

Bar codes: Back to the beginning

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Bar codes - and more modern versions such as two-dimensional codes and QR codes - allow organisations around the globe to uniquely identify their products and trace these at every point along the value chain. It's difficult to imagine life without machine-readable product codes, but this concept has only been in commercial use since the 1970s.



[Smithsonian.com](#) reports that in June 1974, the first item marked with a Universal Product Code (UPC) – a pack of Wrigley's chewing gum – was scanned through the checkout of Marsh Supermarket in Ohio, USA. However, the journey of this bar code began a few decades before that.

The concept of a machine-readable product code was first patented by American inventor Joe Woodland and his associate Bernard Silver. The idea first came to Woodland while he was on Miami Beach in January 1949 and he began drawing lines in the sand, inspired by Morse Code. For quite some time, Woodland and Silver had been trying to devise a type of code that could be easily and clearly printed on groceries and then scanned to simplify stocktaking and solve the issue of slow supermarket queues.

First envisioned as a rectangular row of lines of varying thickness, Woodland and Silver changed their design to a bull's eye shape, which they felt would be easier to read from all angles. A research team at the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) assisted with the technical development of an automated check-out; and the first live test took place in Cincinnati in 1972.

In 1973, representatives of the grocery trade in the US began searching for a way to introduce a Universal Product Code – which could be universally applied to all goods manufactured for sale in supermarkets. They wanted this code to uniquely identify the product and the company that made it. This body was looking for a symbol that was small, neat and readable from any angle.

At the stage, Woodland was working at International Business Machines (IBM) – and he was part of a team that submitted a version of the UPS for consideration. The bar code that was put forward by IBM was ultimately designed by Woodland's

colleague George Laurer, who moved away from the bull's eye shape to the rectangular design we are familiar with today. This is the design that was selected by the committee.

While the manufacturing and retail industries took a few years to warm up to the UPC, both manufacturers and mass retailers began to adopt it in the 1980s; and by 2004, the bar code was used by 80-90% of the top 500 companies in the U.S.

Of course, coding and marking has evolved quite a lot since then. For industry updates and cutting-edge coding technology, contact [Pyrotec PackMark](#).

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