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European distilleries lag in digital adoption

Spreadsheets still dominate stock control and reporting, raising risks for inventory accuracy, compliance and traceability.

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European distilleries are adopting digital tools more slowly than their American counterparts because many still rely on spreadsheets for stock control, reporting and traceability, according to Stuart Maxwell, chief operations officer of Proof 8.

Maxwell said visibility over inventory is one of the most urgent operational needs in distilling, especially when producers need automated alerts about stock levels and better control over production and maturation. He made the comments during a seminar at ProWein 2026, held at The Spirits Business Hub, where he described technology as a practical response to problems that affect day-to-day operations rather than as a break from tradition.

He said compliance reporting is another major pressure point. In the United States, he said, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau reporting system is so complex that many producers have already built their processes around digital systems that can handle it. That has made American customers more open to adopting new software, he said, because they already understand the need for automation and have structured their operations accordingly.

“In Europe, most of our customers are coming from spreadsheets,” Maxwell said. “They’ve built a dependency on them.” He said that dependence makes change harder because producers must untangle long-standing habits before they can move to a new system.

Proof 8 has been working with whisky distilleries to introduce more digital workflows, Maxwell said, while stressing that producers do not have to give up heritage or craftsmanship to modernize their operations. He said the goal is to improve visibility, accuracy and accountability across the supply chain.

Traceability is another reason distillers are turning to technology, he said. Producers want to be able to track products back to a field or source, particularly in craft spirits where authenticity can be part of the brand’s value. That need becomes even more important for bottles sold at high prices, where buyers expect clear records and confidence in origin.

Maxwell warned that reliance on spreadsheets can create risks tied to errors, weak inventory accuracy and limited traceability. Those problems can affect trust with customers and regulators alike, he said, especially when products carry premium price tags and when audits require reliable records.

The broader issue, he said, is that spirits companies that delay digital adoption may find it harder to manage compliance and protect credibility as operations become more complex.