

Bridging Cultures and Trends: An Insider Look into Retail Buying at RALNEWYORK

RALNEWYORK



I had the privilege of interviewing **Rachel Adeola-Lawal**, a retail buyer for RAL New York, a prominent streetwear brand with roots in both Nigeria and New York. Rachel's role at RAL New York is critical as she bridges the gap between fashion trends and the market demands. RAL New York is located in the heart of Manhattan and focuses on unique, culturally inspired streetwear that appeals to a diverse urban clientele. The brand is known for its vibrant, contemporary designs that merge Nigerian heritage with New York street culture, creating a unique fashion statement.

Interview:

What does you buy (category-categories) of merchandise? I buy a diverse range of merchandise including apparel, accessories, and footwear, all specifically tailored for the streetwear market. Our apparel line features a mix of graphic tees, hoodies, jackets, and denim that resonate with the urban culture and our brand's aesthetic. Our accessories include caps, beanies, and backpacks, while our footwear range focuses on trendy sneakers and boots. Each category is selected with an eye for blending contemporary fashion trends with traditional Nigerian elements, ensuring our products stand out in the crowded market.

From whom do you buy the merchandise? I source products from a variety of vendors, both local and international. Domestically, I work with well-established suppliers in New York and Los Angeles who have a keen understanding of the streetwear scene. Internationally, I collaborate with manufacturers in Nigeria, who provide unique, culturally inspired pieces, as well as suppliers in Japan and Italy known for their high-quality materials and craftsmanship. These partnerships allow us to maintain a diverse and eclectic inventory that appeals to our wide customer base.

In what markets do you buy the merchandise? USA - where? Abroad - where? Do you purchase merchandise via the internet? In the USA, I primarily purchase from markets in New York and Los Angeles, where the fashion scenes are vibrant and ever-evolving. Abroad, I focus on Nigeria, Japan, and Italy. In Nigeria, I find



“The Triple R (RRR) embodies a symbol of rebellion...

...Signifying a departure from conventional styles and norms while embracing a bold, non-conformist approach.”

culturally rich pieces that add authenticity to our brand. Japan offers cutting-edge streetwear trends, while Italy provides high-quality, luxurious fabrics and craftsmanship. Additionally, I frequently use online platforms to discover emerging designers and trends from around the world, ensuring our collections are always fresh and relevant.

How do you determine what to buy? I determine what to buy through a meticulous process that involves multiple sources of information. I rely heavily on fashion reports and trend forecasting services to identify upcoming trends and consumer preferences. Social media analytics play a crucial role, as platforms like Instagram and TikTok offer real-time insights into what influencers and trendsetters are wearing. Additionally, I attend fashion shows and trade fairs to get firsthand exposure to new collections and ideas. Customer feedback is another vital source of information; listening to our customers helps me understand their needs and preferences, ensuring our selections resonate with them.

How is your open-to-buy determined? By whom? Who okays it? The open-to-buy (OTB) budget is a collaborative effort involving multiple departments. It is initially determined by the finance department based on projected sales, inventory levels, and financial goals. Once the OTB is calculated, it requires approval from senior management, including the CEO and the head of merchandising. This process ensures that we stay within budget while making strategic purchasing decisions that align with our overall business objectives.

How often do you buy? How far ahead of the retail selling season? I make purchases quarterly, typically six months ahead of the retail selling season. This advanced planning allows us to secure the best pieces and ensure timely delivery. It also provides enough time for any necessary modifications or adjustments to the merchandise, ensuring everything is perfect by the time it hits the shelves.



-- Rebellion of the Triple R

Do you buy only from manufacturers' open lines, or do you create some of her own merchandise? What is the percentage of each? About 70% of our inventory comes from established manufacturers' open lines. These are tried-and-tested products that we know our customers will love. The remaining 30% is designed in collaboration with local designers to create exclusive pieces unique to RAL New York. These collaborations allow us to infuse our collections with fresh, innovative designs that set us apart from competitors.

Does your opinion alone determine what to buy? How many others are consulted? While I have significant influence over purchasing decisions, the process is highly collaborative. I consult with the design team to ensure the merchandise aligns with our brand's aesthetic and vision. The marketing department provides insights into market trends and consumer preferences, while senior executives offer strategic guidance. This collaborative approach ensures that our selections are well-rounded and strategically sound.

To whom do you report? What is your line of supervision upwards? I report directly to the Chief Merchandising Officer (CMO). This reporting structure ensures that my decisions are aligned with the company's overall strategic goals and allows for a streamlined decision-making process. The CMO provides oversight and guidance, ensuring that our purchasing strategies are effective and aligned with the company's vision.

How many people on an average report to you? Do you supervise? What are the areas of supervision? I supervise a team of six, which includes assistant buyers and merchandise planners. My supervision covers the entire procurement process,

from selecting and ordering merchandise to managing inventory and vendor relationships. I ensure that my team is well-coordinated and that all tasks are completed efficiently and accurately.

Do you run a department? Does she/he have customer contact? How often? How are you involved with customer returns or complaints? Yes, I run the buying department and have regular customer contact, especially during product launches and promotional events. I believe in staying connected with our customers to understand their needs and preferences. I handle customer feedback and complaints personally, ensuring that any issues with the merchandise are resolved promptly and to the customer's satisfaction. This hands-on approach helps us maintain a strong relationship with our customers and improves our service quality.

Do you determine the retail price of the merchandise? On what formula(s)? Yes, I determine the retail price of the merchandise using a cost-plus pricing strategy. This involves calculating the cost of goods, adding a markup to cover overhead and desired profit margins, and considering competitive pricing to ensure our products are marketable. I also take into account factors such as perceived value and customer willingness to pay to set prices that reflect the brand's premium positioning.

How do you keep track of sales? How do you determine the success or failure of items purchased? Sales tracking is an ongoing process that involves analyzing weekly sales reports, monitoring inventory levels, and evaluating customer feedback. I use point-of-sale (POS) systems and advanced analytics tools to track sales data and identify trends. The success or failure of items is determined by comparing sales performance against projections, analyzing return rates, and assessing overall customer satisfaction. This data-driven approach helps me make informed decisions about future purchases and inventory management

Explain your paperwork in general. My paperwork includes a range of documents essential for the procurement process. This includes purchase orders, which detail the items ordered, quantities, and prices agreed upon with vendors. Sales reports provide insights into product performance, while inventory management records track stock levels and reorder points. I also handle vendor communications, which include contracts, payment terms, and delivery schedules. Keeping all this documentation organized is crucial for maintaining smooth operations and ensuring accountability.

What is your relationship to: sales training, advertising, the fashion department, display department and public relations? I maintain close relationships with the sales training, advertising, fashion, display, and public relations departments. Coordination with sales training ensures that our sales team is knowledgeable about new products and can effectively communicate their features to customers. Working with the advertising department helps us create compelling marketing campaigns that drive sales. Collaboration with the fashion department ensures that our merchandise aligns with the latest trends and our brand's aesthetic. The display department assists in creating attractive in-store presentations, while the public relations team helps in promoting our brand and products through various media channels.

What vendor services are available? Which ones do you take advantage of? Vendor services available to us include exclusive previews of new collections, extended payment terms, and promotional support. I take full advantage of these services to secure the best deals and support from our suppliers. Exclusive previews allow us to get early access to new designs, while extended payment terms help manage our cash flow. Promotional support from vendors enhances our marketing efforts and boosts product visibility.

Any other pertinent duties or responsibilities in your job description? Besides the primary buying responsibilities, I am also involved in trend analysis, vendor negotiations, and ensuring timely delivery of merchandise. I attend trade shows and fashion events to stay updated on the latest trends and network with industry professionals. Negotiating with vendors is crucial to securing favorable terms and maintaining good relationships. Ensuring timely delivery involves coordinating with logistics and supply chain teams to avoid any disruptions in our inventory flow.

Does you plan on remaining a buyer, or are you looking to go into another area of the fashion industry? Any possible promotion? I aspire to eventually move into a broader merchandising role or a senior executive position within the fashion industry. I am always looking for opportunities to grow and take on new challenges within the company. Potential promotions could include roles such as Director of Merchandising or even Chief Merchandising Officer, where I could have a more significant impact on the company's overall strategy and direction.

What are the major advantages and disadvantages of your job? One of the major advantages of my job is the opportunity to travel and stay at the forefront of fashion trends. Traveling to various markets and attending fashion events allows me to discover new designs and gain inspiration. However, a significant disadvantage is the high-pressure environment and the constant need to adapt to market changes and consumer preferences. The fast-paced nature of the fashion industry requires resilience and the ability to make quick, informed decisions.

What advice do you have for fashion merchandising students? My advice to fashion merchandising students is to gain as much practical experience as possible, stay informed about industry trends, and build strong networks

Bonus Questions

How do you handle sourcing sustainable or ethically produced merchandise? Sustainability and ethical production are becoming increasingly important in the fashion industry. At RAL New York, I prioritize working with vendors who adhere to sustainable practices and ethical labor standards. I conduct thorough research and due diligence to ensure that our suppliers meet these criteria. This includes looking for certifications such as Fair Trade, Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), and others. By incorporating sustainable and ethically produced merchandise, we not only meet the growing consumer demand for responsible fashion but also contribute positively to the environment and society.

How do you stay ahead of competitors in such a fast-paced industry? Staying ahead of competitors requires a proactive approach. I constantly monitor market trends, attend fashion shows, and network with industry professionals to stay updated on the latest developments. Utilizing advanced analytics tools helps me gain insights into consumer behavior and preferences, allowing us to anticipate trends and adjust our strategies accordingly. Additionally, fostering strong relationships with suppliers and designers gives us access to exclusive products and collaborations that set us apart from our competitors.

What strategies do you use to manage and reduce excess inventory? Managing and reducing excess inventory is crucial for maintaining profitability. I employ several strategies to address this challenge. First, accurate sales forecasting and demand planning help minimize overstocking. Second, implementing a markdown strategy for slow-moving items ensures that excess inventory is sold off at a reduced price before it becomes obsolete. Third, I explore alternative sales channels such as online marketplaces, outlet stores, and pop-up shops to move excess stock. Finally, collaborating with marketing and sales teams to create targeted promotions and clearance events helps in effectively managing excess inventory.

How do you balance the need for trendy items with classic staples in your buying decisions? Balancing trendy items with classic staples is key to maintaining a well-rounded product assortment. Trendy items attract fashion-forward customers and create buzz, while classic staples ensure consistent sales and appeal to a broader audience. I achieve this balance by dedicating a portion of the budget to trendy, seasonal items and allocating the rest to timeless pieces that are always in demand. Regularly reviewing sales data and customer feedback helps me adjust this mix as needed, ensuring that we meet the diverse preferences of our customer base.

Can you describe a time when a purchasing decision didn't go as planned? What did you learn from the experience? One memorable instance was when we invested heavily in a line of graphic tees that were trending on social media. Despite the initial hype, the sales were significantly lower than expected. This taught me the importance of thorough market research and not relying solely on social media trends. I learned to cross-verify trends with other data sources, such as sales history, customer feedback, and broader market analysis. This experience underscored the need for a balanced approach in decision-making and the importance of being prepared to pivot quickly when things don't go as planned.

Summary:

In my interview with Rachel Adeola-Lawal from RAL New York, I gained valuable insights into the complex and dynamic role of a retail buyer. Rachel's expertise in sourcing merchandise from both local and international markets, her strategic decision-making process, and her ability to collaborate with various departments demonstrate the multifaceted nature of her job. She is instrumental in shaping the product offerings of RAL New York, ensuring that the brand remains relevant and competitive in the streetwear market. Rachel's passion for fashion and her dedication to her role are evident, making her a potential mentor for anyone aspiring to enter the fashion merchandising field. Her advice to stay informed, network, and gain practical experience is crucial for success in this fast-paced industry.