



Universal Product Codes (*revised*)

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In developing new products to sell at the retail level, there are many things to consider when creating a product label. One of these “things to consider” is the need for a Universal Product Code. The Universal Product Code is a system for uniquely identifying many different suppliers of a myriad of different items that travel throughout the channels of distribution. It is a 12-digit all-numeric code that identifies the company/product combination. A bar code, a series of black and white lines that correspond to the 12-digit code, is required if a product is to reach a retail (or other) outlet that uses electronic scanners. The bar code is often a limiting factor in getting a product into some outlets and onto some shelves.

The Universal Product Code (UPC) serves as the cornerstone of global retailing. The code has been in place since the early 1970s allowing suppliers and distributors of consumer products around the world to build upon the UPC as they continue to change the fundamental ways of running their businesses. The UPC is now a critical part of the entire product cycle – from manufacturer through distributor to consumer.

The full UPC system includes numbers for people to read, and bar codes for machines to read. Both the numbers and the bar code are printed on a consumer package with each unique package showing its own unique number and bar code.

The Uniform Code Council, Inc.® administers the assignment of all UPC manufacturer identification numbers to ensure the uniqueness of each individual item. The full UPC system is intended to provide readers of the code – both people and machines – with a reliable way to make businesses work more effectively through accurate product identification. The Uniform Code Council is not a government agency; it is a not-for-profit organization that exists specifically to develop and implement standard product and shipping container codes, control the distribution of company identification codes and provide detailed information to and coordinate the efforts of all participants.

In the late 1970s, the European Article Number (EAN) Association began in Europe. The EAN is the international standard bar code for retail goods, serving the same purpose as the UPC in the United States. The EAN was modeled after the UPC system, but was adapted for global use. The EAN differs from the UPC in that it has a 13-digit numeric code. Soon after the EAN began, more countries joined the EAN Association. Presently the EAN Association is known as EAN International. The Uniform Code Council (UCC) became a member organization of EAN International in 2002. As a member organization, the UCC services the needs of its territorial members with the provision of company prefix numbers, education and advice on the use of the EAN/UCC standards within the cultural and legal framework of its territory.

Even though membership to the Uniform Code Council is voluntary, membership is required to obtain a UPC identification number. Membership with the Uniform Code Council provides the ability to place a UPC bar code symbol on your product and distribute it into the marketplace.

The membership application is only available online at <https://catalog.webec.uc-council.org/application>. The Uniform Code Council no longer accepts paper applications. Before you fill out the online application, you need

to collect some basic information about your company. The membership application will ask you to provide the following facts:

- Current or projected sales revenue of your company
- The number of products that you will be identifying with a UPC symbol
- The number of locations that you might identify with a Global Location Number¹

The information you provide on the application will determine the fee that you will pay for membership. While you fill out the online application, you will be provided a user name and password. At the end of the application you will be quoted your membership fee. You can then choose to pay the membership fee or use your user name and password to return to the application and pay it at a later time. The membership fee is dependent upon the number of different products or locations a company needs to code as well as sales information. As of January 2005, fees ranged from \$750 to \$50,000.

The membership fee is a one-time fee good for the life of your company. With membership, the Uniform Code Council will issue your company a unique, six digit identification number (called the UCC prefix) for use on any of your companies products. Your company may then assign an additional five digit number to each of its products. The five digit assignment to different company products will allow for up to 100,000 different products to be coded by any one company.

A full set of technical specifications, guidelines and a list of suppliers that can produce camera-ready bar code symbols will be provided with your membership and UCC prefix. After you receive your UCC prefix, you are then able to assign the individual 5-digit product code to your business' products.

The number assigned to each product your company produces must be unique. For example, if you have two different sizes of the same product, each must be assigned a different number. When you assign the numbers, you should communicate them to all of your trading partners. This will help create an efficient tracking system for your products from manufacture through distribution to your customer.

For an application and additional information about obtaining a bar code (UPC) contact:

Uniform Code Council, Inc.
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¹ The Global Location Number is the globally unique EAN.UCC System identification number for legal entities, functional entities and physical locations. It uses the EAN.UCC-13 data structure. Supply side trading partner locations generally include corporate headquarters, regional offices, warehouses, plants and distribution centers. Demand side trading partner locations generally include corporate headquarters, divisional offices, stores and distribution centers.

Sources: Eichelberger, D. Uniform Code Council, Inc.® reply to inquiry about membership fees, correspondence by e-mail sent to info@uc-council.org on 12/20/2004.

Uniform Code Council, Inc.®. Found online at <http://www.uc-council.org>. Accessed 1/13/2005.