YOUR 10-STEP 3PL READINESS GUIDE FOR Q4 & PEAK

You're close to go-time and what will hopefully be your best peak season yet. To help you dot the i's and cross the t's, we've pulled together the 10 things you should be checking with your 3PL partner in the next 2 weeks - capacity, carriers, cut-offs, comms, and contingencies. Work through the list to make sure you're ready.

☑ FORECAST & CAPACITY LOCK-IN

Your 3PL should convert your daily SKU/order forecast (including promo spikes and weekends) into a written capacity plan that spells out space (pallets/locations), labour (pick/pack hours by shift) and carrier headroom. Insist on named carrier confirmations for late and weekend collections and a weekly re-forecast cadence (calendar invites in). You're looking for a one-pager and a simple spreadsheet you can skim at 9am every Monday.

☑ INVENTORY POSITIONING & INBOUND DISCIPLINE

Expect a zeroed variance report (WMS = truth) and a current floor map showing fast movers and promo SKUs pre-positioned near pick with buffer stock for big days. Ask for the inbound SLA report (ASN compliance, on-time %, put-away time) so goods-in won't choke outbound.

Bonus: an exceptions lane for late/short deliveries with an owner and a same-day clear target.

☑ SYSTEMS READINESS & FAILOVER

Your partner should share load-test evidence for WMS/OMS/label printing at peak+20% and a recovery runbook: who does what, in what order, how long it takes (RTO/RPO), and how CS/customers are updated. There should be an on-call rota covering nights/weekends and minutes from a 15-minute "table-top" outage drill. You're checking the test screenshots/logs and that contact trees are current.

☑ CARRIER CAPACITY & COLLECTIONS PLAN

Ask for a bottom-up collections schedule (picks → cartons → pallets → trailers) for each day of peak, with pre-booked weekend/late pick-ups and depot escalation contacts named. You should receive a daily carrier plan by 10:00 and an end-of-day update if volumes shift. Look for a clear trigger e.g. "If backlog > X pallets at 16:00, call Y depot for extra trailer."

REALISTIC CUT-OFFS & SLA MATRIX

Your 3PL publishes a day-by-day cut-off and delivery promise calendar (including BF/CM, Sundays and bank holidays) based on what they can beat. You approve it and mirror it on site banners, order emails and CS macros; performance is reviewed daily with tighten/relax calls logged. Aim for transparency over heroics e.g. "Order by 7pm → ships same day; otherwise next day."

WORKFORCE PLAN & TRAINING

Review rosters that cover nights/weekends with cross-training across pick, pack, replen, returns and loading. Expect short SOP refreshers (safety, MHE, exceptions, kit builds) and a documented contingency bench (agency/on-call) to backfill no-shows. Check supervisor coverage ratios and that forecasted volume per hour actually matches hands on deck.

PICKING & PACKING OPTIMISATION

Your 3PL should walk you through the slotting plan (ABC/XYZ, travel time), any capacity adds (second pick line, pre-built bundles), plus packaging stock levels and fit-to-size/cartonisation rules. You'll co-review picks/hour by zone and expect one bottleneck cleared per day. Targets worth asking for: pick accuracy ≥99.8%, damage rate down week-on-week, volumetric charges trending lower.

RETURNS SURGE & RAPID RESTOCK

Ask for a returns model (Nov/Dec + January spike), with lane throughput targets, staffing and ring-fenced space so outbound never stalls. Expect a daily returns scoreboard and a policy to get saleable items back to stock within 48 hours. Useful artefacts: aged returns report (>48h), triage codes (resell, refurb, scrap, RTV) and owner names.

DATA VISIBILITY & CUSTOMER COMMS

Expect a live ops dashboard (orders, picks/hr, backlogs, missed cut-offs, carrier scans) and a 10-minute daily stand-up with named owners. Verify proactive tracking/exception messages (e.g., weather delays) are enabled and that CS scripts reflect today's cut-offs and any workarounds. Good signs: shared URLs, uptime monitored, and WISMO tickets declining as comms go out.

RISK REGISTER, ESCALATION & CONTINGENCIES

Your 3PL maintains a written risk register (carrier failure, IT outage, weather) with likelihood/impact, triggers, and pre-agreed mitigations (alt carrier, manual labels, overflow site). They also publish a simple escalation ladder with response times and run one rehearsal pre-peak. You're checking the log is dated, owners are named and actions are closed.

Prolog Fulfilment is a UK-based 3PL built for growing ecommerce brands. We handle pick, pack, multi-carrier delivery, B2B/retail drops, value-add/kitting and returns, personalisation, bonded goods, and cross-border deliveries - all tied together with real-time dashboards and clean integrations to leading e-commerce platforms (Shopify, Magento, BigCommerce, marketplaces).

We're trusted by over 150 brands. We operate 24 hour from 2 UK sites, and typically onboard new clients in 4 weeks with clear SLAs. If you want a partner that's hands-on in the warehouse and transparent in the numbers, we'd love to talk.

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