

PEPbase: A General Overview

PEPbase was developed at the Personal Essentials Pantry, Zion Church ELCA, Madison, Wisconsin. Its purpose was to provide us with the ability to manage the complex product eligibility rules and product lifetimes for the products required for personal and household hygiene. Unlike food products, for which there are fairly good general statistics regarding usage and need over time, these personal/household hygiene products vary quite a bit in terms of who is eligible to receive them (a household without children 3 or younger *probably* – though not necessarily – does not need diapers or pull-ups; a household with no women 12 or older *probably* – though not necessarily – does not need sanitary napkins) and the expectable lifetime of the products (toothpaste tends to last longer than shampoo; a household of five will go through toilet paper more quickly than a household of two). It became obvious very quickly in our history that paper-and-pencil lists were unworkable, and that some sort of computer-based control and management would be necessary.

PEPbase is written in public-domain, open-source software languages (MySQL and Apache), so that it can be freely disseminated to any other agency who may wish to use it. It is also intentionally *very* flexible, so that other agencies can customize products, languages, and eligibility rules as they need to. More specific information on what can be customized, and how to customize it, can be found in the *Coordinator Functions* section of this manual.

The PEPbase package consists of three linked databases (and a couple of minor control/coordination databases – see the *Technical Specifications* section) and the user interface system to them.

PEPbase Structure

The three main databases that PEPbase uses are:

- 1) *Household*:

This database contains the names, genders, and dates of birth for all members of a household, along with their street address and phone. It also records whether a second language should be used for guest forms, whether there are allergies in the household, whether special assistance is needed, etc.

This database is probably the least customizable. Our presumption is that most pantries or service agencies will need to collect similar information – if not for product control purposes, then for control of the service population (preventing four individuals from one household from signing up as four individual households, for instance) and for demographic analysis and reporting.

2) ***Product:***

This database contains all of the information about the products: the product name in all the languages supported, the product location, the rules as to who is eligible for the product (all ages, only some ages; both genders, only one gender; household generally or per individual, etc.), and the rules for how often guests may request the product.

Note that this database must be populated by *your* agency; the database in the PEPbase software as provided to you is completely blank, with only the data table structure defined. This is because we don't dare presume that *our* product definitions are *your* product definitions; you may not even be offering the same set of products.

Product definition capability is restricted to the Coordinator level; see the ***Coordinator Functions*** section of this manual for details.

3) ***Shopping History:***

This database records what each household received, and when. This database needs to be updated following each customer service shift of your agency, and should be updated as quickly as possible, so that the information is available to PEPbase in time for the next shift.

Because of the information recorded in these three databases, and the way that they're used by the software, you can have greater assurance that you don't have multiple registrations for any single household. Because the software allows you to custom-generate your guests' shopping lists for each visit, you also have the flexibility to allow your guests to come as often as they wish, as many times as they wish.¹ Essentially, PEPbase controls what products are made available to

¹ If your agency does not allow "as many, as often" visits, you may still find the database very useful in ensuring that families are not visiting more often than you allow; see the *Adaptive Uses of PEPbase* section in the *Appendices*.

the guests based first on their household composition (what products from your agency are they theoretically eligible for?) and their shopping history (which of the products that they are theoretically eligible for have they received within the expectable usable lifetime of the product?).

PEPbase at your agency or pantry

How you make use of PEPbase will be a function of what factors you need to control. We certainly anticipate that you will want to make use of the Household database for controlling guest registration, and in reporting the demographics of your agency's service. We also believe that, even if you don't use the Product database in the same fashion we do, it can be a useful tool for you in helping you not only control your inventory but in assessing how well you're doing at providing the products your guests need. How useful it will be in this fashion will depend very much on how you've set up your Product database, and how you record information on the Shopping List for each guest. We've presented some possibilities in the *Adaptive Uses of PEPbase* section in the *Appendices*. Over time, we may also host a blog to let folks who are using the PEPbase software share ideas and strategies.