

Digital Product Substantiation Playbook: A Practical Guide for New Zealand Exporters¹

Why it matters

Exporters are facing growing demands from customers, retailers, regulators and consumers to prove what they say about their products.

Questions that were once asked occasionally are now becoming routine:

- What is this product?
- Where did it come from?
- What is it made from?
- How was it made? Who made it?
- Can you prove the claims on the label?
- What certifications support those claims?

Many businesses are still answering these questions through emails, PDFs and manual document exchanges. While this may work today, it is time-consuming, difficult to scale and increasingly out of step with global expectations. What's more exporters are reporting a shift from one-off listing checks (*"Can I trust you? And your product?"*) to ongoing proof at shipment or even batch level.

Around the world, governments, retailers and industry groups are moving towards digital approaches that allow trusted product information to be shared quickly, securely and consistently. For New Zealand exporters, this presents an opportunity to reduce compliance costs, strengthen customer trust, protect market access and potentially command higher value for premium products.

This playbook provides a practical pathway to get started.

What is product substantiation?

Product substantiation is simply the ability to prove that claims made about a product are true.

For example, a Mānuka honey producer may need to demonstrate:

- MGO levels
- Country of origin
- Organic certification
- Halal certification
- Sustainability credentials

Some claims can be supported by laboratory tests. Others rely on certifications or records from trusted third parties.

The challenge is not usually a lack of evidence. Most exporters already hold the information they need. The challenge is making that information available efficiently when customers, regulators or consumers ask for it.

¹ NZ PECC Project Team: Rebecca Berendt, Derek Gill, Peter Stevens

Why traditional approaches are reaching their limits

Most substantiation today relies on:

- PDF certificates
- Email exchanges
- Manual document handling
- Multiple versions of the same information

This creates:

- Administrative overhead
- Duplication
- Increased risk of error
- Difficulty responding quickly to requests
- Greater exposure to fraud

As information requirements increase, these processes become harder and more expensive to manage.

The opportunity: Digital Labelling

Digital labelling uses next generation QR codes² to connect a physical product to trusted digital information.

A consumer scans a QR code and sees information about the product.

A retailer scans the same code and accesses supply-chain information.

A regulator can access supporting certifications and documentation.

The result is a single product identity that can connect different audiences to the information they need. For exporters, digital labelling creates a bridge between products, customers and trusted information without requiring major changes to existing systems.

Most importantly, this is a journey rather than a technology project. Businesses can start small and expand their capability over time.

Summary

The trading environment is getting increasingly demanding. Consumers, governments and procurers are wanting to know more about your products and increasingly wanting substantiations of any product claims. Digital labelling via 'smart' QR codes compliant with ISO 18975:2024 is already rolling out in many countries. Regulators are also latching onto the technology as a means of both informing and protecting their public. Kiwi exporters need to be proactive and adopt new digital approaches to maintain market access, tell 'stories' to prospective buyers and consumers and flexibly adapt to regulation.

Get started on the journey!

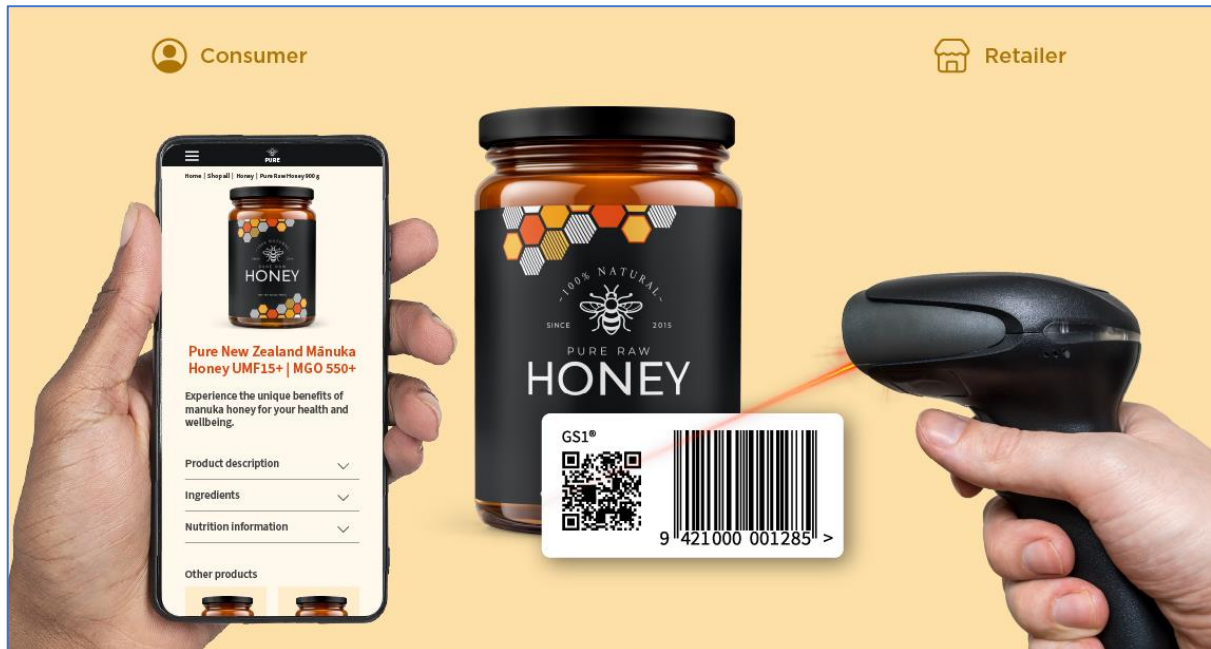
² ISO 18975:2024 global standard (also known as the 'GS1 QR code with Digital Link')

Getting Started

Level 1 – Connect Your Product to Your Customer

Designed to minimally change your product or your processes but position you to connect directly with your consumer a QR code compliant with ISO 18975:2024 is preprinted on your packaging. This is normally alongside the traditional linear barcode (unless you are confident that all your trading partners are able to scan QR codes at the point-of-sale and in their warehouse). To get started:

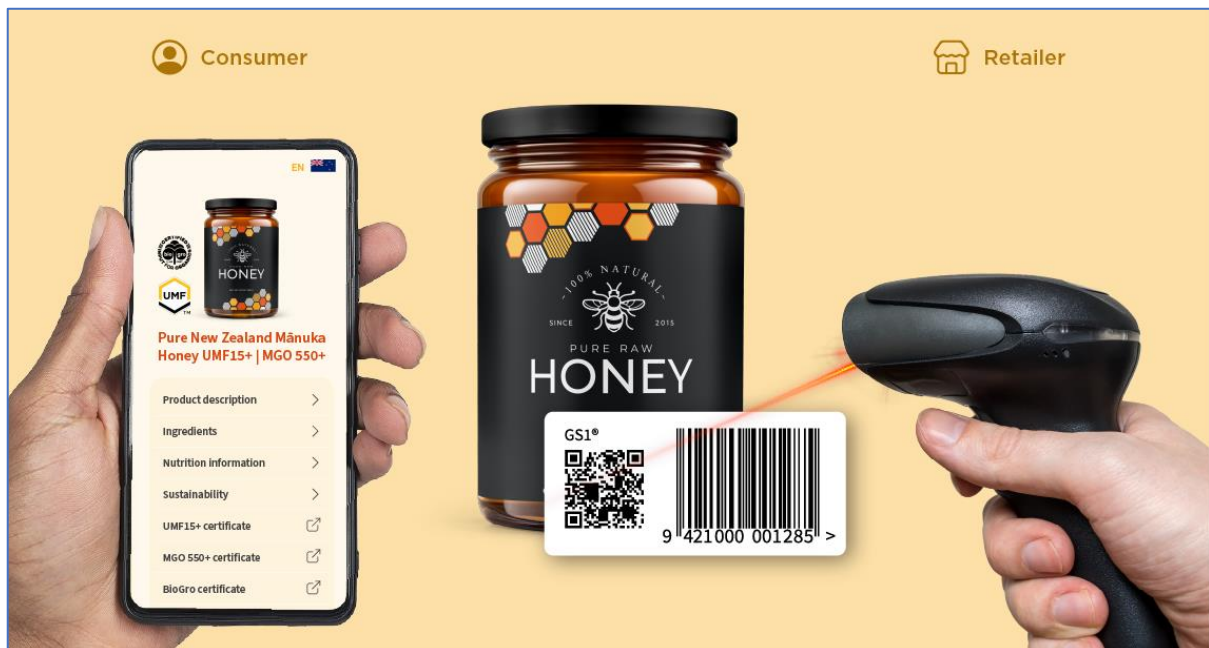
1. Ensure that your product is globally and uniquely identified (with a Global Trade Item Number or GTIN)
 - Create the GS1 QR code by encoding the product identifier and the digital link (the URL that goes into the QR code).
 - You will need what is technically called a ‘resolver’ (a software component that re-directs the consumer to whatever web page you want).
 - To get started without having to do anything too sophisticated, just ‘point’ the resolver to your product’s standard webpage on your company’s website.
 - On this page (the online destination for the user) you can present information about your product (e.g. marketing information, technical information such as ingredients etc).
- 👉 Tip – talk to your webmaster so that you are set up to track and monitor the incoming number, location and platform (e.g. mobile/tablet, operating system) of the consumers scanning your products!
- 👉 Tip – add a ‘scan here’, ‘find out more’ call-to-action on the pack to educate your customer to scan



Level 2 – Build Trust Through Product Information

At Level 2 you might want to provide the answers to common questions that your potential buyers or those consuming your product want to ask. Consider this a ‘twin’ of what is already required to be pre-printed on your pack. What’s great is that you can provide more context sensitive information (e.g. customisation to the language or geography where your consumer has your product in their hand) or provide greater depth of information (including substantiation of claims) and open up easy access to low vision and blind consumers.

2. Repeat Steps 1 & 2 from Level 1 above.
 3. Work out what information your consumer might be interested in or you wish to show to them. This could include dynamic value-added content or marketing campaigns. You might want present dynamically customise information to your consumer in real time using their consumers’ location, language or behaviour.
 - Either work with a solution provider or get your webmaster to build your own mobile phone-ready landing page for each product. For claims that you know are of high interest to your consumers or trading partners (e.g. organic status, MGO test results), you might like to consider loading the certificates of conformance for consumers to access directly, or provide links to the certifying bodies (e.g. UMF Association).
- 👉 Tip – Your menu structure should ideally follow standard industry models to provide consistence for your consumers. Good examples are the ‘SmartFacts’ templates developed for food products in Australia/New Zealand or the ‘SmartLabel’ format typical in the US
- 👉 Tip - Digital label landing pages are defined by regulation in some jurisdictions. Please check before you try to export!
- 👉 Tip – if you sell into multiple markets or where consumers speak different languages, be aware that it is relatively straight-forward to automatically detect where they are or which language their cell phone is running in and deliver customised pages.

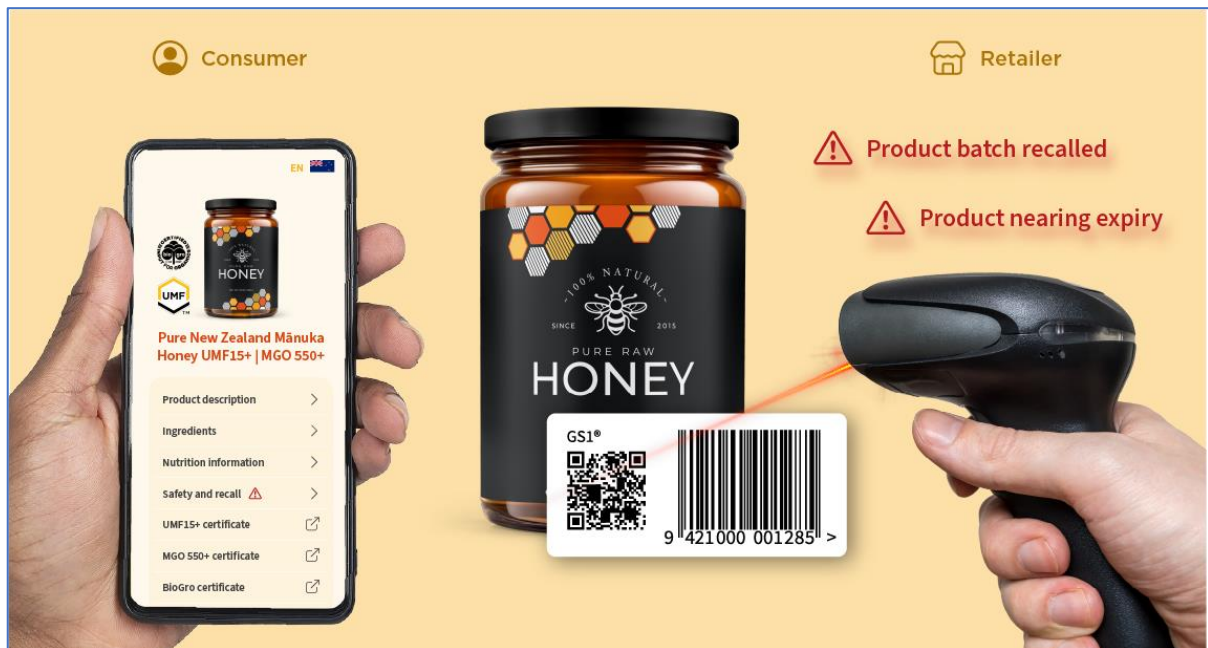


Level 3 – Enable Traceability and Supply Chain Visibility

At Level 3 *production* data specific to the product such as batch/lot, serial number or dates (e.g. best-before or expiry) is encoded into the QR code. Having such data elements available to scan will assist you and your trading partners with supply chain processes like fulfilment, traceability, targeted recalls and ‘first-in, first-out’ stock turns.

As production data is dynamic and only available at the time your product is made, the QR code cannot be pre-printed and typically is applied at the time of production (normally in-line on your manufacturing line).

4. Repeat steps 1-4 from Levels 1 & 2 above!
 5. Work with your coding/marketing solution partners to set up a barcode printing system that will allow you to generate and print relevant production data in the QR code according to the standard specifications.
- 👉 Tip: A low-tech option is print and apply QR codes on stick-on labels for each batch. But a better option is to set up an in-line barcode printer to take relevant production data from your core production system and encode and print it in the QR code as you are making your products on your production line. You may already be applying batch & date codes via ink-jet printer or laser coder. If so, the key data is already available on the production line – you just need to get it turned into the QR code in your production system.



Implementation roadmap

