

New barcode technology begins to make it stick

Following a successful trial in a number of Wal-Mart stores, the GS1 DataBar is attracting interest from retailers worldwide looking to secure more accurate information about sales of loose fresh produce. **Mike Knowles** reports

THE prospect of scanning individual, barcoded fruits at the point of sale in retail stores worldwide is closer to becoming a reality, after US retail giant Wal-Mart completed a trial on a new and improved barcode label known as the GS1 DataBar, formerly referred to as RSS (Reduced Space Symbology). In the wake of the trial, which took place mainly on apples across 29 Wal-Mart stores in Washington state, the company is now planning to extend the technology to other divisions.

GS1, THE organisation charged with developing and managing global supply chain standards, has adopted the name GS1 Databar for its new, omni-directional barcodes, replacing the original name RSS (Reduced Space Symbology) as the symbol enters its "broad adoption phase". According to Eric Decroix, chief marketing officer at GS1, the name change was required in order to avoid confusion with the acronym for internet-based news distribution technology Really Simple Syndication. "The GS1 DataBar name was selected because it is easy to remember and pronounce, and works in all major languages," he says. "It also fits perfectly with the GS1 DataMatrix name already used for our version of this two-dimensional barcode." To ensure a smooth transition, GS1 will refer to GS1 DataBar (RSS) until the end of 2008, before dropping the acronym altogether. "This will allow for industry documentation to match equipment interfaces during the transition period," adds Mr Decroix. "We have also made provisions to maintain legacy terminology for five years in the GS1 General Specifications Glossary."



Canada's largest food retailer Loblaw's and the UK's biggest retail company Tesco are also conducting trials of the barcodes, while the leading US grocery retailer, Kroger, is reportedly planning to try out the new technology later this year.

Demand among retailers is high for barcodes that can be used on fresh produce that is sold loose and at different weights, because category managers and buyers are hungry for more detailed and accurate information about how their products are selling. All too often, loose fruit is scanned inaccurately either by staff at the point of sale or by customers using self-scan checkouts, making it harder to monitor sales according to criteria such as variety and country of origin. Keeping a closer eye on loose items passing through the checkout would enable retailers to manage fresh produce categories more effectively, while also helping to reduce shrinkage and increase traceability.

Until now, however, getting all of the necessary data onto a label small enough to be stuck on an individual item of fruit has been extremely difficult, mainly because existing UPC and EAN barcodes are too large for most labels. The majority of fruits can only carry a relatively small sticker, so with all the information that needs to be displayed, such as the PLU code, variety name and sometimes even brand logos and country of origin designation, there is only a relatively small amount of space left for the barcode itself.

By splitting the barcode into two rows, the GS1 DataBar offers a more effective means of squeezing the necessary graphical representation into a smaller area. The two rows are stacked, one on top of the other, and, unlike conventional barcodes, do not show the 14-digit Global Trade Item



Number (GTIN) unique to each product. However, the PLU is to remain on the label as a convenient back-up for retailers who are not yet scanning the new code.

"The technology is more robust and allows for more sophisticated cross-checks," explains Bill Hallier, president and chief executive officer at produce labelling specialist Sinclair International, the company which supplies the majority of label stickers used in the fresh produce business. "Wal-Mart has seen significant benefits from the new barcode system in the past year and a number of retailers worldwide are asking fresh produce suppliers to be prepared to introduce the labels."

The fact that the new barcode cannot be read by the human eye is not expected to present a problem. "The barcodes do require a different type of scanner, but many of these have already been introduced as most scanners installed since 2001 are DataBar equipped," says Mr Hallier. ■