

UK HIRING TRENDS:

FMCG CHALLENGER BRANDS

UK FMCG Challenger Brands: In the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, “challenger brands” refer to smaller, high-growth companies that are disrupting established markets. These businesses often have lean structures, rapid innovation cycles and aggressive growth agendas – all characteristics that distinguish them from large FMCG corporates. As the challenger segment matures, many are scaling up operations and making high-profile hires, especially in sales/commercial and marketing roles, to fuel their next growth phase. This report explores key hiring trends in 2025 for sales and marketing talent in UK-based FMCG challenger brands, using the PIE 2025 FMCG Salary Survey as a benchmark alongside wider market research.

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HIRING PRACTICES: EMERGING VS. ESTABLISHED CHALLENGERS

Emerging Challenger Brands (Start-ups & Small SMEs):

Younger brands often hire at pace. Recruitment is usually founder or network-led, with short interview cycles and sharp focus on cultural fit and adaptability. Early hires typically cover wide remits and need to be comfortable with ambiguity, autonomy and the realities of fast-growth environments. These firms value versatility, entrepreneurial mindset and passion for the brand's mission which allows for a wider than normal set of responsibilities.

Compensation can be less than in the blue-chips, but equity, rapid development and the appeal of building something meaningful often make up the difference. These brands frequently target high-potential talent willing to grow into roles rather than paying a premium for extensive experience.

“Most candidates aren't just looking for a job, they're looking for somewhere they can grow fast. Challenger brands appeal because people can see the impact of what they do, but only if the role is set up properly and expectations are clear.”

GEORGE ROBINSON, MANAGING CONSULTANT

Established Challenger Brands (Scale-ups & Mid-sized Firms):

As challenger brands grow, their hiring practices start to mirror the more established companies. They implement structured recruitment processes and seek candidates with proven expertise to drive scaling. Many of these scale-ups have begun making senior appointments from larger FMCG companies, e.g. bringing in experienced Sales Directors or CMOs to benefit from that expertise.

With larger teams and budgets, established challengers can offer more competitive salary and benefit packages, inching closer to corporates. But unlike early-stage start-ups, they can't rely solely on their mission appeal as candidates will now expect better aligned pay for their market, clearer job definitions and structured career pathways. However, what still sets them apart from blue-chip FMCG businesses is their agility. Their leaner structure enables quicker offers and onboarding, giving them a chance to snag talent before slower-moving competitors.

“The companies winning talent right now are the ones that don't overcomplicate things. A clear brief, tight process and quick decisions are what makes a difference in this market.”

WILL GARDNER, MANAGING DIRECTOR

COMPARISON OF HIRING APPROACHES – EMERGING VS. ESTABLISHED FMCG CHALLENGERS

ASPECT	EMERGING CHALLENGERS (START-UPS/SMALL SMEs)	ESTABLISHED CHALLENGERS (SCALE-UPS/MID-SIZE)
Recruitment Process	Informal & quick; founders/network driven; few interview rounds.	More structured; dedicated HR/recruiters; defined interview stages.
Talent Profile	Generalists & high-potentials who can multitask and grow into roles.	Specialists and experienced hires (often from larger companies) to fill defined roles.
Speed & Agility	Very fast hiring decisions to secure talent quickly.	Moderately quick (leaner than corporates) but more process than start-ups.
Remuneration	Lower base salaries, but offer equity, steep growth potential and mission-driven motivation.	Near-market salaries with benchmarking; structured raises, full benefits package. Equity less common.
Career Development	Rapid expansion of role scope, “learn by doing” opportunities.	Clearer career paths, training and leadership roles as company scales.
Employer Value	Exciting vision, innovative culture, personal impact is high.	More stability and resources than a start-up, but still innovative and growth-focused.

TALENT EXPECTATIONS:



Candidate expectations are increasingly shaped by how mature the business is. People joining early-stage challengers expect breadth, autonomy, hands-on responsibility and a mission-led culture. They are more likely to be motivated by the brand's mission/purpose or the chance to build something new, e.g. NPD or new channels.

Those looking at established challengers expect competitive salaries, clarity, development pathways and progression, moving closer to what they'd get in blue-chip FMCG.

Skill shortages in digital, category, ecommerce and brand mean candidates are highly aware of market demand and will weigh offers carefully. If an SME cannot match the salary of a larger employer, it must employ other angles such as culture, growth opportunities or equity to close the deal. With talent in short supply, many FMCG challengers are broadening their criteria and hiring for competencies and cultural fit over exact experience to increase their talent pool.

“Digital, category and brand roles are still the hardest to hire for. There isn't enough experienced talent to go around, so employers need to think beyond 'perfect CVs' and focus on potential.”

GEORGE ROBINSON, MANAGING CONSULTANT



SALARY EXPECTATIONS VS. SURVEY BENCHMARKS



Our FMCG Salary Survey 2025 provides up-to-date salary ranges for key sales and marketing roles, compiled from 1,000 UK candidates across food, beverage and health & wellness businesses. The majority of these candidates (76%) are working or have worked recently with emerging or established challenger brands.

- **Sales/Commercial Roles:** For example, National Account Manager (NAM) base salaries range roughly from £42k (min) to £63k (high), averaging ~£52k. A Senior NAM might average ~£73.6k. At the top end, a Commercial Director in FMCG averages about £108k with highs up to ~£150k. These figures illustrate the market rates that candidates are likely aware of.
- **Marketing Roles:** Mid-level brand and marketing roles also command solid salaries. A typical Brand Manager averages around £47.5k base, with £35k entry-level and up to £60k for top end. Senior marketing specialists see higher ranges; e.g. Senior Brand Managers average ~£64k. Marketing Directors in this survey averaged nearly £99k, with the top earners around £170k – reflective of how senior strategic roles are valued.

In the current market, candidate salary expectations are often outpacing what employers initially plan to offer, creating a mismatch. Over half of UK companies report that matching candidate salary expectations has become their biggest hiring challenge. Driven by skill shortages and high inflation in recent years, many candidates, especially those with strong track records are negotiating for salaries at or above the market median. Hiring managers cannot assume offers at the midpoint of these ranges will be accepted as competitive counteroffers are common and top performers are all too well aware of their worth. In fact, 57% of organisations say salary mismatches have impeded their hiring plans and reportedly nearly 50% struggled to hire at all in the past year. This trend forces employers to realign offers closer to market reality or risk losing talent during or at the conclusion of a process. It can also mean that they start hiring processes over again with different priorities in order to secure candidates who may not have matched initial briefs but who are more likely to be affordable.

It's worth noting that some large FMCG employers are containing costs by hiring less-experienced talent - for instance, advertising a senior NAM role but ultimately hiring a junior NAM on a lower salary. Challenger brands, with typically leaner teams, have less room for such downgrades as they often need hires who can hit the ground running. Therefore, challenger brands must strive to meet salary expectations where possible or bolster the total package in other ways. This might include performance bonuses, development opportunities or equity stakes for senior hires, to bridge gaps between candidate expectations and market realities.

IN-DEMAND BENEFITS AND FLEXIBLE WORKING



Beyond salary, candidates increasingly view benefits as core decision-making factors rather than added extras. The most influential pull factors:

FLEXIBLE/HYBRID WORKING:

Still one of the strongest drivers. Requiring even four days a week in the office significantly limits your potential talent pool, causing jobseekers to choose more flexible competitors. Challenger brands that embrace remote working options, flex hours, or four-day weeks can significantly broaden their talent pool. When talent is scarce or expensive, compromises need to be made by hiring managers. This is an interesting dynamic currently as the return to the office debate continues to rage on.

HOLIDAYS & LEAVE:

Our survey found an average holiday entitlement of 25+ days (excluding bank holidays). Anything below 25 days is viewed as a detractor to a role. Many companies now allow the buying of additional leave which is a popular benefit to support work-life balance. Brands which aren't aligning risk losing candidates to employers with more generous holiday policies.

CARS/ALLOWANCES:

In sales and commercial roles, company cars or car allowances remain a key perk. Field-based and mid-to-senior sales positions typically expect a car allowance and companies providing a choice (e.g. cash alternative or car) will attract more talent. This benefit is particularly relevant in FMCG, where Key Account Managers and field sales reps often travel extensively. Challenger brands targeting experienced salespeople need to budget for a car allowance or risk being outmatched by competitors.

PRIVATE HEALTHCARE:

Healthcare risen in importance over the years, moving from a premium perk to almost baseline expectation. To truly stand out, add family or partner cover, dental and mental health support, or critical illness insurance, as these extras differentiate a benefits package. Fortunately, this can be relatively inexpensive to offer as a benefit and many employers add employee funded family cover to further keep costs down.

PENSION & FINANCIAL BENEFITS:

With growing awareness of the importance of securing future financial security, jobseekers are starting to prioritise strong pension contributions. While UK law mandates minimum employer pension contributions of 3%, many employers go further. Offering a flexible or enhanced pension is very appealing to candidates and challenger brands that can afford it should consider matching the practices of bigger firms here. Other valued financial perks include life insurance, income protection and bonus/profit-sharing schemes, all of which help contribute to an attractive overall package.

WELLBEING AND OTHER PERKS:

When brands compete on culture, thoughtful policies can make a big impact. These can include wellbeing allowances, mental health support, employee assistance schemes and family-friendly policies such as enhanced parental leave. Importantly, work-life balance initiatives, can bolster a challenger brand's reputation as a people-centric employer. Given that 44% of HR leaders cite work/life balance as a key factor in retention, these softer benefits play a role in keeping people happy. Again, these benefits can be relatively low cost and should be in the arsenal of any hiring manager to bolster the attractiveness of their compensation package.

In summary, FMCG candidates in 2025 expect a well-rounded benefits package and flexible work model as the norm, not the exception. Challenger brands must compete on these terms. Many businesses are stepping up, for instance nearly 70% of professionals say flexible working is a top factor in staying with an employer and this has pushed even smaller firms to offer hybrid work and generous leave as standard.

Those that fail to offer flexibility, adequate time off, or basic perks like healthcare will find it significantly harder to attract and retain high-calibre sales and marketing talent.

GENDER BALANCE AND TALENT MOBILITY

The talent pool in FMCG sales and marketing shows contrasting gender distributions. Sales and Commercial roles remain male-dominated, with only about 39% female and 61% male representation in the UK. By contrast, marketing roles have a near 50/50 gender split (roughly 47% female to 53% male). This aligns with longstanding trends: marketing as a function tends to attract a more balanced or slightly female-leaning workforce, whereas sales, especially senior sales roles in FMCG, have traditionally been populated by more men.

The persistence of a c.60:40 split in sales suggests that diversity remains an area of focus. Some challenger brands (often being newer companies) can build more diverse teams from the ground up and there are signs the industry is aware of this imbalance. Efforts such as inclusive hiring practices and mentorship programs for women in sales could gradually shift the ratio. In marketing, the near parity indicates a healthier balance, though leadership roles (e.g. Marketing Directors) in the broader industry may still skew male; challenger brands with women founders or CMOs are notable and could inspire further gender diversity at the top.

The FMCG job market in 2025 has been active, with a significant share of professionals changing roles. According to the survey, about 16% of sales/commercial professionals (roughly 1 in 6) in the FMCG space changed jobs in the past 12 months. In marketing, the figure is similar with around 15.5% of marketing professionals changing roles within the last year. This level of churn is noteworthy. Double-digit turnover reflects a dynamic market in which professionals are open to new opportunities, whether for higher pay, career progression or better work-life balance.

Several factors are driving this mobility:

(Post-Pandemic) Career Re-evaluations: Many individuals reassessed their career goals and work conditions in recent years, making them more open to switching jobs for the right offer (better flexibility, growth options etc)

Demand Outstripping Supply: In areas like digital marketing, e-commerce and analytics, talent is so sought-after that skilled people are frequently poached or enticed away by competitors, including tech and finance firms that can pay far more. This creates backfill openings and movement between companies.

Challenger Brand Growth: As challenger brands expand, they create new roles and often pull talent from larger FMCGs or from other challengers. Conversely, some professionals at early-stage startups may exit if growth stalls or funding is uncertain, contributing to movement in the sector.

For hiring managers, these trends carry implications. The male skew in sales might mean a narrower field of female candidates for sales leadership roles, making diversity-focused recruiting important to broaden the pool. The high turnover rate means that while talent is available, those candidates likely have multiple options. Employers must understand that many candidates they interview are also in process elsewhere, given the churn. It also suggests that retention strategies are crucial as stemming the outflow is as important as attracting new people.

STRATEGIC INSIGHTS FOR COMPETITIVE TALENT ACQUISITION



In a competitive talent landscape, hiring managers at challenger brands should adopt strategic measures to attract and retain top sales and marketing talent. Based on recent trends, the following insights can help employers remain competitive:

Benchmarked and Competitive Compensation: Align salary offers with current market rates and be prepared to meet or slightly exceed candidate expectations for high-priority hires. With 57% of firms finding salary expectations a major hurdle in hiring, it's critical to use salary surveys and industry benchmarks during budgeting. If budget constraints prevent a top-of-market salary, emphasis on total compensation – performance bonuses, stock options, or profit-sharing – will help sweeten the offer. Regular salary reviews for existing staff also help prevent turnover by ensuring pay stays competitive.

Emphasise Employer Value Propositions - Culture, Purpose and Growth: Challenger and scaling brands often have compelling stories and missions. Leverage this appeal in recruitment. Many candidates will trade a higher salary for an inspiring company ethos or a role where they can have a tangible impact. Highlight values, team culture and growth trajectory in job adverts and interviews. Also showcase career progression paths as candidates are drawn to roles with clear advancement and development opportunities. For instance, outline how a National Account Executive could become a NAM, or a Brand Manager a Head of Brand, within a few years. A strong EVP that goes beyond just pay can set you apart in a crowded market.

Fast Hiring Process: Speed is of the essence in a candidate-driven market. Streamline your hiring process by avoiding excessive interview rounds or delays between stages. Top sales and marketing candidates are often off the market in weeks, sometimes even more quickly. If your process drags, you risk losing talent who will withdraw from the process in favour of a more streamlined approach elsewhere. Aim to reduce time-to-hire: for example, coordinate decision-makers upfront, use panel interviews to consolidate rounds and be ready to make an offer quickly. Challenger brands can use their agility here as an advantage over larger companies.

Flexible Work and Work-Life Balance: Make flexible working arrangements a core part of your offer, as this is now often non-negotiable for candidates. Whenever the role allows, let new hires choose hybrid schedules or remote work options. Encourage work-life balance internally to aid retention – e.g., respect personal time, discourage excessive out-of-hours emailing – since work-life balance issues contribute to retention problems for 44% of HR teams. Being known as a flexible, people-friendly employer will draw talent who might otherwise go to a tech company or bigger firm with such policies.

Broaden Your Talent Pool: Given skill shortages, be open to candidates from adjacent industries or those with high potential but perhaps slightly less experience. For sales roles, consider strong salespeople from other consumer sectors who can learn FMCG dynamics. For marketing, given the scramble for digital skills, you might hire for aptitude and cultural fit, then provide training/upskilling in areas like analytics or CRM. This approach, focusing on competencies over exact background, widens your reach. Additionally, tap into specialised networks that connect with passive candidates who may not be actively applying.

Mentorship and Development: Today's candidates, especially younger ones, value learning opportunities and mentorship. Over 70% of sales candidates prioritise roles where they can learn from respected and capable mentors/managers. Ensure your hiring pitch includes any mentorship or training elements. A reputation for nurturing talent will attract candidates who are looking to build their skills and career, not just land a job.

Retention as a Hiring Strategy: Reducing turnover eases recruiting pressure. Half of HR leaders say offering a competitive salary is the top challenge in retaining staff and many also cite insufficient work-life balance or progression for departures. By addressing these (pay, flexibility, advancement) for current employees, challenger brands can improve retention, which in turn means fewer critical vacancies to fill. It also bolsters employer brand – happy employees become advocates and word-of-mouth in the tight-knit FMCG community can significantly aid recruiting. Consider long-term incentives for key players (e.g. retention bonuses, equity vesting, clear promotion timelines) to keep your best people onboard. This stability can be a selling point to prospective hires as well.

Leverage Interim and External Talent if Needed: If a role is hard to fill (e.g. a niche digital marketing skill or an urgent sales vacancy) and the talent search is dragging, don't overlook interim solutions. The market shows a trend toward temporary or interim hires to meet short-term goals when top permanent talent is scarce. Contractors or fractional specialists can keep the business momentum while you continue the search for a full-time fit.

SUMMARY OF HIRING ACTION POINTS



“It’s a competitive market, but the brands that communicate well, move quickly and offer a genuine growth story are still securing brilliant people. The fundamentals haven’t changed but the expectations absolutely have.”

WILL GARDNER & GEORGE ROBINSON

IN SUMMARY

FMCG challenger brands must be both proactive and people-centric to win the war for sales and marketing talent. The differences between emerging and established players are narrowing, as even smaller brands adopt sophisticated hiring and compensation strategies. By offering competitive pay (in line with market data), a compelling benefits package, truly flexible work options and a great story, challenger brands can (and will) attract the people they need. Moving quickly and creatively in recruitment processes – while never losing sight of retention and development – will help these businesses build strong, people-first teams that will drive continued success.



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