# Retail Buyer interview questions

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## What to expect

Retail Buyer interviews test whether you can read numbers and turn them into stock decisions, and whether you can hold your own with suppliers without damaging the relationship. Expect a mix of past-experience questions and live scenarios, sometimes with a short case study or data exercise thrown in.

- **Behavioural:** Past examples of negotiating with suppliers, managing range decisions or resolving supplier problems, usually asked as 'tell me about a time'.
- **Process / technical:** How you actually work through demand forecasting, range reviews or reporting, often walked through step by step.
- **Scenario / judgement:** A live problem, such as a supplier failing to deliver before a promotion, to see how you prioritise and communicate under pressure.
- **Commercial reasoning:** Questions checking you understand margin, markdown and budget trade-offs, not just product taste.

Most retail buyer interviews start with questions about your category or product background, move into a couple of behavioural questions on negotiation and supplier management, then present one or two scenarios or a short data or range-planning exercise. Panels often include a category manager or planning lead alongside HR, and some employers ask candidates to bring or present a sample range plan.

## 1. Walk me through how you'd use sales and inventory data to decide what to reorder for next season.

**Why they ask**

Checks whether you have a repeatable process for forecasting demand rather than relying on gut feel.

**How to structure your answer**

Walk-through: describe the data sources you'd pull, how you'd spot trends or turnover issues, and how that translates into a buying decision.

**Example answer**

*“I'd start with sell-through and stock turn by SKU over the last comparable period, flagging anything trending well above or below forecast. For the strong performers I'd check whether the trend is seasonal or sustained before increasing the order. For slow movers I'd look at whether it's a pricing, placement or range issue before cutting the line. I'd cross-check against competitor activity and any known market shifts, then build the reorder around budget and lead times, leaving some headroom for reactive buys closer to the season.”*

## 2. Tell me about a time you negotiated better terms with a supplier.

**Why they ask**

Negotiation is core to the role and interviewers want a concrete example, not a general claim of being 'a good negotiator'.

**How to structure your answer**

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

**Example answer**

*“A key supplier increased their unit cost mid-season, which would have squeezed our margin on a top-selling line. My task was to protect margin without losing the supplier relationship or the stock we needed. I went back with our sales data showing the volume we were driving for them, and proposed*

*a tiered discount tied to order volume instead of a flat price rise. We agreed on a smaller increase with rebates once we hit set volumes, which kept margin close to target and kept the supplier committed to priority delivery slots."*

## 3. A key supplier tells you they can't deliver stock in time for a major promotion. What do you do?

**Why they ask**

Tests judgement under pressure and how you balance the promotion, the customer and the supplier relationship.

**How to structure your answer**

Judgement under pressure: state your immediate priority, the options you'd weigh, and the decision you'd make and why.

**Example answer**

*"My first priority is finding out exactly how late and how much of the order is affected, since a partial delay is a different problem to a full miss. I'd check if we can split the order with a secondary supplier or expedite freight, even at extra cost, given the promotion is already committed to customers. If neither works, I'd flag it to marketing and store operations early so they can adjust promotional stock allocation or swap in an alternative line, rather than let stores find out on the day. I'd also document the delay for future supplier scorecards."*

## 4. Tell me about a time you had a difficult ongoing relationship with a supplier and how you managed it.

**Why they ask**

Buyers deal with recurring supplier issues, not just one-off negotiations, so this probes relationship management over time.

**How to structure your answer**

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

**Example answer**

*"One supplier had a pattern of late deliveries that was affecting our in-stock rate on a core range. I raised it directly rather than letting it slide, setting out the impact on our sales and asking for a clear delivery plan with agreed lead times. When issues continued, I built in buffer stock for that line and started dual-sourcing part of the range while keeping the relationship professional. Delivery reliability improved once they understood we were prepared to shift volume elsewhere, and we kept the supplier for the lines where they performed well."*

## 5. How do you decide where to cut spend when a category budget is tighter than the range plan needs?

**Why they ask**

Checks commercial reasoning and prioritisation, not just product enthusiasm.

**How to structure your answer**

Judgement under pressure: outline your prioritisation criteria before naming the decision.

**Example answer**

*"I'd look first at margin contribution and stock turn by line, protecting the products carrying the category's profit and cutting back on lines with weak sell-through or high markdown history. I'd also consider whether any cuts affect range breadth in a way that hurts the customer's perception of choice. Where possible I'd trim order quantities rather than dropping lines entirely, so we keep presence in the range while managing risk, and I'd flag the trade-offs clearly to the category manager rather than making the call in isolation."*

## 6. How do you keep track of competitor ranges and market trends when building your own range?

**Why they ask**

Tests whether market awareness is a genuine ongoing habit rather than a one-off task.

**How to structure your answer**

Walk-through: describe your regular sources and how the information actually changes a buying decision.

> **Example answer**
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> *“I do regular store visits and online checks on key competitors, and I use market research databases and trend reports to spot broader shifts before they show up in our own sales data. If I see a competitor pushing hard on a category we're light in, I'll test it with a small order rather than committing the full range budget upfront. I also keep an eye on ABS retail trade figures and industry reporting to understand whether a trend is category-wide or specific to one retailer.”*