

9 tips for finding buyers on the European cocoa market

Last updated:

14 December 2022

Europe plays a dominant role in the global cocoa sector, with the ports of Amsterdam (the Netherlands) and Antwerp (Belgium) as important hubs for cocoa trading. The continent also houses a large cocoa grinding and processing industry, as well as an important food and beverage industry. Europe's dynamic cocoa and chocolate market provides plenty of opportunities for finding buyers. Keep in mind that your company profile and product offer will be critical in influencing your success on the market. The following tips show you how and where you can find European buyers for your cocoa beans.

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1. Define your offer and its potential

European buyers, especially those focusing on the specialty segment, are increasingly looking for cocoa that is unique, with specific flavour notes, from unexplored origins and with nuances in fragrance and texture. Specialty cocoa is a niche market in which smaller quantities of higher-quality beans are traded. Knowing your product and its specifics is crucial in finding buyers and establishing long-term relationships with them.

Note that, on the specialty market, the origin of cocoa beans is important, in combination with storytelling and traceability. This means you should be able to indicate:

- your cocoa bean's genetic profile and variety;
- the potential supply volumes you have available, per variety and/or grading;
- characteristics of the producing cooperative(s) and its individual members;
- their agro-climatic context, such as micro-climates, surrounding forests and other factors;
- their sensory parameters, assessed using a consistent method and verified by external experts;
- characteristics of the post-harvest protocols: fermentation and drying;
- existing awards you have won, such as the [International Cocoa Awards](#), or feedback from current buyers.

The market for bulk cocoa beans is highly price-oriented (thus following international prices) and offers limited

possibilities for value addition. It suits exporters that can supply large volumes at a standard and consistent commercial quality.

Tips:

Always have up-to-date and reliable data available on your cooperative or company, as well as on your cocoa bean offer. For example, think about data regarding the origin of your cocoa beans, the agro-climatic characteristics of the producing region, the culture of the producing communities, the unique quality of your product, the post-harvesting techniques implemented or a combination of all these aspects.

Develop and articulate your unique selling points as a supplier of cocoa beans. Consider which factors set you apart from your competitors, as mentioned above, and create your marketing story around these factors. Interesting examples of producers and exporters that have succeeded at this are [Xoco Gourmet](#) (Honduras), [Ingemann](#) (Nicaragua), [Nahua](#) (Costa Rica) and [Kokoa Kamili](#) (Tanzania). Also, have a look at the websites of chocolate makers [Diogo Vaz](#) (São Tomé and Príncipe) and [Marou](#) (Vietnam).

Assess the sustainable and ethical aspects of your cocoa production and supply chain. For example, fill out the [Climate-smart Cocoa's risk assessment tool](#) developed by CIAT and Rainforest Alliance.

Never make claims that you cannot support, for instance on the quality or production volumes of your cocoa or the impact you have made on communities. Make sure to back up your claims with numbers.

Check whether you qualify for industry awards such as the [International Cocoa Awards](#). This can be an interesting way to profile yourself on the European market for specialty cocoa.

2. Know the European market for cocoa and chocolate

Knowing your market means being aware of your opportunities on international markets. It also means that you know which markets match your product offer in terms of cocoa variety, origin, taste profile, cocoa content, etc. This knowledge can increase your chances of finding buyers and building relationships.

As a starting point, consider the European countries that do significant trade in cocoa beans, and especially those that import directly from producing countries. This will indicate whether there are importers, cocoa processors, chocolate manufacturers or small-sized chocolate makers in that country that actively source cocoa beans through (direct) trade. Explore the different producing countries that supply to those markets and identify whether it is a more concentrated or diverse market.

Once you have identified promising target markets for cocoa beans, you can explore the type of company that could be a potential buyer for you. For example, if you supply speciality cocoa, search for importers and/or chocolate makers that import high-quality or fine flavour cocoa; you can also check if those companies get their supply from specific regions or countries.

Tips:

Visit our website for more [market information from the European cocoa sector](#).

Read our country studies to learn more about the specialty and mainstream segments in those markets, including examples of actors that are active in these segments. Interesting cocoa markets include [Belgium](#), [Eastern Europe](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), [Italy](#), [Scandinavia](#), [Spain](#), [Switzerland](#), [the](#)

Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Use statistical databases and other information sources to compile your own data and define your target market, such as: [International Cocoa Organization](#), [International Trade Centre - Trade Map](#) and [Access2Markets](#).

Take a close look at our [study on the specialty cocoa market in Europe](#).

3. Identify your ideal buyer profile and preferred market channel

There are different channels to bring your cocoa beans to the European market. How you can enter the market will depend on the quality of your cocoa beans, your supply capacities and your export experience. So it is crucial that you know your product well and know which channels match its profile.

The figure below shows you the most important entry channels for cocoa beans in Europe. Note that the European market is moving towards shortened supply chains. This means that cocoa-processing companies and chocolate makers are increasingly sourcing their cocoa beans directly from source, but importers still play a major role in the cocoa market.

In general, you should aim to look for companies that are willing to develop long-term business relationships, either directly or through an importer. This gives you the best chance of sustainable market access to Europe, as well as of consolidating your market position.

Figure 1: The main channels for export of cocoa to Europe



Source: ProFound, 2021

Specialty market

In the specialty and fine flavour segment, cocoa beans are increasingly traded directly from farmers (or farmer associations and cooperatives) to chocolate makers. Although this type of direct trade is growing, it still represents a very small part of the cocoa market. Not all chocolate makers are able to sustain direct trade and all the responsibilities that are usually outsourced to traders, such as logistics, documentation and pre-financing.

As such, direct trade often happens with an importer as intermediary. This importer acts as a service provider and contact point in the transactions between the producer and the chocolate maker. Importers can also safeguard traceability and communicate the story of the cocoa beans accurately along the chain. Examples of these importers focused on specialty cocoa are [Bohnekaf-Kolonial](#) (Germany), [Silva](#) (Belgium), [Daarnhouwer](#) and [Crafting Markets](#) (the Netherlands) and [Uncommon Cacao](#) (United States / the Netherlands).

In the specialty market, some small and medium-sized chocolate makers market their products directly to end consumers through web shops and/or brand stores. These buyers are looking for very special and high-quality cocoa beans. If you have the financial means and technical know-how to organise export activities, you can target these buyers. Examples include [Artisan du Chocolat](#) (UK) and [Amedei Toscana](#) (Italy). On this [map of the Fine Cacao and Chocolate Institute](#), you can find more bean-to-bar makers, specialty chocolate stores or chocolatiers in any market, as well as a few cocoa bean importers.

Mainstream market

If you sell bulk cocoa, you are more likely to successfully find buyers within this sector by targeting commodity traders, cocoa processors or large chocolate manufacturers. Examples of commodity traders in Europe include [Theobroma](#) (the Netherlands), [Touton](#) (France) and [Albrecht & Dill Trading](#) (Germany). Examples of large multinationals include [Cargill](#), [Olam](#) and [Barry Callebaut](#) (cocoa grinders and processors) and [Nestlé](#), [Mars](#) and [Mondelez](#) (chocolate manufacturers).

All these companies tend to buy large volumes of standard qualities. They usually have their own export companies with cocoa-buying stations, or have partnerships with export companies in producing countries to which you can sell your beans directly. Some of the companies involved in processing and manufacturing also buy cocoa beans via importers.

Tips:

In your target market, check out the websites of big and small chocolate makers, importers and cocoa processors. Their company websites will provide some initial information on where they buy their cocoa and what kind of cocoa they use. For instance, see the website of the Dutch cocoa importer and distributor [Crafting Markets](#) to read more about their cocoa suppliers' profiles.

Find European commodity traders and chocolate processors in the [membership list of the European Cocoa Association](#).

By identifying competing cocoa bean suppliers in your target market and to whom they are selling, you can get a good idea of who the market players are.

Take a look at our study about [doing business with European buyers of cocoa](#).

4. Visit and/or exhibit at trade fairs

Trade fairs provide an excellent opportunity to actively promote your products and meet potential customers. Due to the effects of COVID-19, several fairs have been cancelled, while others have looked into ways to go virtual or held hybrid events. Review the list of cocoa and chocolate trade fairs below and also specifically look at the virtual alternatives they provide. Interesting cocoa and chocolate trade fairs to visit include:

- [Salon du Chocolat](#) (the main event is in Paris, but Salon du Chocolat also has events in, among others, Belgium, Italy and the United Kingdom). The Paris event hosts the [International Cocoa Awards](#) every two years; this competition showcases and celebrates high-quality cocoa and diversity;
- [Chocoo](#) (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), which brings together stakeholders from the entire cocoa supply chain annually, from producers to chocolate consumers;
- [Biofach](#) (Nuremberg, Germany), an annual trade fair for organic food, including cocoa products and chocolate.
- [Anuga](#) (Cologne, Germany), is the largest biannual trade fair for food and beverages in the world, which includes cocoa products and chocolate.
- [ISM](#) (Cologne, Germany), an annual trade fair specialising in the confectionery market, including chocolate and other cocoa-based products.

Other interesting events include:

- [World Confectionary Conference](#), which is held every year, bringing together companies from the global sweets, snacks and bakery markets.
- [World Cocoa Conference](#), which is organised by the International Cocoa Organization and hosted by a

different country every two years.

If you do not have the means to exhibit as a participant, you can also consider attending these events as a visitor. Being present and meeting potential buyers face to face is much more effective than email or telephone communication, especially when it comes to first impressions. Also as a visitor it is very important to prepare your trade fair visit thoroughly. This means you should do the following:

- Choose the right event to attend. Research the events, their main focus and exhibitor/visitor profile. Try to find out if the fair is mainly directed at consumers (like chocolate festivals) or to industry players (like chocolate makers and importers). Check if the focus of the event is on mainstream or specialty cocoa.
- Review the exhibitor list at the trade fair's website, and select companies from that list that are relevant to your buyer profile. This will help you make appointments and navigate the exhibition grounds strategically.
- Bring promotional materials, but remember to keep them simple and short. Carrying around heavy materials at a fair is not ideal, and potential buyers will most likely not bring heavy brochures home. Flyers or business cards are best, and should display contact details and other relevant information.
- Prepare and bring samples, usually consisting of 1 kg. These can be packed in a plastic or ziplock bag. Use an attractive sticker with an accurate and adequate description of the cocoa beans.
- Besides making appointments with potential buyers, make sure to contact sector associations and trade promotion organisations.
- Practice your 'elevator pitch' – a 30-second introduction to your company and product that impacts a potential buyer, using some of your Unique Selling Points (USPs). Practice your pitch in English.
- Fairs also include workshops, lectures and tastings. Check the agenda of each fair and plan ahead for the events you want to attend.

Exhibiting at or visiting a trade fair can be combined with visits to chocolate makers and/or potential partners in Europe. Note that appointments should be made months in advance and have a clear purpose.

If you cannot visit or exhibit at a trade fair, you can alternatively check the list of exhibitors, which can help you map out potential European buyers that are active in different countries.

Figure 2: Chocoo trade fair in Amsterdam



Source: chocoo.nl

Tips:

Contact local export promoting agencies to help you participate in trade fairs; their support can be financial and/or technical in nature. Examples of export promotion agencies are [ProColombia](#), [ProEcuador](#), [PromPerú](#), [ApexBrasil](#) and [GEPA](#) (Ghana).

Participate in awards and competitions during events and trade fairs, such as the [International Cocoa Awards](#). This is a good way to demonstrate the quality of your cocoa beans and draw attention to you as a cocoa farmer. Note that you should plan this in advance, as you have to comply with sampling and other protocols established by the organisation of this event.

Refer to the website of the International Cocoa Organization for a [list of global cocoa events](#) that might be of interest to you.

Read more about the protocols for the preparation and flavour evaluation of samples in the publication [Cocoa Beans: Chocolate Manufacturers' Quality Requirements](#).

Use the [trade fair benefit check](#) after your exhibition. This software, free of charge, is a tool for calculating the costs and benefits for exhibitors, and is available in different languages.

5. Visit the websites of sector associations

Sector associations play a role in representing and promoting the cocoa or confectionery industry in a country or a wider region. The websites of international sector associations provide relevant information about the worldwide and European cocoa markets. Some of these associations also provide useful member lists, which could include potential buyers. Examples are:

- the [International Cocoa Organisation \(ICCO\)](#);
- the [Federation of Cocoa Commerce \(FCC\)](#);
- the [European Cocoa Association \(ECA\)](#);
- the [Fine Cacao and Chocolate Institute \(FCCI\)](#);
- the [Fine Chocolate Industry Association \(FCIA\)](#).

You should also try visiting the websites of national associations and look at their member lists, which show a variety of different companies that work with cocoa products in a particular market. Examples include:

- the [Royal Belgian Association of the Chocolate, Pralines, Biscuit and Confectionary \(ChoPraBisCo\)](#);
- the [Dutch Association for the Bakery and Confectionery Industry \(VBZ\)](#);
- the [Association of the German Confectionery Industry \(BDSI\)](#);
- the [French Chocolate Union \(Syndicat du Chocolat\)](#);
- the [Association of Swiss Chocolate Manufacturers \(CHOCOSUISSE\)](#);
- the [Association of Italian industries of sweets and pasta \(AIDEPI\)](#).

Tips:

Visit the website of the Association of Chocolate, Biscuit and Confectionery Industries of Europe (Caobisco) for a [list of national cocoa, chocolate and confectionery associations in Europe](#). Make sure to explore the existing associations and business platforms in your target market or markets.

Consider becoming a member of a trade association in your country or region. This will enhance your credibility and help you build up your network. Examples of interesting local or regional associations are the [Cocoa Association of Asia](#), [Caribbean Agribusiness](#) and [ANECACAO](#) (Ecuador).

6. Build and expand your business network

Apart from sector associations and trade fairs, there are other ways to search for potential buyers. Your existing business network could be a good place to start. In general, personal recommendations and connections are a good way to expand your network.

Check certification bodies and sustainability platforms

Another way to find potential buyers is through the customer databases of certification bodies. For example, by accessing the [database of FLOCERT](#), you can find a list of Fairtrade-certified organisations that are active in the cocoa sector. The [list of Rainforest Alliance/UTZ-certified cocoa farms and supply chain actors](#) is another rich source of information. [Organic-Bio](#) has a list of organic-certified cocoa supply chain actors.

You can also check which companies participate in national/international cocoa sustainability platforms. Examples are [The Swiss Platform for Sustainable Cocoa](#), the [German Initiative on Sustainable Cocoa](#), the [Dutch Initiative on Sustainable Cocoa](#) and the Belgian partnership for a sustainable chocolate industry [Beyond](#)

Chocolate. These platforms have signed a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) to collaborate more closely and to enhance transparency. In 2020, the [European Union launched a sustainability initiative in the cacao sector](#) focused on Ivory Coast, Ghana and Cameroon.

Access company databases

You can also try to expand your network by accessing company databases, from which you can derive a list of potential customers. There are both free and paid resources: chambers of commerce can be accessed free of charge (for example, the [Dutch KvK](#)), while websites such as [Global Database](#) are paid resources. Also, try to access websites containing local export data, [Legiscomex](#) (Colombia), for instance. On these websites, you can investigate in more detail what your competition sells to which buyer.

Your country's embassy in your target market or markets could also help you find potential buyers and/or identify the competition. They usually have a commercial attaché to help you with your enquiries. There are also European chambers of commerce with offices in your country or region, including:

- [British Chamber of Commerce Indonesia](#)
- [German-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce and Industry](#)
- [The Netherlands-African Business Council \(NABC\)](#)

Use social networks

Being an active member in a group on the professional networking website [LinkedIn](#) is a good way to engage in the global cacao sector. There are over 100 cacao groups on LinkedIn, such as the [Cocoa Trading Network](#) and [Cacao Bean to Bar – Artisan Chocolate making](#). There are also cacao and chocolate groups on Facebook, such as the [Well Tempered Facebook group](#).

Becoming a member of these social network groups can help you build contacts, stay up to date on market developments and find potential buyers. Also look at the connections your competition has on social networks. You will often find interesting contacts through these channels, which you can then approach directly via LinkedIn, email or telephone. Make sure to contact the right person within the companies such as sourcing managers or those working in the purchasing department. You can find these key persons by using the search function on LinkedIn.

Collaborate with your network

Your position on the international market may be strengthened if you can work together with other actors in the sector on a national level. For instance, try to engage the local or national government in setting a sector strategy for cocoa exports. An example is the Nigerian government, which is working together with the [Cocoa Farmers Association of Nigeria](#) (CFAN) and the [Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria](#) on a sustainable cocoa chain. You could also consider joining forces with other cocoa farmers and working together in promoting your country and/or region as a cocoa origin.

Tips:

To find out if your country has an embassy in your target market, go to the [Embassy Worldwide](#) website.

Check the websites of European embassies in your country to see what kind of active export or value chain programmes they currently have.

Expand your mapping of the specialty cocoa sector by identifying bean-to-bar makers, their product profiles and their sourcing practices. Websites such as [beantobar.be](#) and [bean.bar](#) provide elaborate lists of chocolate companies operating in this niche market.

Work together with other producers and exporters in your region to promote good-quality and sustainable cocoa from your region – for example [government, companies, farmer organisations and](#)

NGOs promote deforestation-free cocoa from Cameroon.

7. Team up with matchmaking programmes and trade missions

Embassies, business support organisations/trade promotion agencies and chambers of commerce often organise matchmaking programmes and trade missions. The organisers of these missions have strong relationships with businesses in your target market. This means they can help you identify, screen and meet potential buyers.

To find a matchmaking programme and/or trade mission in your sector, have a look at the pages of European trade promotion organisations. They target mostly small and medium-sized enterprises in selected partner countries that aim to export their products. Such agencies include:

- the Dutch [Centre for the Promotion of Imports from Developing Countries](#) (CBI)
- the Belgian [Trade for Development Centre](#) (TDC)
- the German [Import Promotion Desk](#) (IPD)
- the Finnish [Finnpartnership](#)
- [Open Trade Gate Sweden](#) (OTGS)
- [Swiss Import Promotion Programme](#) (SIPPO)
- [International Trade Center](#) (ITC)
- [COLEACP](#)

Tip:

Contact the embassy or trade promotion organisation in your country to see what kind of matchmaking facilities they can offer you.

8. Invest (time) in online marketing

Online marketing is the best way to attract the attention of potential buyers. You can invest in your own social media account (like Instagram or LinkedIn) or through a website. When you opt for a website, it must be factual, up to date and accurate. Your website must be clear and should provide relevant information regarding:

- your cocoa varieties;
- the history of your farm;
- the origin;
- the story behind your products.

The website or your Instagram account should convey a reliable and unique image. The story you tell is very important, which is why the website should be inspiring. See, for instance, how [ABOCFA](#) (Ghana) or [Xoco Gourmet](#) (Honduras) presents its story in a clear and appealing way, by presenting their impact and key partners and/or by using photos of farmers and their plantations. Also, see the website of [Nahua Cacao](#) (Costa Rica), which provides interesting information about the flavour profile and specific technical data on the cocoa that the company offers. The website of [Kakaw Export](#) (Nicaragua) provides a good example of how to present the origin of the cocoa and the cocoa-producing regions.

Publish regular updates about your cocoa farm and/or cocoa product on social media, for example on LinkedIn,

Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Always pick the right platform and make sure to have attractive up-to-date profiles. Hence, do not start a YouTube channel if you do not have attractive videos.

Share your story and inform your audience about your activities. This information is also important to chocolate consumers in Europe, as traceability of cocoa products has become very important. An increasing number of chocolate makers communicate the source of their cocoa beans on the product wrapping.

Tips:

Research options for generating visitors to your website. One way of doing this is through Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). SEO is a strategy that makes it easier to find you using online search engines. Minor changes to your website can positively impact your position on search result lists. For instance, see these tips [to create a Google-friendly website](#) or access the European Commission website for [information about optimising your website for search listings](#).

Learn more about how you can use social media to increase your visibility. For instance, see the series published by Dame Cacao, which includes articles on: 1) [social media basics for growing a small business](#); 2) [how to use Instagram for your small business](#); 3) [creating better content on Instagram](#); 4) [crafting an engaged Instagram audience](#); 5) [how to make effective ads on Instagram](#). Although the focus is on chocolate as an end product, it gives relevant tips that you can use for any cocoa product.

Websites should ideally be written in good English; if you are able to hire professional translation services, you can also make the website available in the language of your main target market or markets.

Make sure to create a mobile-friendly website, since many potential buyers may want to read your company and product information on their mobile phones.

9. Contact your buyers with confidence

Good communication, accurate information and confidence about what you sell are important elements to doing business. Being well prepared will give you the confidence you need, and it will give your potential buyers trust in what you do.

The information you send to your potential buyers needs to be complete and clear. When you email someone at a cocoa-purchasing company, address your emails to the purchasers/buyers (if you know their names), or to the purchasing department. Always write a good introduction about your company and product offer. Important elements to include can be found in our study on [doing business with European buyers of cocoa](#).

It is always good to contact potential buyers by email or telephone in the run-up to trade fairs, usually a couple of weeks before the event. Schedule meetings with a specified time and place and reconfirm one day in advance. The trade fair is a good reason for contacting them; you could, for instance, propose a meeting at the event to discuss business possibilities together.

Remember that it takes time for a buyer to decide to commit to a new cocoa supplier. Usually, the buyer has a number of good suppliers with longstanding relations. Do not expect to have a deal after you have had a positive meeting or have sent a cocoa sample. Sometimes, it takes one or two years of exchanging information and samples before you get the first order.

Tips:

Read our [Tips for organising your exports to Europe](#), to help you prepare for organising your first shipment or first cocoa transaction. If you already successfully export cocoa beans to Europe, this study can increase your efficiency and help you gain a competitive edge.

Always have your technical and promotional material as well as samples prepared when you go to a trade fair or event.

When contacting a buyer, keep your email short, relevant and concise, while also giving complete and accurate information.

If you are not confident about communicating in English, do so in your own language and consider using the services of a professional interpreter or translator.

Take your time to find the right buyer; research your possibilities and engage with business partners that match your company's philosophy and that you feel comfortable doing business with.

Do not send impersonal emails with unsolicited information. This may harm your reputation as a supplier.

This study was carried out on behalf of CBI by [ProFound – Advisers In Development](#).

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