

10 tips for finding European coffee buyers

Europe has the most coffee buyers in the world, each with its own approach to business, its own expectations and specific demands. As a result, finding the right buyer can be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Be prepared because it takes time. Work through the following tips to help you find your European buyers for your coffee.

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1. Explore your target market

Before starting your search for European buyers, it is important to understand the characteristics of your target market. Each national coffee market in Europe differs from the next. These differences may relate to factors such as consumption patterns, levels of trading, preferences for specific coffee varieties, how many roasters there are and how big these roasters are.

You need to profile the target market and its structure. You need to ask yourself questions such as: Which markets and channels offer the most opportunities for my product? What is the demand for my type of coffee in each country? Who else supplies my variety of coffee to Europe? Where and how do they enter the European market?

Analyse this market information and identify the main coffee buyers and their requirements. Without this market knowledge, you will limit your success.

Tips:

Consider which entry channel is most suitable for your company: directly to coffee roasters, through an importer or trader, or through an agent or broker. Or maybe you are too small, and need to export through an exporter in your own country, for the time being.

One of the most important initial questions is to check whether your potential client imports directly from origin or via middlemen.

Define your unique selling points and what you can offer to European buyers.

Compile your own trade statistics on the [International Trade Centre \(ITC\) Trade Map](#) and the [EU Trade Helpdesk](#). Find trade statistics for coffee under chapter 9 of the Harmonised System (HS).

Read the annual [European Coffee Report](#), which is also a valuable source for more quantitative and qualitative information on the European coffee market.

Learn more about the European and other international coffee markets on [The markets for coffee](#) in the ITC's The Coffee Guide, chapter 2.

Use the [International Coffee Organisation's coffee trade statistics per country](#) in your market research.

Read our study on [demand for coffee in Europe](#) and the [information on specific countries](#).

2. Use sector and trade associations

The [European Coffee Federation](#) (ECF) plays a prominent role in representing the interests of traders, roasters, manufacturers and other companies involved in the European coffee sector. The companies affiliated with the ECF represent a total import volume of approximately 40 million bags, which is more than half of the world trade volume.

The ECF and its associated members publish lists of member companies on their websites, which is a good source of information on buyers in different European countries. You can find potential buyers on the [ECF's members list](#). Check also the websites of the national associations on the ECF's members list. Focus on associations in countries which have a high demand for your product.

For specific market segments such as specialty coffee, you can refer to the links to the [national chapters](#) of the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA), or the [International Coffee Organisation](#).

3. Visit and participate in trade fairs and events

Visiting and participating in trade fairs, coffee events and festivals are good ways of meeting potential buyers and obtaining market information. If you exhibit at a trade fair, you can increase exposure for your company and products, and assess your competition.

You should find out whether or not a trade fair is interesting for your company. You can go as a visitor, which is less expensive than exhibiting and is recommended as a first step.

Visit the booths of coffee importers. Introduce your company and establish initial business contacts. Study the trade fair catalogues online. This is a good way of identifying potential buyers in advance.

Most online trade fair catalogues allow you to search specifically for coffee companies. The most important trade fairs in the coffee sector are:

- [SCA World of Coffee](#) — European trade fair with a focus on specialty coffee, held every year in a different European city.
- [COTECA](#) — international trade fair for coffee, tea and cocoa in Hamburg, Germany, held every two years.
- [Tea & Coffee World Conference](#) — international coffee trade fair, held annually in a different city.
- [Triestespresso Expo](#) — trade fair specialised in espresso coffee, held every two years in Trieste, Italy.
- [SIGEP](#) — International Trade Show of Artisan Gelato, Pastry, Bakery and the Coffee World, annually in Rimini, Italy.
- [BioFach](#) — the most important international exhibition for organic food and fair-trade products, held every year in Nuremberg, Germany. It is a key trade fair for companies that sell organic certified coffee.
- [Anuga](#) — the world's leading food fair for the retail trade, and the food service and catering market. It can be a useful trade fair to discover new trends and to learn about the European consumer market for coffee. It is held biannually in Cologne, Germany.
- [SIAL](#) — one of the world's largest food exhibitions, covering a number of food ingredients and final products, including coffee. SIAL is held every two years in Paris.

Other interesting events include:

- [Europe & Middle East Coffee Symposium](#) — the leading event for senior executives from across the European coffee shop and food-to-go sector.
- [The London Coffee Festival](#) — the United Kingdom's largest coffee and artisan food event.
- [Caffè Culture Show](#) — the main gathering event for the café and coffee community in the United Kingdom.
- [Kaffee Campus](#) — one of the largest coffee events in Germany, bringing together coffee growers, logistics players, green coffee traders, roasters, suppliers, gastronomes, baristas and consumers.
- [The Amsterdam Coffee Festival](#) — a two-day event celebrating Amsterdam's coffee scene.
- [Vienna Coffee Festival](#) — a three-day specialty coffee event in Vienna.

Tips:

Check out the exhibitors' lists of the events above to find out whether they are interesting for you.

Make appointments with exhibitors in advance. You can find their contact information on the website of the specific event.

Set clear objectives and targets for yourself, whether you are an exhibitor or a visitor.

Write down questions in your notebook or on a business contact form which you cannot answer directly.

After the trade fair or event, follow up on specific requests such as quotations, further information on your company, product and certificates.

4. Contact trade promotion agencies, embassies and chambers of commerce

Many European countries have governmental organisations promoting imports from developing countries. They target mostly small and medium-sized enterprises in selected partner countries that aim to export their products to Europe.

In addition to the Dutch Centre for the Promotion of Imports from developing countries ([CBI](#)), other governmental organisations active in the coffee sector include:

- [Belgian Development Agency](#) (Enabel) from Belgium;
- [Finnpartnership](#) from Finland;
- [Import Promotion Desk](#) (IPD) from Germany (in cooperation with CBI);
- [Swiss Import Promotion Programme](#) (SIPPO) from Switzerland.

Check which import promotion organisation of your interest specifically targets your country.

Think about applying for export programmes, which offer matchmaking services and support for exhibiting at trade fairs, for example.

In addition to these agencies, you can contact your country's embassies in Europe, as well as European chambers of commerce with offices in your country or region. Examples include:

- [Ethiopian-Netherlands Business Association](#);
- [German-Colombian Chamber of Industry and Commerce](#).

As a coffee exporter, it is important for you to join your national or regional coffee association, which can offer interesting services, such as up-to-date market and price information, trade fair participation and marketing support. Examples include:

- [African Fine Coffees Association](#);

- [Uganda Coffee Federation](#);
- [Colombian Coffee Growers' Federation](#);
- [Anacafé \(Guatemala\)](#);
- [Specialty Coffee Association of Indonesia](#).

5. Using online trading sites

Online trading sites are not very popular in the coffee sector as a whole. Most European buyers require direct contact with suppliers for a detailed assessment of your potential. Nevertheless, there are online trading sites which provide access to coffee buyers in less traditional market channels such as microlots and other niche markets. This is a new trend in the coffee trade.

- [Alliance for Coffee Excellence](#) is a recommended online trading website for high-quality coffees. It puts you in contact with buyers of microlots. It is difficult to access this very small market segment any other way.
- Similarly, the [FLOCERT](#) website provides a list of Fairtrade-certified operators worldwide, including buyers in Europe (choose Coffee in 'Product Category').

Tips:

Check whether portals as: [Cropster](#) and [Algrano](#) could be useful for you.

Use online trading sites to help you map your target markets.

For high-quality coffees, try the [Alliance for Coffee Excellence](#) trading website.

Find [Fairtrade-certified operators on the FLOCERT](#) website. choose Coffee in 'Product Category'.

6. Get to know your buyers

Once you have found a potential buyer, it is important to understand their business, their culture and their individual requirements and demands. Coffee buyers differ significantly from country to country, and that can make the following steps for doing business quite challenging.

Visit the website of the buyer you have found. Research as much information as you can about their business, their philosophy and business practices.

Find out which segment they operate in, for example. Do they buy mainstream or niche products such as speciality, organic, and fair trade coffee? Do they expect certification or specific requirements on bean quality, packaging or transportation?

Contact them directly to find the answers.

Tips:

Once you are convinced your coffee might have a chance with this buyer, send an e-mail with a complete specification or fact sheet of your coffee, such as [this example](#).

Study our [tips for doing business with European coffee buyers](#).

7. Use the trade press for market information

What are the trends in the coffee sector? What influences business in Europe? And what affects your potential buyer's decision-making and business practices? The only way to find out is by keeping yourself up-to-date on market news.

Find out what is going on in the coffee sector. Follow market developments published in trade magazines and market trends. This can also be a good way of assessing the competition. You could also consider using magazines for advertising your business and your products to your new target audience.

However, magazines can also function as a way of finding potential buyers. Not only do these publications bring up-to-date information on the coffee sector, they also provide a database of potential buyers, such as traders and roasters.

The following magazines or news portals focus exclusively on coffee:

- [Coffee & Cocoa International](#) — coffee news and industry listings.
- [Tea and Coffee Trade Journal](#) — subscribers get free access to the [Uker's Tea & Coffee Global Directory & Buyers Guide](#), a very useful catalogue for finding potential buyers and placing ads.

The following journals may also be interesting for coffee exporters:

- [Daily Coffee News](#) — a free and very good source of information on the specialty coffee market, with an emphasis on the North American market.
- [Comunicaffé](#) — coffee news and advertising opportunities.
- [Global Coffee Report](#) — coffee industry news and advertising opportunities.

Tips:

Study our [tips for doing business with European coffee buyers](#).

Keep yourself up-to-date on market news by exploring the websites mentioned above.

Consider using magazines as way of advertising your products.

Find potential buyers in the company directories of the magazines given above, such as the [Buyer's Guide Index of the Coffee & Cocoa International](#).

Learn about your competition by browsing through the ads of other producers / exporters in your own country and elsewhere.

8. Use online marketing

The right marketing can help you to be successful in Europe. Choose professional marketing to communicate an image of reliability and credibility. A professional website is a vital tool for this. Social media is another.

A high-quality website offers you the opportunity to market your business and your products. You will need to include the following aspects:

- Coffee varieties, grades and sensory characteristics;
- Origin of your products;
- Availability;
- Packaging;

- Quality and delivery reliability;
- Certificates: mention the year of certification and explain how it contributes to the quality of your products and services. Certificates can be related to quality management or ethical aspects, such as [Fairtrade](#), [UTZ](#), [Rainforest Alliance](#) and organic. Read our study about [buyer requirements](#) for more information about certification;
- The mission and history of your company;
- Describe your company's processes for implementing and monitoring quality;
- News: recent, updated information about your coffee region. Provide an overview of your travels, market visits, trade fairs, and any other news items that could be interesting for potential buyers.

The Internet provides increasing possibilities for marketing and communication. Online video sharing platforms such as [YouTube](#) make it possible for you to refer potential buyers to a video about your company.

European buyers are regularly active on social networks, such as [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#). These kinds of social media platforms can help you to find and get to know European buyers. However, two-way communication predominantly takes place through email, phone and face-to-face contact.

Tips:

Communicate reliability and credibility with a professional website.

Use video sharing platforms such as [YouTube](#) to advertise your company's best qualities, like in [this example](#).

Find and get to know European buyers using social media platforms, such as [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

Collaborate with others to promote your country, region or sector as a whole, like the [Colombian coffee producers do](#), for example.

9. Tell your story, make it marketable

What makes your coffee stand out? Where do your products come from? How are they grown and processed? Many coffee buyers are interested in answers to questions such as these, and use them as a story to distinguish their products, sourced from you, from those of the competition.

These types of storytelling is often closely associated with corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices. You see a lot of this type of marketing in the speciality coffee segment.

Think about what your story is. What sets you apart from the competition and how do you contribute to society? Certifications are very important tools to support your story and emphasise the quality of your coffee. The main certifications for coffee are:

- [Rainforest Alliance](#) (now merged with [UTZ](#));
- [4C Services](#);
- Starbucks [C.A.F.E. Practices](#);
- [Nespresso AAA](#) programme;
- [Organic](#);
- [Fairtrade International](#) (FLO).

Tips:

Read our study on [buyers requirements](#) for more information about certification.

Research your target markets before engaging in costly and time-consuming certification processes.

Discuss certification needs with your potential buyers.

Contact local representatives of the different certification schemes to ask for information.

Look for certification services and training possibilities in your region or country.

Never make claims that you cannot support.

10. Be persistent

It takes time before a buyer decides to make a contract with a new coffee supplier. Usually, the buyer has a number of good suppliers with longstanding relations. Do not expect to have a deal after you submitted a first coffee sample. Sometimes, it takes one or two years exchanging information and samples before you get an order.

Tips:

Make sure you have someone who speaks English available, and who checks and answers emails every day.

If a buyer does not answer, do not hesitate to send reminders and ask for feedback on the cupping of your coffee sample.


Plan your export marketing activities: schedule calls with prospective buyers, schedule updating the 'News' tab on your website, and inform all prospective buyers when you visit Europe for example.

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