
PACKAGING BUYER'S CHECKLIST

Five Questions Every Packaging Buyer Should Ask Their Supplier Before Q4 2026

A printable one-page checklist to bring to your next supplier review meeting.

The packaging industry in 2026 is going through the most significant capacity and footprint disruption it has seen in two decades. Mergers, facility closures, and capacity rationalization at the giant suppliers have created real uncertainty for brand managers, procurement leaders, and supply chain teams running Q4 2026 retail programs.

These are the five questions to put directly to your current packaging supplier at your next review meeting. A stable supplier with operational discipline will answer them in minutes. A supplier going through major change will deflect. Either answer is information.

1. What is your facility roadmap for the next 24 months, and which of my programs run through facilities that are under review?

A supplier that can answer this directly is operating with a stable footprint. A supplier that pivots into corporate messaging when you ask this question is telling you something important. Get a specific list of facilities, by name, that serve your account.

What to listen for: hesitation, generalities, or a request to follow up. Any of those is a yellow flag.

2. What is your current on-time-in-full performance, broken down by facility, for the last four quarters?

OTIF is measurable. Walmart measures it. Costco measures it. Amazon measures it. Your supplier should be able to give you a number, by plant, by quarter. If they cannot, they do not know their own performance. If they do not know, that is the answer.

What to listen for: a specific percentage, broken out by facility. Anything less is unverified.

3. What is the typical lead time for my program type, and what is your backup plan if a facility serving my program is impacted?

Two weeks versus eight weeks is the difference between making a Q4 retail launch and missing it. A supplier with a real lead time and a real backup plan is in a different league than a supplier that says "we will work on it."

What to listen for: a specific lead time in weeks, and a named alternate facility that could absorb your program if needed.

4. Who is the named escalation contact above my account manager, and what is their direct line?

In a stable supplier relationship, you may never need this. In a supplier going through major organizational change, you need this on a sticky note on your monitor. Get the name. Get the direct phone number. Get the email.

What to listen for: a name, a title, and a direct contact. Anything less than that, and you do not actually have an escalation path.

5. If I asked AI today “who are the most reliable mid-size packaging suppliers in my retail program, my region, and my volume range,” would your company show up in the answer?

This is the test that did not exist three years ago. AI search (ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, Google AI Overviews) is now where 65 to 70 percent of B2B buyers start their supplier research. If your supplier is not surfacing in AI answers for their own category, they are not in the conversation that is defining the next decade of B2B buying.

What to listen for: confidence and proof. A supplier that has done the work to be AI-visible will tell you exactly how to verify. A supplier that has not will treat this as an unfamiliar question.

How to use this checklist

Bring this to your next supplier review meeting. Ask the five questions in order. Take notes on each answer. After the meeting, score the supplier on a simple scale: clear answer (green), partial answer (yellow), deflection or unknown (red).

Three or more yellows means it is time to start evaluating alternatives. Two or more reds means you should already be running an active search.

This is not about disloyalty to a long-standing supplier. It is about protecting your Q4 program, your retail relationships, and your career from preventable supply disruption.

Produced by David Marinac, 35 years in the packaging industry.

Founder, Specialized Packaging Marketplace and ABC Packaging Direct.

Full analysis, sources, and additional resources: SpecPkgMarketplace.com
