

An aerial photograph of a city skyline, likely Lagos, Nigeria. The image shows a dense urban area with various buildings, including a prominent white building with a red roof. A multi-lane highway runs along the coast, with several large offshore oil rigs visible in the water. The sky is hazy, and the overall color palette is dominated by blues, greys, and earthy tones.

# BtoB Events

# West Africa Trade Report

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Prepared by BtoB Events Limited

Based on over a decade of on the ground market intelligence across West Africa  
For Export Managers, MDs and Founders of global SMEs



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# Executive Summary

The most significant market opportunity available to global SMEs today cannot be found on Google, Apollo or LinkedIn Sales Navigator. The distributors, traders and buyers who move product at scale across West Africa operate through open markets, trade associations and WhatsApp-based networks that are entirely invisible to desk-based research. That invisibility is not a weakness of the market. It is the single most important commercial insight in this report.

West Africa has a combined ECOWAS population of over 400 million people, a rapidly reforming economic environment in Nigeria where Foreign Portfolio Inflows surged to \$8.05 billion in the first half of 2025 alone, and growing intra-African trade driven by the African Continental Free Trade Area. The conditions for successful market entry have never been more favourable.

Yet the majority of international companies that could be accessing this market are not. Not because the opportunity is absent, but because it is invisible from conventional research tools. The distributors, traders and buyers who drive commerce across West Africa do not appear on Apollo, LinkedIn Sales Navigator or any database available to a desk-based researcher. They operate through open markets, trade associations and WhatsApp-based networks that are entirely inaccessible without on the ground presence and established relationships.

This report draws on over a decade of direct market intelligence gathered by BtoB Events across West Africa. It sets out the scale of the opportunity, explains why conventional research fails in this market, identifies the most common mistakes companies make when attempting entry, and presents the four-stage process through which BtoB Events engineers successful market access on behalf of its exhibitors. Companies approaching West Africa with the right partners and the right on the ground intelligence are building significant market positions. Companies that wait are watching those positions being claimed by competitors.

**Key finding:** One BtoB Events trade exhibition delivers the equivalent market access of a minimum of eight individual country trips, across multiple ECOWAS markets simultaneously, with pre-recruited qualified buyers ready to do business.

# The Market Opportunity

West Africa is frequently underestimated by international businesses applying conventional market sizing methodologies. Population statistics, GDP per capita figures and consumer spending data, when viewed in aggregate, can suggest a market that is large but not yet commercially mature. This framing misses the point entirely.

## West Africa trade: a decade in review and the road ahead

West Africa's commercial trajectory over the past two decades is a story of structural conditions progressively catching up with long-standing potential.

### Past

*Early 21st century*

- Commercial potential outpaced accessibility
- Currency instability deterred international trade
- Fragmented regulations and weak infrastructure
- No structured pathways for market entry

*The opportunity was visible. The route in was not.*

### Present

*2018 to today*

- Nigeria's fiscal reforms stabilise the economy
- Foreign Portfolio Inflows reach \$8.05bn in H1 2025
- AfCFTA moves from framework to live trading mechanism
- Intra-African trade grows 12.4% to \$220.3bn in 2024

*More stable, integrated and accessible than ever before.*

### Future

*The road ahead*

- Intra-African distribution networks maturing rapidly
- Multi-market supply replacing single country strategies
- Urban consumer markets deepening across the region
- Demand for international products accelerating

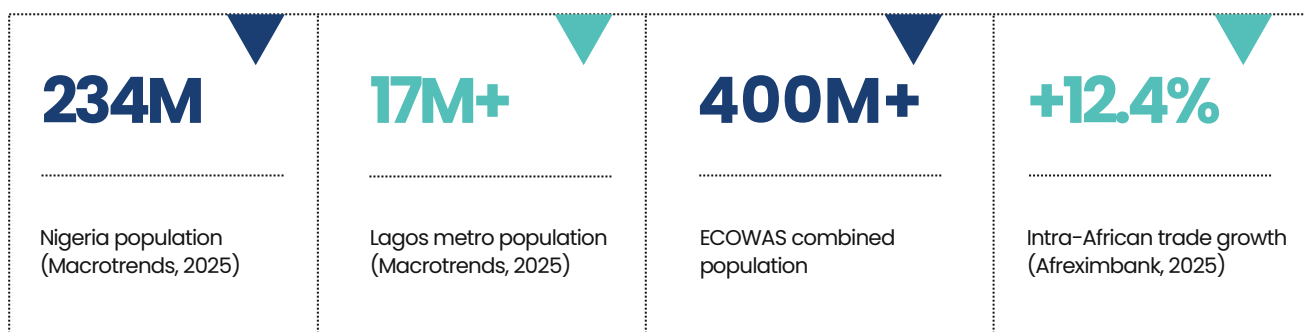
*Companies entering now are entering a growth phase market.*

*West Africa is not an emerging opportunity. It is an accelerating one.*

# Scale

Nigeria, the region's largest economy, has a population of 234.5 million people, making it the most populous nation in Africa and one of the most populous on earth. (Source: Macrotrends, 2025). Lagos, its commercial capital, is home to a metro population of over 17 million and carries the largest middle class population of any city on the African continent according to Ipsos data. The wider ECOWAS trading bloc encompasses 15 member states with a combined population exceeding 400 million people.

The critical analytical point is this: international companies are not selling to the aggregate Nigerian population. They are selling to the premium and mid-market consumer segment concentrated in major urban centres including Lagos, Abuja, Kano and Port Harcourt, as well as the significant trading epicentres of Abia and Anambra state. That segment, in absolute numbers, exceeds the total population of many markets that international companies already consider established and attractive.



## Economic momentum

Nigeria has undergone significant structural economic reform over the past two years, including the removal of fuel subsidies, the cessation of monetary financing of the fiscal deficit and a comprehensive overhaul of foreign exchange operations. (Source: IMF Article IV Mission Nigeria, 2025). Foreign Portfolio Inflows surged to \$8.05 billion in the first half of 2025 alone, almost matching total inflows for the entirety of 2024. (Source: Vanguard Nigeria, November 2025).

Ghana continues to perform as one of West Africa's most stable and commercially predictable environments for international trade, complementing Nigeria as a gateway market for the wider ECOWAS region.

## Continental trade integration

The African Continental Free Trade Area, the world's largest free trade agreement by number of participating countries, is gaining meaningful traction. Africa's total merchandise trade grew by 13.9% in 2024, reaching \$1.5 trillion, with intra-African trade specifically growing 12.4% to \$220.3 billion. By mid-2025, 48 countries had submitted tariff offers and 39 were actively trading under the Guided Trade Initiative, up from just seven countries at launch in 2022. (Source: Afreximbank Africa Trade Report, June 2025 and Engineering News, April 2026).

This trajectory matters for international companies because it signals a progressively more integrated African market. Distribution relationships established in Nigeria today will increasingly provide access to the wider ECOWAS region as these trade corridors deepen and formalise.

## The Invisible Market

Perhaps the most significant and least discussed dimension of the West Africa opportunity is what might be called the invisible market. The AI-powered sales and research tools that have transformed market prospecting in Europe, North America and Asia, platforms such as Apollo, LinkedIn Sales Navigator and comparable data services, have not yet developed meaningful coverage of West African markets.

The buyers, distributors and commercial decision makers who control trade flows across the ECOWAS region are, with very few exceptions, absent from these platforms. They operate through open markets, trade associations and personal networks. They communicate primarily via WhatsApp rather than email. They do not maintain commercial websites.

This creates a window of competitive advantage that is, by its nature, temporary. As digital infrastructure and AI data coverage eventually extends to African markets, the ability to identify and approach these buyers remotely will increase. Companies establishing relationships and distribution networks now are building positions that will be significantly harder and more expensive to replicate when that window closes.



# Why Conventional Research Fails in This Market

The market data presented in Section 2 tells a compelling story of scale, momentum and accelerating opportunity. Yet the vast majority of international companies that could be accessing West Africa are not. The gap between the size of the opportunity and the number of companies pursuing it is not explained by lack of ambition. It is explained by a structural characteristic of this market that makes conventional research methods ineffective.

The most common reason international companies fail to prioritise West Africa is not scepticism about the opportunity. It is the absence of credible intelligence gathered through conventional research methods. When an Export Manager or business development professional turns standard research tools toward West Africa and returns with limited, fragmented or contradictory information, the rational conclusion appears to be that the market is not yet sufficiently developed or accessible to justify investment.

This conclusion, while understandable, is analytically incorrect. The absence of data is not evidence of the absence of opportunity. It is evidence of a structural characteristic of this market that, once understood, becomes a competitive advantage rather than a barrier.

## What conventional research reveals

*The picture from behind a desk*

- Limited company profiles and verified contacts
- Communication via WhatsApp rather than email or commercial websites
- Outdated and fragmented market data
- Open and informal markets that cannot be quantified through digital tools
- Low quality web presence creating a low quality market perception
- Elevated perceived risk of fraud and unreliable partners
- Regulatory information that is incomplete, inconsistent or inaccessible
- Fast-moving policy changes that do not appear on official web portals

*Conclusion: The market does not appear commercially viable*

## What on the ground intelligence reveals

*The reality in the market*

- Access to the region's largest open markets and their key importers, traders and buyers
- Direct relationships with trade associations driving commercial activity in each sector
- Qualified buyers operating across multiple ECOWAS markets simultaneously
- A clear picture of the regulatory and licensing landscape from those navigating it daily
- Understanding of the cultural and commercial norms that determine whether deals get done
- Real time intelligence on fast-moving policy and market changes not available online
- Knowledge of which distribution networks have genuine reach and which do not
- Accurate representation of market scale through direct contact with industry participants
- Awareness of where demand is concentrated and which product categories are underserved

*Conclusion: The market is significantly larger and more commercially active than remote research suggests*

# How the Market Actually Works

Understanding how commerce actually functions in West Africa requires direct experience that cannot be obtained remotely. The following intelligence has been gathered through over a decade of on the ground market presence across Nigeria, Ghana and the wider ECOWAS region.

## The open market ecosystem

The dominant commercial infrastructure in West Africa is not the formal retail or distribution networks that international companies are accustomed to in European or Asian markets. It is a vast, highly organised ecosystem of open markets, trade associations and personal commercial networks that operate largely outside the digital economy.

These are not informal low-volume environments. They are highly structured, association-led commercial ecosystems with sophisticated supply chains and significant purchasing power. They simply do not exist online. Some examples drawn from direct market intelligence:

**01**

Onitsha Market in Anambra State is the largest open market in West Africa, with hundreds of thousands of traders and businesses conducting high-volume commerce entirely through physical presence and WhatsApp-based communication.

**02**

The Balogun Business Association in Lagos serves the beauty and food and beverage sectors with a membership of over 8,000 traders operating from a single market complex.

**03**

The Auto Spare Parts Manufacturers and Dealers Association (ASPMDA) in Lagos operates from a complex housing over 20,000 auto spare parts traders, none of whom maintain a meaningful online presence.

**04**

The pharmaceutical sector is undergoing significant structural change, with the development of Clinical Wholesale Centres (CWC) in Kano and the relocation of the renowned Idumota market in Lagos to a newly established CWC. This transition reflects a continental drive toward greater transparency, regulatory compliance and consumer protection across pharmaceutical supply chains.



Field intelligence: The moment that led to the creation of Africa's largest automotive exhibition

**Jamie Hill, Co-owner and CEO of BtoB Events, describes the market discovery that led to the launch of the West Africa Automotive Show:**

*I was finishing a meeting at the BBA Market off the Badagry Expressway in Lagos, and on the way back, we drove past another market which looked sizable. It had a lot of billboards with auto spare parts, accessories, and oils and lubricants around it, and it was called ASPMDA. I asked the driver what it was there, and it turns out it's the largest auto spare parts market on the African continent and plays host to 20,000 different auto spare parts dealers in a really, really organised and civilised market setting.*

*We went into the complex, went to the secretariat, and met with the president. After a few meetings, an MOU was signed, a relationship was built, and that was where we started the West Africa Automotive Show, which is now Africa's largest annual auto parts exhibition.*

*You don't find that on Google, and you don't find that on any database.*

*The reason I found it, the reason that we now own West Africa's largest automotive show, is because I was there on the ground and saw the opportunity. I understood the market, and that success that was built from that understanding. That's how the market works, and I'd say that you have to be in it to see it. You have to experience it to understand it, and you have to understand it to succeed within it.*

## **The role of trade associations**

In Nigeria and Ghana, trade associations play a pivotal role in organising commercial activity across every major sector. Association presidents hold genuine influence over the purchasing and importation decisions of their members. Relationships with these associations, built over time through consistent presence and demonstrated commitment to the market, are the primary mechanism through which international companies gain credible access to qualified buyers at scale.

This dynamic is notably different in Francophone West African markets including Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal, where the association infrastructure is less developed and relationship-building follows different cultural norms. Market entry strategy must be adapted accordingly. A single approach does not work across the ECOWAS region.

## **Cultural and commercial nuance**

Business in West Africa operates on relationship capital that cannot be shortcut. Sustained engagement, enquiring about families, understanding cultural practices and demonstrating genuine market commitment rather than extractive intent, is what separates companies that build durable positions from those that burn budget on trips that yield nothing.



# Common Mistakes in West African Market Entry

Based on over a decade of direct market presence and observation of how international companies approach West African market entry, three patterns emerge consistently that limit commercial outcomes. Each is avoidable with the right intelligence and the right approach.

## Mistake 1

### ATTEMPTING MARKET ENTRY THROUGH DESK-BASED RESEARCH AND SELF-ORGANISED VISITS

The reasoning is that direct trips will deliver the same outcomes at lower cost than trade events. In practice, the buyers, distributors and association leaders who represent genuine commercial opportunity are not findable through conventional research and are not accessible to unknown visitors without established introductions, structural realities identified in Sections 3 and 4 of this report. The true cost, accounting for flights, visas, accommodation and the opportunity cost of not reaching the right buyers, consistently exceeds the cost of structured market participation with no guarantee of results.

## Mistake 2

### ASSUMING ONE MARKET PROVIDES A TEMPLATE FOR ALL OTHERS

West Africa is 15 distinct ECOWAS member states, each with different regulatory environments, commercial cultures and buyer communities. Francophone markets including Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal and Benin operate very differently from Anglophone Nigeria and Ghana. The trade association infrastructure central to buyer access in Nigeria is largely absent in Francophone West Africa. Africa is a continent of 54 nations and over 1,000 dialects. The minimum viable unit of market analysis is the country, not the region.

## Mistake 3

### RELYING ON GLOBAL TRADE SHOWS TO REACH WEST AFRICAN BUYERS

Exhibiting at global shows in Dubai or Europe in the expectation of meeting West African buyers is a structurally flawed approach. The West African buyer community that attends international shows outside the region is a small, self-selecting subset of the total market. The majority of importers and distributors with genuine purchasing scale do not travel internationally. At a global show an exhibiting company also competes with thousands of other suppliers for a diffuse audience. At a sector-specific West African exhibition, they meet a concentrated audience of pre-recruited buyers attending specifically to make distribution decisions. The two environments are not comparable.

# How BtoB Events Engineers Your Market Entry

BtoB Events executes a four stage process on behalf of every exhibitor. Each stage removes a specific barrier that would otherwise prevent access to the right buyers. Exhibitors do not implement this process. BtoB Events implements it for them.

## Stage 01

### Market Intelligence

We conduct sector-specific research identifying import-reliant industries, mapping open market locations and buyer concentrations, and establishing the regulatory and licensing landscape. This intelligence is in exhibitors hands before they arrive in market.

## Stage 02

### Buyer Recruitment

We directly engage trade association presidents, open market leaders and established importers through relationships built over a decade. Buyers are personally recruited and pre-briefed by our team, not simply invited through advertising.

## Stage 03

### End to End Logistics

We handle VISA applications, freight and customs, vetted accommodation, ground transport and local expertise on behalf of every exhibitor. They arrive in market with one job: to focus entirely on commercial relationships.

## Stage 04

### The Exhibition Platform

The culmination of everything above. A curated, high-intent commercial environment in which the buyers we have recruited meet the exhibitors we have prepared. Both sides arrive ready to do business. Exhibitors walk in with hope. They walk away with business.

*Walk in with hope. Walk away with business.*

The efficiency advantage of this process over independent market entry is significant. An international company attempting to replicate the buyer access and market intelligence that BtoB Events delivers through independent travel would require a minimum of eight separate country visits over a period of twelve to twenty four months, at substantially greater cost and with no guarantee of reaching the right buyers. The BtoB Events exhibition compresses all of that into three days, with the work already done.

## 1 Exhibition > 8 Regional Business Trips

*Minimum 8 trips. 12-24 months.  
Uncertain outcomes.*

- Trips 1-2: Market orientation and first contact building in Lagos
- Trips 3-4: Relationship deepening and confidence building for local travel
- Trips 5-6: Association relationships solidified, market connections developing
- Trip 7: Expansion to secondary Nigerian markets: Kano, Anambra, Abuja
- Trip 8: Initial visits to other ECOWAS markets including Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire
- Then repeat the entire relationship-building process in each new market
- Duration: 12-24 months minimum
- Cost: 8x flights, hotels, VISA fees and in-market expenditure
- Indirect cost: 8 weeks minimum time out of office
- Buyers reached: None guaranteed

*Conclusion: The market does not appear commercially viable*

## One BtoB Events Exhibition

*Three days. Multiple markets. Guaranteed buyer access.*

- Market intelligence delivered before arrival in country
- Direct access to the region's largest importers, distributors and industry leaders
- Over 150 pre-qualified hosted buyers from across the ECOWAS region
- Buyers from Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, Benin, Gambia and more
- Association connections across all four exhibition sectors
- Regulatory and licensing guidance on the ground
- Duration: One week in-market
- Cost: One booth fee, one set of flights, VISA and accommodation
- Indirect cost: One week out of office
- Buyers reached: Thousands. Pre-qualified and ready to do business.

*Conclusion: Single investment. Multi-market access. Guaranteed qualified buyer engagement.*

### The buyer perspective: Hon. Ngozi Emechebe, President of ASPMDA

*The impact of the exhibitions is huge. Now my members do not need to travel to China or other countries to meet the manufacturers. They meet them here, we do the business, we have the haulage companies and it helps my members grow their businesses*

**Hon. Ngozi Emechebe, President, Auto Spare Parts Manufacturers and Dealers Association (ASPMDA), Lagos**

# Evidence of Outcomes

The commercial outcomes delivered through the BtoB Events methodology are evidenced both by aggregate performance data and by the individual results achieved by exhibiting companies across sectors.

|                                                      |                                             |                                                 |                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>5,000+</b><br>International exhibitors since 2018 | <b>71%</b><br>Average annual rebooking rate | <b>4</b><br>Annual exhibitions across 4 sectors | <b>150+</b><br>Pre-qualified hosted buyers per show |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|

The 71% annual rebooking rate is the most significant single data point in this report. In the exhibition industry, rebooking rates are the primary commercial validation of an event's value. Companies do not commit exhibition budget for a second consecutive year unless the first year delivered a return that justified the investment. A 71% rebooking rate, sustained across four annual exhibitions in four separate sectors, is evidence of consistent and repeatable commercial outcomes.

## Success Stories

### Dkhon Emirates, Beauty West Africa First exhibited: 2025

**Signed a six figure distribution agreement with Eslac Africa** on site at their very first exhibition, opening the West African region for their business. From first attendance to signed deal within three days.

### Sun Mark International, Food and Beverage West Africa First exhibited: 2018

Energy drink brand Bullet became the Nigerian market leader and was distributed across 14 African markets. **Bullet was subsequently acquired by Champions Breweries in a multi-million dollar deal.** What began as a single exhibition stand became a market-leading brand and a significant commercial exit.

### Naturally Tiwa, Beauty West Africa First exhibited: 2020

Through contacts built on site, Shalom Lloyd **established state of the art shea processing factories in Abuja and Niger State, employing hundreds of local staff.** 'Beauty West Africa was a significant part of my journey and helped me shape how I approached the African beauty market.' — Shalom Lloyd, Founder

### Wanis International / Tropical Sun | Food and Beverage West Africa | Exhibiting annually since 2019

Now among the market leaders across West Africa for their indigenous food brands. **Growth directly attributable to two large distribution partnerships formed at the exhibition.** Six consecutive years of participation from a company that now holds a market-leading position.

# Beyond Commercial Deals: Government to Government Outcomes

The impact of BtoB Events exhibitions extends beyond private sector trade. In 2025, Nigeria formally joined the African Medicines Agency, a unified continental effort to regulate and improve healthcare access across Africa. The binding documentation was passed through Nigeria's internal legal system and handed to the African Union as a matter of law. This landmark regulatory development was facilitated through the Pharma West Africa conference platform.

This outcome demonstrates that BtoB Events exhibitions create conditions not only for business to business and business to government commercial relationships, but for government-to-government agreements that shape regulatory frameworks across the continent. For pharmaceutical companies considering West African market entry, the regulatory environment is frequently cited as a primary barrier. The fact that Pharma West Africa has played a direct role in shaping that environment at the highest level is a material differentiator.



# Conclusion and Recommended Next Step

The evidence in this report supports a clear conclusion. West Africa represents a significant, accessible and underserved commercial opportunity. The conditions are currently favourable: macroeconomic reform in Nigeria, growing intra-African trade integration and an intelligence gap that still advantages companies with on the ground relationships. Those conditions will not remain unchanged indefinitely. The companies establishing distribution relationships and brand presence now are compounding their advantage with each passing year.

Successful market entry requires on the ground presence, pre-built buyer relationships, sector-specific market intelligence and logistical support that removes the barriers preventing most international companies from showing up at all.

BtoB Events has spent over a decade building precisely this infrastructure across West Africa. The market intelligence, the association relationships, the buyer networks and the logistical systems documented in this report are available to international companies through participation in our annual trade exhibitions.

The companies profiled in Section 6 of this report did not achieve their outcomes through superior products alone. They achieved them by showing up in the right room, in front of the right buyers, through a platform that had done the work to make that possible.

That room exists. The buyers are already recruited for our next exhibition cycle. The only question is whether your business will be represented when the deals are made.

## Your first step to making Africa happen starts here.

To discuss how BtoB Events can support your West Africa market entry strategy and to receive details of our upcoming exhibition programme, arrange a call with our team today.

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## SOURCES & NOTICE

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*Important notice: Company names and deal values referenced in Section 6 are used with the approval of the companies concerned. This report is intended for distribution to qualified business recipients only.*



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