ABSTRACT
A packaged item of merchandise, the packaged item includes a cylindrical container of a standard size and configuration for accommodation in an existing multi-compartment beverage vending machine used for dispensing various types of canned liquid beverages. The cylindrical container is filled with non-beverage consumer items, instead of a liquid beverage, to permit merchandising the non-beverage consumer items in an existing multi-compartment beverage vending machine. The cylindrical container is made of a material of sufficient rigidity and stiffness to maintain its cylindrical configuration such as to enable the multi-compartment beverage vending machine to handle it in the same manner it handles canned liquid beverage containers.
DEVICES AND METHODS FOR MERCHANDISING NON-BEVERAGE CONSUMER ITEMS


[0002] The present invention relates to merchandising consumer items via vending machines, and particularly to novel devices and methods for merchandising non-beverage consumer items.

[0003] Consumer items are presently sold via different types of vending machines each constructed for dispensing a particular type of consumer item. For example, beverages are generally sold in multi-compartment beverage vending machines constructed to handle cylindrical containers of a standard size and configuration for each of the different beverages. On the other hand, food snacks, such as candy bars, peanuts, cookies, etc., are usually packaged in bags or boxes and sold in vending machines specially constructed to handle such bag or boxes. Various types of toiletry items, such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, combs, etc., are generally sold in a different type of vending machine constructed to handle blister-packaging or other types of packaging for such toiletry items.

[0004] Accordingly, any particular point-of-sale site must include a separate type of vending machine for each type of consumer item to be sold at the respective location. This requires a large space area to be allocated at the respective point-of-sale site for selling the different types of consumer items. In addition, the present situation increases the installation costs for the different types of vending machines, as well as the maintenance cost for maintaining such different types of vending machines.

OBJECTS AND BRIEF SUMMER OF THE PRESENT INVENTION

[0005] A broad object of the present invention is to provide a novel device and method for merchandising non-beverage consumer items having advantages in the above respects. More particularly, one object of the invention is to provide a novel packaged item of merchandise particularly useful for merchandising non-beverage consumer items; another object of the invention is to provide a novel cylindrical container particularly useful in the novel packaged item of merchandise; and a still further object of the invention is to provide a novel method of merchandising non-beverage consumer items.

[0006] According to one aspect of the present invention, there is provided a packaged item of merchandise, comprising: a cylindrical container of a standard size and configuration for accommodation in an existing multi-compartment beverage vending machine used for dispensing various types of canned liquid beverages; the cylindrical container being filled with non-beverage consumer items, instead of a liquid beverage, to permit merchandising the non-beverage consumer items in an existing multi-compartment beverage vending machine; the cylindrical container being made of a material of sufficient rigidity and stiffness to maintain its cylindrical configuration such as to enable the multi-compartment beverage vending machine to handle it in the same manner it handles canned liquid beverage containers.

[0007] Several embodiments of the invention are described below for purposes of example. In the described embodiments, the cylindrical container is made of two sections which are manually openable for providing access to the non-beverage consumer items therein.

[0008] In one described preferred embodiment, the two sections are of semi-cylindrical configuration joined together along one of their longitudinal edges by an integral hinge, and carrying retainer members on the other longitudinal edges for retaining the two sections together in a closed condition, the retainer members being manually releasable to open the container and to provide access to the non-beverage consumer items therein.

[0009] Preferably, the cylindrical container further includes a tamper-indicating element covering one of the edges of the two sections in the closed condition of the cylindrical container, the tamper-indicating element being automatically ruptured when the two sections are moved to the open condition of the container.

[0010] According to a further optional feature in this embodiment of the invention, the cylindrical container further includes, in addition to the non-beverage consumer items therein, a pair of legs attachable to the cylindrical container in its open condition to support the cylindrical container in its open condition on a flat supporting surface.

[0011] A second embodiment of the invention is described below, for purposes of example, wherein one of the sections of the cylindrical container is in the form of a cap removable from the other section of the cylindrical container to open the container and to provide access to the non-beverage consumer items therein.

[0012] According to another aspect of the present invention, there is provided a cylindrical container, comprising two sections of semi-cylindrical configuration joined together along one of their longitudinal edges by an integral hinge, and carrying retainer members on their other longitudinal edges for retaining the two sections together in a closed condition, the retainer members being manually releasable for opening the two sections to permit access to the contents of the container.

[0013] According to a still further aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method of merchandising non-beverage consumer items, comprising: packaging the non-beverage consumer items in cylindrical containers of the size and configuration of containers used for dispensing beverages in multi-compartment beverage vending machines; and loading the cylindrical containers with the non-beverage consumer items therein in at least some of the compartments of the multi-compartment beverage vending machine to enable a user to select a the cylindrical container for the non-beverage consumer items when operating the vending machine.

[0014] The non-beverage consumer items to be dispensed in this manner are preferably selected from the group consisting of snack food items, such as candy bars, nuts, cookies, etc.; toiletry items, such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, combs, etc.; sewing kits; condoms; and nonprescription pharmaceuticals, such as aspirin.

[0015] It will thus be seen that the present invention, in permitting existing beverage vending machines to be used also for dispensing non-beverage consumer items, substantially reduces the area required at a point-of-sale locations.
for selling a wide variety of consumer items, and also substantially reduces the machine installation costs as well as maintenance costs at the respective location.

0016 Further features and advantages of the invention will be apparent from the description below.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

0017 The invention is herein described, by way of example only, with reference to the accompanying drawings, wherein:

0018 FIG. 1 illustrates a typical multi-compartment beverage vending machine currently available in many point-of-sale locations for dispensing various types of beverages, which machine can be used also for dispensing non-beverage consumer items in accordance with the present invention;

0019 FIG. 2 illustrates one form of container that may be used for enabling a beverage vending machine, such as illustrated in FIG. 1, also to be used for vending non-beverage consumer items in accordance with the present invention;

0020 FIG. 3 illustrates the container of FIG. 2 in its closed condition;

0021 FIG. 4 is a fragmentary view illustrating one end wall of the container of FIGS. 2 and 3, including a tamper-indicating element to provide an indication of whether the container had been previously opened;

0022 FIGS. 5a and 5b illustrate a modification of the container of FIGS. 1-4, in its closed and open conditions, respectively, provided with legs to support the container in its open condition on a flat supporting surface;

0023 FIG. 5c illustrates one of the legs in the modified container of FIGS. 5a and 5b;

0024 FIG. 5d illustrates a modification in the container of FIGS. 5a and 5b to accommodate the legs;

0025 and FIGS. 6a and 6b illustrate another container, in its open and closed conditions, respectively, constructed in accordance with the present invention for enabling existing beverage vending machines also to be used for selling non-beverage consumer items in accordance with the present invention.

0026 It is to be understood that the foregoing drawings, and the description below, are provided primarily for purposes of facilitating understanding the conceptual aspects of the invention and possible embodiments thereof, including what is presently considered to be a preferred embodiment. In the interest of clarity and brevity, no attempt is made to provide more details than necessary to enable one skilled in the art, using routine skill and design, to understand and practice the described invention. It is to be further understood that the embodiments described are for purposes of example only, and that the invention is capable of being embodied in other forms and applications than described herein.

DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

0027 FIG. 1 illustrates, for purposes of example, a typical multi-compartment beverage vending machine currently provided at a large number of locations for vending various types of canned liquid beverages. The vending machine illustrated in FIG. 1, therein designated 2, includes a plurality of compartments 3 each containing a liquid beverage in a cylindrical container 4, displayed for selection by a consumer. Thus, the consumer, after selecting a particular beverage, inserts the required amount of money (coins and/or paper money) in a slot 5, and then presses one of the selector buttons 6 according to the selection made. The selected beverage container falls by gravity through a chute (not shown) within the vending machine to an outlet opening 7 for removal by the consumer.

0028 As indicated earlier, such beverage vending machines are constructed to handle cylindrical containers of a standard size and configuration. Therefore, the existing beverage vending machines are not capable of handling other types of containers or other types of packaging commonly used for non-beverage consumer items, such as food snacks and the like. As a result, separate vending machines are generally provided for vending non-beverage consumer items, if desired, thereby increasing the space allocation for such vending machines, as well as their installation and maintenance costs.

0029 Two implementations of the invention are described below for purposes of example. In both implementations, the non-beverage consumer items are included in a cylindrical container of a standard size and configuration for accommodation in existing multi-compartment beverage vending machine, such as illustrated in FIG. 1. The cylindrical container used for containing the non-beverage consumer items need not be made of metal, as in a conventional beverage container, but may be made of another material, such as plastic or cardboard, of sufficient rigidity and stiffness to maintain its cylindrical configuration. Such a container construction thereby enables the multi-compartment beverage vending machine to handle containers of non-beverage consumer items in the same manner it handles canned liquid beverage containers.

0030 Two embodiments of the invention are described below for purposes of example.

The Embodiment of FIGS. 2-5d

0031 FIGS. 2-5d illustrate one form of cylindrical container, generally designated 10, constructed in accordance with the present invention for accommodating non-beverage consumer items, such as shown at 11 in FIGS. 2 and 5d. Such non-beverage consumer items could be, for example, food snacks, e.g., candy bars, nuts, cookies, or the like; toiletry items, e.g., toothbrushes, toothpaste, comb, and the like; a sewing kit; condoms; non-prescription pharmaceuticals, e.g., aspirin; etc. Whereas such non-beverage consumer items are heretofore sold in a wide variety of packaging, such as plastic or paper bags, blister-packages, etc., according to the present invention they would be included in cylindrical containers, such as shown at 10 in FIG. 2, of a standard size and configuration for accommodation and handling in existing multi-compartment beverage vending machines.

0032 In the embodiment of the invention illustrated in FIGS. 2-5d, cylindrical container 10 is made of two semi-cylindrical sections 12, 13 which may be manually moved either to a closed condition, as illustrated in FIGS. 34, 5a and
or to an open condition as illustrated in FIGS. 2 and 5b. In this embodiment, the two sections of semi-cylindrical configuration are joined together along one longitudinal edge by a hinge 14. The other longitudinal edges of the two semi-cylindrical sections 12, 13 carry interengageable retainer members 15, 16 which retain the two sections in the closed condition, as illustrated in FIGS. 3, 4, 5a and 5b, but which are manually releasable to permit the two sections to be moved to the open condition. Illustrated in FIGS. 2 and 5b, as shown in the latter figures, when the cylindrical container 10 is in its open condition, it provides access to the non-beverage consumer items 11 within the container.

Cylindrical container 10 may be of plastic material, such that hinge 14 is an integral hinge integrally formed with the two sections 12, 13, as a single unit. Cylindrical container 10 may also be of cardboard, or of other material of sufficient rigidity and stiffness to maintain its cylindrical configuration for handling by the beverage vending machine 2 (FIG. 1).

Another optional feature preferably included in cylindrical container 10 is a tamper-indicating element for indicating when the container has been opened. FIG. 4 illustrates such a tamper-indicating element, in the form of circular label 17 attached to one end wall 18 of the two semi-cylindrical sections in their closed condition. Label 17 thus covers the two semi-circular sections 12a, 13a, of the two container sections 12, 13 in the closed condition of the container. Thus, when the container is opened, label 17 is ruptured along line 17a (FIG. 4) to thereby provide a clear indication that it had been previously opened. Label 17 may also be used for advertising purposes, informational purposes, and the like.

A further optional feature that may be included in container 10 is illustrated particularly in FIGS. 5c-5d. This optional feature involves providing the container with a pair of legs, 18, 19, attachable to the container in its open condition to support the container on a flat supporting surface FIG. 5c illustrates the construction of one of the legs 18, wherein it is seen that its upper surface is formed with a pair of projections 18a receivable within a pair of openings 13a in semi-cylindrical section 13 of container 10. The second leg 19 would be provided with a similar pair of projections receivable within another pair of openings 13b formed in cylindrical section 13 of container 10.

Thus, legs 18 and 19 may be included with the non-beverage consumer items 11 within the container 10, such that when the container has been opened for use, the two legs 18, 19 may be removed and conveniently attached within openings 13b, 13c of section 13 of the container for supporting the container on a flat horizontal surface, as shown in FIG. 5b. This feature not only enables convenient access to the contents of the container after it has been opened, but also enables the container to be later used for a wide variety of other purposes, e.g. as a candy dish, or the like.

The embodiment of FIGS. 6a and 6b

In the embodiment illustrated in FIGS. 6a and 6b, the cylindrical container, therein generally designated 20, includes two sections 21, 22. In this case, however, section 21 is the main section for receiving the non-beverage consumer items, shown at 23 in FIG. 6a, and section 22 is a cap removably applied to the open end of section 21. For example, cap 22 may be threaded onto the open end of section 21, or force-fitted thereon.

As described above, cylindrical container 20 illustrated in FIGS. 6a and 6b, would also be of a standard size and configuration for accommodation in an existing multi-compartment beverage vending machine, so that it would be handled in the same manner as the canned liquid beverages normally dispensed by such a machine.

It will be appreciated that cylindrical container 20 illustrated in FIGS. 6a and 6b could also be provided with an anti-tamper element, such as a plastic covering over cap 22 and a part of section 21 engaged by the cap, which would be automatically ruptured upon opening the cap to thereby indicate that the container had been previously opened.

While the invention has been described with respect to two preferred embodiments, it will be appreciated that these are set forth merely for purposes of example, and that many variations may be made. For example, the cylindrical container could be made of cardboard formed with weakened lines to be severed for opening the container, or with a pull-strip to be pulled in order to open the container. Many other variations, modifications and applications of the invention will be apparent.

What is claimed is:

1. A packaged item of merchandise, comprising:

   a cylindrical container of a standard size and configuration for accommodation in an existing multi-compartment beverage vending machine used for dispensing various types of canned liquid beverages;

   said cylindrical container being filled with non-beverage consumer items, instead of a liquid beverage, to permit merchandising said non-beverage consumer items in an existing multi-compartment beverage vending machine;

   said cylindrical container being made of a material of sufficient rigidity and stiffness to maintain its cylindrical configuration such as to enable the multi-compartment beverage vending machine to handle it in the same manner it handles canned liquid beverage containers.

2. The packaged item of merchandise according to claim 1, wherein said cylindrical container is made of two sections which are manually releasable for providing access to the non-beverage consumer items therein.

3. The packaged item of merchandise according to claim 2, wherein the two sections of the cylindrical container are of semi-cylindrical configuration joined together along one of their longitudinal edges by an integral hinge, and carrying retainer members on the other longitudinal edges for retaining the two sections together in a closed condition, said retainer members being manually releasable to open the container and to provide access to the non-beverage consumer items therein.
4. The packaged item of merchandise according to claim 3, wherein said cylindrical container further includes a tamper-indicating element covering one of the edges of the two sections in the closed condition of the cylindrical container, said tamper-indicating element being automatically ruptured when the two sections are moved to the open condition of the container.

5. The packaged item of merchandise according to claim 4, wherein said two semi-cylindrical sections of the cylindrical container have semi-circular end walls which come together in the closed condition of the cylindrical container, and wherein said tamper-indicating element covers the two semi-circular end walls at one end of the cylindrical container in the closed condition of the container.

6. The packaged item of merchandise according to claim 2, wherein said cylindrical container further includes, in addition to the non-beverage consumer items therein, a pair of legs attachable to the cylindrical container in its open condition to support the cylindrical container in its open condition on a flat supporting surface.

7. The packaged item of merchandise according to claim 6, wherein said cylindrical container includes openings for receiving attaching elements on said legs for attaching said legs to the cylindrical container in its open condition.

8. The packaged item of merchandise according to claim 2, wherein one of said sections of the cylindrical container is in the form of a cap removable from the other section of the cylindrical container to open the container and to provide the non-beverage consumer items therein.

9. The packaged item of merchandise according to claim 1, wherein said cylindrical container is made of a plastic material.

10. The packaged item of merchandise according to claim 1, wherein said cylindrical container is made of a cardboard material.

11. The packaged item of merchandise according to claim 1, wherein said non-beverage consumer items within the container are selected from the group consisting of snack food items, toiletry items, sewing kits, condoms, and non-prescription pharmaceuticals.

12. A cylindrical container particularly useful for merchandising non-beverage consumer items, said cylindrical container comprising two sections of semi-cylindrical configuration joined together along one of their longitudinal edges by an integral hinge, and carrying retainer members on their other longitudinal edges for retaining the two sections together in a closed condition, said retainer members being manually releasable for opening the two sections to permit access to the contents of the container.

13. The cylindrical container according to claim 12, wherein said cylindrical container further includes a tamper-indicating element covering one of the edges of the two sections in the closed condition of the cylindrical container, said tamper-indicating element being automatically ruptured when the two sections are moved their open condition.

14. The cylindrical container according to claim 13, wherein said two semi-cylindrical sections of the cylindrical container have semi-circular end walls which come together in the closed condition of the cylindrical container, and wherein said tamper-indicating element covers the two semi-circular end walls at one end of the cylindrical container in the closed condition of the container.

15. The cylindrical container according to claim 12, wherein the interior of said container includes a pair of legs attachable to the cylindrical container in its open condition to support the cylindrical container in its open condition on a flat supporting surface.

16. The cylindrical container according to claim 14, wherein said cylindrical container includes openings for receiving attaching elements on said legs for attaching said legs to the cylindrical container in its open condition.

17. A method of merchandising non-beverage consumer items, comprising:

packaging the non-beverage consumer items in cylindrical containers of the size and configuration of containers used for dispensing beverages in multi-compartment beverage vending machines;

and loading said cylindrical containers with the non-beverage consumer items therein in at least some of the compartments of the multi-compartment beverage vending machine to enable a user to select a said cylindrical container for the non-beverage consumer items when operating said vending machine.

18. The method of merchandising according to claim 16, wherein each of said cylindrical containers is made of two sections which are manually openable for providing access to the non-beverage consumer items therein.

19. The method of merchandising according to claim 17, wherein the two sections of each cylindrical container are of semi-cylindrical configuration and are joined together along one of their longitudinal edges by an integral hinge, and carrying retainer members on the other longitudinal edges for retaining the two sections together in a closed condition, said retainer members being manually releasable to open the container and to provide access to the non-beverage consumer items therein.

20. The method of merchandising according to claim 18, wherein each of said cylindrical containers further includes a tamper-indicating element covering one of the edges of the two sections in the closed condition of the cylindrical container, said tamper-indicating element being automatically ruptured when the two sections are moved to the open condition of the container.

21. The method of merchandising according to claim 19, wherein said two semi-cylindrical sections of each cylindrical container have semi-circular end walls which come together in the closed condition of the cylindrical container, and wherein said tamper-indicating element covers the two semi-circular end walls at one end of the cylindrical container in the closed condition of the container.

22. The method of merchandising according to claim 17, wherein each of said cylindrical containers further includes, in addition to the non-beverage consumer items therein, a pair of legs attachable to the cylindrical container in its open condition to support the cylindrical container in its open condition on a flat supporting surface.

23. The method of merchandising according to claim 21, wherein each of said cylindrical containers includes openings for receiving attaching elements on said legs for attaching said legs to the cylindrical container in its open condition.

24. The method of merchandising according to claim 17, wherein one of said sections of each cylindrical container is in the form of a cap removable from the other section of the cylindrical container to open the container and to provide access to the non-beverage consumer items therein.
25. The method of merchandising according to claim 16, wherein each of said cylindrical containers is made of a plastic material.

26. The method of merchandising according to claim 16, wherein each of said cylindrical containers is made of a cardboard material.

27. The method of merchandising according to claim 6, wherein the non-beverage consumer items within each of said cylindrical containers are selected from the group consisting of snack food items, toiletry items, sewing kits, condoms, and non-prescription pharmaceuticals.

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