Before You Place the Order

Choosing Your Products, Building Your Retail Shelf, and Buying with Confidence

A GUIDE FOR ESTHETICIANS WHO WANT TO MAKE INFORMED PRODUCT DECISIONS AND BUILD A PRODUCT COLLECTION THAT WORKS FOR THEIR PRACTICE.

INTRODUCTION

The Decision School Doesn’t Teach

Most estheticians choose a product line the way clients choose a serum: a friend recommended it, the sample felt great, or a rep made it all sound easy. Then the boxes arrive. Some of what’s inside gets used every day. Some of it sits in the back of a cabinet until the date on the bottom stops making sense.

Product is one of the biggest financial decisions in an esthetics business, and one of the least taught. School covers what ingredients do and how to use them in a treatment. It rarely covers how to decide what to buy, how much, from whom, and what to do when something isn’t moving.

This guide walks through that decision in seven parts, from building your list to asking the right questions to keeping inventory under control once it’s on your shelf. It works whether you’re setting up your first treatment room, taking a hard look at the shelf you already have, or changing lines because your current one is going away.

The goal is simple: carry what your clients actually need, use up what you buy, and keep your money working for you instead of sitting in a drawer.

At the end you’ll find a **Product Line Scorecard** for comparing companies side by side and a **Before You Place the Order checklist** to run through before any opening order or major reorder.

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SECTION ONE

Start With Your Menu, Not the Catalog

A product catalog is built to make you want everything. Every page has a reason the product is essential. If you start there, your list will grow to match the catalog instead of your business.

Start with your service menu instead. Write down every service you offer (or plan to offer) and the steps in each one. Next to each step, write the job a product has to do there: cleanse, exfoliate, treat, mask, massage, hydrate, protect. That list of jobs is your backbar.

Then look at who you serve. What are the three concerns you see most often, or expect to? Dehydration, breakouts, uneven tone, sensitivity, early aging? Your retail shelf should follow those concerns, not the full range a company sells.

Your focus matters here too. An esthetician who specializes in acne needs depth in clarifying products and gentle hydration. One who focuses on relaxing, results-driven facials for mature skin needs something very different. Neither needs everything.

> **Try This**
>
> Write down your top three services and your top three client concerns.
>
> Any product that doesn't serve at least one of them waits. You can always add it later, when a real client gives you a real reason.

A note on your setting. If you rent a suite or room, storage space is part of this decision: you may not have room for gallon sizes or a deep retail wall. If you work for a spa that chooses the line, you still have a say. Knowing what your clients need puts you in a good position to ask for it.

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SECTION TWO

Backbar and Retail Are Two Different Jobs

It's easy to think of your products as one collection. They aren't. Backbar and retail are judged by different standards, and a product that's excellent in one place can be a poor fit for the other.

What makes a good backbar product

- **Performance in your hands.** How it spreads, how much slip it has, how cleanly it removes, how it smells to someone lying still for an hour.
- **Cost per use.** Professional sizes should bring the cost of each application well below what the same product costs in retail size. (Section Six shows how to figure this out.)
- **Versatility.** A mask or serum you can use across several services earns its place faster than one that fits a single treatment.
- **Professional sizes that exist.** Some lines are retail-first and offer few true backbar sizes. Using retail bottles in treatments gets expensive fast.

What makes a good retail product

- **Clients will actually use it correctly.** Clear directions, a routine that fits real life, and no guesswork about what goes first.
- **The price fits the people you serve.** A beautiful product your clients can't afford to repurchase won't move, no matter how good it is.
- **Packaging that suits the formula.** Pumps and airless dispensers may suit some formulas, but packaging choice depends on the formula, container design, and manufacturer's guidance.
- **It continues what you started.** Home care should support the results of the treatment, not compete with them.

Let your backbar lead your retail

Your strongest retail products usually start on your backbar. When clients feel a product on their skin during a treatment, they've already tried it. Recommending it afterward isn't a sales pitch; it's telling them what you just used and why.

That doesn't mean every backbar product needs a retail match. Professional-strength exfoliants and peels belong in the treatment room only, and your state's rules on what you can use and at what strength come first. Check your state board's scope of practice before adding any corrective product to your menu.

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SECTION THREE

Start Lean

One of the most common opening-order mistakes is trying to be prepared for every client who might ever walk through the door. It feels responsible to have a product for every skin type and concern. In practice, it can leave you with shelves full of products you rarely use and money tied up in inventory that may expire before you need it.

Instead, build your backbar around the services you offer and the clients you expect to serve. Start with the essential jobs your products need to do, then select the smallest assortment that lets you perform those services effectively and safely. A lean starting collection might include:

Function	Lean starting point	Notes
Cleanse	One or two cleansers	Choose for the clients you serve and the treatments you perform. Add a balm or oil if your services regularly require it.
Prep	One appropriate prep product	Select according to your treatment protocols and the products used in the next steps.
Exfoliate	One or two options, if needed	Choose products suited to your services, client needs, training, and scope of practice.
Treat	A small selection of serums or treatment products	Prioritize the concerns you see most often rather than trying to cover every possible condition.
Mask	One or two complementary options	Choose based on the needs your services commonly address.
Massage	One suitable massage medium, if needed	Consider slip, removal, compatibility with the treatment, and client sensitivities.
Moisturize	One or two appropriate moisturizers	Choose products that meet the needs of the clients you serve.
Eye	Optional, if your menu calls for it	Add an eye product only when it serves a clear purpose in your services or home-care recommendations.
Protect	An appropriate broad-spectrum sunscreen for daytime services	Follow the product's directions and your treatment protocols.

This is an example, not a required shopping list. Your menu, training, client population, and the manufacturer's protocols will determine what belongs in your backbar. Some estheticians will need fewer products; others will need additional options for specialized services.

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Retail: start with the routine, not the range

For retail, begin with the products that help clients maintain an appropriate home-care routine. Depending on your clientele, that might mean a cleanser, moisturizer, treatment product, and sunscreen. You don't need to stock every product in every category from the beginning. Start with a limited number of units, pay attention to what clients actually purchase and repurchase, and expand when demand gives you a reason to do so.

Watch the opening minimum

Some companies require a minimum opening order, and the amount may be substantial for a new or small practice. Before committing, ask whether a starter package or smaller initial order is available. If meeting the minimum requires purchasing products you don't need, won't use, or cannot reasonably sell, reconsider whether the line fits your business. A lower initial investment in the right products may serve you better than a larger assortment purchased simply to qualify for an account.

Keep in Mind

Inventory you can't use isn't an asset. It's cash sitting on a shelf with an expiration date.

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SECTION FOUR

Questions to Ask Before You Sign

A good company answers these questions easily and puts the answers in writing. If you get vague replies or a lot of pressure to decide quickly, take note.

Money and terms

- What is the opening order minimum? What is the minimum for reorders?
- Are there annual purchase requirements to keep your account active or keep your pricing?
- What is the suggested retail price, and what will your actual gross margin be at that price? Don't assume that every line uses the same wholesale-to-retail markup.
- Is there a minimum advertised price (MAP) policy, and how is it enforced?
- What does shipping cost, and is there a free-shipping threshold?

Product and safety

- Are full ingredient lists available for every product, including backbar sizes?
- Regulatory information: Can the company explain how it meets the cosmetic requirements that apply to its products and business? If applicable, who is responsible for facility registration and product listing? Consult the FDA's cosmetics registration and listing guidance for current information.
- What is the shelf life unopened, and after opening? Does every product carry a batch code?
- How do they handle shipping in extreme heat or cold?

Training and support

- What training comes with the line, both at the start and ongoing? Are treatment protocols included?
- Are testers and samples provided, and are they free or charged?
- Is there a real person you can reach when you have a question or a client reaction?

Distribution

- Where else is the line sold? Drugstores, big-box stores, online marketplaces?
- What does the company do about diversion (professional products showing up on third-party sites, often at lower prices and sometimes past their date)?
- Is there any territory protection, so another business down the street isn't carrying the same line?

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When something goes wrong

- What is the policy for damaged or incorrect shipments?
- How much notice do they give when a product is discontinued?
- Will they exchange slow-moving or short-dated stock?
- If you decide to leave the line, are there contract obligations or unsold inventory you're responsible for?

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SECTION FIVE

One Line or Several?

There's no single right answer here, but there are clear trade-offs.

Carrying one line

- **Works well for:** simpler ordering, one rep, one training, one set of minimums, and a consistent story for clients. Volume with one company can also mean better pricing.
- **The catch:** you live with that line's weak spots. Every company has categories it does better than others.

Carrying several

- **Works well for:** filling real gaps. One line may have an excellent sunscreen and a weak acne range.
- **The catch:** more minimums, more inventory, more to track, and a shelf that can be harder for clients to understand. You also have to think about how products from different companies work together on the same skin.

The middle path

Many estheticians do well with one primary line for the core of their treatments and retail, plus a single specialty product or line that fills a specific gap. The second line should earn its spot by doing something your primary line can't.

> **A Simple Test**
>
> Can you explain why your shelf looks the way it does in one sentence a client would understand?
>
> If you can, your product mix is probably working. If you can't, it may be time to simplify.

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SECTION SIX

Manage Inventory So It Doesn't Manage You

Buying well is half of it. The other half is knowing what you have, what it costs you, and when to reorder. None of this requires special software. A simple spreadsheet and a regular habit will do.

Know your product cost per service

Pricing a service without knowing what the products cost you is guessing. Here's how to figure it out for each backbar product:

> **Example**
>
> A 16 oz (about 473 ml) backbar cleanser costs $40 wholesale.
>
> You use about 4 ml per service.
>
> 473 ÷ 4 = about 118 services per bottle.
>
> $40 ÷ 118 = about $0.34 per service.
>
> *Do this for every product in a service and add them up. That total is your product cost for the treatment.*

Your numbers will be different. The point is to measure your own usage for a few treatments rather than estimate it.

Set a par level and a reorder point

Par level is how much of a product you want on hand. **Reorder point** is the amount left when it's time to order more: enough to cover what you'll use while the order ships, plus a cushion.

If you go through one cleanser every three weeks and shipping takes a week, reorder when you're down to about half a bottle. You won't run out mid-day, and you won't have three spares aging in the cabinet.

Rotate and date

- **First in, first out.** New stock goes behind older stock.
- **Write the open date on every product.** Then check it against the period-after-opening symbol (the small open-jar icon marked with a number and "M," such as 12M).

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- **Store products cool, dry, and out of direct sun.** Never in a hot car or garage. Vitamin C and retinoids are especially sensitive to heat, light, and air.
- **Watch for changes.** Separation, a new smell, or a shift in color or texture means the product shouldn't go on a client.

Pay attention to what sits

Count retail on a regular schedule; monthly is enough for most small businesses. If a product hasn't moved in about three months, ask why. Is it the wrong product for your clients, the wrong price, or simply one you never talk about? Then decide: start recommending it with intention, use it on the backbar if it fits, or stop reordering it.

A simple tracking sheet

Product	Size	Wholesale	Retail	On hand	Par	Reorder at	Date opened

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SECTION SEVEN

When You're Switching Lines

Sometimes the decision is made for you. A product is discontinued, a company closes or stops serving your area, or prices change enough that the line no longer works for your business. Other times the results just aren't there. Either way, a switch goes more smoothly with a plan.

Give yourself time

Don't wait until the shelf is empty. Start testing the new line while you still have enough of the old one to keep treatments consistent. Try products on yourself first, then on a model or a trusted client who knows what you're doing.

Map old to new

For each product you use now, find the closest match in the new line by function and key ingredients. Write down anything that has no equivalent. Those gaps tell you whether the new line truly fits or whether you'll need a second source for one or two items.

Talk to your retail clients early

Clients who rely on a product deserve to hear about the change from you, not discover it when they try to reorder. Tell them what's changing, what you recommend instead, and why. A sample of the replacement makes the switch easier.

Pay special attention to clients with sensitivities or past reactions. Check the new ingredient lists against what they've reacted to before, and patch test when there's any doubt.

Introduce new products gradually

Bring new products into treatments one or two at a time. If a client has a reaction, you'll know which product to look at.

Update your records

- Note in each client's file what they were using and what they moved to.
- Update treatment protocols, your service menu, and any website copy that names specific products.
- Use remaining backbar stock in services before it expires, rather than letting it sit as a backup you never reach for.

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CLOSING

Carry Less, Know It Well

No product line is perfect, and no shelf is ever finished. Clients change, your focus sharpens, companies come and go. What stays the same is the approach: start from what your clients need, buy what you'll use, ask good questions, and keep an eye on what's working.

The estheticians who handle product well aren't the ones with the biggest retail wall. They're the ones who know every product they carry, can explain why it's there, and use it up before it expires. That knowledge builds trust in the treatment room, and it keeps more money in your business.

Before your next order, take ten minutes with the checklist that follows. It's a small habit that pays for itself.

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WORKSHEET

Product Line Scorecard

Rate each line from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Use it to compare companies side by side, or to take an honest look at the line you carry now.

Criteria	Line A	Line B	Line C
Covers my top 3 services			
Addresses my top 3 client concerns			
True backbar sizes available			
Reasonable opening and reorder minimums			
Retail pricing fits my clients			
Full ingredient lists and batch codes			
Training and real support			
Protects professionals (MAP, diversion)			
Clear policies on damage, discontinuation, exchanges			
How the products perform in my hands			
TOTAL			

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Before You Place the Order

A checklist for opening orders, reorders, and line changes

Know What You Need

- ☐ I've listed every service and the product job at each step.
- ☐ I know my top three client concerns.
- ☐ Every product on my list serves a service or a concern.

Backbar and Retail

- ☐ Backbar products come in true professional sizes.
- ☐ Retail products fit my clients' budgets and routines.
- ☐ My retail continues what I do in the treatment room.
- ☐ Corrective products are within my state's scope of practice.

The Order Itself

- ☐ Each backbar job is covered by one or two products, not five.
- ☐ Retail starts with a basic routine, a few units each.
- ☐ I'm not buying anything just to meet a minimum.

Questions for the Company

- ☐ Minimums, pricing, MAP, and shipping are in writing.
- ☐ Full ingredient lists and batch codes are available.
- ☐ Training, samples, and support are clear.
- ☐ I know their policies on damage, discontinuation, and exchanges.
- ☐ I know where else the line is sold.

Once It Arrives

- ☐ I know my product cost per service.
- ☐ Par levels and reorder points are set.
- ☐ Products are dated, rotated, and stored cool and dry.
- ☐ I count retail monthly and act on what sits.

If I'm Switching

- ☐ I've mapped old products to new by function.
- ☐ Retail clients hear about the change from me first.
- ☐ I'm introducing new products one or two at a time.

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- [ ] Client records, protocols, and my menu are updated.

Explore more guides and checklists in the Esthetician Ease resource library.

This guide is for educational purposes. Always follow your state's regulations, your scope of practice, and each manufacturer's instructions.

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