



THE GLOBAL LANGUAGE
OF BUSINESS

CASE STUDY



The Blessing Basket Project

Non-profit uses the GS1 System of Standards to bring financial security, entrepreneurship and self-esteem to artisans

CHALLENGE

The Blessing Basket Project® (Blessing Basket) partners with 3,000 artisans in some of the world's most geographically dispersed countries. With a supply chain so widespread and artisan suppliers difficult to reach managing inventory, quality control, on-time delivery and cash payments were onerous for this non-profit organization.

SOLUTION

To uniquely identify each woven basket, Blessing Basket assigns a GS1 Global Trade Item Number® (GTIN®), which is encoded in a Universal Product Code (U.P.C.) barcode that is printed on the label applied to the basket. "GS1 Standards have not only streamlined Blessing Basket's operations, but are also connecting consumers with the artisans who made their baskets," says CEO Theresa Carrington.

BENEFITS

Efficiencies gained come from improved warehouse and inventory management as well as expedited shipping. Baskets are no longer counted manually; instead they are scanned at the point of origination and again before shipment.

According to Carrington on-time shipping has risen to nearly 90 percent and shipment shrinkage has dropped from 19 percent to less than two percent. Supplier transparency back to the artisan has resulted in a 63 percent increase in customer and artisan engagement and a 49 percent increase in the time consumers spend connecting with artisans.



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— THERESA CARRINGTON,

CEO, The Blessing Basket Project

Weaving the world together

Theresa Carrington had long kept a “blessing basket” where she tucked away photos, cards and notes of encouragement from friends and family she could reread during tough times. Tapped to give motivational talks to other women about overcoming adversities, Carrington used her blessing basket as a prop. When others expressed interest in having their own blessing baskets, Carrington saw an opportunity to source the baskets and, at the same time, help women halfway around the world, who are living in poverty. The Blessing Basket Project was born.

Simply put, Blessing Basket engages with basketry artisans in Third World countries from whom baskets are purchased for importation into the U.S., where they retail at fair prices, while still affording the artisans significantly better wages than what is available in their local markets.

“My goal was quite simple: to offer women living in poverty a way to work and prosper,” explains Carrington. “And I wanted to be able to put the payments for the baskets directly in the hands of the women.”

At the beginning, Carrington reached out through a global forum to communicate her ideas and goals. Overnight, Carrington had emails from 12 countries in the developing world, and in the days that followed, she had over 80 enquiries from 25 countries.

Most of the respondents were social workers from non-government organizations. By trade an investigative journalist, Carrington used her skills to cull through to the messages that showed the most promise, written by people who could work directly with artisans in poverty-stricken areas on behalf of the non-profit Blessing Basket Project.

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The Blessing Basket goal: To end poverty through entrepreneurship and Prosperity Wages*.

Photo courtesy of The Blessing Basket Project



Uganda's Country Director Sarah Walugembe travels to rural locations to collect baskets and pay artisans directly.

Photo courtesy of The Blessing Basket Project

Prosperity Wages® paid directly

Today, The Blessing Basket Project works through in-country directors to buy from more than 3,000 artisans in Bangladesh, Ghana, Indonesia, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, Uganda and Kenya.

In Uganda, for example, Country Director Sarah Walugembe is a native of the country. Working with Blessing Basket, she has been able to put cash directly in the hands of village artisans, rather than working through middlemen. In 2013, Blessing Basket moved to paying the women through electronic funds via their mobile phones.

As The Blessing Basket Project has grown, it has made a demonstrable difference in the circumstances not only of the individual artisans, but in a large swath of the countries. This is typical of the Blessing Basket model.

“When we showed up in Bangladesh, for instance, the going rate for baskets was the U.S. equivalent of \$1. I was paying them the U.S. equivalent of \$12,” Carrington says. Carrington has coined and trademarked the term Prosperity Wages® to explain her organization’s mission of allowing the rural poor to pull themselves out of poverty by paying at least two-and-a-half times the going rate.

Carrington credits much of Blessing Basket’s business model to students with the Olin Business School at Washington University of St. Louis. “The knowledge and expertise that we have gained by working with the Olin Business School has been and continues to be critical to our success,” says Carrington.



“The GS1 System has helped us highlight the artisan and her achievements. And best of all, poverty levels for these artisans have been radically reduced.”

— SARAH WALUGEMBE, Uganda Country Director, The Blessing Basket Project



Photo courtesy of The Blessing Basket Project



Walugembe prints labels with GTINs encoded into U.P.C. barcodes, which are then applied to the baskets collected from artisans.

Photo courtesy of The Blessing Basket Project

Handmade goes hand-in-hand with GS1 Standards

Like any participant in the global supply chain, Carrington realized early on that she would need the tools and technology to successfully identify the baskets as they traveled from their native countries to point of purchase—retail stores and online marketplaces—especially when the project captured Whole Foods Market as a retail partner. GS1 US provided the standards Blessing Basket would need to successfully conduct business in retail markets.

“With GS1 Standards, inventory counting and management has been significantly simplified and my workload has been reduced since the system automatically counts the items when they are scanned.”

— SARAH WALUGEMBE, Uganda Country Director, The Blessing Basket Project

Today, GS1 GTINs uniquely identify each artisan’s specific woven basket. Country directors travel to artisan villages to collect baskets. Using battery packs, labels (with the GTINs encoded into U.P.C. barcodes) are printed and applied to the handmade baskets, each one destined for a shipping container.

When the director returns to the local office, she may have data from as many as 150 artisans from whom she has collected baskets—data that includes payments that were tendered, either in cash or as a credit to artisans’ mobile phone accounts. The transactions are linked to the U.P.C. barcodes printed just a few hours before in the village. As baskets are loaded into the container, inventory is collected, providing an accurate count.

“Before barcodes, I would load the containers, doing a hand count,” explains Walugembe, Uganda’s country director. “With GS1 Standards, inventory counting and management has been significantly simplified and my workload has been reduced since the system automatically counts the items when they are scanned.”

Carrington adds, “Before using GS1 Standards, we would receive containers here in the U.S. and count the goods by hand again. It seemed like our count never corresponded to theirs and trust started to gradually erode. Today, using the GS1 System of Standards—having this data has re-established trust. And when the two sets of data don’t line up, we are able to trace the discrepancy back to the country, back to the person, and back to the specific basket to sort out what happened.”

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The ripple effect

Carrington also points to improved inventory control in the warehouse: “With GS1 Standards on each basket, I know exactly where a given artisan’s baskets are—whether in the warehouse or along their journey. It’s the traceability that enables us to do this on a large scale.”

Shipping a handmade item on time can be a huge challenge and that is exacerbated when it originates in some of the world’s most logistically challenging environments. Using GS1 Standards, Carrington has seen on-time shipments increase to nearly 90 percent and shrinkage on those shipments has dropped from 19 percent to less than two percent.

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And as with any handmade item, quality standards can be difficult to manage. Formerly, if the Blessing Basket rejected an artisan’s product, it was difficult to explain why. Now, a GS1 Standards-based U.P.C. barcode links a faulty product directly back to the artisan, who can be shown photos for training purposes. As a result, product quality has improved and trust is maintained between the organization and the artisan.

A U.P.C. barcode contains a Global Trade Item Number or GTIN, which is the number series that appears under the barcode symbol. When used properly, it uniquely identifies a product when it is scanned at various points in the supply chain. It’s important to note that there is an entire system of GS1 Standards that are recognized globally, of which the U.P.C. barcode is just one symbology or data carrier.

Connecting consumers with artisans

“GS1 Standards helped our business again when we realized that they could enable us to establish for our consumers this amazing connection with the artisans,” says Carrington. “Today, our consumers get a wealth of information about the artisan through the GS1 barcode and our website.”

On Blessing Basket’s website, consumers can input the code from the purchased basket’s label to discover the artisan who created the basket along with information about her and her country. Consumers can write an email to the artisan as well as see her other beautifully handcrafted baskets, in the event they’d like to purchase another one in the future. And the artisan can write consumers back via the country director.

“A great many of these women have never seen their images before in photographs. When they began to realize that their photos were going to be seen on their baskets in the United States, it produced a groundswell of pride that was, again, an unexpected ripple effect of using GS1 Standards.”

“We’ve forwarded hundreds and hundreds of emails that people have written to artisans,” says Carrington. “The artisans are so amazed and appreciative because they now get to communicate with their customers from around the world.”

Walugembe continues, “The GS1 system has helped us highlight the artisan and her achievements. And best of all, poverty levels for these artisans have been radically reduced.”

Connecting the world

When advising others of the advantages of using GS1 Standards, Carrington says: “Make GS1 Standards a part of your processes and your culture at the beginning.”

“GS1 US has an incredibly rich website filled with information. Any communication that we have had with GS1 US—be it a question about our barcode or whatever it might be—we have been able to address via their educational resources. As part of the start-up process, businesses need to engage with GS1 US and utilize them as a business partner, knowing GS1 US is going to make you smarter, better, faster, earlier.”

“For me, this is about connecting the world in a way that makes it a smaller place and makes it a more peaceful place. And so part of my heart hurts, that if I’d done this so much sooner what larger change could I have made in the world?”

Having rolled out their GS1 Standards-based solution, The Blessing Basket Project has grown artisan engagement by 63 percent, and consumers are spending an average of 49 percent more time connecting with artisans and the organization’s products.

The “ripple effect” Carrington refers to can now be felt throughout the Blessing Basket’s world.

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Carrington meets with artisans in the Upper East Region of Ghana.

Photo courtesy of The Blessing Basket Project

About the Companies



ABOUT THE BLESSING BASKET PROJECT

In 2002, when facing opposition in her own personal life, Theresa Carrington was inspired by the incredible support provided by her friends and family. They sent her notes, cards, and pictures for encouragement, which she kept in her own blessing basket that she would turn to for daily reinforcement. To motivate other women, Carrington began speaking at conferences and organizations, using her blessing basket as a prop. Soon after, women started to request their own blessing baskets. Enthused by this interest, Carrington sought a way to curate a deeper connection with the maker of the baskets and the recipient, while simultaneously blessing both maker and recipient. Further, she wanted to ensure that the makers of the baskets would be compensated properly, without having to cede the majority of the profits to a middleman.

Finding a direct path to impoverished artisans around the world took more than a year, but by the summer of 2003, the first major shipment of blessing baskets arrived and The Blessing Basket Project was on its way. www.blessingbasket.org

Watch Artisan&You to see how The Blessing Basket is making a difference in artisans' lives with help from GS1 Standards: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHqi89EUsS0

GS1 US APPAREL AND GENERAL MERCHANDISE INITIATIVE

The GS1 US Apparel and General Merchandise Initiative is an industry group that is committed to defining business challenges and opportunities and organizing adoption plans for the implementation of GS1 Standards. The members of the initiative represent a broad cross-section of industry trading partners. The work of the initiative is driven by Workgroups of industry stakeholders who are collaborating to develop standards-based guidelines, best practices, case studies and thought leadership. To learn more, contact us at apparelgm@gs1us.org or visit our website at www.gs1us.org/apparelgm.

ABOUT GS1 US

GS1 US, a member of the global information standards organization GS1®, brings industry communities together to solve supply-chain problems through the adoption and implementation of GS1 Standards. Nearly 300,000 businesses in 25 industries rely on GS1 US for trading-partner collaboration and for maximizing the cost effectiveness, speed, visibility, security and sustainability of their business processes. They achieve these benefits through solutions based on GS1 global unique numbering and identification systems, barcodes, Electronic Product Code (EPC®)-enabled RFID, data synchronization and electronic information exchange. GS1 US also manages the United Nations Standard Products and Services Code® (UNSPSC®). www.gs1us.org.



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