

Category Manager interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for Category Manager roles assess your commercial acumen, analytical skills and ability to manage supplier relationships. Expect a mix of behavioural questions about past achievements, scenario-based questions that test your judgement, and technical questions about how you use data to make decisions.

- **Commercial and analytical:** Questions that probe how you use sales data, margin analysis and forecasting to make range and pricing decisions.
- **Supplier negotiation:** Scenarios or past examples where you had to negotiate price, terms or promotional support with a supplier.
- **Stakeholder management:** How you work with buyers, merchandisers, store teams and other internal stakeholders to execute category plans.
- **Scenario-based:** Hypothetical situations that test your problem-solving and judgement under pressure, such as a supplier demanding a price increase.
- **Behavioural:** Questions asking for specific past examples of when you improved category performance, managed a difficult supplier or influenced a decision.

The process typically starts with a phone screen with a recruiter, followed by an interview with the hiring manager that covers your experience and skills. You may then be asked to complete a data exercise or case study, and a final interview with senior stakeholders such as a head of category or commercial director.

1. Walk me through how you analyse category performance to decide which lines to keep, promote or discontinue.

Why they ask

This tests your analytical approach and commercial judgement, which are core to the role.

How to structure your answer

A process walk-through: start with the data you pull, the metrics you prioritise, how you interpret trends, and the actions you take as a result.

Example answer

"I start by pulling weekly sales, margin and inventory data for the category, looking at metrics like sales dollars, units, gross profit and stock cover. I compare performance against the same period last year and against our plan. I also look at competitor pricing and promotions to see if external factors are at play. Lines that are underperforming on both sales and margin, or that have high stock cover and low sell-through, become candidates for markdown or deletion. I then consider the role the line plays in the range: is it a traffic driver, a basket builder or a margin contributor? If it's not delivering on any of those, I'll work with the supplier on an exit plan or replace it with a better option. For lines that are performing, I look at whether we can expand distribution or increase promotional support."

2. Tell me about a time you negotiated a favourable outcome with a supplier.

Why they ask

Negotiation is a key part of the role, and past behaviour is a good predictor of future success.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Focus on the negotiation process and the outcome.

Example answer

"We were approaching peak season and I needed to secure promotional funding for a key category. The supplier was initially only offering a small rebate. I prepared a fact-based case showing the volume we could deliver if we had the right promotional support, referencing historical sell-through data and competitor activity. I also offered to increase shelf space and run a secondary display in exchange for better terms. After a couple of rounds, we agreed on a higher rebate and a commitment to fund a national catalogue promotion. The result was a stronger promotional program that drove sales and improved our margin on the category."

3. Imagine a key supplier is pushing for a price increase just before peak season. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

This scenario tests your judgement under pressure and your ability to balance supplier relationships with commercial targets.

How to structure your answer

A judgement-under-pressure structure: acknowledge the situation, assess the impact, consider options, and decide on a course of action while managing the relationship.

Example answer

"First, I'd ask the supplier for the reasoning behind the increase and the data to support it. I'd assess the impact on our margins and pricing strategy, and consider whether we can pass any of it on to customers without losing sales. I'd also look at alternatives: are there other suppliers who can meet our needs, or can we adjust the range to reduce reliance on this product? I'd then sit down with the supplier to negotiate. I might agree to a smaller increase if they commit to additional promotional support or better terms elsewhere. If the increase is unavoidable, I'd work with our merchandising and store teams to minimise the impact and communicate any price changes clearly. Throughout, I'd keep the relationship constructive because we need to work together long term."

4. How do you work with store teams to ensure your category plan is executed well on shelf?

Why they ask

Execution is critical to category success, and this question assesses your stakeholder management and collaboration skills.

How to structure your answer

A collaboration and communication structure: describe how you engage store teams, provide clear guidance, and follow up.

Example answer

"I start by involving store teams early in the planning process, especially for range changes or new launches. I provide clear planograms and merchandising guidelines, and I make sure they understand the commercial rationale behind the plan. I also work with the field merchandising team to train store staff on how to set up displays and manage stock. I regularly visit stores to see the execution firsthand and gather feedback. If I see gaps, I work with the store manager to fix them, and I recognise stores that do a great job. Building strong relationships with store teams means they're more likely to prioritise my category and get it right."

5. Describe a time you had to influence a stakeholder who disagreed with your category strategy.

Why they ask

Stakeholder management and influence are essential, as category managers often need to bring others along with their decisions.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Focus on how you listened, adapted your approach, and achieved alignment.

Example answer

"I proposed a range reduction in a category to simplify the offer and focus on bestsellers. A senior buyer disagreed, believing the reduced range would hurt sales. I listened to their concerns and then presented data showing that the lines I wanted to cut had low sales and high complexity, while the remaining lines could grow with better support. I also suggested a trial in a small number of stores to test the impact. After the trial showed no loss in sales and an improvement in stock turnover, the buyer agreed to roll it out nationally. The key was staying open to their perspective while using evidence to support my case."

6. What metrics do you look at to measure the success of a promotion?

Why they ask

This technical question tests your understanding of promotional effectiveness and your analytical rigour.

How to structure your answer

A technical/analytical structure: list the key metrics, explain how you interpret them, and describe how you use the insights.

Example answer

"I look at incremental sales and margin: did the promotion drive additional volume beyond what we would have sold anyway? I also measure the lift in units and sales dollars compared to the baseline, and the impact on basket size. I check the promotional ROI by comparing the margin generated against the cost of the promotion, including supplier funding. I also monitor stock levels to ensure we don't end up with excess inventory, and I look at customer response through loyalty data if available. After the promotion, I review the results with the supplier and use the learnings to improve future promotions."