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## Did the store overcharge you? No need to fume

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It used to steam me up: I'd get home after a big shopping trip, only to look at the receipt and realize I'd paid full price for those granola bars – or whatever – that had been advertised on sale. A matter of just a few dollars, mind you, but it still felt like a rip-off.

Little did I know, those granola bars didn't have to cost me a thing.

You, too, could save – up to \$10 on each item – if you are overcharged on your next trip to the store.

Or not, if you aren't aware – as I wasn't – of a national program that compensates customers who have been charged the wrong price by automatically giving them the item incorrectly scanned for free.

Yes, free.

Since 2002, stores that have signed on to a program called the Scanner Price Accuracy Voluntary Code that will give you an incorrectly priced item free, if that item costs less than \$10. If it costs more, you get \$10 off the correct price.

If you buy a bunch of the same, incorrectly priced thing, only the first unit purchased qualifies.

There are more than 8,000 participating locations across Canada.

The \$10 code was developed as a way to maintain consumers' faith in the retail system, says communications director Mark Beazley of the industry group Retail Council of Canada, which, along with other groups representing grocery and drug stores, administers the code.

"Although retailers strive to be accurate in scanner pricing, errors can occur in the system," Beazley says. Errors such as an item that has the wrong label or is scanned incorrectly at the checkout. The code is a simple and effective way for customers to have those errors corrected, Beazley says.

Except that customers we spoke to had never heard of the code, despite shopping at participating chains.

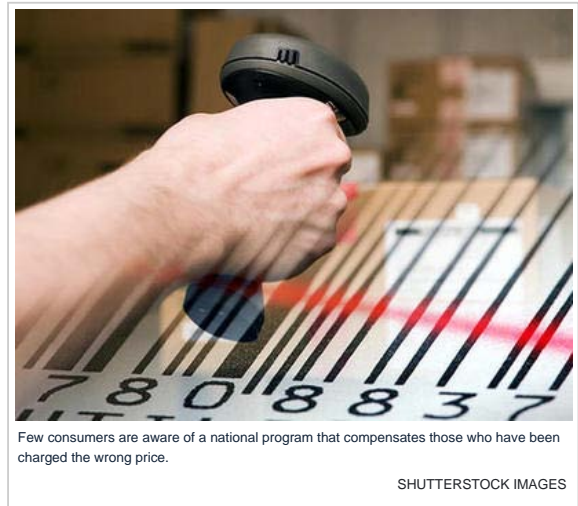
"I can tell you in my case, definitely, I wasn't aware there was such a thing," says Sonya Kladich who was checking over her bill in a west-end grocery store parking lot.

"I am the worst when it comes to (checking prices)," she says, adding that she has been burned in the past by one chain that does not subscribe to the code and now keeps an eye out when shopping there.

Fred Vella, 73, also didn't know about the code.

"If they charge me too much, I go back to the store for an adjustment," he says, pushing a Loblaw's cart holding two bags of flour, canned soup and some yogurt that had been discounted for quick sale.

"It's an inconvenience, eh? I have to drive back to the store from home." (Customers can also call a toll-free complaint line set up by the Retail Council of Canada.)



Savvy shoppers on the deal-spotting site [www.SmartCanucks.ca](http://www.SmartCanucks.ca) know about the code, but a recent discussion suggests a level of confusion over how it works. Some members thought it was universal among Canadian retailers.

Vella says he wouldn't think to demand his money back, which is typical, says Mel Fruitman, vice-president of the advocacy group Consumers Association of Canada.

"It's not in the Canadian psyche," Fruitman says. "We don't stand up for ourselves like we should.

Fruitman says the Retail Council doesn't go far enough in making the public aware of the seven-year-old code – "It's sort of just sitting there," he says – and recommends more signage.

Beazley says a survey of 255 stores conducted for the Retail Council showed 87 per cent were well-versed in the code and 84 per cent had signs displayed at every checkout and entrance.

Customers with a complaint can call the store directly or call a complaint hotline at 1-866-499-4599.

"I don't think you can jump to the conclusion this is showing an increase in the number of errors," Beazley says. "It may just be that consumers are more aware of the actual program."

All the complaints phoned in last year were resolved, Beazley says.

Fruitman says, with our reliance on technology, it may not occur to many customers to double-check their bill.

"Most consumers accept that we're in an electronic world and don't think too much about it anymore," he says.

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## THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT

When errors occur, it is usually in the customer's favour, according to an audit commissioned by retailers that participate in the Scanner Price Accuracy Voluntary Code. Several objective audits of stores' compliance with the code have been conducted by market researcher The Nielsen Company. In 2008, auditors visited 351 stores and tracked 35,100 scanned items, representing \$284, 377 in retail sales.

The study found:

- \* About 59 per cent of errors favour the customer.
- \* The error rate is about 2.90 per cent.
- \* The value of the average error is \$0.23 (+/-)
- \* 67 per cent of errors are owing to the shelf tag price being incorrect.
- \* 2 per cent of errors are owing to the barcode scanning incorrectly.

*Source: Scanner Price Accuracy Voluntary Code Associations' Annual Report to the Competition Bureau (2008)*