



A FREE STARTER KIT FROM ARDENT SELLER

SKU Naming & Barcode System

a starter kit for growing makers

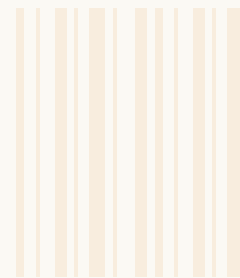
Prefix conventions that scale past 50 SKUs, when barcodes start paying for themselves, free vs. paid barcode options, and a one-page cheat sheet to tape above the workbench.

SKU

NAMING

BARCODES

CHEAT SHEET



WELCOME

The system you wished you had at SKU #20.

Most makers don't set up a real SKU system until they regret not having one. By that point there are 80 product listings, three spreadsheets, a Shopify export, an Etsy CSV, and four labels that all say "Lavender 4oz" in slightly different ways. The fix is straightforward — but it's easier to do before you have 200 SKUs than after.

This kit gives you the same SKU and barcode framework Ardent Seller's product team uses with operating makers: how to design a prefix scheme that survives variants and reorders, when (and when not) to add barcodes, what free options exist before you buy a single UPC from GS1, and a printable one-page cheat sheet for the wall above the workbench.

WHO THIS IS FOR

Makers, bakers, soap and candle producers, jewelry sellers, and small-batch food producers running 30–500 SKUs — the band where SKU sloppiness starts costing real money but a full ERP would be overkill. If you're below 20 SKUs and comfortable, save this for when you're not.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- 01** What an SKU actually is (and isn't)
The three jobs a good SKU does and the four things people confuse it with.
- 02** A prefix scheme that survives variants and reorders
The category > line > variant pattern with three worked examples.
- 03** When barcodes start paying for themselves
The five signals, and the answer to "do I need a UPC for Etsy / Shopify?"
- 04** Free vs. paid barcode options, honestly
Internal Code-128 codes, Amazon's exemption, GS1 UPCs, and the brokers in between.
- 05** The starter cheat sheet
One-page printable rules of the road — tape it above the workbench.

SECTION 01

What an SKU actually is (and isn't)

Half the SKU pain in maker businesses comes from confusing four different identifiers that look similar but do different jobs.

An SKU — stock keeping unit — is an internal code you assign to a specific sellable variant of a product. The 8oz lavender soy candle is one SKU; the 12oz lavender soy candle is a different SKU; a 12oz lavender soy candle in a black tin is a third SKU. Same product line, three variants, three SKUs. Used well, an SKU does three jobs:

1. Identifies one specific variant — not a product line, not a category, not a recipe. Each variant gets one code, and only one variant has that code.
2. Stays stable across reorders. Last year's 8oz lavender candle and this year's 8oz lavender candle share an SKU even if you switched wax suppliers, because the customer-facing variant didn't change.
3. Encodes just enough information that a human can read it but a scanner doesn't need to. CDL-LAV-8OZ-BLK tells you "Candle, Lavender line, 8oz size, Black tin" without looking it up. 74A92B doesn't.

Four things an SKU is not

IDENTIFIER	AN SKU IS...	...WHEREAS THIS IS SOMETHING ELSE
A barcode (UPC, EAN, GTIN)	An internal code you control.	An external standard registered (UPC/EAN) or generated (internal Code-128) for scanning at retail or in fulfillment.
A recipe ID or batch / lot number	Identifies the sellable variant.	A recipe ID identifies the formulation; a batch / lot number identifies one specific production run for traceability.
A product listing ID	A code you assign once and own.	Etsy listing IDs, Shopify product IDs, and Square IDs are platform-assigned and change when listings are recreated.

A category code	Specific to a single variant.	A category covers many variants. The category prefix is part of an SKU, not the SKU itself.
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THE ONE RULE THAT MATTERS

One sellable variant. One SKU. Forever. If the variant changes (new size, new color, new pack), it gets a new SKU. If only the supplier or cost or photo changes, it keeps the same SKU. Following that rule alone makes 80% of SKU pain go away.

SECTION 02

A prefix scheme that survives variants and reorders

The pattern most growing makers land on: a short category code, a short product-line code, then a size and any variant axis. The full code is human-readable, sorts cleanly, and leaves room to grow.

Use 2–4 letter blocks separated by hyphens. Total length 8–14 characters is the sweet spot — long enough to encode category / line / size / variant, short enough to fit on labels, in spreadsheets, and on POs without truncating. Use upper-case letters and digits only; avoid O, I, and 0/1 in adjacent positions because they look identical in some fonts.

The pattern

CAT-LINE-SIZE-VARIANT

CAT — 2–3 letter category. *CDL* for candles, *SP* for soap, *BAK* for baked goods, *JWL* for jewelry. Keep the list small — categories rarely grow past a dozen.

LINE — 3–4 letter product-line code. *LAV* for lavender, *OAT* for oatmeal honey, *VANI* for vanilla bean. The customer-facing line name; if you rename the line, the SKU changes.

SIZE — the customer-facing size as it appears on the label. *4OZ*, *8OZ*, *S/M/L*, *6PK* for a six-pack. Skip leading zeros — *4OZ* not *04OZ*.

VARIANT — one axis only: color, scent strength, packaging, or a numeric edition. *BLK* for black, *GLD* for gold, *UNS* for unscented. If the variant axis doesn't apply, drop the block entirely — don't pad with *NA* or *STD*.

Three worked examples

EXAMPLE 1 — CANDLE WITH SIZE AND TIN COLOUR

CDL-LAV-8OZ-BLK

CDL candle > LAV lavender line > 8OZ the 8oz size > BLK black tin. Switching to a white tin in the same line and size? *CDL-LAV-8OZ-WHT*. Adding a 12oz? *CDL-LAV-12OZ-BLK*.

EXAMPLE 2 — SOAP WITH SCENT AND PACK SIZE

SP-OAT-1BAR

SP soap › OAT oatmeal honey line › 1BAR single-bar pack. The 3-pack gift box of the same bar is a different sellable variant — different price, different packaging, different label — so it gets its own code: SP-OAT-3BOX.

EXAMPLE 3 — JEWELLERY WITH METAL AND SIZE

JWL-HOOP-SS-S

JWL jewelry › HOOP hoop earring line › SS sterling silver › S small. The medium gold-fill version: JWL-HOOP-GF-M. The metal goes in the size slot here because metal is the bigger price driver — arrange variant blocks by what most affects cost.

WHAT TO AVOID

Don't embed cost or supplier data in the SKU. Cost changes; the SKU shouldn't. Don't embed the date. Reorders share an SKU. Don't reuse retired SKUs. A year from now you'll forget. Don't go past ~14 characters. Label printers, Etsy CSV imports, and your future self will all thank you.

SECTION 03

When barcodes start paying for themselves

Barcodes are an operational tool, not a marketing one. They earn their keep when scanning is faster than reading, and they don't before that. Five signals that you've crossed the line.

The five signals below are observable, not theoretical. If two or more describe your business right now, barcodes will save you more time than they cost.

01 Picking an order takes longer than packing it

You're reading SKUs off a packing slip and visually matching them on the shelf. Scanning is materially faster and catches wrong-variant picks before the box leaves.

02 You ship 50+ orders a month from your own inventory

Below 50 orders, a label printer and a scanner is overkill. Above 50, mis-picks (sending the wrong scent / size / colour) start costing more in reships than the scanner cost.

03 You sell at booths, fairs, or pop-ups with a tablet POS

Square, Shopify POS, and Lightspeed all support barcode scanning out of the box. Scanning at a busy booth meaningfully speeds up checkout versus a manual SKU lookup.

04 You sell to a retailer that asks for barcoded products

Bricks-and-mortar retailers and any major marketplace beyond Etsy and Square will eventually ask for GTINs. Walmart, Target, and Amazon require them; Faire and indie retailers ask case-by-case.

05 Your stocktake takes a full day and the numbers still drift

Manual counts entered into a spreadsheet drift over time. Scanning into a system with a running balance is the cheapest way to drive stocktake error toward zero.

Do I need a UPC for Etsy or Shopify?

No. Etsy doesn't require a UPC, GTIN, or any external barcode — the SKU field on a listing is yours to fill with your own internal code or to leave blank. Shopify has an optional Barcode (ISBN, UPC, GTIN, etc.) field that's also voluntary; it's only required when you push products to Google Shopping or Meta Shop, and Google has accepted GTIN exemptions for handmade-and-customised products since 2016. Square POS

takes anything you scan and matches it to whatever SKU you assign — including a barcode you printed yourself.

Where you do need a real registered GTIN: Amazon (most categories require it but offer the GTIN Exemption Program for handmade and private-label products), Walmart Marketplace, Target, and most national bricks-and-mortar retailers. Faire and indie wholesalers vary — ask before you buy.

SECTION 04

Free vs. paid barcode options, honestly

There are four reasonable answers depending on where you sell. Two of them are free.

OPTION	WHAT YOU DO	WHEN TO USE IT
Internal Code-128 (free)	Generate yourself; encodes your existing SKU directly. Use a free generator or your label printer's built-in encoder. Works with any consumer scanner.	Fine for in-house ops — picking, stocktake, booth POS. Not accepted by Amazon, Walmart, or any retailer that needs a globally unique GTIN.
Amazon GTIN Exemption (free)	Apply through Seller Central for handmade, private-label, or specific categories. No barcode needed on the listing.	Free, official, and the right answer for handmade brands on Amazon. Application is per-brand-per-category and can be denied if Amazon decides the category should have GTINs.
Resold UPC from a broker (\$)	\$5–\$15 per code from sites like Speedy Barcodes or Nationwide Barcode. The code is technically legitimate but carries another company's GS1 prefix.	Scans fine at most retailers. Not accepted by Amazon (since 2016), Walmart, or Target — their systems cross-check the prefix against the registered brand. Avoid for any serious retail path.
Registered GS1 UPC (\$\$\$)	Buy directly from GS1 US (gs1us.org). \$30 setup + \$0–\$2 per code under their 2020+ single-code pricing; \$250+ for a company-prefix tier of 10 or more codes.	The right answer for retail growth — the prefix is registered to your business, so Amazon, Walmart, and Target all accept it. Overkill if you only sell on Etsy / Shopify / your own site.

THE PRAGMATIC PATH FOR MOST MAKERS

Stage 1: print Code-128 barcodes of your internal SKUs for in-house ops. Free. Stage 2: if and when you add Amazon, apply for the GTIN Exemption. Still free. Stage 3: only if you land Walmart, Target, or a serious bricks-and-mortar account, buy registered codes from GS1 directly. Most maker businesses live happily at Stage 1 for years.

How to print your own Code-128 barcodes today

1. Decide your SKU first using Section 02. Don't generate a barcode for a code you're going to change.
2. Use any free Code-128 generator — barcode.tec-it.com, barcodesinc.com, or your label printer's software (Dymo Connect, Brother P-touch, Zebra Designer) has one built in.
3. Print on a 1×2 or 2×1 inch label. Quiet zone (the white margin around the code) of at least 0.1" on each side. Most scanners want a bar height of 0.5" or more.
4. Scan to verify with any USB scanner (~\$25) or a phone barcode-scanner app. If the SKU comes back identical to what you encoded, you're done.

SECTION 05

The starter cheat sheet

Print this page, tape it above the workbench. Every rule on it has appeared elsewhere in the guide; the cheat sheet is the form the rules live in when you're actually working.

Pattern

CAT-LINE-SIZE-VARIANT. 8–14 characters, hyphens between blocks, upper-case letters and digits.

Category codes

CDL candles, SP soap, BAK baked, JWL jewelry, FOOD food. Keep the list small.

Line codes

Customer-facing line name in 3–4 letters. LAV lavender, OAT oatmeal-honey, VANI vanilla bean.

Size

Customer-facing size as on the label: 4OZ, 8OZ, S/M/L, 6PK. No leading zeros.

Variant

One axis only: colour, scent strength, packaging, or numbered edition. Drop the block if the axis doesn't apply.

One variant. One SKU. Forever.

New size / colour / pack => new SKU. Supplier or cost change => same SKU.

Don't embed

Never embed cost, supplier, date, or any data that changes. Don't reuse retired SKUs.

Confusing characters

Avoid O next to 0, I next to 1, and S next to 5.

Etsy / Shopify

Use your internal SKU. No UPC required. Shopify GTIN field is voluntary except for Google / Meta Shop.

Barcodes

Code-128 of your internal SKU for in-house ops — free. GS1 UPC only when a retailer demands it.

Three sample SKUs to copy

SKU	Means
CDL-LAV-8OZ-BLK	Lavender soy candle, 8oz, black tin
SP-OAT-1BAR	Oatmeal-honey soap, single bar
JWL-HOOP-GF-M	Hoop earrings, gold-fill, medium

YOUR SKU SYSTEM, OUT OF YOUR HEAD.

Now you have the framework.

Reading about an SKU system is the easy part. Keeping it consistent as you launch a new scent, add a 12oz, switch a tin colour, and answer a wholesale buyer's purchase order at 9 p.m. on a Wednesday is the hard part — that's where the system has to live somewhere that isn't your head.



When the rules need to live somewhere.

Ardent Seller assigns SKUs, prints barcode labels, and ties every code to a product, a recipe, and a stock balance — so the system you sketch on the next page actually runs without you remembering it. Materials, recipes, products, photos, and prices share one source of truth. Start on the free tier with no credit card.

www.ardentseller.app

Start free — no credit card required.

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