

A photograph of an audience of diverse people, including a man with white hair and glasses in the center, clapping and smiling. The background is dark, and the lighting is warm, focusing on the audience members.

100% demand driven

A clear strategy to make
your Chamber grow.

Chamber of
Commerce and Industry
Antwerp

100%
demand
driven

Composition and editing: Luc Luwel, Pieter Leuridan
Translation: Caroline Dumont
Layout and cover: Pieter Geerts
Photos: Vincent Callot, Stephanie Fraikin, Wim Kempenaers

2022 Copyrights Voka – Kamer van Koophandel Antwerpen-Waasland.

All Rights Reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Reponsible publisher: Luc Luwel
Markgravestraat 12,
2000 Antwerp
Belgium

A photograph of an audience of diverse people, including a man with white hair and glasses in the center, clapping and smiling. The background is dark, and the lighting is warm, focusing on the audience members.

100% demand driven

A clear strategy to make
your Chamber grow.

Chamber of
Commerce and Industry
Antwerp



Contents

A word from the authors6

Part I: Advocacy 11

 Chapter 1: Roadmap 2025: an Economic Horizon14

 Chapter 2: A Platform Strategy unites our most important
 Economic Powers21

 Chapter 3: Political Stakeholder Meetings must remain
 Politically Neutral.....25

Part II: Entrepreneurship 33

 Chapter 4: Peer Learning Networks: the best Sounding Board
 for an Entrepreneur is another Entrepreneur 35

 Chapter 5: Our unique Programmes and Toolkits provide
 Tailor-made Answers43

 Chapter 6: Sustainability is a fast growing concern.....49

Part III: Networking and Events 57

 Chapter 7: Flagship Events: where we let our Brand shine! .. 59

 Chapter 8: Thematic Conferences help us demonstrate
 various Areas of Knowledge62

 Chapter 9: International Programmes define our Chamber’s
 Image Abroad64

Part IV: Members, Partners and Advertisers 71

 Chapter 10: Satisfied Members are our most Loyal
 Customers73

 Chapter 11: Advertising and Partnerships create a Win-Win
 Situation76

A word from our CEO

With over 1,500 locations spread across the entire globe, Chamber of Commerce is one of the most powerful brands in the world. It is a name that opens doors and connects entrepreneurs from all over the world; from Greenland to Chile, from Portugal to Taiwan. But it is a broad term that encompasses many definitions. Some Chambers are still working on finding their direction and identity, while others have already been established for centuries. Even the status of a Chamber can vary from country to country and from region to region. In many countries, Chambers of Commerce are regulated by the government and are strongly dependent on public funds. This entanglement can often become a handicap when lobbying for specific topics.

Since the role of administration and the allocation of public funds are often the subject of debate worldwide, this model has come to be under pressure. Moreover, heightened international competition has increased many businesses' need for professional coaching and advocacy that goes deeper than mere administrative support. An increasing number of Chambers are having to reinvent themselves as financially and politically independent organisations.

The Antwerp Chamber of Commerce has been putting this principle into practice for over two centuries, as a non-subsidised NPO. A world-class seaport, an international diamond trading centre and the world's second largest chemical cluster after Houston grant Antwerp a number of valuable assets and a unique economic layout. But these assets alone are not enough: membership to our Chamber is non-compulsory and is likewise cancellable on a yearly basis. This means that we have to earn our members, and that we have to build lasting individual relationships with them. This can only be achieved through constant questioning of our relevance and through adapting our service range to everchanging needs, as any other commercial company would.

The Antwerp Chamber of Commerce, with its 60 members of staff, three thousand plus active member companies and average operating budget of 10 million euros, has grown to be one of the country's largest multisectoral employers' organisations.

Membership fees account for only 18 percent of our annual turnover. As is the case for Chambers in many other countries, the government has also entrusted us with a series of subcontracted administrative tasks.

The bulk of our income is the result of our own portfolio of commercial services, events and products through which we reach hundreds of companies every year. This is a model we have been building up progressively over the last decades, and we would be delighted to share it with other Chambers. Our objective is to provide insight into our methodology through three main pillars: services, networking and advocacy.

From how we use powerful multisectoral platforms to put pressure on important policy areas, to how we coach and guide dozens of SMEs throughout their growth journey every year, or even how we use our flagship events, international trade missions and commercial partnerships to bring all these businesses together into one big community. For years, this approach has been the main driver of our growth and has allowed us to secure a unique, independent position within civil society.

Hence, this business model is one hundred percent demand-driven, dictated by the needs of our entrepreneurs. These needs are mostly universal and adaptable to any Chamber, anywhere in the world, and in any regional economic context.

May you find this informative and entertaining!

Luc Luwel
CEO





VC
K&A
Kornit
Digital
Marketing
Award

ROUTEPLAN
25

WELKOM
"ROUTEPLAN
25"

10010010000001111001001000000111





Part I: Advocacy

Bringing governments and politicians' attention to complex issues, acting as a go between when conflicts arise, giving entrepreneurs a voice... these are the lifework of organisations such as ours. But how would one refer to this nowadays? Lobbying? In our experience, journalists are usually quick to associate this term with backroom politics. Public affairs? A perfectly adequate term to define the streamlined way in which most commercial companies communicate, but a rather limiting one when it comes to summarising a Chamber of Commerce's activities.

This is why we personally opt for the term advocacy. We advocate not only for the interests of our members, but also, and more importantly, for the interests of our region. It is known to be the key economic driver of Flanders, which is Belgium's largest autonomous region. A surface of only 1,475 km² represents twenty percent of Flanders' total employment, generates twenty-three percent of its added value and accounts for thirty-five percent of its total exports.

Our core mission is to ensure the perennity of this economic activity. The common belief that there is opposition between economic interests and public interests is erroneous: our members are the foundation on which our prosperity is built. Moreover, large companies and SMEs are the driving force of this local economy; they are what keeps the value chain of local vendors, logistics providers and small retailers afloat.

Yet, industrial investments and necessary infrastructure works are increasingly faced with stubborn opposition from well-organised pressure groups. These groups use social media to sway public opinion, often through emotional arguments. As a result, they create controversy around certain business topics, which regional policymakers obviously cannot ignore.

And thus, individual entrepreneurs are backed into a corner time and time again. Only through the Chamber's network can they let their voice be heard. But of course, the idea is never to become a lobbying instrument for the particular interests of one individual business. That would entirely undermine our credibility as an independent employers' organisation.

This is why we have invested in a number of multisectoral platforms, through which we try to reach a largely supported consensus in matters of fiscality, mobility, labour market and sustainability. The region's thirty largest employers regularly participate in these discussions. This way, our positions and arguments are backed by top players of the economy, which makes it harder for politicians and policymakers to dismiss them.

The thoroughness with which we build our cases and structure our arguments has even contributed to local authorities regularly consulting us themselves before launching new initiatives that could impact the entrepreneurial climate.

Every successful outcome we have had over the past years has earned us new members.



~ Chapter 1 ~

Roadmap 2025: an Economic Horizon

Antwerp Airport, 24th April 2019: over 400 entrepreneurs, ministers, academics and other personalities gathered in one of the airport's aircraft hangars. For the occasion, it was transformed into a sort of time capsule which took us along on a journey into our region's economic future. Two hours of 3D projections alternated with short video snippets and captivating live interviews. Ever since 2002, our economic Roadmap presentation, which is held every five years, has blossomed into an event which our members eagerly look forward to.

Under the guidance of McKinsey & Co, we created Roadmap 2025: an outline of how we work and what we fight for.

During the launch in 2019, we shared our vision for the development of our region as we enter this new decade in a spectacular and entertaining way. The plan's main topics were smart logistics, health, talent and technology. Smart, digital and future-proof were the key words.

It took over half a year of prior planning and the involvement of more than a hundred prominent stakeholders to launch Roadmap 2025. But why invest so much time, money and energy into a free event? As Seneca put it, "If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favourable"; these wise words may be over two thousand years old, but they are still the most accurate description of our motivation: a clear objective.





Our main objective through this plan for the future is to answer the question of which challenges tomorrow's entrepreneurs will be facing. Ten years ago, tax issues and labour costs would have been at the top of the agenda. But today, our main concerns have shifted towards digitalisation, an ageing population and energy transition. Roadmap is, in this regard, the compass that guides the way we work; it is a strategic mediation instrument that helps us streamline the services we offer our members. It plays a key role in determining which training courses we set up, which learning networks we establish and which economic missions we organise.

Moreover, collaborating with McKinsey helps us look beyond our own regional horizon. Within the last few years, the international context in which our port and industry compete has become unrecognisable. Nowadays, with the Internet, all it takes is one brilliant idea for a start-up or unknown SME to disrupt an entire sector on the other side of the world. We are seeing ICT companies that have ventured into building cars and marketing medical apps. And the sharing economy that recently took the consumer market by storm is now slowly but surely conquering b2b sectors. During the information sessions and conferences we hold for our members, we address these topics in detail and raise awareness about the latest developments.

Finally, Roadmap is also supported by a large platform of stakeholders which strengthens our position when negotiating with governments. Ministers and top government officials know that our advocacy is carefully thought through and not an impromptu reaction to recent developments. In our plan for the future, not only are the ideas we fight for and the projects we hope to launch backed by numbers and facts, but they are also endorsed by the majority of the business community.

There has of course been a clear evolution in our Chamber of Commerce's maturity and level of ambition from our first Roadmap, outlined twenty years ago to our third one. What started as a broad new platform for ambitious ideas has now become a comprehensive plan that acts as a central thread weaving through all of our services and departments.

Our methodology:

Our very first Roadmap, back in 2002, led to the creation, within our Chamber of Commerce, of a permanent consultation platform with the industry sector.

The integration of the port sector and an alliance with the diamond sector followed a few years later. We will explain these platforms in further detail in the next chapter. Together, these stakeholder structures which we have been building these past fifteen years form the powerhouse we use today to keep important strategic topics on the political agenda. But these platforms were also the thinktank that defined the contents and projects of our current Roadmap 2025. Making Roadmap into what it is today was not always an evident journey. We will explain this through five rules of thumb.



1. Start with the right premises

A balanced economic plan for the future does not exist on its own. It must first and foremost be rooted in a region's unique economic ecosystem. With this in mind, we specifically looked for all the elements that make our region what it is. Of course, our vast network of business contacts provided us insight into who the leading players were and where potential focus points for growth could be found. But the danger of coming to conclusions exclusively from one's own bubble's perspective, is that collective reasoning mistakes are often made and new opportunities are often missed. We learnt this lesson first hand from previous attempts to reach a cohesive plan.

This is why we felt the need for an external party to objectively assess this information and to challenge our conclusions. We found this party in the early 2000s in the form of McKinsey & Co, an international management consulting company that had, at the time, just opened an office in the heart of Antwerp. Ever since then, McKinsey has also been our go-to partner for all our subsequent Roadmaps. McKinsey has been helping us identify our region's Unique Selling Points (USPs) as well as its most important economic stakeholders, through an international benchmarking exercise. They also shed a light on any potential lack of knowledge or expertise as well as international trends that could pose a threat to the region. And finally, they have helped us see the importance of paying close attention to the key players of the triple helix model – industry, academia and government – and the roles they play.

Having a clear vision of the situation enables us to present our stakeholders with concrete thought starters: these are our USPs, how do we make them future-proof? These are our key economic drivers, how do we strengthen them? These are our region's potential focus points for growth, which ones do we prioritise? And how do we put all of this into practise?

2. Involve the right stakeholders

A Roadmap's success relies entirely upon the people who answer the questions and make the strategic choices. It is important to remember that a Chamber of Commerce is not a lobbying instrument for governments or politicians.

Furthermore, when it comes to projects or positions, our organisation does not require the approval of any trade union, environmental organisation or interest group. This was the major pitfall of our very first strategic plan, back in 2002, and we've since learnt from it: the Chamber of Commerce exists for the sole purpose of defending entrepreneurship in the interest of the broader region. The thirty plus project proposals and ideas that emanated from Roadmap 2025 are therefore the result of a reunion of stakeholders in which solely CEOs, experts and academics from our broad network took part: a very select party of one hundred people whose daily job is to manage international companies such as Johnson & Johnson or BASF, cultural organisations such as the Flanders Opera, and renowned knowledge institutions such as research platform IMEC or the University of Antwerp. In late 2019 they took part, split into various multidisciplinary teams, in four thematic workshops. In early 2020, these workshops translated into a widely supported vision for the future of the Antwerp region. The fact that these people were willing, despite their hectic schedules, to free up hours and even days of their precious time, speaks volumes about the importance they attribute to this plan. "Infinitely ambitious", as is stated in the baseline, but with realistic and measurable objectives.

3. Create ownership

Having the entire business community endorse a plan for the future is a start, but it is not enough. One must also find a way to guarantee its progress. That is why a team leader was appointed for each and every area defined within the Roadmap. The prerequisite was that they had to be an expert as well as a decisionmaker – in this case, the CEO of a major player – within their respective field. Their task consisted, all while consulting with the Chamber and McKinsey, in defining the challenges and topics from a practical standpoint. Here is an example: for years now, the Antwerp Port community has wanted to transport a larger volume of goods and containers by rail, so as to limit the traffic and environmental pressure caused by road freight. At first, the most obvious solution seemed to be the expansion of rail capacity. However, the Transport and Logistics team leaders informed us about how complicated and time-consuming these kinds of negotiations with the government would be, and instead gave us other pointers that would lead to a faster, more efficient

solution. These included drafting up a business model to optimise the current rail capacity, or expanding and increasing the financial attractiveness of night time transport. These team leaders were also the ones who led the discussions and reported on the breakout sessions during our brainstorm meetings.

4. Measurable objectives

An ecosystem is not just the sum of several separate economic activities that each miraculously generate their own added value. An ecosystem is a value chain of activities, where positive and/or negative developments in one sector affect the entire chain. Thus, when drawing up an economic roadmap, it is of vital importance not to fall into this one-track mindset. Industry, digitalisation, sustainability, mobility... They are all intertwined. It is also tempting to approach economic development from a very holistic point of view. Previous exercises have shown us that support for our plan within the business community tends to dwindle fast if there are no measurable objectives. Tangible ideas are crucial to preserve the project's dynamic. It is for this reason that Roadmap 2025 consists firstly of a conceptual substructure, which led to 36 concrete projects, including mobility, digitalisation, health, the labour market, etc. A compact steering committee gathers every six months to supervise the progress of the projects, and an update event is held every two years to inform the entire business community of progress.

5. Roadmap2025 is no compromise

The point of a plan for the future is to mobilise entrepreneurs around a few powerful ideas and evocative projects. This means it is not some blurry platform text that suits all ideologies and which all interest groups can sort of identify with. A roadmap is a narrative with a clearly defined focus, where critical decisions for the future are made, regardless of whether or not the ruling political class or other civil society organisations agree. One must therefore not be coaxed into signing any other series of demands, civil society manifestos or regional pacts that only partially align with one's own objectives, or even worse, that go completely against them. A Roadmap is the only document that advocates and adversaries alike can refer to when they sit down with our Chamber of Commerce.

Example of a Concrete Achievement

Vaccinopolis: the Triple Helix Model in Action

One of the most internationally prestigious projects to come out of Roadmap 2025 is Vaccinopolis, a world-class expertise centre for research on infectious diseases and vaccines.

The Antwerp region has a unique ecosystem with enough critical mass and ambition to make research and innovation surrounding infectious diseases and vaccines take centre stage on the international scene. Research on disease and vaccines is one of the University of Antwerp's top priorities. Moreover, with the Institute of Tropical Medicine we have by our side one of the world's top players in the field of infectious diseases. Its close-knit network of hospitals, care and research institutes, combined with a recent surge in entrepreneurship, mean there is a great deal of potential in the Antwerp region. Moreover, the region has also been collaborating with national and international pharmaceutical companies for several years. The planning of Roadmap 2025 was an opportunity for these actors to gather and form a coalition around the idea of building a permanent quarantine facility in our region, in accordance with the latest scientific findings: a Vaccinopolis. This would allow researchers and companies from all over the world to develop and test vaccines faster. A few years ago, a similar pilot project by the UA surrounding polio vaccine testing had already caught international attention, including from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Meanwhile, the Belgian Federal Government decided to invest 13 million euros in Vaccinopolis, which the University of Antwerp will now set in motion alongside the Brussels University ULB. The "Drie Eiken" University campus in Antwerp is set to harbour an ultra-modern testing complex by 2021.

The worldwide outbreak of the corona crisis has made this topic a top priority. The Chamber's goal for the next few years is to integrate Vaccinopolis, with help of other actors of the triple helix model, into a broader ecosystem surrounding infectious diseases and pandemic preparedness. The Flemish government is participating with a public funding of 4 million euros.

~ Chapter 2 ~

A Platform Strategy unites our most important Economic Powers

The idea of gathering a number of key economic players from our region around one platform first appeared in our 2002 Roadmap. During the following two decades, we developed this idea into a three-part structure that now forms the backbone of our advocacy.

In 2005, thanks to its close ties with the local industry sector, the Antwerp Chamber of Commerce set up an Industry Platform composed of 22 key players from the industry sector. These key players were to form a bridge between the region's industry sector and local governments. In 2014, a second Platform was launched by Alfaport – an umbrella organisation that gathers the 400 most important employers in the port and logistics sectors – which was to be integrated into the Antwerp Chamber. Finally, in 2016, we forged an alliance with the Antwerp World Diamond Centre (AWDC), the umbrella organisation that represents the Antwerp diamond companies.



These platforms' constant stream of valuable figures and information allow the Chamber to have a 360° view of our region's most important economic sectors. This helps us to continuously ensure a level playing field, and lets us speak with one unified voice when important policy decisions need to be made. Such competencies are key in times where businesses are confronted with significant challenges such as technological transitions, or the need for large-scale training and further schooling of employees.

We gradually noticed that the three platforms also began to strengthen each other in important cross sectoral topics, such as mobility, labour market or customs. In this sense, our platform strategy works as a stimulant that boosts the local economy.

This structure has since been expanded with specific peer learning courses and large conferences; in 2012, we introduced the peer learning programme "Lead Plants & Lead Companies", which helps plants with international roots as well as local production companies with the ambition to go international up their competitiveness on a global scale.

The system was then further expanded in 2017, with the addition of the Industry Forum, which gauges the state of the Antwerp industry sector on the international scene and identifies new trends.



Platforms are cross-sectoral and complementary

We have deliberately and as far as possible conceived our platforms to be cross-sectoral and to aim for complementarity. Various stakeholders are involved in determining the priorities and formulating positions. Local tax issues, mobility and social dialogue are some of the key topics.

Our platforms perform a double function. Firstly, a single point of contact function: they communicate their members' standpoints to local authorities and other stakeholder groups that could have an impact on members' activities. It is in the interest of industrial regions such as Antwerp to remain on a level playing field with foreign countries when it comes to environmental agreements and energy legislation, as taking parallel initiatives without prior mutual agreement can lead to gold plating.

Additionally, a yearly international benchmark study was initiated by of the Chamber of Commerce, to position local companies with respect to international standards for topics such as energy transition, smart manufacturing, circularity, etc.

The platforms also fulfil a project function: members develop local projects to strengthen the industrial and economic fabric of the region. For example, a platform can set up campaigns to encourage more workers with the right profile to transition from the classroom to the labour market. Other projects from our Port and Industry platforms work on improving the sector's image, making it look more challenging and socially relevant, by insisting on the positive contribution companies make to our country's prosperity.

Funding

The ways in which our platforms operate and are funded differ from one platform to another, and depend on the intensity and nature of the collaboration (i.e. an alliance or a complete integration), as well as the agreements made with members.

Operation of the Industry Platform is made possible by financial contribution from the 22 companies of its steering committee.

Apropos alliances, collaboration is carried out through a liaison officer, who goes back and forth between both organisations and actively looks for similar interests and common concerns. Projects and initiatives are funded ad hoc, by mutual agreement between both partner organisations.

Lessons learned:

- > *Gather a steering committee* for each platform that reflects the economic power balances within the respective sectors. Only invite one representative per company and make sure this person has decision-making power.
- > *Work with a subsidy-free funding system*, as this formula ensures that a platform's programme can be set up independently. The platform can then, in all its endeavours, focus on the needs of the companies and sectors it represents, and fulfil its mission regarding topics it considers crucial in a pragmatic and non-political way.
- > *Aim for an effective coordination* and complementarity with other business associations and umbrella organisations that can constitute an added value for your organisation's own activities.
- > *Draw up a clear code of conduct* that all members of the Platform have to adhere to. This code should list the modalities and objectives of the platform, as well as explicitly and comprehensively state what is forbidden during steering committee meetings, such as exchanging information with third parties or reaching commercial agreements between companies.
- > *"To measure is to know"*. Try to bolster your ambitions and trajectories with as many facts and figures as you possibly can. Ensure you have enough in-house skills in the area you aim to make a difference in, and seek out external expertise when needed. In our case this means, for instance, that we draw up a yearly sustainability report in cooperation with the Port of Antwerp.



~Chapter 3 ~

Political Stakeholder Meetings must remain Politically Neutral

Anyone who is a member of a Chamber of Commerce expects, and rightfully so, to have their interests defended regarding all important subject matters and on all political levels. The way in which these are defended mainly depends on a Chamber's status. As a non-subsidised organisation, the Antwerp Chamber is governed by private law, meaning that no politicians participate in our administrative bodies. It may seem like a disadvantage to have to initiate an external lobbying process for every dossier; but this political neutrality allows us to approach any political party to advocate these items.

We uphold this political independence as one of our core principles. Being free of political ties gives us a wide latitude in who we decide to enter into discussion with, but it also gives us the freedom, when needed, to opt for blunt confrontation if we believe detrimental policy decisions are being made.

The power of a private Chamber of Commerce therefore resides in establishing and maintaining informal relationships with politicians from all parties and all levels (local, provincial, regional, federal and even European). On top of this, we also have two major-league consultation platforms, on municipal and on federated state level.



1. Regional Government Stakeholders Meetings

Antwerp Political Consultation

In the past, important economic items discussed in parliamentary commissions or in the regional or federal government were not always optimally defended by political representatives from our region. This passivity was often the result of a lack of awareness or insight into the regional importance of the matters at hand. Moreover, we found that party politics were sometimes prioritised over the interests of the region.

In conclusion: clear, comprehensive information, combined with a regional coordination that goes beyond party agendas can, given the right moment, make the difference. A textbook example of this is mobility. The scope of mobility has long moved beyond just road safety; it also encompasses quality of life, the environment, and infrastructure investments. Every region has a number of key projects it wants to see completed, but there is only so much money to go around. Choices have to be made at the highest political level as to where the budgets will be allocated. Each region presents its arguments: traffic congestion length and its economic impact,

road accidents and fatalities, loss of driving time, blind spots... but also the region's economic value creation, among others. What is important is that when these political decisions are being made, there are enough government and parliament members from the region who can weigh in on the decision making. It is imperative they all be aware of the importance of the proposition and be willing to collectively defend it, irrespective of party politics.

Our methodology:

We bring together all political heavyweights in the region regardless of their party affiliation or whether they serve in the Flemish, federal or European parliament.

We organise regular breakfast meetings that are attended by a permanent delegation of about twenty people.

We ensure these meetings are held in a discreet and calm setting.

The Chamber of Commerce takes the lead in this initiative. Our chairman presides the meeting.

Needless to say, a good agenda is the base for success. Important items such as port expansion, major infrastructure works, projects from our own Roadmap, etc. are only a few examples. We ask for agenda item suggestions to be sent in in advance.

A blackout period is of course respected when elections draw near: meetings are suspended four months before the elections.

Lessons learned:

- > *Stay out of the slipstream of elections.*
- > *Only gather ministers, deputies and mayors*
(no heads of cabinet or high-ranking civil servants).
- > *Private sector participants should only be on CEO level.*
- > *Always ensure that you, as an organisation, remain politically neutral.*

2. Local Stakeholders Meetings

Urban CEO Top 25

For years now, production and distribution companies (among others) have been leaving the city centre to establish themselves in peripheral industrial zones, the hope of finding expansion opportunities, but also in order to create less overall nuisance and escape environmental norms that are growing stricter every day. This has detrimental consequences on the relationship between the City Council and its most important companies that are responsible for the creation of jobs, and thus for the image of the city. Companies undeniably also form an important source of income through local taxation, and it of course remains crucial for companies that city councils create the right conditions for them to do business.

Even the personal contacts between local entrepreneurs and the City Council are increasingly weakened. CEOs no longer live in close proximity to their companies like they did before. After a long day's work, many retreat to the green outskirts of the city. They commute between their home and workplace and rarely, if ever, set foot in Town Hall in the city centre. And so, mayors and their deputies do not know their entrepreneurs well enough. Yet very few local administrations have actually explicitly stated in their policy vision that bonds need to be created with economic players. Usually, the only thing connecting entrepreneurs to their City Council is their yearly tax return, or the occasional club or event sponsorship request. There is clearly room for improvement here.

This is why we, as a Chamber of Commerce, took the initiative to also invite the CEOs of the major cities outside Antwerp to join in the conversation. This way, both parties get to know each other, listen to each other, and forge a trusting relationship.

Our methodology:

One important factor to take into consideration is the garnering of enough support, both from the entrepreneurs and the City Council.

Entrepreneurs only participate if it is actually interesting for them. This means that the topics they want to cover need to be made clear in advance, as well as which problems they may have with the Council's services, and which projects they may have in the making. We go over this agenda with the Mayor and the alderman for economy. At the beginning of every new legislature, the City Council is given the opportunity to introduce its aldermen and policies to a carefully chosen audience. The better the parties get to know each other, the better the understanding, but also the greater the willingness and ability to undertake actions.

Regarding periodicity, we opted for a biannual exclusive meeting: biannual because the agenda needs to stay relevant enough, and exclusive because the CEOs belong to the region's top 25 companies; the invitations are personal.

Following the credo time is money, we chose, similar to the regional government stakeholders meetings, to host breakfast meetings.



Who are the invitees?

- A delegation from the City Council, as well as the department heads for economy, mobility and spatial planning
- The Chairman and CEO of the Antwerp Chamber of Commerce
- The CEOs of the region's top 25 companies (which we refer to as the CEO Top 25)

How does one compile the CEO Top 25? We drew up a list of all 25 top companies in the major cities, regardless of whether they are members of the Chamber or not; we based this on their respective employment and added value.

Lessons learned:

- > *Steer clear of the slipstream of elections.*
- > *This system increases the involvement of companies and local politicians.*
- > *Only address CEOs* (no replacements), this underlines the importance of the meetings.
- > *Remain a politically neutral organisation.*
- > *Always include the Chamber's own projects, missions and actions on the agenda.* This can incite non-members to become members.

Chamber Ambassadors, a bridge between local administration and local entrepreneurs

The Chamber of Commerce defends the interests of entrepreneurs on all levels of administration. Traditionally, our organisation screens European regulations, federal laws and Flemish decrees; but we also liaise with municipal administrations and city councils in the region to solve problems and work out specific issues. All in all, we strive to make the region more business friendly.

Dialogue is crucial when it comes to the accessibility of industrial zones, large shopping areas, and the planning of road works; but it can also be very enlightening when it comes to construction and environmental permits. It is of course very important for the authorities to be aware of entrepreneurs' complaints, and for entrepreneurs to be aware of the local government's plans and policies. Given that it would be impossible for the Chamber

of Commerce to have a branch or local department in each and every municipality, we decided to search for municipal Chamber Ambassadors. These are charismatic, communicative entrepreneurs who are capable of forging optimal relationships with their respective city, municipal and district administrations.

The Chamber Ambassadors build bridges between local business communities and local administrations. The idea is for these entrepreneurs to report any difficulties regarding local economy, so that the Chamber can, in tandem with the municipality, stimulate a business-friendly climate. If enterprises from different municipalities are facing the same problems, these are raised jointly. Ambassadors act as local antennae and are a point of contact for their local councils. Mayors and aldermen for the economy can contact them to fine-tune their policy decisions affecting the economic environment. This way, local administrations can incorporate entrepreneurs' points of view into their decision-making process.

Every year, we organise a meeting with all the Chamber Ambassadors, which we refer to as "States General". They are informed about important current affairs, get to know each other and the Chamber better, and are motivated and inspired to further their missions.

Lessons learned:

- > *Make sure Chamber Ambassadors are politically neutral* (they may have no political function nor be eligible for a mandate).
- > *Ensure Chamber Ambassadors keep the Chamber up to date* regarding the actions they undertake or appointments they make as an Ambassador, but also regularly inform them about new developments.
- > *Appoint a collaborator from the Chamber* as a go-to contact person.
- > *Organise a yearly "States General" meeting.*
- > *Introduce the Ambassadors to all companies* (members and non-members) so as to reduce the distance between local entrepreneurs, and between the Chamber and non-members.

Example of a Concrete Achievement

Solving a mobility problem through dialogue and lobbying

The Chamber of Commerce was informed that a new system surrounding the traffic lights of an important thoroughfare was having an enormous impact on the accessibility of the many companies situated along this road. The intersections were safer, but freight traffic had become confronted with never-before-seen waiting times of up to half an hour just to reach the main axis. People were seeking alternative routes, which was leading to intolerable traffic conditions in residential areas. We immediately started discussing this with the local Chamber Ambassadors to gauge local concerns. They put out feelers, and a collective meeting was organised to look for a consensus regarding possible solutions and how these should be approached. The next phase was a dialogue with local mayors which led, with backing from the Ambassadors, to a common list of demands. The list was then advocated on a higher regional level. This negotiation process with the administration, Police and the Minister of mobility's cabinet resulted in a revised traffic axis layout, which earned the Chamber much praise from all entrepreneurs involved.



Part II: Entrepreneur- ship

To support entrepreneurship. Is this not self-explanatory for an entrepreneurs' advocacy organisation? Should we make this support more specific, outline it more clearly? No. Quite the opposite, in fact. Every initiative is worthy of attention. Whether support involves coaching international lead plants or mentoring student entrepreneurs, whether it leads – directly or indirectly – to the growth of our economy, to strengthened competitiveness or job creation, it all falls within our range of duties. The only condition is that it must be customer centric, i.e., that it stems from the needs of enterprises. Over the years, we have developed various programmes for every conceivable aspect of modern business operation: general management, HR, leadership, finance, digitalisation, internationalisation, sustainability, and more.

As a matter of fact, this sentence perfectly sums up what we do on a daily basis: bring together entrepreneurs to make them learn from each other and thus strengthen their position in the market.

We do this on all levels and for all phases of a company's growth: from pre-start-up to start-up, from fast growing business to multinational. In the past years, we have not stopped broadening our offer. For every start up from the tech scene, there is a start up in the fashion industry. For every SME aiming to join a large or international group, there is a family owned business wishing to pass down the company to its own successors. We have extensively scanned the needs of each and every one of these profiles, and developed programmes to match them. There will be no neglected audiences: every enterprise deserves equal attention and assistance; this is our precept.

Numbers speak louder than words: every year, we mentor around 160 start ups and 350 SMEs, and more than 3,600 members take part in our information sessions, training courses and programmes.

~ Chapter 4 ~

Peer Learning Networks: the best Sounding Board for an Entrepreneur is another Entrepreneur

If there is one thing that has allowed our Chamber to set itself apart from others in the past decades, it is our peer-to-peer approach. The principle is rather genius in its simplicity: we gather ambitious entrepreneurs together in groups of ten to fifteen people. We outline the broader guidelines of the different subjects they can discuss and we let the magic happen! It is a formula so efficient, that over the past years we have incorporated it into all of our training programmes, for all business growth stages.

Many consultants and management trainers have specialised in coaching CEOs and entrepreneurs. Some are more successful than others. But almost all of them operate using the same methodology: a top-down approach in which the coach or consultant plays the role of a sort of an all-knowing expert, showing the entrepreneurs where they make mistakes and helping them improve their management skills. The entrepreneur is challenged through a series of note-worthy best practices, and is presented with new suggestions and ideas that are in line with internationally validated management theories.





This approach has proven to be helpful for large international companies, but when it comes to start-ups, SMEs or family-owned businesses, it is often met with reluctance. The most common reactions are: “Sure, these original solutions might work very well for other companies, but my company is too specific for this, it would never work.”, or, “Sorry, I just don’t have the means or the people for that”.

With that being said, bring together entrepreneurs with similar profiles, and they will automatically start sharing their apprehensions, questions, and more importantly, their experience. When a peer explains how they tackled a certain problem, what worked for them and what did not, other entrepreneurs feel more encouraged to try out this solution themselves. This observation has allowed us, in the past thirty years, to develop courses with which we reach over two hundred companies every year. Peer-to-peer experience sharing has become a permanent addition to all of our training programmes. On top of this, we also offer a number of services in which experience sharing and group problem solving take central position. We call these services our peer learning networks.

Learning networks are a great way to bring company management skills to a higher level. Notwithstanding, precisely because they are built on the idea of experience, they are less suitable for learning completely new skills.

In the past years, we have developed learning networks for the following target groups:

- Start-ups: companies that have been active for 0 to 3 years, with a turnover of under €100,000
- Scale-ups: companies that have been active for 1 to 5 years, with a turnover of €100,000 and the growth ambition to reach €1,000,000 in a short amount of time
- Small companies employing 10 to 100 people, with a turnover or employee growth ambition of 10% per year
- Medium companies employing over 100 people, with a turnover or employee growth ambition of under 10% per year
- Hidden champions or lead companies: companies that employ over 100 people and are European market leaders
- Lead plants: subsidiaries of international industrial companies that have the ambition to secure a leading position within the subsidiary network

The courses are usually stretched out over the course of a year, and participants meet up around ten times, mostly in evening sessions. Participants often look forward to these meetups, as they are the perfect occasion to blow off steam after a long day of work, surrounded by like-minded people.

The logical construction of our learning networks means that, depending on the company's growth profile, we regularly see participants who are able to move on from one course to the next in an almost organic way. Sometimes we see people who joined our start-up programme and were able to develop a successful business idea, join us again many years later in our growth programme .

Sometimes, several senior executives of the same company will participate at the same time. This is often the CEO, together with their CFO or COO.

Our methodology:

The success of a peer learning network relies entirely on the quality of the participants. Is there enough diversity in size and in the sectors represented? Are they really willing to share their experience? Not only is a good, thorough prospection through our events and networks themselves of the utmost importance, but also the selection of the target group, which we then approach by cold calls. After all these years, we can of course also reap the benefits of the frequent word-of-mouth advertising from our past participants.

The second pivotal phase is the kick-off session: this session is crucial for participants to meet and build trusting relationships with one another in a casual atmosphere. We often start courses with a two-day kick-off which includes an overnight stay in a stimulating location, during which partakers really get to know each other and develop a sense of community.

It is also during these kick-off sessions that the participants decide on most of the topics we will be focusing on during the year. Depending on the type of course, a coordinator from the Chamber ensures that either an external expert or one of the participants brings a good, substantial story around which experience across the group then be exchanged. The tighter the bond between participants, the deeper the exchange. This is why we encourage partakers to create WhatsApp groups, so as to keep in touch even in between sessions.

Each network has its own coordinator from the Chamber. The coordinator is responsible for the organisation of the sessions and the facilitation of discussion, and acts as a single point of contact for the participants, listening to their needs and connecting them to partners, customers, and experts or members of our Chamber.

Lessons learned:

- > *Always create matching groups*, with the same ambition and in the same phase of operational management. All participants have to be willing to share as much information as they want to receive.
- > *Ensure participants do not only refer to their successes*. Learning from each other's mistakes and failures is often much more efficient.
- > *Favour in-person meetings whenever possible*. Experience sharing has been proven to be less efficient if done virtually.

1. Our most successful programmes

General Management for SMEs

The “General Management for SMEs” learning network is the course from which all our other networks regarding transmission of knowledge, exchange of experience and networking were born. It has remained our flagship programme to this day. We have since expanded our portfolio with specialised courses encompassing sales and HR. The point is not to fatigue participants with theoretical stories and guest lectures, but to transmit knowledge through rich discussions in a confidential environment.

Each group is made up of 10 to 15 entrepreneurs, CEOs or other decisionmakers. Each group is appointed two or three experienced entrepreneurs, who have a distinct affinity for the topic; we call them “godparents”. They are in charge of the group dynamic and, if needed, put their expertise at the participants’ disposal. Godparents are not paid to lead the sessions; for the most part, they do it out of the principle of paying it forward, but they also learn a lot from this themselves, such as what is happening within the SME community, and how they tackle specific challenges.

The objectives and the group’s agenda for the short and medium term are defined during the kick-off days. This immediately forms a base for the topics discussed during the monthly meetups.

For one year, participants meet with their group on a monthly basis. Ideally, participants take turns hosting these sessions on their business premises. Additional general meetings are also organised throughout the year; these are an excellent occasion to network and exchange know-how with participants from other groups, and turn the course into a forum where contacts and relationships often translate into business opportunities.

Every year, we mentor about 150 SMEs, spread over thirteen groups. In the last thirty years, more than 1,000 of our region's entrepreneurs have taken part in this learning network.



2. Lead plants

‘Lead Plants’ is an intensive course in which executives of Flemish industrial plants make their company undergo the transformation from average production unit to, as the course title suggests, Lead Plant. The course takes place in the form of five peer to peer workshops, where participating CEOs exchange insights, instruments, working practices and methodologies to provide each other with experience-based support on the journey to creating a more competitive plant.

It’s lonely at the top. Especially when one is in charge of keeping a branch of a multinational company thriving. Production site managers and managing directors have many preoccupations. They have to find compromises between the goals set by headquarters and the limitations set by local authorities. They have to be outstanding within the group itself all the while meeting local norms and values. Our non-academic but rather experience-based peer-to-peer approach is much appreciated by Captains of Industry; the Chamber ensures that the “Lead Plants” peer group participants are people who hold decision making power: plant managers, country leaders, CEOs and CFOs.

Because corporate executives have very hectic schedules, the five session dates are set at the very beginning of the year. For practical reasons, we allow them to bring a right hand, so that in case of an emergency, continuity within the exercise is not interrupted for the participating company.

After five years of peer learning courses, with over 115 participating multinational enterprise executives, we have learnt that it does not matter whether companies manufacture brake systems, produce primary chemical products, or prepare and package foods. All these companies share a common characteristic, which is that they must be able to deal with the complex form of entrepreneurship that a production environment entails: ensuring security, training and empowering people, innovating, exploring and implementing technologies... They also have to become leaders in their specific field, learn to communicate with trade unions, organise logistics, conquer markets, etc. A Lead Plant’s ambition is to strengthen its position within its group. This is achieved through becoming

indispensable in a given discipline. Lead Plants raise the bar much higher than average in various areas (and therefore attain much better results).

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter and the major interests at stake, trust between the participants and confidentiality are of even higher importance than in other courses. For this reason, no PowerPoint presentations shown during the sessions are ever shared – despite attendees’ frequent requests to view them again – nor are any minutes taken. Participants can write down their own notes if they wish.

Competition rules are respected and guaranteed by the project coordinator when assembling the peer groups, and we run through the programme with a competition law expert beforehand to be absolutely sure that no infringement can take place.

Agendas are arranged in a way that ensures no topics overlap.

Here are a few quotes from past participants:



“Through this experience, I have learnt to take the different mentalities and conducts between Plants into consideration.”

“This programme introduced us to the philosophy of ‘being a leader’ in our company.”

“This platform has provided me with conversation partners and new insights that have allowed me to develop the right strategy for my company.”

~ Chapter 5 ~

Our unique Programmes and Toolkits provide Tailor-made Answers

The contents of the peer-to-peer programmes listed in chapter 4 are largely influenced by the participants themselves. This methodology, where the participants decide what they want to discuss during the sessions, is very efficient for general management topics. Nevertheless, when it comes to more specific challenges and needs, it is more often than not necessary to work with a step-by-step plan.

The Antwerp Chamber of Commerce is constantly at work identifying these specific challenges, and subsequently developing adapted training courses. In these courses, we often make use of different tools that are gathered in packs, or toolkits, which we will be referring to throughout this chapter.



Unique toolkits have already been developed for the following topics:

- The setting up of a reward based crowdfunding campaign;
- The identification of powerful business ideas and how to develop these ideas into substantiated business opportunities;
- Growth readiness and growth strategy for fast growing businesses;
- International (export) strategy for SMEs, which we will explain in further detail in Chapter 9.

A cost price was calculated for each course, in which every element was incorporated, except for the development costs of the programme itself. More specifically, these include the expenses linked to: marketing and sale of the programme, intake interviews, supervision of the courses themselves, operating resources, and even the administration of it all.



Below is a short summary of the contents and approaches of our various programmes.

Crowdfunding Workshop

This course accompanies entrepreneurs in setting up a reward based crowdfunding campaign. Over the past five years, we have helped over one hundred entrepreneurs successfully set up their own campaign through this course.

The workshop consists of four sessions during which entrepreneurs learn how to set up a successful campaign in order to collect enough funding. Homework is given after each session, and participants can solicit individual coaching if necessary.

Participants take turns presenting their project and we determine which type of crowdfunding would be most suitable for them. We also look at the reasons why one should employ crowdfunding as a means of financing.

One of the tools we use is the crowdfunding canvas which helps entrepreneurs think about and identify the “Why-How-What” of their crowdfunding campaign. In the next stage we help them to define a roadmap which result in a concrete project.

We also vividly encourage the participants to start building a network of ambassadors for their campaign, consisting of friends, family, neighbours, colleagues, etc.

The last session is individual, and the participants schedule it themselves. It is a coaching meeting that is usually planned right before the launching of the campaign, just to go over everything together one last time, or halfway through the campaign, to evaluate how things are going and to assess whether any extra action is needed.

A screening of the campaign text, a video transcript and a press article are all included in the course.

StandUp Bootcamp

Our second unique programme is the StandUp Bootcamp for potential entrepreneurs. This means that it doesn't matter whether participants already have their own business idea or not. In ten sessions spread out over several weeks, they are taught how to identify and validate their ideas, and how to develop them into a substantiated business opportunity.

The first session centres around the entrepreneur themselves, and how to grow a successful business.

We give participants an introduction to several start-up methodologies including Design Thinking (d.school Stanford University) and Value Proposition Design (A. Osterwalder) which are then used to reach a validated business idea that is based on potential customers' needs. Following this, we focus on drafting up a business model through the Business Model Canvas.

We emphasise on setting up a first financial plan. And we prepare participants to pitch their idea to customers, investors and other stakeholders.

After the final session, each participant is invited to an individual session during which we draft a list of priorities, i.e. the most important aspects that have to be taken care of in order to start up.



Growth Accelerator

The growth accelerator focuses on fast growing businesses, known as “high growth companies”. The strict OECD definition describes a fast-growing business as: “All enterprises up to five years old with average annualised growth greater than twenty percent per annum, over a three-year period, and with ten or more employees at the beginning of the observation period.”

Only owner-managers are eligible to partake in this course. This means that participants must not only be a shareholder (regardless of the amount of shares they own), but also have operational (co-)leadership over the enterprise.

Three elements make up the growth accelerator: a network of trust between entrepreneurs, various workshops, and individual coaching sessions for each participant.

- **Network of trust:** a two-day kick-off brings together all participating companies (about ten of them) to quickly create a network of trust. The goal is to create a close-knit group of entrepreneurs who can confidently lay their cards on the table (regarding strategy, finances, HR, etc.). Our target group is companies that reach a yearly turnover of 1 to 5 million euros, and/or employ 10 to 30 full time workers.
- **Workshops:** every three to four weeks, we hold 4-hour workshops centred around the topics that were chosen during the kick-off days. These workshops are a great opportunity for them to learn from each other, regardless of which sector they come from.
- **Individual coaching:** the group sessions are supplemented by intensive individual coaching sessions that are tailored to each business. Eight or more individual talks, called “touchpoints”, are had with each enterprise, during which our growth expert builds a close relationship with all participants and acts as their sounding board. Participants are coached in two areas: growth readiness (short-term), and growth strategy (long-term).

At the end of the programme, we bring participants on “field trips” to foreign cities that are known for their dynamic start-up ecosystems, such as Tallinn, Stockholm, Berlin, etc. During these trips, we visit inspiring companies, organisations or institutions to discuss topics that were deemed important during the course.

Lessons learned:

- > *In order to have a large influx of participants*, one must be actively involved in the region’s start-up ecosystem, and create strong relationships with complimentary organisations and universities.
- > *It is crucial that potential entrepreneurs’ business* ideas fit their passions and skills.
- > *Ensure growth programme participants* are more or less going through the same growth phase, so their growing pains and challenges are at the same level.
- > *When planning sessions*, make sure to keep in mind the profiles and specific challenges of each business, so that every participant can make the most of them.





~ Chapter 6 ~

Sustainability is a fast growing Concern

These last few years, sustainable entrepreneurship has become a key element of the economic picture. The recognition of the importance of sustainability in entrepreneurship dates back to the nineties, when economist John Elkington coined the famous phrase “triple bottom line”. According to this concept, people, planet and profit should each be equally as decisive. With this in mind, in the late nineties, the Chamber started developing programmes with the aim of supporting companies with regards to the environment.

Sustainable entrepreneurship is a top priority even for companies. A recent survey with around 100 companies which we conducted alongside the University of Antwerp showed that improving society and using sustainability as a strategic choice were the main reasons for implementing sustainable entrepreneurship. Government-imposed measures were the least important motivation. Companies focus on seeking support in their journey to becoming sustainable: they are looking for guidelines or more field related knowledge on which to base their sustainability policy.

In 2018, the Antwerp Chamber of Commerce developed a trajectory which would support businesses in their transition towards sustainable entrepreneurship. This approach has already borne fruit: the number of participating companies has grown from 4 in one programme in 2018, to 167 in four programmes in 2021.

Sustainable Business Charter

The Chamber bolsters companies through three ways: the Sustainable Business Charter, specific training courses and peer learning. Not only does this respond to companies' different needs, but it also means that there is always something new to offer them. Moreover, companies can combine these options to suit their preferences. Members are also given access to the Chamber's wide network, which allows them to find partners.

The Sustainable Business Charter offers businesses support in making sustainable entrepreneurship a reality. With help of an action plan tailored to its needs, the company can start working towards sustainability with concrete results in mind. During an extensive kick off session, companies fill in a spider chart in which the opportunities and pain points regarding sustainability are made visible. This spider chart is based on Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations, and ensures that companies contribute to the fulfilling of its 2030 Agenda. Through the suggestions from the chart, companies can start to set up their action plan for the following year. The actions they take vary greatly, from developing a sustainable mobility policy to defining training and growth programmes for all employees. This action plan is subsequently assessed by an

independent evaluation commission made up of experts from government organisations, academia and the business world. The commission provides participants feedback and redirects them if needed.

Companies are given a full year to achieve their action plan, after which a final evaluation takes place. The evaluation commission then decides whether or not it is awarded the Sustainable Business Charter. This Charter is a written statement certifying that the company has taken action in the field of sustainability.





Thanks to our partnership with CIFAL Flanders, a part of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), companies can obtain additional internationally recognised certificates. This is a step-by-step process: enrolled companies that have been participating for a minimum of three years and have shown their commitment to implementing all Sustainable Development Goals are first granted the UNITAR SDG Pioneer Certificate. Should they then take it a step further and start a pilot project surrounding zero waste or sustainable business models, within two years, they will be eligible for the SDG Champion Certificate. Finally, if in the following one to two years, they choose to set up an additional project relative to human rights due diligence, they can obtain the coveted SDG Ambassador Certificate. Due to popular demand, the Sustainable Business Charter has recently become available abroad and been directly implemented in foreign branches of participating companies. Several European Chambers of Commerce have also shown interest, and bilateral discussions are underway concerning the working method implementation.

This programme has been overwhelmingly successful. As stated before, what started as 4 participants in 2018 has grown to 167 participants in 2021. These participants are all personally supervised by a coordinator from the Chamber who is available to them throughout the trajectory's duration. The price of the course depends on the size of the participating business or organisation.

Companies are not limited to personal coaching; they can also choose to follow our specific training courses regarding all aspects of sustainability, such as sustainable procurement or sustainable HR policies. An example of this is our programme, which equips companies with the tools they need to develop a future oriented and inclusive HR policy. In this programme, participants are given a combination of peer to peer learning sessions and targeted field related sessions, namely inclusive communication or working on an unconscious bias.

We also offer more technical courses. These include the Carbon Footprint Workshop or the Circular Economy Lab, which provide respective insight on calculating a company's carbon footprint or tapping into the circular economy. Our course offer varies yearly and is based on companies' needs. This allows these companies to enrich their knowledge in a hands-on way and apply it to their daily activities straight away.

We make use of peer learning in order to help some businesses tread outside of their own bubble. Through a fixed format of ten sessions spread over a year, ten business leaders or chief sustainability officers gather almost every month to acquire knowledge from speakers, share experiences with each other and take in inspiration and practical skills. Once again, the participating companies' needs are made a top priority, and the topics are chosen by the participants themselves.

Diversity charter for CEO's

When thinking of sustainability, people must of course be at the centre. This is why in 2019, our Management Committee came up with an initiative which would bridge the gap between employers and jobseekers from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The motivation was twofold: firstly, the growing shortage within the labour market vis-à-vis the relatively large amount of unemployed youths in our region,



most of whom have a migratory background, and secondly, the fact that, from a European perspective, our country is still very much running behind regarding inclusivity and integration of minorities into the labour market.

The Chamber's management committee decided to draw up a charter clearly listing not only employers' expectations, but also their commitments. The charter is meant as a sign of goodwill, with the aim of having as many company CEOs as possible signing it as a starting point in the forging of an active diversity policy within their recruitment and HR.

The draft was first submitted to organisations and people whose professional or personal experience provided a clear view on the matter. This then led to the creation of a charter that is unique in that, rather than focussing on its social dimension, it underlines the economic urgency for inclusivity and diversity. Moreover, signatories are asked for a binding commitment: they must commit to following a diversity and inclusivity training course tailored to CEOs and management. The Chamber started organising these half-day courses in collaboration with an external partner in 2021.

As of today, over sixty SMEs and multinationals have signed our charter, and three half-day courses have already taken place.

Lessons learned:

- > *Companies are after practical support* and guidance with regards to sustainable entrepreneurship. For them, it is a matter of finding where the added value lies and where sustainability can be reconciled with economic results, and thus how they can put their own triple bottom line into practice.
- > *As an employer's organisation*, the Antwerp Chamber of Commerce is the perfect partner for general support or basic training, but when it comes to sector-specific training, companies are more likely to turn to their sectoral federation. This means that it is vital to tune our courses to their specific needs.
- > *Exchanging knowledge with others* constitutes a great added value for companies. For years now, the Antwerp Chamber of Commerce has stood out with its peer learning networks, which are especially helpful even in the field of sustainability.





Part III: Networking and Events

Amplifying the voice of our entrepreneurs, forging a strong community, offering a sounding board... At the end of the day, this is the core business of every Chamber, anywhere in the world. This is why networking constitutes the base of our whole business operation. Every year, we organise about 250 events, gathering 40 to 1,200 participants each. These are occasions where everyone comes together: entrepreneurs, companies, partners, politicians and journalists. These events also provide a unique momentum to launch new projects, promote our trade missions and place important lobbying topics on the political agenda. Our ambition is not to organise the cheapest, but rather the most comprehensive and talked about events for entrepreneurs in the region, with the most important economic and political leaders in attendance. Our most high-profile events are therefore payable and members only.

We have our own team of four full time equivalents who work year-round to schedule, publicise and prepare the logistics of the events. In the past years, they have surrounded themselves with a group of go-to suppliers and commercial partners, who take care of the layout and printing of leaflets and invitations, personalised digital ticketing, reception, decorating and catering. A technical contractor is in charge of light and sound engineering for the plenary portions of the events. Our guests are introduced and interviewed on stage by famous news reporters and media personalities. An entertainment company provides unobtrusive music and diversion during the networking sessions. Lastly, a team of freelance photographers and cameramen are present for the duration of the events to professionally capture all attendants; we can then use this footage to send out pictures and videos to all attendees and to post content on our online platforms, but also for subsequent event promotion.

We carry out small-scale network events, events centring around specific topics, and prestigious flagship events, each with their own approach, framework and target group. We would be glad to describe these in further detail, but why do so when a picture is worth a thousand words?

~ Chapter 7 ~

Flagship Events: this is where we let our Brand shine!

Our flagship events are the ideal opportunity to position our brand as the most influential organisation for entrepreneurs in the region. We organise about five of these every year, and spare no effort or expense when it comes to mobilising, informing and surprising our members through and through.

In order to give these events the necessary allure, we consistently make sure to choose a location which is as spectacular as it is central in the city. For example, every year, we host a big garden party in the exotic and historical setting of the Antwerp Zoo. In the heart of the city; it features a unique evening walk along the animal enclosures, and a barbecue for over a thousand invitees. The presentation of our Roadmap took place in a converted aircraft hangar at the Antwerp Airport. And for our End-of-the-Year reception, to which we invite an internationally famous speaker every year, we rent out the Antwerp Municipal Theatre's grand hall, filling all of its 2,000 seats. After the plenary portion of the event, all celebrities and attendees are invited to a networking buffet on the front stage of the theatre.



What do we want to get out of this? As we mentioned in the introduction, these events play a crucial role in defining our Chamber's image; but at the same time, they represent unique touchpoints with the most important decision and policy makers in the region. Moreover, they give us a chance to strengthen our relationships with the CEOs of our biggest companies in a casual, relaxed atmosphere. And for new members and young entrepreneurs, these events are a confirmation that they are a part of the region's most powerful network.

On top of their memberships, our members pay an entrance fee, which of course covers only a fraction of the operating costs. This is why we have a group of go-to suppliers who allow us to negotiate keen prices for beverages and catering. This includes a sponsorship from operational partners in exchange for limited yet clearly defined brand visibility, such as hostesses wearing company neckerchiefs, or a subtle logo print on glasses or on the hall staff's aprons. However, we always ensure our own brand and colours take centre stage. Banners or posters of car brands, banks, telecommunication companies or other large consumer products are non negotiable.

Our flagship events are not a means to generate a profit, but we do try to break even through the combination of ticket sales, stack discounts and sponsorships, or at least to get as close to that point as possible.

Our keynote-speakers of the past years:

- **2014 Charles Michel:**
European president
- **2016 Nicholas Sarkozy:**
French president
- **2017 George Osborne:**
former Chancellor of the
Exchequer of the UK
- **2020 Carl Bildt:**
former Prime Minister
of Sweden





Lessons learned:

- > *A Chamber event is not a trade fair.* Your Chamber's own brand has to remain central throughout. Knowing this, always make clear deals surrounding the modalities of partnerships and event sponsorships.
- > *Look for an original approach in order to set yourself apart* from other events and business organisations, through your own experience stories and special stands. For example, we have had rickshaw rides (in the context of our India Mission), a bar serving insect-based snacks and burgers, and even a new exclusive craft beer tasting stand.
- > *Not everyone is as seasoned in networking* or creating new contacts. Give people a little push by providing fun conversation starters, a handy network app, or even specific programme meeting points for participants to meet other people following the same course.



~ Chapter 8 ~

Thematic Conferences help us demonstrate Various Areas of Knowledge

Our flagship events gather Antwerp's entrepreneurs together to form one big community. But underneath this community lies a patchwork of sectors that each have their own needs and technicalities. The real estate, port and industry sectors determine our region's DNA. This is why, aside from our flagship events, we also draw up an annual programme of events with a sharp thematic focus.

Naturally, our thematic conferences also centre around networking and community building. The only difference is that in this case, we add one extra focus: knowledge sharing. With this, we are able to strengthen our unique market position in a number of key industries that usually tend to stay within their own sectorial networks, by making them think outside of this corporate bubble; for example, a large number of participants in our Industry Forum also form a part of the Chemical Industry Sector Federation. Similarly, our yearly conference Antwerp Real Estate, is a key event for the real estate sector.

Working together means that their members get access to our broad network, while we can count on their network of members and alumni for participants and speakers.

When it comes to reception and catering, we mainly go back to the same logistics as for our flagship events, but with a more toned-down approach. What is most important is for these thematic conferences to provide a maximal, substantial added value. To achieve this, we pay extra attention to the quality of the presentations and speakers.



Lessons learned:

- > *Do not regard sector federations as competitors, but rather as partners and co-organisers.*
- > *For these events specifically, look for central, functional locations with good parking facilities.*
- > *Make the expertise and quality of the speakers your main concern.*



~ Chapter 9 ~

International Programmes define our Chamber's Image Abroad

Given the international prestige of Antwerp, it comes as no surprise that the Chamber receives foreign visitors and delegations year-round, all of whom are welcomed by our International Department. Over the years, this department has evolved from providing the necessary export documents to offering a much larger array of services. These include seminars on international topics, meet & greets with foreign embassies, training courses all over the world and international missions. Below are three examples of value-added programmes that the Chamber has developed over the years.

1. Peer-to-peer learning programmes

The Chamber offers peer-to-peer learning programmes for companies in all phases of their international entrepreneurship.

In order to give you an idea of what such a programme entails, let us highlight the Go International Strategy Programme. Here is a quick overview:

The first session focuses on helping participants draft an internal analysis of their company. A SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) gives them a good overview of their company's USP and Why-to-Buy.

The second session concentrates on drafting an external analysis: Who are the national and international competitors? What is the state of the market and the industry sector at home and abroad?

The third session focuses on identifying interesting foreign markets to export to.

The fourth session addresses the various distribution and sales channels in the chosen export countries.

The fifth session goes over market strategy, financial planning and risk management. During this penultimate session, participants are taught to set up an action plan.

The sixth session marks the end of this intensive course. Participants are given a chance to present their action plans to an international advisory board made up of experts in the field of internationalisation. These experienced exporters then give them feedback and advice on how to improve their strategy.

More experienced companies or exporters are gathered as outreach mentors, who we call Global Ambassadors. They offer expert advice for our international programmes and promote these to their own network.

Both the participating companies and the Global Ambassadors remain close to our Chamber of Commerce as paying members who regularly take part in events and trade missions.



2. Training courses

In the last 25 years, the Antwerp Chamber of Commerce has developed several programmes focussing on training multipliers (e.g., for Chambers of Commerce, industrial associations, or local government) in order to support local enterprises with elements of either capacity building, information on the EU's customs policy or visit programmes, depending on the areas in which they are lacking. Throughout these courses, there is a focus on several key themes, such as Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), gender issues and good governance.

One project of which the Chamber is very proud is the South African Programme, which was executed with help of local partners. The aim of the project was to empower South African entrepreneurs through the tailoring of Flanders' and the Chamber's experience in SME development to the South African economic needs.

These capacity building projects are not limited to South Africa; they have been implemented worldwide, from Latin America to the Middle East, each time with different adaptations to the local culture.

The EU policy training courses contain demonstrations of EU websites where concrete cases are processed, leading for instance to the identification of import duties and import formalities to be taken into account by exporters in the country concerned.

The Antwerp Chamber of Commerce has already organised these types of training courses in nearly all the EU Member States who joined in 2004 and in 2007, as well as in Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Suriname, Egypt, Lebanon, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan...



3. International missions

The Antwerp Chamber of Commerce organises international missions in hopes of creating synergies with different continents. This is of great benefit to our companies, our region, and hence our Chamber. These missions can be focused on one specific sector, or be multisectoral so as to bring together different communities of Antwerp entrepreneurs. Different goals are set for each mission, whereby they can be placed in four different categories.

- **Study and Networking missions.** These were specifically created for a distinguished clientele of company owners, board members, CEOs and CFOs. These are usually led by the Minister President of Flanders or a Minister of the Federal or Flemish government. The missions usually last about four days, during which participants are immersed in new initiatives and strategies in different countries. This also allows them to network on the highest level with local Ministers and top entrepreneurs as well as with each other in a more informal environment.
- **High-Tech missions.** These are similar to the study and networking missions, but with a specific focus on innovation, high-tech and the start-up scene. These missions are often shorter, and participants mostly hail from high-tech companies, or have an interest in investing in such companies.
- **Real Estate missions.** Our client base for these missions usually comes from the real estate sector or has an interest in real estate developments. In this case, we often cooperate with a partner from the Belgian Real Estate Association. These missions last for one or two days at the most.

- **Business missions.** Here, targeted participants tend to be CEOs or business development managers looking to do business in a certain country and participate in b2b meetings.

We choose the type of mission and its subjects based on the important links that exist between our Chamber and Chambers abroad, city or provincial links and MOUs with other cities agreements, as well as trade volumes. However, we always keep a close eye on what is happening in the world, where innovative ideas are coming from, how the real estate market is developing, etc.

Good preparation is key for any mission. For the logistic aspects, such as flights, hotels or local transport, we work closely with a dedicated travel company. However, speakers, topics presented and local partners are carefully chosen beforehand by the Chamber during a preliminary visit. Partners can be embassies, the Flemish Investment and Trade Office, local Chambers of Commerce, or even local business partners with a link to Antwerp, all of whom we keep in close contact with even after the mission has ended.

The promotion or marketing campaigns for each type of mission clearly reflect the participants we wish to attract.

These missions play a crucial role in defining the Chamber's international image. We promote our region as an investment and export destination, function as an “international gateway”, and strengthen ties with partners from previous training programmes. Moreover, they give us a chance to strengthen our relationship with the accompanying politicians and CEOs of our region's biggest companies in a casual, relaxed atmosphere.



Lessons learned:

- > *Getting to know one's clients is key.* Do not push your members into a specific programme but rather see them as clients who you can assist throughout the years during their international growth process.
- > *Every international training course, project or mission's flowchart* needs to be adapted to the specific cultural and geographical context of the target country.
- > *A quality label is key for clients to return to projects,* training courses and missions alike.
- > *International contacts are of paramount importance* for the development of a strong innovative region. As a Chamber of Commerce, you need to know what is happening in other parts of the world and partner up. Investing in these partners is a long-term process with a constant emphasis on the mutual benefits.





Part IV: Members, Partners and Advertisers

The Antwerp Chamber of Commerce is built following a customer-centric model. By this, we mean that our organisation's whole *raison d'être* is its members. This does not mean that memberships form our most important source of income – on the contrary – but it does mean that all our activities derive from our members. That's why we conduct a customer satisfaction survey every two years.

The same goes for our sales department. It is not our core activity, but given that we are a non subsidised organisation, it is admittedly the lifeline that makes everything else possible. The department is therefore run as a business, consisting of several full-time collaborators who use a clearly sales-oriented approach to recruit new members, negotiate advertising contracts and seal multi year partnership agreements, securing an average yearly turnover of 3 million euros.

In this strategy, our salespeople are put forward as the first point of contact for prospective members. They act as the first step towards a qualitative and long lasting relationship with new members for years to come.

This only works if two paramount conditions are met: firstly, our salespeople need to have accurate insight into the specific needs and expectations of potential members; and secondly, they must have a thorough knowledge of all the expertise and courses the Chamber offers in order to meet those needs and expectations.

Not only does this require our sales collaborators to be well-versed in Customer Relationship Management, it also requires them to demonstrate a good understanding of the intricacies of the entrepreneurial world.



~ Chapter 10 ~

Satisfied Members are our most Loyal Customers

“The more of us there are, the more we can mean to you”; this is one of the slogans through which our members are reminded of how powerful a large network can be. This is not just valid for our advocacy, however. Peer learning networks are at the heart of our services. Once again, it all comes down to the quality and diversity of participants. Everything the Chamber does only makes sense if we have enough members. Our sales department is at the beginning of this funnel.

Chamber membership is the one way ticket to our network and expertise. Members pay a yearly contribution that we calculate based on the added value of their operational activity, which we retrieve from objective and publicly available data from companies database Bel-first. However, membership is but the first step, as it only accounts for 18% of our turnover.

We therefore need members who make maximum use of our services, and take part in our events, training courses and programmes. In fact, active members typically remain on board for years on end. Our experience has shown that satisfied members are, ultimately, our most loyal customers.

Our sales department is driven by this philosophy. It functions as our organisation's first point of contact and showcases what we have to offer. In order to sell memberships, publicity or partnerships, thorough knowledge of all the Chamber's activities and initiatives is crucial. Every new sales collaborator is therefore given a comprehensive one on one briefing by each and every department manager upon joining the Chamber.

For the purpose of keeping up with the profile and needs of existing and prospective members, we make use of a Customer Relationship Management platform which is updated daily. It is the sales collaborators' task to draw on this input so as to set up a tailor made selection of the Chamber's initiatives and activities. If the sales collaborators deem it necessary, they may invite one of our experts or department managers to join in on interviews with prospective customers or customer retention discussions to clarify specific questions surrounding given topics.

In the past years, the Chamber has managed to attract around three hundred new members. Although leads generated by the departments themselves constitute a large source of member inflow, we also enjoy a fanbase of very active, enthusiastic members who bring in new members. People who help us grow our member base can expect incentives in the form of vouchers for events and courses.

Specific questions directed to our Advocacy and International departments are meticulously inputted into the CRM platform and can, in many cases, lead to retention discussions. Our sales collaborators dedicate one day per week, or around 20 % of their time, to customer retention. Here, the point is to give particular attention to companies with low attendance or involvement with regards to our activities, and who are therefore most likely to leave the network.



Lessons learned:

- > *A member organisation works for its members, and its members only. Services to non members must remain sporadic, for the purpose of lead generation.*
- > *Be clear about what members should and should not expect from your organisation.*
- > *As an employer's organisation, try to be present in as many local networks as possible.*
- > *Always remember that members are an organisation's best ambassadors.*

~ Chapter 11 ~

Advertising and Partnerships create a Win-Win Situation

On top of memberships, the Chamber also offers a number of options for companies seeking greater visibility within our network.

Every member can enjoy different advertising possibilities: banners on our website, our electronic newsletter, our monthly magazine *Ondernemers* or one of the five thematic issues we publish every year, and in our annual report. One of our sales collaborators focusses solely on advertising and advises members on possible publicity campaigns and insert combinations that best put their company in the spotlight. Tariffs vary depending on the carrier and size of the advertisement.





In addition to this, we have created a number of partnership options for a select group of our Premium members. These take the form of a structural collaboration for a period of at least three years, during which members receive continuous visibility throughout our network. Partnerships are thus above all content driven and complementary. For each important field, we try to find a partner with a high added value in that field, such as a bank, an insurer, a tech company, a consultancy firm, an important telecommunications operator, etc.

We offer four different categories of partnerships: corporate, business, activity and event partners.

Corporate partners make a substantial contribution per year, on top of their membership fee. In return, the Chamber helps position their company strategically within our network. Amongst other things, our corporate partners receive maximum visibility and exclusivity in their sector, a feature of their logo in our entrance hall and on our website, free entry to our biggest events for their most important collaborators or clients, a free training course as well as free use of our infrastructure. Additionally, corporate partners get to profile themselves through a column in our monthly magazine or through sharing expertise during our conferences and training courses.

Business partners receive, amongst others, their logo on our printed invitations, free entry to partner events and visibility during our flagship events. On top of this, they also receive free publicity inserts in our magazine.

Activity partnerships can also expect free entries to our most important events as well as their name and logo feature in a number of our publications.

Finally, event partners receive maximum visibility during one of our thematic events or conferences every year.

Currently, the Chamber shares partnership agreements with 32 companies, for a grand total of one million euros per year.

Lessons learned:

- > *Partnerships must be win for both parties.* Only seek out partnerships with companies who you know you will be able to offer an indirect qualitative return.
- > *Quantitative or direct financial return* are never agreed on beforehand within partnerships.
- > *All agreements within a partnership* regarding free tickets, name features, publicity inserts, etc. must be carefully contracted. This ensures no false expectations or misunderstandings arise.



For more information about our Chamber of Commerce and our economic region:
www.cciantwerp.com

Contact us

By e-mail: pr@cciantwerp.be

“From how we use powerful multisectoral platforms to put pressure on important policy areas, to how we coach and guide dozens of SMEs throughout their growth journey every year, or even how we use our flagship events, international missions and commercial partnerships to bring all these businesses together into one big community.

For years, this approach has been the main driver of our growth and has allowed us to secure a unique, independent position within civil society.”

Luc Luwel
CEO Antwerp Chamber of Commerce