.1 for delivery within a time window and EUR 1.2 for delivery to a reception box.
- **Low density:** the more scattered the recipients, the higher the cost per delivery.
- **Returns:** a large share of medium- and high-value goods sold directly goes back to the supplier.

Share of cost: The study reports that the last mile can account for **13% to 75%** of total logistics cost (Onghena, 2008, based on integrator data). The width of the range shows how much the share varies with product, delivery method and area. Using a single "average share" would be misleading.

Pickup points and lockers: Leaving the parcel at a point the recipient will pass, instead of at the door, is a known way to cut failed deliveries. Gevaers and colleagues see collection points as the option with the greatest efficiency and cost gains for medium- and high-value goods. Morganti and colleagues (2014), studying developments in France and Germany, treat in-store pickup points and locker networks as the main alternatives to home delivery.

The load ahead: According to a World Economic Forum projection from January 2020, without intervention demand for urban last-mile delivery will grow by 78% by 2030. In the world's top 100 cities, the number of delivery vehicles would rise by 36% and emissions by more than 30%. These are projections, not measured data.

Figures from Türkiye:

Indicator	Value	Source
Authorised postal service providers (including parcel and courier firms)	59 providers, 67 authorisations	BTK, Türkiye Postal Sector Report 2025/2
Parcel and cargo items	Over 767 million in the second half of 2025	BTK, same report
Share of parcels and cargo sent abroad	About 3%	BTK, same report
E-commerce volume (2025)	TRY 4.567 trillion; about 19.5% of total trade	Ministry of Trade, 12 May 2026

Indicator	Value	Source
Average parcel delivery time in e-commerce	42.2 hours; 53% of orders delivered within 24–48 hours	Ministry of Trade, 12 May 2026
Share of e-commerce shipments within the same city	17%	Ministry of Trade, 12 May 2026

The Ministry of Trade figures come from the Minister's statement at the launch of the "Outlook of E-Commerce in Türkiye 2025" report. With only 17% of e-commerce shipments staying within the same city, the last mile is usually the end of an intercity transfer chain. How parcel rates are charged by volume is covered in **Air cargo: the AWB and chargeable weight**.

Returns and reverse logistics

Reverse logistics is planning and managing the flow of goods back from the point of consumption or use, to recapture value or dispose of them properly. This definition follows the Rogers and Tibben-Lembke definition cited by de Brito and Dekker (2003). The same work sorts returns into three groups:

- **Manufacturing returns:** surplus raw materials, items rejected in quality control.
- **Distribution returns:** product recalls, business-to-business commercial returns, stock adjustments, reusable transport items such as pallets and crates.
- **Customer returns:** goods sent back after withdrawal, warranty and service returns, end-of-life items.

The same work lists the options for returned goods: resale as is, repair, refurbishing, remanufacturing, and recovery of parts and materials.

Why are e-commerce returns a logistics issue? In consumer sales, the statutory right of withdrawal turns returns into a flow that has to be planned from the start:

	Türkiye (Distance Contracts Regulation)	EU (Consumer Rights Directive 2011/83/EU)
Withdrawal period	14 days	14 days; starts when the goods are received
Sending the goods back	The period is set in the current text of the regulation	The consumer sends them back no later than 14 days after notifying withdrawal (Art. 14(1))
Refund	The seller pays within 14 days of receiving the withdrawal notice	The trader pays no later than 14 days from being informed of the withdrawal; it may withhold payment until it has the goods back (Art. 13)
Return shipping cost	If the seller named a carrier in the pre-contract information, returns via that carrier cannot be charged to the consumer; if it named none, no return cost at all can be charged	The consumer bears the direct cost of return, unless the trader agreed to bear it or failed to inform the consumer in advance (Art. 14(1))
Seller outside the EU	—	EU consumer rules can apply if the seller specifically targets EU consumers

The Türkiye column is based on the Ministry of Trade's announcement of 28 November 2014 introducing the regulation. The regulation has been amended since; check the current text in the Official Gazette. The EU column is based on the adopted text of the Consumer Rights Directive and the European Commission's Your Europe consumer page; member states apply the directive through their own laws.

The customs side: a product sold abroad and sent back is subject to customs formalities when it re-enters Türkiye. The rules on returns and returned goods under micro-export are covered in **E-export and micro-export**.

In practice, three decisions are made in advance:

- Will returns be collected in a warehouse in the target country, or come back to Türkiye?
- Can the returned product be resold, or will it be disposed of?
- Who pays for return shipping?

For low-value goods, bringing them back can cost more than the goods are worth. That is why the calculation belongs in the pricing stage.

See the guide's **Reverse logistics and returns management** topic for details.

Where to go next in the guide

- Small-shipment exports: **E-export and micro-export**
- Warehousing and stock: **Warehousing and inventory management**, **Supply chain basics**
- Delivery terms: **Incoterms® 2020**
- Transport: **Choosing a transport mode**, **Road vehicle types and loading metres**
- Steps of a first export: **Your first export or import: a step-by-step roadmap**
- The marketing side: **Marketing basics in logistics**

Which courses cover this topic?

Distribution channels and physical distribution are taught as dedicated courses in logistics and international trade programmes in Türkiye and abroad. E-commerce logistics, urban logistics and the last mile have more recently started to appear as courses of their own. Examples from the **course map**:

Institution	Programme	Course
İzmir University of Economics	Logistics Management (English), bachelor's	Marketing Channels and Supply Chain Management (LOG 214)
İzmir University of Economics, Vocational School	Logistics, associate degree	International Physical Distribution (VSC 213)
Atatürk University	International Trade and Logistics, bachelor's	Distribution Channel Management (IUT402), E-Commerce Logistics (IUT406) (in Turkish)
Giresun University	Logistics Management, bachelor's	Network Design and Physical Distribution (in Turkish)
Kastamonu University	International Trade and Logistics, bachelor's	Urban Logistics (AİS056) (in Turkish)
Ministry of National Education (MEB)	Transport Services, Logistics branch, vocational high school	Distribution (in Turkish)

Institution	Programme	Course
Ministry of National Education (MEB)	Transport Services, Civil Aviation branch, vocational high school	Cargo Services (in Turkish)
Chalmers University of Technology (Sweden)	MSc Supply Chain Management, master's	Management of Physical Distribution (TEK620)
RMIT University (Australia)	Master of Supply Chain and Logistics Management, master's	Distribution and Freight Logistics (OMGT1012)
University of Antwerp (Belgium)	Master of Maritime and Logistics Management, master's	Summer School on Urban Logistics (2137TEWK00)
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT CTL, USA)	Supply Chain Management, master's	Last-Mile Logistics Systems (SCM.293[J])
ASCM	CPIM (Certified in Planning and Inventory Management), certificate	Module 8: Distribution

Test yourself

1. A representative in Germany finds buyers for you for a commission; the goods go straight from your warehouse to the buyer. Who takes ownership of the goods? *(Answer: The buyer, directly. A representative or agent does not buy the goods; it intermediates the sale.)*
2. What sets a cross-docking facility apart from a conventional distribution centre? *(Answer: Each item's destination is known when it arrives. It is sorted without being stored and moved to outbound vehicles within a short time, typically under 24 hours.)*
3. A Turkish exporter places stock in an EU warehouse and sells to EU consumers on a marketplace. Who collects the EU VAT? *(Answer: The marketplace. Under EU rules, when a seller established outside the EU sells goods located in the EU to a consumer through a marketplace, the marketplace is treated as the supplier for VAT; there is no value threshold.)*
4. What range do the sources give for the last mile's share of total logistics cost, and why is it so wide? *(Answer: 13% to 75%. The share varies greatly with the product, delivery method, recipient density and failed-delivery rate.)*
5. In a distance sale in Türkiye, the consumer exercised the right of withdrawal. By when must the seller refund the price? *(Answer: Within 14 days of receiving the withdrawal notice.)*

Frequently asked questions

What is the difference between an agent and a distributor?

An agent finds customers or concludes contracts on your behalf in a territory on a continuing basis and earns a commission; it does not buy the goods, and ownership passes from you straight to the buyer (Turkish Commercial Code, Art. 102). A distributor buys the goods from you, holds stock and resells them on its own account, often providing after-sales service too. For exclusive distribution contracts, Art. 122(5) of the Code extends the agent's indemnity claim on termination unless that would be inequitable.

Is a cross-dock the same as a distribution centre?

No. A conventional distribution centre stores goods and ships them as orders come in. In a cross-docking facility, each item's destination is known on arrival; it is sorted without being stored and moved to outbound vehicles within a short time, typically under 24 hours. A cross-dock can also be seen as one type of distribution centre.

What share of total logistics cost does the last mile account for?

According to integrator data cited by Gevaers, Van de Voorde and Vanelslander (Onghena, 2008), the last mile can account for 13% to 75% of total logistics cost. The width of the range shows how much the share varies with product, delivery method, recipient density and failed-delivery rate; a single average would be misleading.

What is shelf-ready packaging?

Transport packaging designed to go straight onto the store shelf with the product in it (shelf-ready packaging, SRP). A GS1 Germany guide based on ECR work expects five functions: easy to identify, easy to open, easy to shelve, easy to shop and easy to dispose of. The aim is to cut the in-store work of unpacking and shelving.

Who pays the VAT when selling on an EU marketplace?

Under EU rules applied since 1 July 2021, a marketplace is treated as the supplier for VAT in two cases: distance sales to consumers of goods imported from outside the EU in consignments worth no more than EUR 150, and sales by a seller established outside the EU of goods already in the EU to a consumer. In those cases the marketplace collects and pays the VAT.

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