

15 Questions to Ask Any 3PL Before You Sign

The questions that surface hidden fees, contract traps, and operational red flags before a 3PL has your inventory.

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Why these 15 questions

Most ecommerce founders evaluate 3PLs the way most people buy cars: they ask about price, they get a tour, they sign. Then six months in, the monthly invoice has line items they don't recognize, the response times have doubled, and the inventory counts no longer match.

This list was built from the actual failure modes brands experience after they sign. Each question is designed to surface a specific problem before it becomes yours.

Bring this list to every 3PL sales call. The answers you get — and how comfortable the salesperson is giving them — will tell you more than any glossy capabilities deck.

The questions

1. "Can you send me your full fee schedule in writing before I sign anything?"

Why ask: The single most important question on the list. Hidden fees are how 3PLs make margin on the brands they undercharged to win.

Listen for red flags:

- "We'll customize a quote for you" — translation: we charge what we think you'll pay
- "Most fees are passed through at cost" — ask which ones aren't
- Any hesitation, deflection, or "we'll send it after the call"

Green flag: They send the full schedule before the call, or hand it to you in the first 5 minutes.

2. "What's your monthly minimum, and what happens if I'm under it?"

Why ask: The industry-average monthly minimum is now \$517/month — up 53% from 2024. Most 3PLs bury this in the contract. Brands shipping 50–300 orders/month often pay for capacity they never use.

Listen for red flags:

- "There's a minimum but it's pretty low" — get the number
- "We charge a small platform fee if you're below it" — ask the exact amount
- The minimum is presented as a "commitment to volume" rather than a fee

Green flag: No monthly minimum, or a low one (\$100 or less) that's clearly stated.

3. "How are returns billed?"

Why ask: Industry standard is \$2.50–\$10 per return, billed separately from the per-order rate. For a brand with a 5% return rate at 500 orders/month, that's \$62–\$250 extra per month — often a surprise on the first invoice.

Listen for red flags:

- Returns are billed by labor hour without a cap
- Restocking fees per item plus a return processing fee (double-dip)
- "It depends on the return" — vague pricing means expensive pricing

Green flag: Flat rate per return, or returns included in the per-order rate (rare).

4. "What's your software / platform / SaaS fee per month?"

Why ask: Industry average is now \$250/month — up from \$0 a few years ago. Some 3PLs charge \$500/month for the same WMS that costs them \$50/month to license.

Listen for red flags:

- "It's included in your per-order rate" — but it's not, and you'll see it itemized later
- Fees that scale with order volume (you're paying twice — per-order AND per-platform)
- "Premium" platform fees for features that should be standard (basic reporting, integrations)

Green flag: Flat platform fee under \$100/month, or no platform fee at all.

5. "What's your setup or onboarding fee?"

Why ask: Industry average is \$425. Some 3PLs charge \$1,000+ for setup that takes a few days of their labor.

Listen for red flags:

- Setup fee not disclosed until contract review
- Separate fees for "integration setup," "WMS setup," and "first inbound processing"
- "Setup is free during the promo period" — what happens at month 4?

Green flag: \$0 setup, or a clearly bounded one-time fee with a written scope.

6. "What's the markup on shipping rates?"

Why ask: 3PLs get volume discounts from UPS, USPS, FedEx, and DHL. Most of them keep some or all of that discount as margin and charge you a markup on top. Industry typical is 15–30%. Some 3PLs charge "carrier rates" but those rates are actually the 3PL's contract rate plus a hidden markup.

Listen for red flags:

- "We pass through carrier rates" with no further detail — ask if it's their rate or retail rate
- A "shipping discount" that's actually a markup on their volume discount

- The markup increases at higher volumes (it should decrease)

Green flag: Markup disclosed as a percentage, with clear math you can verify against your own carrier accounts.

7. "What's the per-hour rate for special projects (kitting, inserts, stickering, custom packaging)?"

Why ask: Industry average is \$39/hour. Some 3PLs charge \$60–\$80/hour for routine labor. If your brand does any kitting, inserts, or subscription box assembly, this rate can become the largest line item on your invoice.

Listen for red flags:

- Hourly rate above \$50 without a clear specialization justification
- Minimum project size (e.g., "kitting starts at 4 hours")
- No published rate — quoted per project

Green flag: Rate under \$35/hour with no project minimum.

8. "What's your same-day shipping cutoff, and what % of orders make that cutoff?"

Why ask: A "same-day" cutoff at 9am isn't useful if your store gets most orders in the afternoon. And cutoff times are meaningless if the 3PL only hits them 70% of the time.

Listen for red flags:

- Cutoff before noon (limits same-day-eligible orders)
- "We typically meet cutoff" — ask for a specific %
- Cutoff varies by carrier without a clear schedule

Green flag: Cutoff at 2pm or later local time, with 95%+ hit rate.

9. "What's your pick accuracy rate, and how do you measure it?"

Why ask: Pick accuracy is the leading indicator of customer complaints, returns, and chargebacks. Industry benchmark is 99.5%. Below 99% means you'll get angry customer emails weekly.

Listen for red flags:

- They can't name a specific number
- The number is "internally tracked" but they won't share it
- Accuracy measured by orders rather than line items (hides multi-line errors)

Green flag: 99.5%+ measured by line item, with a clear refund policy when they miss-pick.

10. "How are inventory shrinkage and discrepancies handled?"

Why ask: Some shrinkage is inevitable. The question is whether the 3PL reimburses you for product they lose. Many do not — they cap liability at a percentage of inventory value or invoke contract language to limit

claims.

Listen for red flags:

- "Shrinkage is rare so we don't have a formal policy"
- Liability capped at 1–2% of inventory value with no per-unit reimbursement
- Discrepancies must be reported within 24–48 hours (very tight)

Green flag: Written shrinkage SOP with full per-unit reimbursement above a 0.5% threshold, and reasonable reporting windows.

11. "What integrations do you support natively, and what's the cost of API setup if I'm not on one of them?"

Why ask: Brands often discover after signing that their cart, ERP, or returns platform isn't supported — and the 3PL wants \$1,000–\$5,000 for custom API work. Or worse, manual order import (which means slow shipments and human error).

Listen for red flags:

- Native integrations limited to one or two major platforms
- API setup fees above \$500 for standard REST APIs
- Manual CSV import is the fallback for anything non-standard

Green flag: Native integrations with Shopify, WooCommerce, BigCommerce, Amazon, and at least one ERP. Free setup for any of the above.

12. "What's the contract term, and what's the exit process?"

Why ask: 12-month contracts with auto-renewal clauses are common in 3PL. Brands who try to leave often face: 60–90 day notice requirements, restocking fees on outbound inventory transfer, and "data egress" charges to export their own records.

Listen for red flags:

- Auto-renewal with short notice window (30 days or less)
- Outbound transfer fees per pallet
- Data export fees
- "Termination fees" for leaving early

Green flag: Month-to-month contract or 90-day initial term, with a clear, fee-free exit process documented in writing.

13. "Can I see a sample monthly invoice for a brand my size?"

Why ask: Quotes describe the rate card. Invoices reveal what brands actually pay. The difference is sometimes 30–50%.

Listen for red flags:

- They won't share a sanitized sample
- The sample has "miscellaneous" or "other charges" line items
- The total is significantly higher than the quote implied

Green flag: They send you a sanitized real invoice and walk through each line item.

14. "Who will be my point of contact, and how quickly do they respond?"

Why ask: The biggest single complaint about large 3PLs is response time. Brands shipping under 5,000 orders/month are often assigned to a shared pool of CS reps with 24–72 hour response windows.

Listen for red flags:

- Support via ticketing system only, no direct email or phone
- Response SLAs measured in business days
- "Account manager" is a sales role, not an operations one

Green flag: Direct email or phone access to a named person on the operations team, with a same-business-day response commitment.

15. "Can I do a pilot or trial before committing to a long-term contract?"

Why ask: This is the single most powerful question on the list. A 3PL that's confident in its operation will offer some form of low-risk trial. A 3PL that locks you into 12 months on day one is signaling it doesn't expect you to be happy.

Listen for red flags:

- No pilot option
- "Pilots" that still require a contract and setup fee
- Trial limited to 1–2 weeks (not enough to evaluate)

Green flag: 30+ day pilot, ideally with one SKU, no setup fee, and the ability to walk away with no penalty.

How to use this list

1. **Print it.** Use the paper version on sales calls — typing during the call signals you're checking boxes.
 2. **Score each answer.** Green flag = 1, neutral = 0, red flag = -1. Most 3PLs land between 4 and 8 out of 15. Anything under 6 is a hard no.
 3. **Compare across providers.** Run this against 3–5 3PLs. The deltas will be obvious.
 4. **Save the answers in writing.** What you got verbally on the sales call won't hold up later. Ask the 3PL to email you written confirmation of their answers to the questions that matter most (especially #1, #2, #4, #12).
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Where NexHaul lands

We built this list by walking through our own operation, then walking through every objection we've heard from brands shipping with other 3PLs. Our answers to all 15:

1. **Full fee schedule:** Published on the website at nexhaul-3pl.com/pricing. No demo or call required.
2. **Monthly minimum:** None.
3. **Returns:** Included in the per-order rate. No separate charge.
4. **Software fee:** \$50/month flat. 80% below industry average.
5. **Setup fee:** \$0. Receiving fees on the first inbound covered during the 30-day pilot.
6. **Shipping markup:** 15–20%, disclosed up front, with verifiable carrier rates.
7. **Special projects:** \$25/hour. 36% below industry average. No minimum.
8. **Same-day cutoff:** 3PM MST. 99.6% hit rate over the last 6 months.
9. **Pick accuracy:** 99.8%, measured by line item. Mis-picks reshipped at our cost.
10. **Shrinkage:** Reimbursed at full retail value above 0.5%.
11. **Integrations:** Native Shopify, WooCommerce, BigCommerce, Amazon Seller Central. Custom API setup is free.
12. **Contract:** Month-to-month. No auto-renewal. No exit fees.
13. **Sample invoice:** Sent on request, with every line item explained.
14. **Point of contact:** Direct email and phone access to one of the founders.
15. **Pilot:** 30 days, one SKU, no setup fee, no contract. You can leave at any point.

If you'd like our written answers to any of these in advance of a sales call, just email info@nexhaul-3pl.com and reference this guide.

One more thing

The 3PL industry runs on information asymmetry. The provider knows what they charge other brands, what their margin is per order, where their service breaks down, and what's hiding in the contract. The brand knows none of this until they're already in.

These 15 questions exist to flatten that asymmetry. Use them. The 3PL that answers all of them straightforwardly is the one you want.

Ready to start a 30-day pilot?

■ (801) 214-8013 ✉ info@nexhaul-3pl.com ■ www.nexhaul-3pl.com/pricing

Or compare us against your other quotes using the free [3PL Cost Comparison Template](#) — also at nexhaul-3pl.com/resources.

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