

10 questions to ask your Chinese supplier before you pay a deposit

Most first orders go wrong before production starts - at the quotation and deposit stage. These are the questions I would ask, in this order. Ask them in writing (email or chat), and keep the answers. A supplier who refuses to answer in writing has already told you something.

1. Who exactly produces my order - and what is your company name on the business licence?

ASK

I need the full legal name (Chinese and English) of the entity that will manufacture, not the name of the sales office or the shop you found me on.

WHY IT MATTERS

A trading company will quote, negotiate and sign, then hand the job to a factory you have never seen. That is not automatically bad, but the price, the lead time and the responsibility for defects all sit with an entity you cannot audit.

WARNING SIGNS

Answers that dodge the legal name; two different company names on the quotation and the proforma invoice; "we have our own factory" with no name; a name that changes when you ask again.

2. Does your business licence scope (经营范围) include production, manufacturing or processing?

ASK

Send me a photo of the licence and point to the scope line.

WHY IT MATTERS

In China, a company can legally trade in a product without being allowed to make it. If the scope covers only sales, wholesale or import-export, then whatever they sell you is made by someone else, and your quality agreement has no factory behind it.

WARNING SIGNS

Only 销售 / 贸易 / 批发 / 进出口 in the scope; scope limited to "technology development" or "consulting"; refusing to send the licence photo; sending a licence that is not the invoicing entity.

3. What is the real minimum order quantity for my box or film, at my size and material - not the catalogue MOQ?

ASK

Give them your exact size, material, print and quantity, and ask for the MOQ of that combination, plus the price at that MOQ and at 2x that quantity.

WHY IT MATTERS

Catalogue MOQs are written for the easiest product on the easiest machine. The real MOQ is set by the plate or cylinder, the material reel width and the press setup time. It is also the first place where a subcontractor gets involved without telling you.

WARNING SIGNS

A number that matches the website exactly regardless of your specification; "any quantity is fine" (usually means shared plates or digital only); a price jump of 3x or more between two nearby quantities with no explanation.

4. Which steps do you run in-house, and which do you outsource - specifically printing, lamination and finishing?

ASK

Ask for the process list: printing, lamination, die-cutting, gluing, foil, spot UV, embossing. In-house or subcontracted, step by step.

WHY IT MATTERS

This is the single biggest hidden risk in Chinese packaging sourcing. A supplier who prints in-house but subcontracts lamination loses control over bond strength, solvent residue and delamination - and usually only finds out at the customer complaint stage.

WARNING SIGNS

"All in-house" with no machine list; refusing to name the subcontractor; a different factory address for printing than for finishing; a workshop tour that skips the lamination or gluing area.

5. How do you control colour - who signs the standard sample, and who keeps the retained copy?

ASK

Ask: will you send me a physical sample to sign before the run, will you keep a signed copy, and will you run the production order against that signed sample?

WHY IT MATTERS

Colour approved on a PDF or a phone photo is not a colour standard. The signed physical sample is the only thing that lets you reject a batch later with evidence instead of an argument. Whoever keeps the copy controls the interpretation.

WARNING SIGNS

Approval by email attachment only; "our colour is standard, no need for a sample"; no retained sample; a Delta-E target nobody can state; first-article sample taken from a different production run.

6. Can you trace one finished carton or one film reel back to the incoming material batch?

ASK

Ask them to pick a finished box from the last shipment and show the incoming inspection record, the material batch number and the production record it came from.

WHY IT MATTERS

Traceability is what makes a recall or a claim possible. If a defect appears six months later and the material lot cannot be identified, the whole shipment is suspect and nobody can isolate the cause with you.

WARNING SIGNS

Batch numbers only on the outer carton; incoming inspection records kept but not linked to output; "we will check for you" and no document produced; material certificates for a different lot number.

7. What do you inspect, how many pieces, and against which AQL? Show me a real inspection record.

ASK

Ask for the inspection standard (AQL level, single or double sampling), the inspection items, the instrument list, and one redacted inspection report from a recent order.

WHY IT MATTERS

An AQL agreement turns "some defects" into a pass or fail decision. Without it, acceptance is a negotiation after the goods are made and the balance is due. It also tells you whether they inspect at all, or only pack.

WARNING SIGNS

No sampling plan, only "100% visual check" with no record; records that are all ticked with no measurements; an AQL they cannot quote; defect categories that exclude the defect you care about.

8. For each certificate you claim, what is the certificate number, the issuing body and how do I

verify it myself?

ASK

Ask for the certificate PDF and the issuer's website, then check it yourself on the issuer's own verification page. Ask which legal entity the certificate is issued to.

WHY IT MATTERS

A certificate on a sales page proves nothing. What matters is whether it is valid, in scope, issued to the entity that will make your goods, and whether the scope actually covers your product and process.

WARNING SIGNS

A certificate issued to a different company name or a different site; expired or suspended status; a number that cannot be found on the issuer's site; a certificate for a process the supplier subcontracts; watermarked screenshots instead of the original PDF.

9. Which company will issue the invoice, and does it match the contract and the bank account?

ASK

Get the exact invoice-issuing entity, its tax number, and confirm the bank account name matches that entity before you send any money.

WHY IT MATTERS

This is the cheapest fraud check available and people skip it. If the quotation, the contract, the invoice and the bank account are four different companies, you have no enforceable counterparty and very little recovery route.

WARNING SIGNS

Payment requested to a personal account or a third company name; invoice entity different from the contract entity; pressure to pay a deposit before any of this is confirmed; a bank account opened in another province.

10. If the goods are wrong, what happens - who pays, how fast, and where is it written down?

ASK

Agree in writing: defect definition, claim window after arrival, remedy (rework, replacement, credit), who pays return or disposal freight, and the maximum liability.

WHY IT MATTERS

Suppliers are cooperative before the deposit and busy after it. Deciding the remedy mechanism while everyone still wants the order is the difference between a credit note and a six-month email thread.

WARNING SIGNS

Refusal to put a claim clause in writing; "we have never had a claim"; liability capped at the deposit only; a claim window so short it expires before the container is unpacked; verbal promises only.

This list is based on three years on the factory quality side in China - including on-site quality audits of 4 core suppliers and 6 customer pre-shipment inspections with a 100% pass rate. It is written from the questions I used to have to answer, not from a template.

Want me to put these questions to a specific supplier and bring back the answers with the documents checked? Reply to this email.