Merchandise Planner interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for merchandise planner roles typically assess your analytical rigour, commercial judgement, and ability to work with buying and finance teams. Expect a mix of technical questions, scenario-based problems, and behavioural prompts about influencing stakeholders.

- **Technical/analytical:** Questions that test your ability to forecast demand, build open-to-buy budgets, and interpret sell-through data.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical situations where you must decide how to handle excess stock, a missed forecast, or a sudden trend shift.
- **Behavioural:** Prompts about past experiences working with buyers, managing markdowns, or influencing decisions without direct authority.
- **Process:** Walk-throughs of how you approach range planning, allocation, or replenishment from start to finish.
- **Stakeholder:** Questions about how you collaborate with finance, supply chain, and store teams to balance competing priorities.

The process often starts with a phone screen with a recruiter, then a technical exercise or case study with the hiring manager. Successful candidates then meet a panel that may include buying, finance, and supply chain representatives, and sometimes a final interview with a senior planner or head of merchandising.

1. Walk me through how you forecast demand for a new season.

Why they ask

Tests your analytical approach and understanding of data sources.

How to structure your answer

A process walk-through: start with historical data, then layer in external factors, and finish with how you validate and adjust.

> **Example answer**
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> *“I start by pulling sales history for similar products or categories over the past two to three seasons. I look at sell-through rates, store-level variation, and any known market shifts. Then I build a baseline forecast in Excel or a planning tool, and I pressure-test it with the buying team. If the product is genuinely new, I use analogue products and adjust for differences in price point or marketing support. Finally, I set up weekly reviews to track actual sales against the forecast and adjust replenishment as needed.”*

2. You have excess stock in a core category with markdown budget already committed elsewhere. What do you do?

Why they ask

Assesses commercial judgement and creativity under constraint.

How to structure your answer

A judgement-under-pressure structure: clarify the constraint, outline options, recommend a path, and explain how you'd measure success.

> **Example answer**
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> *“First, I'd quantify the excess and how long it would take to clear at current sell-through. Then I'd look at options: shifting stock to stores or online channels where it sells faster, bundling with*

complementary products, or negotiating with the buying team to reallocate markdown budget from lower-priority lines. I'd recommend the option that protects margin best while freeing up space for incoming stock. I'd track sell-through weekly and adjust if needed."

3. Tell me about a time you had to influence a buyer to change their range plan.

Why they ask

Tests stakeholder management and ability to use data to persuade.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"In a previous role, a buyer wanted to expand a category that had been declining for three seasons. I analysed sell-through and stock cover data and found that the growth was coming from a small sub-category while the rest was cannibalising sales. I presented the data to the buyer and suggested a smaller, more focused range. They agreed, and we reduced the range by a third, which improved sell-through and freed up open-to-buy for a new category."

4. How do you build an open-to-buy budget?

Why they ask

Tests your understanding of the financial planning side of the role.

How to structure your answer

A step-by-step walk-through of the process, from sales plan to stock flow to budget.

Example answer

"I start with the sales plan and the target stock levels for the season. Then I calculate the planned purchases by working through beginning stock, plus purchases, minus sales, minus markdowns, to get ending stock. I build in safety stock for key lines and adjust for lead times. I use Excel or a planning system like Anaplan to model different scenarios, and I review the budget monthly with finance to keep it on track."

5. How do you balance the competing priorities of buying, finance, and supply chain?

Why they ask

Assesses collaboration and communication skills.

How to structure your answer

A reflective structure: describe your approach, give an example, and note what you learned.

Example answer

"I see my role as translating between commercial ambition and financial reality. I make sure everyone is working from the same sales and stock data. When priorities clash, I facilitate a meeting where we agree on a shared goal, like protecting margin or clearing a stock target. In one instance, supply chain wanted to reduce order frequency to save freight, while buying wanted more flexibility. I modelled the cost of both options and we agreed on a hybrid schedule that saved some freight without hurting availability."

6. Describe a time you had to manage a significant markdown.

Why they ask

Tests your experience with markdown management and decision-making.

How to structure your answer

STAR, with emphasis on the analysis and outcome.

Example answer

“A fashion category had underperformed due to an unusually warm season. I analysed sell-through by store and identified that some locations still had strong demand. Instead of a blanket markdown, I reallocated stock to those stores and ran a targeted promotion online. We cleared the excess within six weeks, reduced total markdown spend compared to the original plan, and maintained the brand's price integrity in key stores.”