

Barcodes & How to Get Them for Your Products

So you're manufacturing a product or rebranding an existing product and now are ready to start selling to retailers, and wondering how to obtain a UPC barcode for your packaging (or trying to determine if you even need one?). Or maybe you already sell to retailers and you've just been notified by a customer that they now need a UPC barcode on your products. As a manufacturer, if you're selling to retailers that require barcodes, it's your responsibility to obtain the codes. But whatever your situation, if you're considering using a barcode on your products, this article will explain the basics of what they are and how to obtain one.

UPC (Universal Product Code) barcodes may seem intimidating...what exactly do all the little lines and numbers mean? A UPC barcode is a unique identifier used for a particular product branded by a particular company, which is scanned to obtain data attached to that code. Usually that data is the price of the product. The number below the scannable lines is a GTIN – global trade item number. There are several different GTINs, and therefore different barcodes. The UPC symbol is the most recognizable barcode in the US. It utilizes a 12 digit GTIN, which is creatively called a GTIN-12.

But before we dive into the nuts and bolts of the actual UPC barcode, you should understand a little about GS1, the organization that set the standards for barcodes.

GS1 (called Uniform Code Council prior to 2005) is a non-profit international organization that has developed a set of standards for product identification that is the most widely used system in the world. In order to generate barcodes, you need to become a member of GS1's Partner Connections. The organization also issues EPC (electronic product codes) that utilize RFID technology. But for this article, we'll focus on UPCs.

Membership in GS1 is pricey – currently starting at \$760, with an annual renewal fee starting at approximately \$125. The price varies according to how many unique identifiers you require. If you have multiple sizes/colors/flavors/quantities/etc. you need a unique barcode for each variation. For instance, say you're manufacturing men's shirts, and you offer small/medium/large in 5 different colors. You will need 15 different GTINs for that shirt. If you have a few products but they have several options, you can see how the number of unique codes can quickly add up.

The starting level of GS1 membership allows 100 identifiers. There are other levels that allow 1,000, 10,000 and 100,000 GTINs. You will need to know how many GTINs you require before applying for membership in GS1.

Once your membership is approved, usually within one business day, you'll be issued a unique GS1 company prefix and a UPC company prefix. The UPC company prefix (a numerical symbol between six and nine digits) is used to create the GTIN under a UPC barcode. Technically you're licensing the company prefix number from GS1. You are not allowed to sell the number or share it with another company. With these restrictions GS1 can assure there is no duplication of GTINs.

So now you have your number, what's next? To complete the GTIN, you need to assign the particular product you are identifying a unique product number. Use the UPC company prefix for the first set of digits and create a product ID number to fill out the number to 11 digits. Six digit prefix – 5 digit product ID; nine digit prefix – three digit product ID. You get the picture. The 12th digit is called the check digit and is created using a convoluted mathematical equation using the first 11 digits. But no need to whip out the calculator, there is a check digit calculator on the GS1 website.

There's actually a pretty handy database tool on the GS1 website called Data Driver. You can enter all your product information, assign the product ID number, calculate the check digit and print your barcode. You can even send the barcode image electronically as an eps or png file.

Other options:

Say you're a new or small manufacturer and only have a few products with limited variations, and are looking for a less pricey alternative. There is another option out there. A Google search of barcode sellers will produce a multitude of companies willing to sell you a UPC barcode. Is it legal? Well, yes...but as in many things internet – buyer beware.

There are some legitimate companies engaged in reselling UPC barcodes. These companies are utilizing company prefixes issued prior to August 28, 2002. In 2002 UCC (Uniform Code Council) lost a class-action lawsuit filed against them regarding renewal fees. In losing the lawsuit, UCC also lost control of the company prefixes previously issued. What it all means is that companies issued prefixes before the above date could resell or transfer their numbers.

So these companies will sell you either just the GTIN or the graphic UPC barcode with the GTIN. Prices are reasonable but vary wildly, so I'm not going to quote any prices here. But be careful, the whole point of having a UPC barcode is to have a unique identifier that retailers can scan. There may be some barcode resellers that are selling the same number to multiple parties, essentially nullifying the whole uniqueness issue. Apparently Walmart will not accept barcodes without a copy of the GS1 certificate indicating membership. But if you're to the point where you're selling to Walmart, go ahead and join GS1 – you'll be better off in the long run.

Another option to consider if you're a new manufacturer is just to skip barcodes for the time being. Unless your retail customer requires barcodes, there's no need to use them. Sure, it may make your company look more legit, and it may make it easier for your retailers, but there are a lot of small independent merchants who don't use a point of sale register that scans merchandise. If you can get by without using barcodes in the beginning, it might be something to consider. Then when you've grown to needing a multitude of GTINs, take the plunge and join the club.