

The 3PL RFP Guide: How to Run an RFP, Read 3PL Pricing, and Pick the Right Partner

Everything we'd want a brand to know before it puts us, or anyone else, through an RFP. The companion Excel workbook (quote comparison, scorecard, and questions) is free at getproductiv.com/3pl-rfp-guide.

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IN ONE PARAGRAPH

A good 3PL RFP compares true cost per order delivered right, not headline rates. Send every bidder the same data pack and the same model month. Make them price it on a full rate card, apply their minimums, and add the costs that never hit the invoice: chargebacks and errors. Then score finalists on fit for your channels, execution, true cost, retail compliance, account management, integrations, and contract terms. In our worked example, the quote with the lowest pick-and-pack rate ends up costing the most per order.

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Before the RFP: build the data pack

Bidders can only price what they can see. A vague RFP gets vague quotes, and vague quotes get repriced after you sign. Send everyone the same pack.

01 12 months of order history, by channel

DTC, wholesale, and each retailer separately, by month, so bidders can see your peak and your trough.

03 SKU list with velocity

Active SKUs, dimensions and weights, and which SKUs make up most of your volume.

05 Storage profile

Average and peak pallets (or bins), plus anything slow-moving you'll be paying to hold.

07 Kitting, sets, and displays

Kit configurations, items per kit, annual volumes, how often configurations change, and any display or PDQ programs.

09 Returns

Volume and what should happen to each return: restock, refurbish, or dispose.

02 Order profile

Units per order, lines per order, and the share of single-unit orders. This drives pick-and-pack pricing more than total volume does.

04 Inbound profile

Containers, pallets, or cartons; how many suppliers; how often; and whether inbound arrives floor-loaded or palletized.

06 Retail accounts

Every retailer you ship to or plan to, with their routing guides, label requirements, and your current chargeback history.

08 Systems

Cart, marketplaces, ERP, and EDI provider, plus what you need to see daily (inventory, orders, exceptions).

10 Growth plan

New channels, retailers, and launches in the next 12 to 24 months. A 3PL priced for today and wrong for next year is the expensive kind.

The workbook's **Data pack** tab is this list as a fill-in sheet.

Running the RFP

Nine weeks is a workable plan. Faster usually means skipping the site visit or the reference calls, which are the two steps that catch the most.

WEEKS 1-2	Build the data pack and a longlist Assemble the data above. Longlist providers by the work you need (channels, kitting, retail), not by size.
WEEK 3	Short RFI, then shortlist three or four Five or six questions about fit: channels, kitting, retail compliance, location, minimums. Cut anyone who can't do the hard part of your work.
WEEKS 4-6	Issue the RFP with the data pack Ask every bidder to price the same model month (Part 3) on a full rate card, not a summary.
WEEK 7	Site visits Go to the building that would run your product. Meet the person who would run your account.
WEEK 8	References, normalize, score Call references in your channel mix. Normalize the quotes to true cost per order. Score with the weights in Part 5.
WEEK 9	Decide and negotiate Negotiate the terms that move total cost (minimums, escalators, exit terms), not just the headline rate.

On the site visit

- ✔ Watch a retail order get built: labels, case packs, pallet build, and the ASN that goes with it.
- ✔ Ask to see a real chargeback report for a current client, anonymized. If they don't track chargebacks, that's your answer.
- ✔ Meet the person who would run your account day to day, not the salesperson.
- ✔ Walk the kitting or value-add area and ask how a new kit configuration is set up and approved.
- ✔ Ask how inventory is counted, how often, and what happens when a count is off.
- ✔ Look at how DTC and retail work share the floor during peak.

How 3PLs price, and how to compare quotes that don't look alike

Every 3PL quote is built from the same few pieces arranged differently. Learn the pieces and you can see where each quote puts its margin. This is the part of the RFP where most brands lose money.

The three pricing models

Cost-plus (open book)

You pay the provider's actual labor hours, materials, and facility costs, plus a management fee or markup.

GOOD FOR

Dedicated operations where the work is hard to define up front and you want full visibility into the cost base.

WATCH FOR

You carry idle labor in slow months and pay for inefficiency. More hours means more revenue for the provider.

THE PROVIDER EARNS MORE WHEN IT...

Bill more hours.

Transactional (rate card)

A price for each activity: receiving, storage, pick and pack, each additional item, packaging, and a long list of accessories.

GOOD FOR

Standard DTC fulfillment with a stable order profile.

WATCH FOR

Anything outside the catalog becomes a line item. The headline pick rate is the smallest part of the story.

THE PROVIDER EARNS MORE WHEN IT...

Bill more activities.

Per-unit (fixed unit)

One price per unit of output (per order, per kit, per carton), built from a defined spec. The provider carries the labor risk.

GOOD FOR

Kitting, assembly, and defined programs, and any brand that wants the quote and the invoice to match.

WATCH FOR

The spec has to be right. When the work changes (a new kit configuration, new labeling), the rate is repriced.

THE PROVIDER EARNS MORE WHEN IT...

Run the work faster and better.

Most contracts mix models (a rate card for fulfillment, per-unit for kitting, cost-plus for a dedicated program) and then add minimums, account fees, and escalators on top. Read the incentive line twice: it tells you what the provider gets paid to do more of.

The rate card, line by line

These are the lines you'll see on a full rate card, how each is billed, what makes it go up, and the question that gets you a straight answer.

LINE ITEM	HOW IT'S BILLED	WHAT DRIVES IT	WHAT TO ASK
Setup and onboarding	One-time fee	Integrations, SKU setup, retailer setup	What exactly does it cover, and what's billed separately later?
Integrations and IT	One-time build plus hourly change requests	Cart, marketplace, ERP, EDI	Who builds and owns integrations, and what does a change request cost?
Receiving	Per pallet, per carton, per container, or per hour	Floor-loaded vs palletized, mixed SKUs, inspection	How is messy inbound billed? What's the dock-to-stock commitment?
Storage	Per pallet, bin, shelf, or cubic foot, per month	Slow movers, peak pre-build, long-term storage	Is there a long-term storage surcharge, and when does it start?
Pick and pack	Per order, plus per additional item	Units per order, special handling	Price your real order profile, not a single-unit order.
Packaging materials	Included, or per order / per carton	Box sizes, branded packaging, dunnage	Are materials included in the pick rate or billed on top?
Kitting and assembly	Per item placed + base fee per kit, per kit, or hourly	Items per kit, lot control, labeling, packaging type, accuracy	Is it priced per unit or per hour? What changes the rate?

LINE ITEM	HOW IT'S BILLED	WHAT DRIVES IT	WHAT TO ASK
Retail and B2B handling	Per carton, per pallet, per label	Case packs, GS1-128 labels, pallet builds	Is retailer compliance work in the rate or an accessory?
EDI	Per document, per retailer setup, or included	850 / 856 / 810 volume, number of retailers	What does adding a new retailer cost, and how long does it take?
Returns	Per return, plus inspection and disposition	Restock vs refurbish vs dispose	What's included in the per-return fee?
Shipping	Carrier rates passed through, often with a markup	Zones, DIM weight, fuel and residential surcharges	Is there a markup on carrier rates, and can you see the carrier invoice?
Account management	Monthly fee or included	Dedicated staff, reporting, reviews	Who is the account manager, where do they sit, and what does the fee buy?
Minimums	Monthly minimum billing	Your volume vs their floor	What do you bill in a slow month? Model your lowest month.
Peak and escalators	Peak surcharges, annual rate increases	Season, contract term	Are there peak surcharges? What's the annual escalator?

Where quotes hide cost: the month-two invoice

Monthly minimums

A minimum doesn't show up in an average month. It shows up in your slowest one. Model your trough, not your mean.

Per-additional-item fees

A low per-order rate with a high per-item rate punishes multi-unit orders. Price your real units per order.

Packaging billed on top

Some pick rates include boxes and dunnage; some don't. Two identical headline rates stop being identical once materials land.

Receiving by the hour

Floor-loaded containers and mixed-SKU pallets take time. Hourly receiving on messy inbound adds up fast.

Long-term storage

Pre-building for peak in September means paying to hold it through November. Check when long-term rates start.

Carrier markups and surcharges

Parcel rates passed through with a markup, plus fuel, residential, and DIM adjustments. Ask to see the carrier invoice.

EDI per document

Every PO, ASN, and invoice billed separately. Small per document, large across a retail program.

IT change requests

Integrations quoted as one-time, with every later change billed hourly.

Escalators

An annual increase written into the contract. Year-three pricing matters as much as year one.

The costs that never hit the invoice

Retailer chargebacks

Deductions for wrong labels, late ASNs, missed windows, and bad case packs. They come out of your remittance, not the 3PL's invoice, so a cheap 3PL with weak compliance can be the most expensive one.

Errors and rework

Mispicks, wrong kits, and damaged orders cost you replacements, shipping, and customers.

Stockouts from slow receiving

Inventory sitting unreceived at the dock during your selling window is revenue you don't get back.

Your team's time

Hours your people spend chasing a provider that needs supervising are a real cost. Ask references how much time they spend managing their 3PL.

How to normalize three quotes

01

Build one model month
Take a real month from your data pack: orders, items, inbound pallets, storage, retail cartons, EDI documents, and returns. Send the same model month to every bidder.

02

Price every line, not the headline
Multiply each provider's full rate card against the model month. Include materials, account fees, and anything they listed as an accessorial.

03

Apply minimums
If a provider has a monthly minimum, you pay the larger of the minimum and the invoice. Run your slowest month too.

04

Add the off-invoice costs
Estimate chargebacks (expected chargeback rate × retail revenue) and errors (orders × error rate × your cost per error). Get the rates from references and the provider's own scorecards, not the sales deck.

05

Compare cost per order, delivered right
Divide the true monthly cost by orders. That's the number to compare, and the one the workbook calculates for you.

Worked example: the cheapest rate isn't the cheapest 3PL

Three hypothetical quotes, priced against the same model month. The rates are illustrations of how pricing structures interact, not market benchmarks and not our rates. The workbook has this exact example loaded so you can replace it with your own numbers.

THE MODEL MONTH					
DTC orders	10,000	LINE	Quote A Lowest headline rate	Quote B Highest headline rate	Quote C Middle of the pack
Additional items beyond the first	6,000	Pick & pack (per order)	\$22,500 @ \$2.25	\$27,500 @ \$2.75	\$26,000 @ \$2.60
Inbound pallets received	120	Additional item (per item)	\$3,600 @ \$0.60	\$2,400 @ \$0.40	\$3,000 @ \$0.50
Pallets in storage	400	Packaging materials (per order)	\$4,000 @ \$0.40	\$0 @ \$0.00	\$3,000 @ \$0.30
Retail / B2B cartons shipped	1,500	Receiving (per pallet)	\$1,440 @ \$12.00	\$1,200 @ \$10.00	\$1,080 @ \$9.00
EDI documents (850 / 856 / 810)	300	Storage (per pallet / month)	\$8,800 @ \$22.00	\$8,000 @ \$20.00	\$7,200 @ \$18.00
Returns processed	300	Retail / B2B carton handling (per carton)	\$2,625 @ \$1.75	\$1,875 @ \$1.25	\$2,250 @ \$1.50
Retail revenue shipped (\$)	\$250,000	EDI documents (per document)	\$450 @ \$1.50	\$0 @ \$0.00	\$300 @ \$1.00
Your cost per fulfillment error (\$)	\$25	Returns (per return)	\$900 @ \$3.00	\$750 @ \$2.50	\$825 @ \$2.75
		Account management fee (per month)	\$1,500 @ \$1,500.00	\$0 @ \$0.00	\$2,500 @ \$2,500.00
		Invoice before minimum	\$45,815	\$41,725	\$46,155
		Monthly minimum	\$40,000	None	\$25,000
		Invoice	\$45,815	\$41,725	\$46,155
		Expected chargebacks	\$7,500	\$2,500	\$3,750
		Cost of errors	\$2,500	\$1,250	\$750
		True monthly cost	\$55,815	\$45,475	\$50,655
		True cost per order	\$5.58	\$4.55	\$5.07

Quote A has the lowest pick-and-pack rate (\$2.25) and the highest true cost (\$5.58 per order). Quote B has the highest headline rate (\$2.75) and the lowest true cost (\$4.55). The difference is materials, account fees, and, above all, chargebacks and errors.

Expected chargebacks = retail revenue × the provider's chargeback rate. Cost of errors = orders × error rate × your cost per error. Get both rates from references and scorecards. Then rerun the comparison for your slowest month, where minimums bite.

What per-unit kitting pricing looks like

Kitting is where hourly pricing hurts most, because you can't see the hours. Here is how we price it, published so you have a reference point: **\$0.04–\$0.08 per item placed** plus a **\$0.25–\$0.75 base kit fee**. A 10-item kit of mid-level complexity, with no lot control and a standard box build, runs **\$0.65–\$1.05 per kit**, all in.

Whoever you hire, ask for kitting priced this way: a per-item rate plus a base fee, with the base fee tied to things you can verify. Then the quote is something you can check, not something you have to trust.

WHAT MOVES THE BASE FEE

- ✔ Lot or batch control
- ✔ Special labeling
- ✔ Packaging type (box build and seal, heat seal, crinkle paper)
- ✔ Required accuracy tolerance

Ten pricing questions to ask every bidder

- 01 Price our model month on your full rate card. What's missing from this quote?
- 02 What's included in the pick-and-pack rate: materials, inserts, labels?
- 03 Is there a monthly minimum? What would you bill us in our slowest month?
- 04 Is kitting priced per unit or per hour? What would change the rate?
- 05 What does adding a new retailer cost, including EDI setup, and how long does it take?
- 06 Do you mark up carrier rates? Can we see the carrier invoice?
- 07 Are there peak surcharges or long-term storage fees, and when do they start?
- 08 What's the annual escalator, and what triggers a reprice?
- 09 When a chargeback is your fault, who pays it?
- 10 What would year three cost us at our projected volume?

Questions to ask, by area

Ask every finalist the same questions, in writing, and keep the answers side by side. The workbook's Questions tab has a column for each bidder.

OPERATIONS

Which building would run our product, and what else runs there?

What's your order accuracy and on-time ship rate for clients like us? How is it measured?

What's your dock-to-stock time, and what's the commitment in the contract?

How do you staff peak? Who are the people on the floor: your own operators or temp labor?

RETAIL COMPLIANCE

Which of our retailers do you already ship to, and which do you have EDI connections with today?

How long does it take to bring a new retailer live?

What's your chargeback rate for current retail clients, and who pays when it's your error?

Who reads the routing guides and keeps label templates current?

KITTING AND DISPLAYS

Do you build kits and displays in-house, on the same floor as fulfillment, or send them to a co-packer?

How is a new kit configuration set up and approved before production?

How do you track components versus finished kits in inventory?

What's the largest kit program you run today, in kits per day?

INTEGRATIONS AND DATA

Who builds and maintains our cart, marketplace, ERP, and EDI connections?

What can we see daily, without asking: inventory, orders, exceptions?

How long does a typical integration change take, and what does it cost?

ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT

Who is our day-to-day contact, where do they sit, and who covers when they're out?

What's the meeting cadence: daily, weekly, quarterly?

Who do we call when something is broken at 4 p.m. on a Friday before a retail ship date?

CONTRACT AND EXIT

What's the term, and what are the exit terms?

How do we get our inventory and data out if we leave?

What happens to pricing if our volume grows faster, or slower, than planned?

Scoring the finalists

Score each finalist 1 to 5 on each criterion, then weight. These are the weights we'd use for a brand selling through more than one channel. Change them to fit your priorities before you see the quotes, not after.

CRITERION	WEIGHT	A 5 LOOKS LIKE
Fit for your channels and work	20%	Runs every channel and program you have, plus the ones in your growth plan, in one operation.
Execution and quality	20%	Accuracy, on-time, and dock-to-stock commitments backed by references in your channel mix.
True cost per order	20%	Lowest normalized cost per order, including minimums and off-invoice costs.
Retail compliance	15%	Already connected to your retailers; owns its compliance errors.
Account management	10%	A named person close to the floor, with backup and a set cadence.
Integrations and visibility	10%	Builds and owns integrations; you see inventory and exceptions daily.
Contract terms	5%	Fair minimums, clear escalators, clean exit.

THE 1-5 SCALE

- 5 Proven: references and data confirm it
- 4 Strong: clear answer, credible evidence
- 3 Adequate: meets the need, no evidence beyond the pitch
- 2 Weak: gaps or workarounds
- 1 Can't do it, or wouldn't answer

Red flags

Any one of these is worth a hard follow-up question. Two or more, and it's worth walking.

⚠ Won't price your model month on a full rate card.

⚠ The salesperson can't introduce you to the person who'd run your account.

⚠ Doesn't track chargebacks, or can't tell you who pays for its own compliance errors.

⚠ Kitting or displays "handled by a partner": your program goes to a co-packer you've never met.

⚠ References are all in a different channel mix than yours.

⚠ Wants a multi-year term with high minimums before you've seen a site visit.

⚠ Integration questions get routed to a ticket queue during the sales process.

Frequently asked questions

01 How do 3PLs price their services?

3PLs price in one of three ways. Cost-plus bills actual labor, materials, and facility costs plus a markup. Transactional pricing uses a rate card with a price for each activity: receiving, storage, pick and pack, additional items, packaging, and accessorials. Per-unit pricing charges one price per unit of output, built from a defined spec, with the provider carrying the labor risk. Many contracts mix models and add minimums, account fees, and escalators.

03 What should be in a 3PL RFP?

A data pack (12 months of orders by channel, order profile, SKU velocity, inbound and storage profiles, retail accounts and routing guides, kitting programs, systems, returns, and your growth plan), a model month to price, questions by area, and how you'll score responses.

05 What hidden fees should I look for in a 3PL quote?

Monthly minimums, per-additional-item fees, packaging billed on top of the pick rate, hourly receiving, long-term storage, carrier markups and surcharges, per-document EDI fees, IT change requests, peak surcharges, and annual escalators.

02 How do I compare 3PL quotes?

Send every bidder the same model month from your real data and ask them to price it on a full rate card. Multiply every line, apply monthly minimums, then add off-invoice costs: expected chargebacks and the cost of errors. Compare true cost per order, not the headline pick-and-pack rate.

04 How long does a 3PL RFP take?

About nine weeks is a workable plan: two weeks to build the data pack and longlist, a week for a short RFI, three weeks for the RFP, a week of site visits, a week for references and scoring, and a week to decide and negotiate.

06 How does Productiv price kitting?

Per unit, not per hour: \$0.04–\$0.08 per item placed plus a \$0.25–\$0.75 base kit fee. A 10-item kit of mid-level complexity with no lot control and a standard box build runs \$0.65–\$1.05 per kit. The base fee is driven by lot or batch control, special labeling, packaging type, and required accuracy tolerance. Productiv runs 30M+ kits a year.

// INITIATE_SEQUENCE

Running an RFP now? Put us in it.

Send us your data pack and model month. You'll get a full rate card priced against it, a site visit at the building that would run your product, and the person who'd run your account on the call.

getproductiv.com/contact