

Alibaba vs AliExpress for Starting Your Import Business



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Alibaba is a wholesale B2B marketplace and AliExpress sells retail, one unit at a time. Alibaba suits importers buying in bulk or making custom and private label products, while AliExpress suits small dropshippers. IndiaMART, for India, is a lead directory with no payment protection for foreign buyers.

The Short Version

- On Alibaba, price and MOQ are set by each seller and are often negotiable. On AliExpress the listed price is the price.
- Free shipping on AliExpress is usually the slow economy tier with thin tracking.
- Alibaba is the better choice for custom and private label products, because you can talk to the factory directly.
- Since 30 June 2025 Alibaba.com offers Trade Assurance to Indian sellers who opt in, on payments made on Alibaba only.
- IndiaMART's Buyer Payment Protection Plan excludes foreign buyer transactions.

Plenty of foreign importers source from China and India through Alibaba, AliExpress and IndiaMART for their Amazon FBA, white label or Shopify dropshipping business. Alibaba and AliExpress are two of the biggest shopping platforms in the world, and both belong to the Alibaba Group, so people assume they're the same thing with a different logo.

They aren't. In general, Alibaba is a wholesale B2B marketplace, while AliExpress sells products directly to consumers, and that one difference drives almost everything else about them. Most experienced buyers know this. If you're new then the rest of this post is for you.

My goal today is to compare them from a few practical angles – price, shipping, MOQ, dropshipping and custom products. Hang around till the end, where I answer some frequently asked questions about Alibaba, AliExpress, and where IndiaMART fits if you're looking at India.

1. Which One to Choose, Consideration by Consideration

There are various factors you should consider when choosing between Alibaba and AliExpress. Here's a brief overview of the ones that matter when you're picking a platform to import products from China.

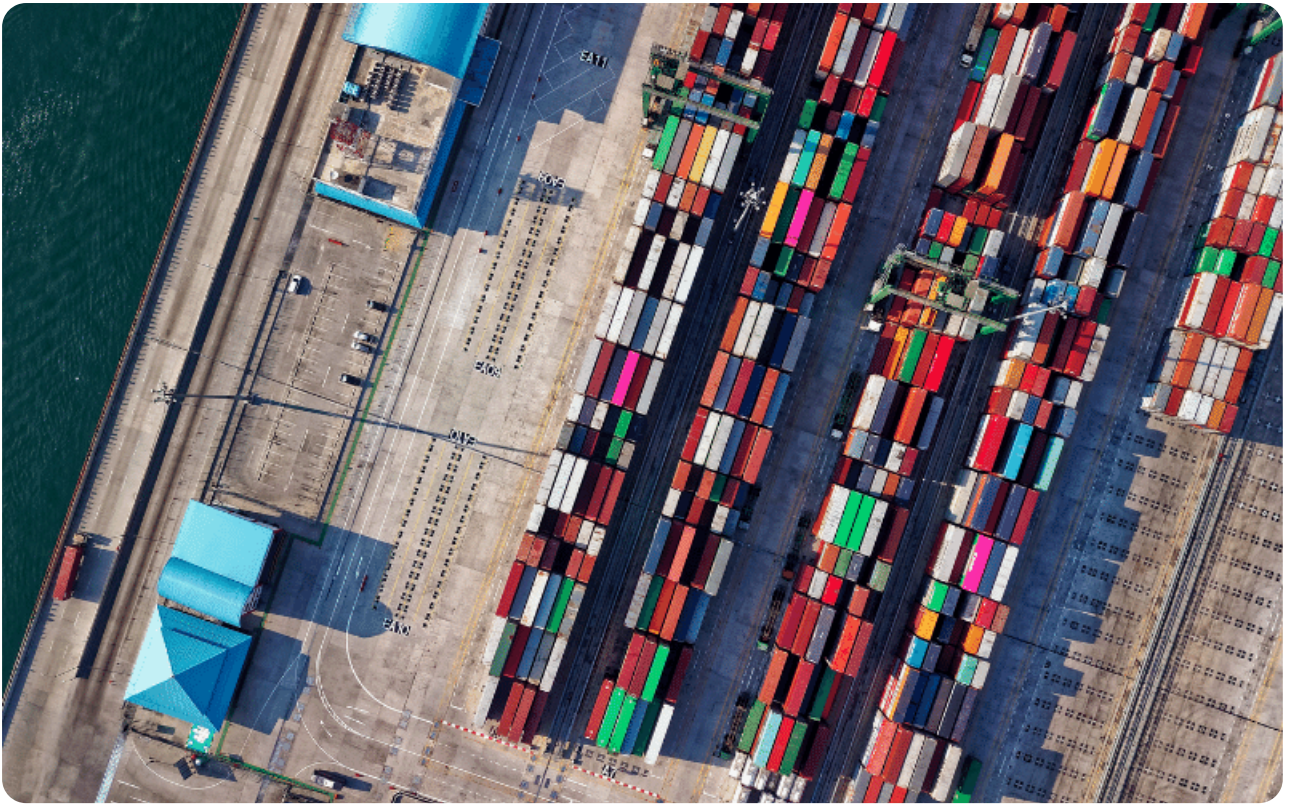
Consideration 1 - Price

The profitability of any business model is influenced by the sourcing price. Source at a high cost price and you lose potential profit. Chase the cheapest listing and you lose customers to poor quality instead. Neither is fun.

AliExpress will generally have higher unit prices than Alibaba, since Alibaba is a wholesale marketplace that caters to businesses and AliExpress is built for retail. On Alibaba you can negotiate with your supplier on their quotation before placing an order, and Alibaba's own guidance says MOQ and price are open to discussion if you ask politely. On AliExpress the listed price is the price, and you're usually buying from a seller rather than the factory itself.

Alibaba is the better choice for businesses with an established or growing market that can hold hundreds or thousands of units in inventory at a time.

Verdict – Alibaba is the better choice for wholesale importers.



Consideration 2 - Shipping Fee

Alibaba doesn't typically offer free shipping, whereas AliExpress often does. The reason is simple. Posting a single parcel is cheap and can be hidden in the retail price, but moving a few hundred kilos of stock is a real freight cost that somebody has to pay.

When an AliExpress seller offers free shipping, you're usually getting the economy tier. AliExpress lists several service levels on its own shipping guide (Feb 2026): Economy, AliExpress Standard Shipping at roughly 15 to 45 business days, Premium at about 7 to 15, and full express couriers like DHL or FedEx at the top. The free option is the slow one, and tracking on it is thin. If you don't want to wait then you can pay for a faster method at checkout.

Alibaba lets you negotiate the shipping directly with the supplier, or better, book your own freight forwarder and have the supplier quote FOB at a named port. The fee depends on the method: express courier by air, air

freight, sea freight, or rail and road for some routes. Suppliers may sometimes absorb part of the freight on a big order if their margin allows, but I wouldn't count on it.

Verdict – It's a tie. It depends on what you're purchasing and how fast you need it.

Consideration 3 - Minimum Order Quantity (MOQ)

Alibaba is primarily a marketplace for manufacturers and traders, and each seller sets their own MOQ to cover production and delivery costs. There's no platform-wide number. Alibaba's own guidance says MOQs can be as low as a handful of units for some sellers and in the thousands for others, and that they are negotiable in many cases. A manufacturer may set a lower minimum if they already hold stock of the product.

Each product category has a different typical MOQ. High-value products tend to have a smaller MOQ than low-value ones, because the seller hits their breakeven sooner. If you're negotiating, ask what drives the number (colours, sizes, packaging runs) rather than just asking for less. The [MOQ and pricing guide](#) covers those levers in detail for India, and the logic is the same in China.

On AliExpress, most sellers list ready-made products with no minimum, which is typical of resellers and trading companies. You can buy one unit.

Verdict – For businesses, Alibaba is the better option.



Consideration 4 - Dropshipping

Many Alibaba suppliers are manufacturers, so they're set up for production runs and not for posting one parcel to one customer. Alibaba does now run a dropshipping section where suppliers who offer per-order fulfilment list themselves, so it's no longer a flat no, but you'll need to find those specific suppliers and agree terms. Trading companies on Alibaba, which are a perfectly normal business model, are often more willing to dropship if you negotiate well.

AliExpress is a retail platform, most sellers hold ready stock, and it runs its own dropshipping centre for finding products and managing orders, so it supports dropshipping out of the box.

Whichever platform you use, there are two ways to dropship -

1. You buy one product at a time from a supplier, and it goes directly to your customer.

2. You buy in bulk, the supplier stores your stock in their warehouse, and they dispatch each order as it comes in.

Obviously, the second option comes with storage and handling fees on top.

Verdict - If you're a small dropshipper looking to get into the game, AliExpress is your friend.

Consideration 5 - Custom Products

Alibaba is your best choice if you want customised products. It has a huge number of factories, some with in-house design teams, and you can speak directly with them about your idea.

Let's say you want a particular hoodie or jacket made your way. You share your spec and needs, they help you turn it into a prototype, and then they produce it. Manufacturers can also print your own label on the product so you can sell it as a private label brand.

You can find a trading company on AliExpress to help you customise a product, but it's a longer road. They sit between you and the factory to relay your idea, and when you can't talk to the factory directly, what comes back may not match what you had in mind. (Nothing wrong with trading companies, by the way. The extra hop is just a bad fit for custom work.)

Verdict - If you're going into FBA or private label, go for Alibaba over AliExpress.



2. Alibaba vs AliExpress Side by Side

	Alibaba	AliExpress
Business model	Wholesale first	Retail first
Price	Competitive and usually negotiable	Fixed, and usually higher per unit than Alibaba
Shipping fee	Depends on volume and method	Often free or cheap on the economy tier
MOQ	Set by each seller, often negotiable	Usually none, buy one unit
Dropshipping	Depends on the seller, some list for it	Supported
Custom products	Yes	Possible, not recommended
Buyer protection	Trade Assurance on orders paid through the platform (Indian sellers only if they opt in)	Buyer Protection, 15 days from receipt

One India note on that last row – IndiaMART's Buyer Payment Protection Plan excludes foreign buyers, so if you source there the protection is whatever you arrange yourself.

Frequently Asked Questions About Alibaba vs AliExpress

Is Alibaba a Reliable Platform?

It's one of the most established wholesale marketplaces in the world, and the platform itself is fine. Alibaba's Trade Assurance covers orders paid through the platform for late shipment, missing goods and defects, as its own page describes. Individual sellers are another matter, and the usual problem isn't a scam so much as a mismatch: the price moves after the quotation, the sample was better than the run, or a promise didn't make it into writing.

The fix is boring but it works.

1. **Shortlist several suppliers** rather than sticking with one.
2. **Get everything into a written order**, including what the sample showed. The sample was perfect, why wasn't the bulk? explains why.
3. **Pay through the platform** where you can.

Finding a good supplier is the whole game, and you can't run a successful business without one.

One India note. Since 30 June 2025 Alibaba.com offers Trade Assurance to Indian sellers who opt in, on payments made on Alibaba only ([Alibaba.com, 30 June 2025](#)). A seller who hasn't opted in will ask for a wire or PayPal instead, and you lose the protection you expected. Not a red flag about the seller, just a gap you need to know about before you pay. The detail is in [is there a Trade Assurance for India?](#).

Who Can Buy From Alibaba?



Is AliExpress Safe and Reliable to Use?



What About IndiaMART if I Want to Source From India?



Is One Better for Amazon Sellers Than the Other?



3. Wrapping Up

I hope this helps you make an informed choice between Alibaba and AliExpress for your own particular needs. If you've got a question about either one, drop it in the comments and I'll answer it.