12-Point Factory Audit Checklist

The twelve things a factory walkthrough has to show on camera — and the four a scripted tour cannot fake

Version 1.0 · 17 September 2026 · Built from the checks we run before a programme is placed

---

Why this document exists

Machine count tells you very little. A factory with forty injection moulders can still ship a container with mismatched hardware, because equipment is capital and a quality system is a habit.

A quality system is visible in records, not in equipment: lot files, sampling plans, in-process sheets, corrective-action logs, a signed golden sample, a calibration sticker. Those things exist whether or not anyone tidies up for you.

This is the order we ask for them on a live video walkthrough — on a working day, during a shift, without telling the factory which line they will be shown.

1 · Three checks to run from your desk, before any call

1. **Look up the certificate number.** A quality management certificate is a claim until you verify it against the issuing body's register — number, scope and expiry, and the exact legal entity. Certificates that do not hold up are a documented problem: a peer-reviewed study of quality managers, consultants and auditors, published in *Business Horizons* in **2018**, found faked ISO 9001 certificates to be widespread in the industry it sampled, and recommended that buyers verify rather than trust. That is that study's conclusion about its own sample, and the practical point here is narrow: **the register, not the framed copy, is the evidence.**
2. **Look up the export record.** Customs-trade data platforms show shipment history by supplier and product category. Coverage varies by market and the free tiers are thin, so treat it as a directional check: does this factory ship the category you are buying, to the markets you sell in?
3. **Read the brands' reviews — and work backwards.** Public consumer reviews cluster on wheels, zips and handles. Where a brand's complaints repeat, the factory behind it produced that. You are not auditing the factory; you are auditing its output, as experienced by people who paid for it.

2 · The twelve points to photograph on a video walkthrough

Send the list **ahead** of the walkthrough. A factory that objects to the list has told you something. A factory that prepares for it has told you something better. Then ask to see these twelve things on camera.

#	Point	Ask to see
1	QMS certificate	The certificate itself, its number, its scope and its expiry date
2	Incoming records	The last month of shell-material and hardware lot records
3	Sampling plan	Lot size, sample size and acceptance number, in writing
4	In-process checks	A filled-in sheet from the shift that is running now

5	Final inspection	The bench in operation, with reject bins visible
6	Corrective actions	The log — any page — with root cause and closure recorded
7	Traceability	Wheel and zipper cartons showing supplier and lot
8	Calibration	Measuring equipment with a current sticker or log entry
9	Golden sample	The signed, dated approved sample held on site
10	Defect library	Physical or photographic rejects, with the defect named
11	Test capability	In-house rigs, or the last third-party report with the lab named
12	The QC owner	The person who can stop the line, on camera, saying so

Four of these decide the visit

Points 1, 6, 9 and 10. If these are refused, deferred or fudged, stop there. A working quality system cannot function without a verifiable certificate, a corrective-action log, a signed golden sample and a defect library — because those four are how the factory itself knows what "wrong" means.

Twelve points, twelve chances for a scripted tour to fall apart. The value of the list is not the twelve answers; it is that a rehearsed tour cannot hold twelve answers together.

3 · Scoring what you saw

Score each point against what a working system looks like, not against whether the factory was pleasant to deal with. A document shown on request is not the same as a document in use.

#	Point	1 — Absent	2 — Present	3 — Working
1	QMS certificate	Cannot produce it	Certificate shown, register not checked	Number, scope and entity verified on the register
2	Incoming records	No lot files	Records exist, not current	Current, with disposition recorded per lot
3	Sampling plan	Verbal only	A written plan exists	Plan matches the lots and the acceptance numbers are applied
4	In-process checks	No sheets	Sheets exist, blank or back-filled	Completed live, signed, by the operator
5	Final inspection	Claims 100% check, no bench	A bench exists	Bench running, rejects segregated and counted
6	Corrective actions	No log	Log exists, entries open	Root cause and closure recorded per issue
7	Traceability	Cannot trace components	Partial lot marking	Component lot traceable to the finished unit
8	Calibration	No records	Some stickers	Current, with a schedule and a named owner
9	Golden sample	None on site	An unsigned sample	Signed, dated, and used at the line as reference

10	Defect library	None	Photographs only	Physical rejects with defect names and limits
11	Test capability	Neither rigs nor reports	Reports older than a year	Relevant rigs in use, or a recent report covering your product
12	The QC owner	Quality is everyone's job	A QC manager exists	A named person can stop the line, and has

How to read the total. Anything scoring 1 on points 1, 6, 9 or 10 is a stop, whatever the rest of the card says. Scores of 2 across the board describe a factory that can pass an audit and still ship you a problem — the system exists on paper and is not yet load-bearing.

4 · The questions that do the real work

- **"Which component fails most often on your line, and what did you change last year because of it?"** A factory with data answers in numbers and names the change. A factory without data answers in adjectives.
- **"Who can stop the line, and who did they stop it for last month?"** Authority that has never been exercised is authority that does not exist.
- **"Which defects did you catch at final inspection last month that in-process did not?"** The answer tells you how much of the quality system is real and how much is the last gate doing the work.
- **"Can I see the corrective-action log for a problem that came from a customer?"** Customer-driven entries are the ones a show-audit never prepares.

Red flags, in the order they matter: the golden sample cannot be produced; sampling is described but never written down; the certificate's scope does not include your product category; the walkthrough is offered on a non-production day; the factory asks which line you want to see.

5 · After the walkthrough

1. **Run the three desk checks before you spend a minute on a call.** Certificate register, export record, public reviews.
2. **Make the audit provisional.** A walkthrough is evidence about intent, not about your order. What you enforce is the specification, the acceptance criteria and the inspection plan.
3. **Write quality into the commercial documents.** Attach the acceptance criteria and the inspection plan to the purchase order. An audit finding that is not in a contract is a conversation.
4. **Book the inspection before you book the container.** A final inspection you can act on has to happen while the goods are still in the factory's hands.
5. **Re-run this card at the second order.** The first order gets the A-team. The card is worth more on order two, and worth most on the order that follows a change of line, shift or subcontractor.

A note on what this is not. This checklist evaluates a factory's quality system; it does not certify it, and it is not a substitute for a commissioned third-party audit or for a legally reviewed supply agreement. Scores are a record of what was seen on one day. The study cited in section 1 is referenced by publication and year — it is that study's conclusion about its own sample, not a claim about any named company. Where a management standard is mentioned, confirm the current edition with the issuing body or your certification partner before you rely on it.