How I Vet a Corrugated Manufacturer

After visiting 40+ corrugated plants and auditing hundreds more remotely, here is the exact 7-point checklist my team uses.

☐ 1. Mill Certificates (Not Converter Certificates)

Ask for mill test reports for the linerboard and medium, not just the finished box. The mill certificate tells you the actual basis weight, ECT, burst strength, and moisture content of the raw materials. The converter's finished-box certificate often just repeats the order specification.

☐ 2. In-House Testing Lab

A manufacturer with an in-house lab running daily ECT, BCT, and moisture content tests is in a different league from one that sends samples out quarterly. I reject any supplier that can't produce test data from the past 7 days of production.

☐ 3. Corrugator Age and Maintenance Logs

The corrugator is the heart of the plant. A well-maintained 15-year-old BHS or Fosber will outperform a neglected 5-year-old machine. Ask for maintenance logs. Look for records of roll changes, steam pressure calibration, and glue gap adjustments. No logs? Walk away.

☐ 4. Moisture Control Protocol

Humidity kills corrugated. Every plant I trust has a temperature- and humidity-controlled raw material warehouse and a moisture meter on the corrugator line — not just at final QC. Ask: "What was your average incoming liner moisture this morning?" If they can't answer, they're not measuring.

☐ 5. Score Line Quality

Score lines are where boxes fold — and where they fail. Too shallow, and the box is hard to fold. Too deep, and the liner tears. I inspect score lines with a thickness gauge on every first-article sample. The score residual thickness should be 45-55% of the original board thickness. Outside that range, I reject.

☐ 6. Minimum Order Quantity (MOQ)

The published MOQ is the starting position. In my experience, if you order during the plant's slow season and pay 50% upfront, many manufacturers will accept 60-70% of the stated MOQ. I've successfully negotiated a 5,000-unit MOQ down to 3,000 during the January-February lull. It never hurts to ask.

☐ 7. Lead Time and On-Time Delivery Rate

A factory that consistently delivers late costs you more than a factory that charges 10% more per unit. I track on-time delivery rates across all my suppliers and drop anyone who falls below 90% over a rolling 12-month period. I've dropped three suppliers for this reason in the last two years.

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