

Retail merchandiser

Job Description

Merchandisers are responsible for ensuring that products appear in the right store at the right time and in the right quantities. This involves working closely with the buying teams to accurately forecast trends, plan stock levels and monitor performance. While the buyer selects the lines, the merchandiser decides how much money should be spent, how many lines should be bought, and in what quantities.

Merchandisers set the prices to maximise profits and manage the performance of the ranges, planning promotions and markdowns as necessary. They also oversee the delivery and distribution of the stock and deal with problems with suppliers as they arise.

Typical Work Activities

Actual work activities will vary depending upon the company and the particular retail sector, though will typically include:

- planning product ranges and preparing sales and stock plans in conjunction with buyers;
- liaising with buyers, analysts, stores, suppliers and distributors;
- maintaining a comprehensive library of appropriate data;
- producing layout plans for stores;
- forecasting profits and sales using computer programs;
- optimising the sales volume and profitability of designated product areas;
- planning budgets and presenting sales forecasts and figures for new ranges;
- controlling stock levels based on forecasts for the season;
- analysing every aspect of the best and worst sellers (for example, the best selling price points, colours or styles);
- ensuring that best sellers are fully potentialised;
- monitoring slow sellers;
- taking action to reduce prices or set promotions as necessary;
- gathering information relating to the customer reaction to products;
- analysing previous season's sales and reporting on the current season's lines;
- accompanying buyers on visits to manufacturers to appreciate production processes;
- visiting suppliers and stores for best/worst seller meetings;
- meeting with suppliers and managing the distribution of stock, possibly negotiating cost prices with suppliers;
- identifying production and supply difficulties and dealing with them as and when they occur;
- managing, training and supervising staff.

Work Conditions

- An entry-level post would typically attract around £19,000, rising to £27,000 with experience. After several years' experience, a merchandiser can expect to earn anything between £35,000 and £45,000 in a managerial post (salary data collected Jul 07). Merchandiser positions often come with benefits such as a company car.
- Range of typical salaries for a senior merchandiser: £45,000 - £60,000, plus a benefits package. At the top of the profession, a head or director of merchandising can earn upwards from £65,000. In a large company, this is likely to be in excess of £80,000 (salary data collected Jul 07).
- Salaries will vary with location, employer size, turnover and product type. Large, high-street multiples often offer the highest salaries. Other benefits are common, such as company car and medical care.
- Working hours are normally nine to five, Monday to Friday. Saturday working is occasionally needed to visit branches or for competitive shopping.
- You may be required to work extra hours in response to a store's demands (for example supporting the opening of a new branch) or unanticipated production difficulties.
- Work is mainly office-based with a balance between individual computer work and regular team contact.
- There are no real opportunities for self-employment or freelance work unless you set up as a retail consultant.
- It can be difficult to get part-time work because of the need to be available daily in case of problems with suppliers. Some companies may offer flexible working hours.
- Gender balance within the occupation is around 50:50 in products such as homewares, electrical and groceries, but this can increase to 90% female in fashion.
- Merchandising can vary in different retail organisations and it can be a head office or a branch-based function. However, most retail merchandisers normally work from head offices, the majority of which are in London and the South East. Some opportunities exist in other areas (e.g. Matalan in the North West, Asda in West Yorkshire).
- Dress code depends upon the company, but is usually formal.
- Merchandising is fast-moving, competitive and target-orientated.
- The work involves high levels of responsibility - you could be in charge of anything from a £5million to a £50million budget and even minor errors can result in vast reductions in profit. This aspect can either be a challenge or a source of stress.
- The work can occasionally involve travel during the day, as you may be required to go on store visits, or to supplier meetings and trade fairs or fashion shows. This may involve a stay away from home, within the UK.
- There can occasionally be opportunities for overseas travel, particularly in fashion, as you may be required to accompany buyers to the Far East, Latin America or South East Asia, depending on the product range.

Entry Requirements

Although this profession is open to all graduates, a degree in the following subjects may increase your chances:

- business/management;
- accountancy and finance;
- economics;
- marketing;
- mathematics/statistics.

Many companies prefer to recruit graduates from business-related or maths-based degrees, but others will consider graduates from any discipline as long as they have the necessary skills.

This profession is also open to all Diplomates, but the following HND subjects may increase your chances:

- accounting/finance;
- business/management;
- transport/distribution/logistics.

Entry without a degree or HND is possible, for candidates who have studied relevant GNVQ Advanced courses.

A postgraduate qualification is not needed, although there are relevant postgraduate courses available. There are relatively few graduate training schemes for merchandising, although some buying/trading schemes include merchandising as one of the specialisms.

Pre-entry work experience is highly desirable. Experience of office work coupled with some retail experience of the major high street operators, which demonstrates both evidence of an interest in retailing and an understanding of stock control levels, will be advantageous.

Potential candidates will need to show evidence of the following:

- strong analytical and good numerical skills, and commercial awareness;
- the ability to keep a cool head under pressure, to quickly identify problems and recommend solutions;
- sound decision-making skills;
- the ability to plan and prioritise;
- good communication and negotiation skills;
- computer literacy;
- aptitude for teamwork;
- self-confidence.

When investigating merchandising vacancies, read employer brochures carefully to ensure you understand that particular employer's own definition of the role as the role can vary greatly between companies.

Competition for entry is moderate to high. Most graduates will need to apply directly for entry-level posts, usually as an allocator, distributor or merchandise administrative assistant (MAA). However, it is advisable to make speculative applications to the head office of your chosen employer's merchandising department.

Although it is illegal to discriminate against candidates on age grounds, fashion retailers tend to select younger trainees. Mature entrants require relevant retail experience to overcome this problem. However, some companies do place particular value on relevant experience, good people skills and maturity. For more information on equality and diversity in the job market and how to handle discrimination see the AGCAS publication, Handling Discrimination (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/discrimination).

Training

Training for retail merchandisers is largely on the job and competency-based, and usually involves working towards specific set tasks and undertaking projects, either individually or as part of a larger team. Most retail companies will have a training scheme. This will vary according to employer, but may include courses on system training, consumer behaviour, assertiveness, time management, negotiation and communication.

There are a number of courses that can be taken in merchandising prior to entry including: short courses in Fashion Merchandising at the London College of Fashion; MSc level courses at Glasgow Caledonian University, Heriot-Watt University and Manchester Metropolitan University; and MPhil and PhD level qualifications through the University of Manchester.

A number of further education colleges offer focused courses such as retail display and merchandising whilst the British Shops and Stores Association (BSSA) (www.british-shops.co.uk) offers a distance-learning foundation course in buying/merchandising for people working in the field.

The Fashion Retail Academy (www.fashionretailacademy.ac.uk) is a recent initiative set up to support those wishing to embark on a career in fashion retail. The Academy offers the Level 2 and 3 Diploma in Fashion Retail, both of which are one-year courses. Students study all aspects of fashion retail including store management, customer service, visual merchandising, buying, design, technology, IT and marketing. Training provides a combination of retail business and fashion education and aims to introduce students to all of the practical and vocational skills needed for the challenging and fast-paced world of fashion retail. Training involves teaching, work placements and industry master classes. Competition is high for places on these courses and previous relevant work experience is advised.

Career Development

The entry point can vary from company to company and will depend on relevant experience and qualifications. Usually, new entrants begin as allocators, distributors, or merchandise administrative assistants (MAA).

There is a clear career development path in merchandising. Companies often have a competency development programme in place, laying out a set of competencies that have to be achieved in order to qualify for the next level and gain promotion. The next level after working as an MAA is assistant merchandiser (in some companies, there is a level in between this as senior allocator/senior distributor). It is common to remain at assistant level for a couple of years before promotion to merchandiser and then to senior merchandiser. For those interested in management, it is possible to work up to merchandise manager, then on to head of merchandising and then merchandising director. These roles will be head-office based.

Career development can be rapid, but speed of progression is dependent upon performance and down to the individual. You could be responsible for sales and budgetary control of a multimillion-pound department, managing a team of people within four to five years. It is typical to have reached senior merchandiser level within seven to eight years.

It is usual for a merchandiser to specialise in a certain product area, such as homewares, food or fashion, but skills are transferable between products, although moving between areas within a company (from merchandising to buying, for example) is not always very easy. It is also possible to move sideways into a business analyst role.

Typical Employers

Retailing is the UK's largest employment sector outside the public sector, employing 11% of all workers (2.7million people), with an annual turnover of £260billion.

The types of employers most likely to recruit retail merchandisers include:

- fashion retailers;
- department stores;
- multiple high street chain stores;
- supermarkets;
- chain fast food/sandwich shops;
- larger independent high-street retailers;
- wholesale suppliers;
- manufacturers;
- mail order companies;
- internet shopping providers.

Merchandisers tend to work in head offices, many of which are based in London and the South East. For further details, see The Retail Directory of the UK (www.theretaildirectory.co.uk).

There are also opportunities to work abroad, particularly with retail firms which have international outlets.

Sources of Vacancies

- The Appointment (www.theappointment.co.uk) (monthly);
- Drapers (www.drapersonline.com) (weekly);
- Retail Week (www.retail-week.com) (weekly);
- InRetail (www.inretail.co.uk);
- Retail Careers (www.retailcareers.co.uk);
- Retail Moves (www.retailmoves.com/);
- Retail Choice (www.retailchoice.com).

Fashion and retail recruitment agencies frequently handle merchandising vacancies, for example:

- Success Jobs (www.successjobs.co.uk);
- Retail Human Resources (www.retailhumanresources.com);
- Fashion and Retail Personnel (www.fashionpersonnel.co.uk);
- Talisman Retail (www.talismanretail.co.uk).

Related Occupations

- Cash and carry manager
- Logistics and distribution manager
- Market researcher (qualitative/quantitative)
- Operational researcher
- Quality manager
- Retail buyer
- Retail manager
- Sales executive

Information Sources

Bibliography

AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services.

AGCAS Publications

[Fashion and Textile Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing

[Handling Discrimination](#), AGCAS Information Booklet

[Options with Accountancy and Finance](#), AGCAS Options Series

[Options with Business Studies](#), AGCAS Options Series

[Retail Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing

Other Publications

[The Appointment](#), The Appointment Ltd, Fortnightly

[Contemporary Visual Merchandising and Environmental Design](#), [Prentice Hall](#), 2007

[Drapers](#), EMAP Retail, Weekly

[Mastering Fashion Buying and Merchandising Management](#), [Palgrave Macmillan](#), Nov 2000

[Retail Desire: Design, Display and the Art of the Visual Merchandiser](#), [RotoVision](#), Feb 2005

[The Retail Directory of the UK](#), Hemming Information Services, Annual

[Retail Marketing](#), [Thomson Learning](#), 2002

[Retail Week](#), EMAP Communications, Weekly

Websites

[Fashion Retail Academy](#), www.fashionretailacademy.ac.uk

[Fashion and Retail Personnel](#), www.fashionpersonnel.co.uk

[InRetail](#), www.inretail.co.uk

[Manchester Fashion Network](#), www.manchesterfashion.com

[Retail Careers](#), www.retailcareers.co.uk

[Retail Choice](#), www.retailchoice.com

[Retail Human Resources](#), www.retailhumanresources.com

[Retail Moves](#), www.retailmoves.com/

[Retail and Shopping Centre Directory](#), www.grocerdirectories.co.uk/home/home.aspx

[Success Jobs](#), www.successjobs.co.uk

[Talisman Retail](#), www.talismanretail.co.uk

Addresses

[British Retail Consortium](#), 2nd Floor, 21 Dartmouth Street, London SW1H 9BP Tel: 020 7854 8900 URL: www.brc.org.uk

[British Shops and Stores Association \(BSSA\)](#), Middleton House, 2 Main Road, Middleton Cheney, Banbury, Oxon OX17 2TN Tel: 01295 712277 URL: www.british-shops.co.uk

[Chartered Institute of Marketing \(CIM\)](#), Moor Hall, Cookham, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 9QH Tel: 01628 427500 URL: www.cim.co.uk

[Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply \(CIPS\)](#), Easton House, Church Street, Easton on the Hill, Stamford, Lincolnshire PE9 3NZ Tel: 01780 756777 URL: www.cips.org

[Institute of Sales & Marketing Management \(ISMM\)](#), Harrier Court, Lower Woodside, Bedfordshire LU1 4DQ Tel: 01582 840001 URL: www.ismm.co.uk

[Skillsmart Retail: The Sector Skills Council for Retail](#), 4th Floor, 93 Newman Street, London W1T 3EZ Tel: 020 746 5060 URL: www.skillsmartretail.com