

Finding buyers in the European timber sector

This CBI Finding Buyers document provides you with ten concrete tips on how to find the buyers that you are looking for. Among other things, we explain how to do your own market research, where to find information on and data and names of potential buyers, how to build your image and how to advertise. These tips of course do not guarantee business success after finding potential buyers, as you still need to offer the right quality at the right price, to the right buyer and in a professional manner.

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1. Do your own market research

The first step in accessing the market is always to conduct thorough market research. Start by identifying which European countries offer the best opportunities. Be aware that there is a difference between European countries with regard to the quality levels, pricing, design and timber species demanded.

After selecting the country, identify the channels that you should use to sell your product. Think about matching your delivery capacity with the buyer's scale of operations, and find a buyer who imports the type of product (and the level of added value) that you are selling. Perform this matching exercise yourself, as you know the ins and outs of your product best.

Read our studies of the opportunities in specific European timber market segments, including [Certified Tropical Timber in the EU](#), [Garden Furniture in the United Kingdom](#) and [Decking in Europe](#).

To find out what kind of buyers you should target in your market segment, you should also consult our study of [channels and segments](#) in the timber sector.

2. Check the websites of sector associations

Almost all importers in the timber sector are members of a sector association, which often publish membership lists on their website. Studying these lists can help you pinpoint potential clients. Check the website of the sector association in a country or segment that might offer opportunities for you. The most important timber sector associations are listed below.

Europe in general:

European Timber Trade Federation ([ETTF](#)). The ETTF represents national timber trade federations in Europe (members are listed on their website) and can be a starting point for further research.

The Forest Trust ([TFT](#)). This organisation concentrates on eradicating illegal tropical timber from the supply chains. You can check their membership list.

Association Technique Internationale des Bois Tropicaux ([ATIBT](#)). The ATIBT focuses on the promotion and study of tropical timber. It has an international list of members.

European Federation of the Parquet Industry ([FEP](#)). FEP brings together national parquet federations within Europe, as well as individual parquet manufacturers and suppliers to the industry. It currently has over 70 members, which are listed on the website.

The European Furniture Manufacturers Federation ([UEA](#)). The main role of this federation is to act as the voice of the furniture manufacturing industry in Europe. UEA represents 14 national associations of furniture manufacturers. Study the membership lists of these national organisations to find the actual importers, who might be potential buyers of your timber or timber products.

Belgium:

The Belgian Timber Importers Federation ([BTIF](#)). The BTIF has about 50 members in Belgium (including both importers and agents). Its website lists 17 [BTIF tropical hardwood importers](#).

Union Nationale des Entreprises du Bois ([UNEBO](#)) / Nationale Unie Houtsector ([NUHOS](#)). Represents the Belgian timber merchants sector, including wholesalers and retailers, with some 250 members. The website has a search option, but it is only available in Dutch and French.

France:

Le Commerce du Bois ([LCB](#)) is an association representing French companies in the timber trade industry. A list of all 153 members can be found on the LCB website.

Fédération du Négoce de Bois et des Matériaux de Construction / French Timber and Builders Merchants Federation ([FNB](#)). It has more than 1,100 members, but they are not listed.

Germany:

The German Timber Trade Federation ([GD Holz](#)) is a neutral association for the timber trade representing the interests of 900 members in Germany, which are included on the website.

Italy:

[Fedecomlegno](#), the Italian national timber association, represents importers, merchants and agents trading in timber, semi-processed and finished wood products. It has around 100 members.

The Netherlands:

The Netherlands Timber Trade Association ([NTTA](#)) represents 259 timber companies, which account for 65%-70% of all Dutch timber imports.

The Sustainable Trade Initiative ([IDH](#)) is a Dutch foundation with an international scope. It creates alliances of

leading companies, civil society organisations and governments to guide the global market towards sustainable production and consumption. It operates in a number of different sectors, of which tropical timber is one. Members associated with the timber trade are united in the European Sustainable Tropical Timber Coalition (STTC). A membership list is available.

The United Kingdom:

The Timber Trade Federation (TTF) represents the timber industry in the United Kingdom. Its website has a members' directory listing all 517 members along with their details.

Spain:

The Spanish Timber Importers' Association (AEIM) is a private organisation set up to represent the interests of timber importers in Spain. Its website has a Spanish version and an English version, and includes a membership list giving details of the association's 92 members.

3. Visit or participate in trade fairs

Trade fairs provide an excellent opportunity to meet potential customers. Timber traders use these fairs mainly to make new contacts or meet existing trading partners.

Being an exhibitor at a trade fair is an expensive matter. You should visit the trade fair that you are interested in first. If desired, you can then make arrangements to have your own stand there the next year. Prepare your first visit well and make appointments to meet importers that you are interested in before you go.

If you cannot visit trade fairs, at least have a look at the lists of participants and exhibitors that they offer, as these are your potential clients. Most trade fairs have an index of participants and exhibitors on their website.

The main timber trade fairs in Europe from January 2017 to the autumn of 2018 are listed below in chronological order. Stars (up to a maximum score of five) are used to indicate the relative importance of the fairs with regard to European trade in tropical timber.

[Domotex](#), Germany, medium-sized biennial fair for flooring (14-17 January 2017).**

[Bau](#), Germany, large biennial fair for construction materials (16-21 January 2017).****

[Hout en habitat](#), Belgium, small annual fair for the timber sector in general with a focus on furniture (28 January-5 February 2017).*

[Bouwbeurs](#), Netherlands, medium-sized biennial fair for the building industry (6-10 February 2017).***

[ZOW](#), Germany, medium-sized annual fair for furniture components (7-9 February 2017).*

[Salone del Mobile](#), Italy, large annual furniture and design trade fair. A must if you are in the furniture sector (4-9 April 2017).****

[Retec](#), Germany, medium-sized biennial fair for second-hand machinery. This is the only trade fair that buys used timber processing machinery (25-27 April 2017).***

[Interzum](#), Germany, large biennial fair for furniture production and interiors. Little information about timber in the last few editions (16-19 May 2017).***

[Ligna](#), Germany, large biennial fair for machinery (22-26 May 2017). ***

[Spoga](#), Germany, medium-sized annual fair for garden products (3-5 September 2017).***

[SICAM](#), Italy, medium-sized annual fair for furniture components (10-13 October 2017).**

[Timberexpo UK](#), small annual fair for the timber sector but crucial for would-be entrants to the British market (10-12 October 2017).****

[HoutPro+](#), Netherlands, small biennial fair for timber products in general (31 October-3 November 2017).*

[Batimat](#), France, large annual fair for the construction sector (6-10 November 2017).***

[Polyclose](#), Belgium, small biennial fair for doors and windows (17-19 January 2018).*

[Dach+Holz](#), Germany, medium-sized biennial fair for roofs, walls, buildings, and so on (20-23 February 2018).*

[Fimma Maderalia](#), Spain, medium-sized biennial fair for timber products in general. Best fair in Spain (February 2018).***

[EFWEX](#), Belgium, small biennial fair for flooring, walls, and so on (14-16 March 2018).*

[Fensterbau frontale](#), Germany, medium-sized biennial fair for doors, windows, frames, walls, and so on (21-24/3/2018).*

[Xylexpo](#), Italy, medium-sized biennial fair for technology and furniture supplies (May 2018).*

[Carrefour International du Bois](#), France, large biennial fair for general timber products. Most important trade fair in this sector in Europe (June 2018).*****

[Wood products & technology](#), Sweden, small biennial fair for the timber industry (4-7 September 2018).*

[Prowood](#), Belgium, small biennial fair for the furniture sector (21-25 October 2018).*

4. Check online sales platforms

There are two major online sales platforms in the timber sector through which you can find buyers. These are also particularly useful for checking out the competition, as many exporters are listed as well. Of course, you can also become registered on these platforms yourself to promote your company and your products, but a direct approach to buyers is generally better. Professional importers do not usually look for exporters on these platforms.

[FORDAQ](#). With more than 110,000 wood professionals listed as members (log producers, sawmills, veneer mills, panel producers, importers and large industrial users), FORDAQ is the largest online platform. It also includes an up-to-date news section that you should consult frequently.

[TimberWeb](#) has been an important internet player in the global timber and lumber marketplace for well over a decade. It has 50,000 registered members from nearly 200 countries.

5. Check online databases for importers

Apart from the online sales platforms and sector organisations mentioned above, there are some interesting databases that you can consult in your search for potential buyers.

Certification bodies' websites. If you supply certified timber with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) or Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) logo, your first option is to approach an importer who is also certified. There is a fair chance that they will be interested in your products, as FSC/PEFC certified tropical timber is difficult to find. Check the [FSC database](#) and the [PEFC membership](#) list for details of such importers.

Some national FSC offices have their own lists of FSC suppliers or other members who may interest you. For example, check this [list of the signatories to the FSC-sponsored Construction and Timber Convention](#) in the Netherlands (aimed at promoting the sustainable use of timber in the building industry). You can also check the search options on the FSC Belgium website (in Dutch) or [the FSC Germany website](#) for German certificates.

The Global Forest & Trade Network ([GFTN](#)) of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). This database lists companies that are either FSC certified or in the process of becoming so. The membership list might be a starting point in your search for buyers.

6. Read more about niche markets and find the right buyers

It can be very difficult to find buyers or to understand who the actual importers are in some timber niche markets or highly specialised trade channels. The tips and tricks below may help you here.

Public procurement

Tropical timber is used in many public construction projects such as the building of waterways or large office complexes, but you cannot sell your timber directly to the governments of European Member States. In almost all cases, construction projects are published for tendering and awarded to large construction companies, who buy the timber that they need from large timber importers and wholesalers.

It is therefore better to contact these timber importers (such as [Vandecasteele Houtimport](#) (Belgium), [Dekker Hout](#) and [Wijma](#) (the Netherlands)) directly. See also our specific study of [Channels and Segments](#) for the timber sector.

House construction in the private sector

In some countries such as Belgium, Germany and France, people usually commission a local construction company to build their houses. The architect involved will generally be the person who makes decisions about the use of timber in doors, windows, frames and external cladding. The construction company will then buy the material, sometimes from suppliers selected by the architect.

Architects who work at the top end of the market may prove to be very valuable customers. Most European Union Member States have one or more professional associations of architects, which can be very useful sources of information in this field. You can, for example, consult the membership list of the Royal Institute of [British Architects \(RIBA\) in the United Kingdom](#) or visit the (Dutch-language) website of the Belgian [Orde van Architecten](#).

Component market

Suppliers of tropical timber may find interesting opportunities in the export of components for such products as furniture and kitchens. Outsourcing is a growing trend that you may be able to benefit from. To do so, you need to contact European manufacturers of such products, who are often located in Eastern Europe (for furniture), Germany and Italy (for kitchens). Consult our various [product studies](#) for further information.

7. Ask your commercial attaché for help

When you have selected a target country, it can be very useful to contact your own embassy in your target country. They will usually have a commercial attaché whose job it is to help you with your enquiries.

Make sure that you have formulated your question clearly and in detail. Commercial attachés are not sector specialists and often rely on other contacts within their own network to answer questions.

8. Build your image, website and social media tools

While you should do your best to find customers, they will also be able to find you if you are well prepared. This means presenting a professional image to the outside world. Your website should be professionally designed and convey the same corporate style as your business cards, the contact details at the bottom of your emails, your brochures and the advertisements that you place online and elsewhere. The first impression that a buyer gets may well determine whether or not they will pursue contact with you.

Use the following advice to build your own professional image:

Treat your online presence as a digital showroom and an extension of your business, ensuring its visibility on a worldwide scale. Design and maintain it carefully, knowing that doing this well can capture the attention of your prospects and, more importantly, generate business. Place the design in professional hands and make sure that your website is up to date to show visitors that you are a proactive entrepreneur. This effort may cost time and money, but it will pay off in the long run.

Make sure that you visually separate the export products from the local sales, include a small story about the history of your company, indicate the size and capacity of your company, include mission and vision statements to show your long-term goals and targets, give details of any certifications, include pictures of employees working on the shop floor, list the types of woods that you are using (with technical data sheets for each species) and include a map to show where your company is located.

Optimise your website for search engines, so that buyers will be able to find you more easily. Have a look at the

[Google Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide](#) for tips on how to improve the ranking of your website.

Create links from your website to all the main modern social media tools, as this is a good way of exposing your business to a wider circle of potential buyers. Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter all offer access to new networks, so these social media tools need to be actively managed.

9. Advertise online or in magazines

Advertising can be an excellent way of telling potential buyers about your products, but you always have to weigh up the advertising costs against the revenue that you can generate in this way.

Start with a careful analysis of the groups that you are targeting (by a magazine advertisement, for example). If the target group of the magazine mainly consists of consumers, you may not be able to attract many large importers to whom you can sell construction timber. Nevertheless, there are some websites and magazines that you may like to consider.

The aforementioned [FORDAG](#) and [TimberWeb](#) offer the opportunity to place advertisements on their home page for a certain period of time (this has to be paid for, of course).

If you are an exhibitor at a trade fair, you can generally pay a little extra to have your advertisement shown on the home page of the trade fair's website or in their magazine.

Some trade journals may meet your needs very well. Most of these exist in both a paper version and an online version, while some have an associated online newsletter as well. You may look for options in the British [Timber Trade Journal](#), the German [Holz](#), the French [Bois International](#), the Belgian [WoodForum](#) (available in both French and Dutch), the Dutch [Houtwereld](#) and the Spanish [El sector de mueble y madera](#).

10. Get to know potential buyers before you contact them

Buyers in the timber sector are often approached by producers, suppliers and traders. The only way to convince them that you are a supplier who is worth doing business with is to prepare yourself very well. Most of the time you will only get one chance to prove yourself, so consider the following points when you are preparing for a meeting:

Make sure that your corporate style is in place and online (see tip 8 above). The products that you are going to offer should all be listed on your website.

Remember that a trustworthy image and a positive track record in doing business and delivery are much more important to any European buyer than quality and price. Make sure that you offer the right product to the right buyer at the right price (all on the basis of your market research and customer selection).

Read our document on [Doing business with European buyers](#) to learn more about cultural differences, communication style, language, informal or formal business approaches, and much more. Speak the right technical language and be prepared for technical questions. You could prepare in advance a short list of questions that potential importers might ask during an initial phone call or Skype conference, together with the answers that you should give.


Frequent communication is crucial. If you do not have an immediate answer to questions about delivery times, inform your buyer when the answer will be available instead of simply saying "I don't know".

If you follow all the above tips and you still find it difficult to contact buyers, be proactive. Send them an email, followed by one or at most two reminders, after which you should call to make an appointment for a telephone or Skype conference.


Good luck!

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