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(71) Applicant: **EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY**
Rochester, New York 14650 (US)

(72) Inventors:
• **Long, Michael,**
c/o Eastman Kodak Company
Rochester, New York 14650-2201 (US)
• **White, James Arthur,**
c/o Eastman Kodak Company
Rochester, New York 14650-2201 (US)

(74) Representative: **Jones, Alan John et al**
CARPMAELS & RANSFORD
43 Bloomsbury Square
London, WC1A 2RA (GB)

(54) **Device for packaging articles between opposed webs**

(57) Equipment (10) for packaging a plurality of articles (1) has a rotatable drum (12) for supporting the articles (1) in one of a plurality of spaced through openings (14) along the circumferential portion (22) of the drum (12). First and second sources (30,32) of first and second webs (16,18), respectively, supplies the webs sequentially under continuous tension towards one of the plurality of through openings (14). By passing the webs (16,18) through respective serpentine paths (28,30) prior to delivery to one of the plurality of through openings (14) provide the desired continuous tensioning level on the webs (16,18). An article dispenser (40)

is provided to dispense one of the plurality of articles (1) into one of the plurality of through openings (14) when one of the first and second webs (16,18) generally covers the through opening (14) forming a seat for article 1. Thereafter, and in sequence, the other of the first and second webs (16,18) overwraps the article (1) seated in the through opening (14). A sealing means (46) is provided to seal the webs (16,18) about the article forming a packaged article. A punch means (150) cooperating with the drum (12) is employed to relieve the packaged articles in sequence from the through openings (14).

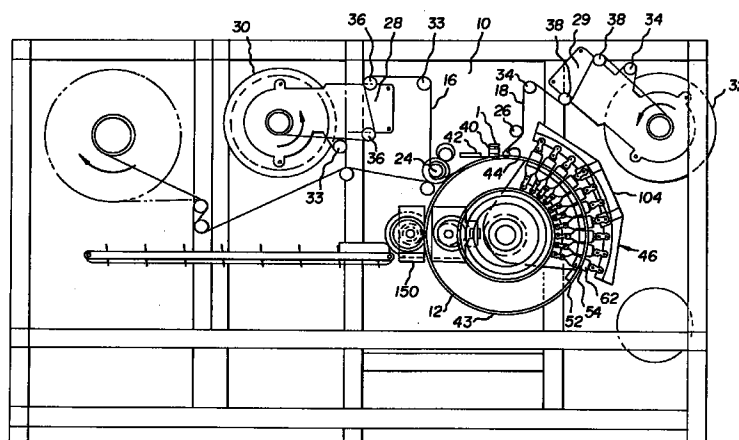


FIG. 2

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Description

Field of the Invention

The invention relates generally to packaging equipment. More particularly, the invention concerns equipment capable of high speed, continuous packaging of a plurality of articles with flexible webs which undergo continuous tensioning.

Background of the Invention

Numerous prior art patents have attempted to solve the packaging pitch registration problems associated with metering a product to be packaged onto a web, sealing a second web to the first and thereby enveloping the product then singulating the packaged product. Brock 2,896,387; Smith 2,928,221; Lewi 2,896,943; and Mahaffy 4,034,536 add the additional essential steps of heating and thermoforming a pocket in one or both packaging webs to prevent product migration on the lower web as it is transported between the filling and sealing stations. Baumstingl 4,133,162 and Limmer 3,557,517 add the additional essential steps of introducing mold cavities which move with the packaging web through the filling, sealing and cut-off stations and means of deforming at least one of the packaging webs into the moving cavities in order to prevent product migration on the web between the filling and sealing stations.

Prior art devices such as shown by Brock, Smith and Lewi, supra, use apertured belts to support and transport in a straight line path semi-rigid plastic films which are thermally deformed to include five-sided depressions protruding through the apertures in the belt. In for instance the devices of Brock and Smith, the thermoformed depressions are sized so as to conform to and enter into positive driving engagement with the apertured belt. Lewi teaches the use of a system of hinged clamping elements arranged in the form of a belt to positively clamp and thereby drive the packaging webs through the thermoforming, filling, sealing, and cutting stations without requiring that the thermoformed depression enter into driving engagement with the apertured belt. In all three patents, product is introduced into the thermally deformed depressions and is prevented from migrating out of position by virtue of the sidewalls and depth of the depressions.

Mahaffy teaches the use of edge clamps to support and drive in a straight line path a semi-rigid pair of packaging webs through thermoforming, filling, sealing, and punching stations in lieu of an apertured belt as in Brock. Like Brock, the product introduced to the thermally deformed depressions is prevented from migrating out of position by virtue of the sidewalls and depth of the depressions and further, in the types of products to be packaged as cited by Mahaffy, by the cohesion between these moist products and the packaging webs.

Baumstingl teaches the use of cooperating half

molds carried on chains and arranged in a belt-like manner to define product enveloping cavities in a tubular packaging web and to advance these cavities in a straight line path through cross sealing and cross-cutting stations which act on the packaging web between mated half molds. Moreover, Baumstingl uses the mated half molds to prevent the product from migrating out of position between the filling and sealing stations.

Limmer allows for product enveloping, vacuum ported mold cavities to be carried on a drum in a circular path or on a belt in a straight line path. In both cases, a first flexible packaging web is drawn by vacuum into a cavity which both prevents product migration and defines the seal boundary between the two packaging webs.

The product in our application is relatively thin and flat and our application requires that the packaging web be extremely soft and pliable. Such supple webs cannot be thermoformed to act as reliable web driving means as taught by Brock and Smith. Nor can such thin and supple webs be thermoformed to provide depressions to precisely maintain thin products in position as they are transported in a straight line path between the filling and sealing stations as taught by Lewi and Mahaffy. The mold cavities introduced in the devices according to Baumstingl and Limmer could be used to package thin, flat products in soft and pliable webs, but the additional cost and complexity of the molds and means to make the web conform to the mold are rendered unnecessary by the device according to our invention which instead uses the web tension between the two packaging webs as they are drawn over and apertured support drum to maintain product placement much more accurately than any of the prior art devices as it is transferred between the filling and sealing stations. None of the devices using a straight line path between the filling and sealing stations can achieve a normal force between the two packaging webs and thereby hold the product in a precise position to the extent that our device achieves this end by wrapping the packaging webs over an apertured drum.

Summary of the Invention

It is, therefore, an object of the invention to provide equipment for continuously packaging articles in a plurality of regularly spaced openings arranged in a rotatable drum.

It is another object of the invention to provide equipment for continuously packaging articles by sequentially delivering tensioned webs about the article seated in one of a plurality of spaced openings.

Yet another object of the invention is to provide packaging equipment that can form a sealed packaged article with extensible overlapping webs surrounding the article in one of a plurality of spaced through openings formed in a rotatable drum.

It is a feature of the invention that first and second webs are continuously tensioned as each travels

through a generally serpentine path prior to overlappingly wrapping one of a plurality of articles disposed in one of a plurality of regularly spaced openings in a drum.

To accomplish these and other objects and advantages of the invention, there is provided, in one aspect of the invention, packaging equipment having a rotatable drum for movably supporting a plurality of articles. The drum is provided with a plurality of spaced through openings aligned at least partially along a circumferential portion. Each of the spaced through openings are somewhat larger than each of the plurality of articles. Further, the equipment includes first and second sources of first and second webs, respectively which are arranged so as to sequentially deliver the respective first and second webs about the circumferential portion of drum towards one of the plurality of spaced through openings. Furthermore, means is provided for continuously supplying the first and second webs while undergoing continuous tensioning from the respective first and second sources to the circumferential portion of the drum so that either of the first and second webs generally covers one of the plurality of through openings when any one of the plurality of articles is in proximity with the spaced through opening. The other of the first and second webs is supplied in an overlapping relations about the article or product. Moreover, means is provided for introducing at least one of the plurality of articles into proximity with one of the plurality of through openings. In this embodiment at least one of the plurality of articles is introduced when either of the first and second webs generally covers the through opening. The equipment of the invention also provides means for sealing the first and second webs about the at least one of the plurality of articles. More particularly, the sealing means provides sealed first and second web portions surrounding the at least one of the plurality of articles to form a sealed packaged article. Finally, the equipment provides means for relieving the sealed packaged article from each of the spaced through openings and then removing the residual web material from the through opening.

It is, therefore, an advantageous effect of the present invention that high speed continuous packaging, sealing and then singulating of articles can be achieved using webs which undergo continuous tensioning.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The foregoing as well as other objects, features and advantages of this invention will become more apparent from the appended Figures, wherein like reference numerals denote like elements, and wherein:

Figure 1 a front view of a typical article or product to be packaged;

Figure 1(a) is a end view of the article illustrating its general flatness;

Figure 2 is a front elevational view of the apparatus of the invention;

Figure 3 is a top plan view of the drum circumference showing the article and web sealing region with the article enlarged to expose certain details thereof;

Figure 4 is a detailed front elevational view showing the sealing element cooperating with the drum;

Figure 5 is sectional view along line 5-5 of Figure 4 showing the heating means in a closed position;

Figure 6 is the same as Fig 5 except that the heating means is in an open position;

Figure 7 is an exploded isometric view of the heating element;

Figure 8 is an isometric view of the article dispenser and reciprocating pusher elements, the former being partially torn away to expose articles therein; and,

Figure 9 is an enlarged end view of the drum illustrating an article-web wrapping stage.

Detailed Description of the Invention

Turning first to Figs. 1-1a, illustrated is an exemplary example of a typical article or product **1** capable of being packaged using the equipment **10** (described in details below). Briefly described, the article or product, **1**, for instance a dental x-ray pack, is generally flat having a thickness of less than about .050 inches, as depicted in Fig. 1a. While the equipment **10** is capable of packaging articles having a variety of geometric shapes, for instance round, triangular, etc., most of our experience has been largely with generally rectangular shaped articles.

Rotatable Drum 12

In Figures 2, 3, 4 and 9, the equipment **10** in accordance with the principles of the invention is illustrated. Figure 2 depicts a front view of a preferred embodiment of the equipment **10** having generally a rotatable drum **12** having through openings **14** for supporting a plurality of articles **1**, first and second sources **30, 32** (described below) of first and second webs **16, 18** provided under continuous tension for overwrapping each of the articles **1**, means **46** (described below) for sealing the overwrapped webs **16, 18** about the articles **1**, and means **150** (described below) for relieving the articles **1** from the apertured drum **12**. As best seen in Figure 3, the drum **12** has a plurality of regularly spaced through openings or apertures, **14**, surrounded by shoulder portions **20** aligned at least partially along a circumferential portion **22** of the drum **12**. Each of the spaced through openings **14**, in the preferred embodiment is somewhat larger than each of the plurality of articles **1**, although, in general, each need not be as large as the article **1**. Further, as depicted in Fig. 3, the through openings **14** are arranged in an array along the circumferential portion **22** of drum **12** according to a

given pitch (λ_1) defined by the distance (l) between identical articles 1 similarly situated in adjacent through openings 14 along the circumferential portion 22 of the drum 12. In our application, we prefer accommodating about ten (10) articles 1 in through openings 14 arranged about the circumferential portion 22 of the drum 12 and spaced apart by a single pitch (λ_1) between a sealing cycle, described in details below.

According to Fig. 2, first and second lateral web guides 24,26 insure the correct lateral position of first and second webs 16,18, respectively, on the circumferential portion 22 of drum 12. Depicted in Fig 3, either of the first or second webs 16,18 which eventually underlies one of the plurality of articles 1 seated in one of the plurality of through openings 14 is releasably secured to a shoulder portion 20 surrounding the through opening 14. We prefer using an adhesive coating 43 applied to the shoulder portions 20 to releasably secure the webs 16,18 to the shoulder portions 20. Alternatively, those skilled in the art will appreciate that other methods may be used to secure the webs 16,18 in position on shoulder portions 20, such as by vacuum (not shown). However, the adhesive coating, preferably 3M™ spray pressure sensitive adhesive, prevents slippage of the webs 24,26 relative to the shoulder portions 20 of the drum 12 as well as controls the shrinkage of the web 16,18 when they are heated during sealing, as described below.

Web Tensioning Means 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 36, 38

Shown clearly in Fig. 2, first and second sources 30,32 of first and second webs 16,18, respectively, are provided for supplying the respective webs 16,18 under continuous tension toward at least one of the plurality of spaced through openings 14. First and second webs 16,18 travel, in a preferred embodiment, though a respective serpentine path 28,29 formed by first and second idler roller 33,34 each being arranged to cooperate with first and second pivoting, tensioning idler rollers 36,38, respectively. Thus, preferably, first web 16 travels through serpentine path 28 formed by idler roller 33 cooperating with a pair of identical pivoting tensioning rollers 36, and then about another identical idler roller 33. Similarly, second 18 travels about serpentine path 29 formed by idler roller 34 which cooperates with a pair of identical pivoting tensioning rollers 38, and then about another identical idler roller 34. This arrangement of identical unwind rollers 33,34 and idler rollers 36,38, preferably upstream of the plurality of spaced through openings 14 in the circumferential portion 22 of the drum 12, produces the required level of continuous tension on the first and second webs 16,18. Of course, skilled artisans will appreciate that other means for tensioning the webs 16,18 are within the contemplation of the invention, including braking devices applied to the unwind spindle (not shown) and vacuum boxes (not shown). A preferred tensioning level (measured in pounds of tension per inch of web width or pli) of

the webs 16,18 is one in the range of about 0.3 pli to about 1.3 pli. Consequently, taking into account the curvature of the circumferential portion 22 of the drum 12, and the continuous tension in the two incoming webs 16,18, a compressive force is thereby exerted on the product or article 1 by the overwrapped webs 16,18 which reliably holds the product or article 1 stably in place, centered in one of a plurality of through openings 14.

With reference to Fig. 2, since it is advantageous that equipment 10 continuously packages a plurality of articles 1, according to the invention, first and second webs 16,18 are arranged so as to be continuously delivered, in sequence, from its respective first and second source 30,32 toward one of the plurality of spaced through openings 14 of the drum 12. Either of the first and second webs 16,18 generally covers at least one of the plurality of through openings 14 when any one of the plurality of articles 1 is in proximity with one of the plurality of through openings 14. The other of the first and second webs 16,18 is then supplied in an overlapping relations about the article 1 thereby enveloping the article 1. In a preferred order, first web 16 is first delivered toward and into a through opening 14 with an extended portion of the first web 16 resting and adhering to the surrounding shoulder portions 20. An article dispenser (described below) then dispenses one of a plurality of articles 1 towards and into the through opening 14 such that the article rest on the first web 16. The second web 18, thereafter, is delivered towards and into the through opening 14 for overwrapping the article 1 nesting on the first web 16 and overlapping the first web 16, as shown in Fig. 9.

Article Dispenser 40

In Figs. 2 & 8, means, such as an article dispenser, 40, is arranged about the equipment 10 to introduce at least one of the plurality of articles 1 into proximity with one of the plurality of through openings 14. Clearly illustrated in Fig. 8, dispenser 40 comprises a sequencing means (not shown) to introduce at least one of the plurality of articles 1 when either of the first and second webs 16,18 generally covers the through opening 14 forming effectively a seat for the article 1 in the through opening 14.

Referring again to Fig. 8, articles 1 to be packaged are introduced between the first and second webs 16,18 at their point of convergence by a reciprocating pusher 42 which cooperates with article dispenser 40 and roller 44. A preferred reciprocating pusher device 42 contemplated by this invention is one disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,293,782 by assigned to the Eastman Kodak Company, hereby incorporated herein by reference. The articles 1 are introduced at a predetermined pitch (λ_2), as shown in Fig. 3, which coincides with the pitch (λ_1) of through openings 14 arranged about the circumferential portion 22 of the drum 12. Pitch (λ_2) of the articles 1 is defined as the distance between articles 1 seated in

adjacent through openings 14. In our invention, pitch (λ_1) is equal to pitch (λ_2).

Sealing Means 46

Referring to Figs. 2 and 4, in the preferred embodiment, means 46 is provided for sealing the first and second webs 16,18 about each of the plurality of articles 1 seated in one of the plurality of through openings 14. Sealing means 46 forms sealed web portion 48 about the article 1 resulting in a sealed packaged article 45 (shown in Fig. 3 enlargement) suitable for shipment into the stream of commerce.

According to Figs. 5-7 and 9, either one of the first and second incoming webs 16,18 is contacted from underneath by a plurality of identical heater pads 52 which protrude at least partially into the apertures or spaced through openings 14 during a portion of the operating cycle of equipment 10. These heater pads 52 may be constructed of thermally and electrically insulating materials, such as composite glass fiber and epoxy or silicon resins, or ceramics such as zirconia, and alumina. Heater pads 52 may have recesses to accommodate the thickness of the product or article 1. Impulse heating elements 54, constructed preferably of nichrome or similar electrically conductive material, are mounted on their upper surfaces 53 (Fig. 7). A non-stick, high temperature tape 56 covers the impulse heating elements 54. The heater pads 52 are supported on an oscillating support arm 60 through identical first spring flexures 61 which allow each heater pad 52 to move in a radial direction toward and away from circumferential portion 22 of the drum 12. According to Fig. 4, pitch (λ_3) of the heater pads 52 is identical to the pitch (λ_1) of the spaced through openings 14 when the heater pads 52 are positioned for sealing the webs 16, 18 about the article 1 resting in the through opening 14.

Referring to Figs. 4, 5 & 6, oscillating support arm 60 also supports a series of pressure pads 62 through second spring flexures 63 which guide the pressure pads 62 to move radially toward and away from the circumferential portion 22 of drum 12.

According to Fig. 4, the pitch (λ_4) of the pressure pads 62, defined as the distance between adjacent spaced pressure pads 62, is identical to the pitch (λ_1) of the through openings 14 in the circumferential portion 22 of the drum 12 when the support pads 62 are in engagement with the incoming first and second webs 16,18. As depicted in Fig. 4, the support pads 62 have an elastomeric covering 66, preferably composed of closed cell silicone foam in order to present a compliant and non-stick surface to the incoming first and second webs 16,18. The compliancy of the elastomeric covering 66 insures good seal uniformity in the incoming first and second webs 16,18 about the article 1 despite slight non-uniformities in contact pressure between the pressure pads 62 and the heater pads 52. The pressure pads 62 are generally narrower than each of the through openings 14 in circumferential portion 22 in the

transverse direction (denoted solid arrow in Fig. 3) and are larger than the openings 14 in the circumferential direction (denoted by broken arrow in Fig. 3). This allows the preferably flat faced pressure pads 62 to more closely conform to the incoming first and second webs 16,18 which become chordal segments as they span the through openings 14 and stops the motion of the spring loaded pressure pads 62 at a consistent radial position relative to the input webs 16,18 despite radial runout of the webs 16,18 enveloping one of a plurality of articles seated in a through opening 14 of circumferential portion 22. Elastomeric covering 66 in the circumferential direction (shown by broken arrows in Fig. 3) serves to clamp the webs 16,18 against extended portions 68,70 of first and second webs 16,18 arranged about the transverse shoulder portions 28 surrounding the spaced openings 14 in the circumferential portion 22 to limit shrinkage and subsequent wrinkle formation in the incoming first and second webs 16,18 as they are being sealed.

In Figs. 4-6, a pair of identical linear guide rods 80 slidably mounted in guide bearings 82 and mounted to one face of oscillating support arm 60 support actuator blocks 86, 88 for linear movement in a radial direction. Actuator block 86 is driven toward and away from circumferential portion 22 of drum 12 along guide rods 80 by first cam profile 94 of cam 96 through cam follower 98. Actuator block 86 simultaneously drives each of heater pads 52 into and out of spring loaded engagement with the incoming webs 16,18 and the pressure pads 62 through links 99 which pivot about pins 100,102. Actuator block 88 is clamped to guide rods 80 and causes support arch 104 to move in a radial direction toward and away from circumferential portion 22 through second cam profile 106 of cam 96 acting against second cam follower 108. Support Arch 104 simultaneously drives each of pressure pads 62 into and out of spring loaded engagement with the input webs 16,18, the heater pads 52 and the circumferential portion 22 of drum 12 in order to effect an annular seal band in the two input webs 16,18 which captures the product or article 1 inside of the annular sealed web portion 48, as seen in Fig. 3.

Further, according to Figs. 4-6, pressure pads 62 and heater pads 52 employ a preloaded spring tensioning system (not shown) to insure that a consistent desired clamping force is achieved between the heater pads 52 and support pads 62. Moreover, the preloaded spring system insures that the input webs 16,18 are neither pushed excessively into the through openings 14 nor pulled away from the circumferential portion 22 despite its radial runout and set-up inaccuracies in the preferred heights of the heating pads 52 and pressure pads 62. This is accomplished by having pins 102 captured in slots 112 in heater pads 52 and arch 104 which allow radial motion of the heater pads 52 and pressure pads 62 with respect to their actuators 86,88, respectively, through the use of identical preloading springs 113 which exert a predetermined force against heating

pads 52 and pins 102 and between arch 104 and pins 102, forcing the heating pads 52 against heads 114, 116 of height adjustment screw 122, 124, respectively. When cam 96 activates the heater pads 52 and pressure pads 62 to clamp against both the first and second webs 16, 18, the timing of first and second cam profiles 94, 106 is such that the pressure pads 62 contact the outer surface of the drum 12 before the heater pads 52 contact the first and second webs 16, 18. Skilled artisans can also appreciate that the first and second webs may be sealed by pressure pads 62 contacting either one of the webs 16, 18 when the webs 16, 18 envelop the article 1 in the through opening 14. Support arch 104 is displaced more than the distance required to cause contact between the pressure pads 62 and the circumferential portion 22 of drum 12 so as to unseat the head 116 of height adjustment screws 124 and thereby cause each pressure pad 62 to bear against the transverse shoulder portions 25 of the circumferential portion 22 between spaced through openings 14 with a predetermined force. Actuator block 86 similarly is overdriven so as to unseat the heads 114 of height adjustment screws 122 and thereby cause each heater pad 52 to contact the webs 16, 18 and bear against the elastomeric face of pressure pads 62 with a preset contact force.

Referring once again to Figs. 4-6, oscillator support arm 60 is made to oscillate through an arc of about 60 degrees by a commercially available cam driven actuator (not shown). The oscillator support arm 60 is configured such that it maintains a constant angular velocity over an output displacement of 50 degrees for a constant input velocity and over 180 degrees of input rotation. The constant angular velocity portion of the oscillator cycle is made to correspond exactly to the angular velocity of the circumferential portion 22 by a system of drive pulleys so that the heater pads 52 and pressure pads 62 may cooperate to form a sealed web portion 48 between the webs 16, 18 through the through openings 14 in circumferential portion 22 of drum 12. Moreover, according to Figs. 4-6, Cam 96 is driven through a system of drive pulleys (not shown) to make one revolution per oscillator cycle and is contoured to activate the heater pads 52 and pressure pads 62 to clamp the input webs 16, 18 together for sealing during the constant angular velocity portion of the oscillator's cycle and to disengage from the webs 16, 18 at the end of the constant velocity portion of the oscillator's movement. In this way, the heater pads 52 and pressure pads 62 are able to join the two webs 16, 18 and maintain a constant pressure on the sealed web portion 48 while it cools in order to effect a high quality seal in webs 16, 18 having low tack strength.

Article Relieving Means 150

According to Figure 2, important to the invention, means 150 is provided for relieving the sealed packaged article 45 from the each of the spaced through

openings 14. In the preferred embodiment, relieving means, or alternately punch device, 150, such as a knife or any cutting member, is adapted to relieve the tolerances of the through openings 14. A preferred punch device 150 is one disclosed in Research Disclosure 38195, Publication 196, page 81 which describes a punching device with a cycle inhibitor. The aforementioned preferred punch device 150 in cooperation with a variable cycloidal indexing device, described and disclosed in U.S. Serial Number 08/572,374, by the inventors Michael Long and James White, assigned to the Eastman Kodak Company, and hereby incorporated herein by reference, would then enable the sealed packaged article 1 to be sequentially relieved from the spaced openings 14 and conveyed away from the operation for shipment into the stream of commerce.

As seen in Fig. 3, webs 16, 18 remain adhered to shoulder portions 20, 25 surrounding the through openings 14 of drum 12 after sealing and is transported to a subsequent operation in perfect registration with the through openings 14. In our application, a moving punch press 150 (Fig. 2) having cooperating punching or cutting tooling (not shown) is brought into velocity matching engagement with the drum 12 and hence the sealed input webs 16, 18 to cut the webs 16, 18 to cut the packaged product 45 from the joined webs 16, 18 through the through openings 14. Further, circumferential portion 22 of drum 12 cooperates with the sealing and punching processes to hold the input webs 16, 18 and the article 1 to be packaged in a repeatable position relative to these devices and to maintain pitch registration between these and possibly several additional processes, but does not contact the heater pads 52, punch press 150 or packaged product 45. This attribute minimizes the possibility of contaminating the packaged product 45 and enables multiple product formats varying in size, shape, and thickness to be packaged using the equipment 10 of the invention and without changing the configuration of spaced through openings 14 in circumferential portion 22.

Parts List

1	article or product
10	equipment
12	drum
14	through openings
16, 18	first and second webs
20	shoulder portions
22	circumferential portion of drum 12
24, 26	first & second lateral web guides
25	transverse shoulder portion
28, 29	first and second serpentine paths
30, 32	first and second sources of first & second webs, respectively.
33, 34	first & second unwind roller
36, 38	first & second idler rollers
40	article dispenser
42	reciprocating pusher

43	adhesive coating	
44	roller	
46	sealing means	
45	packaged article or product	
48	sealed web portion	5
52	heater pads	
53	upper surface of heater pad 52	
54	heating elements	
56	high temperature tape	
60	oscillating support arm	10
61,63	first and second spring flexures	
62	support pads/pressure pads	
66	elastomeric covering	
68,70	extended portions of first and second webs, respectively.	15
80	linear guide rods	
82	guide bearings	
86,88	support actuator blocks	
94,106	first and second cam profiles or faces	
96	cam	20
98	first cam follower	
99	links	
100,102	pins	
104	support arch	
108	second cam follower	25
112	slots	
113	preloading springs	
114, 116	heads of height adjusting screws 122, 124, respectively.	
122, 124	height adjustment screws	30
150	article relieving means	

While the invention has been described with a certain degree of particularity, it is manifest that many changes may be made in the details of the construction and the arrangement of components without departing from the spirit and scope of the disclosure. It is understood that the invention is not limited to the embodiments set forth herein for purposes of exemplification, but is to be limited only by the scope of the attached claim or claims, including the full range of equivalency to which each element thereof is entitled.

Claims

1. Packaging equipment, comprising:

a drum for rotatably supporting a plurality of articles, said drum having a plurality of spaced through openings surrounded by shoulder portions aligned at least partially along a circumferential portion thereof, each of said spaced through openings being somewhat larger than each of said plurality of articles;
first and second sources of first and second webs, respectively, said first and second sources being arranged so that said respective first and second webs can be delivered under tension to said circumferential portion of said

drum towards one of said plurality of spaced through openings;

means for continuously supplying said first and second webs in sequence from said respective first and second sources to said circumferential portion of said drum so that either of said first and second webs generally covers at least one of said plurality of through openings when any one of said plurality of articles is in proximity with said one of said plurality of through opening, and wherein the other of said first and second webs is supplied in an overlapping relations about said article;

means for introducing at least one of said plurality of articles into proximity with one of said plurality of through openings, said at least one of said plurality of articles being introduced when either of said first and second webs generally covers said through opening;

means for sealing said first and second webs about said at least one of said plurality of articles, said sealing means providing sealed first and second web portions surrounding said at least one of said plurality of articles to form a sealed packaged article; and,
means for relieving said sealed packaged article from each of said spaced through opening.

2. The equipment recited in Claim 1, wherein said tension of said first and second webs is achieved passing said first and second webs through a respective first and second serpentine path prior to delivery to said drum.

3. The equipment recited in Claim 2, wherein said first and second serpentine paths for said first and second webs, respectively, each is formed by first and second unwind rollers, respectively, arranged upstream of said one of said plurality of spaced through openings for cooperating with a respective series of first and second idler rollers, said series of first and second idler rollers being biased and further arranged so as to achieve a desired level of tension on said respective first and second webs.

4. The equipment recited in Claim 3, wherein first and second lateral web guides are arranged substantially downstream of said first and second idler rollers, respectively, for securely maintaining said respective first and second webs on said circumferential portion of said drum.

5. The equipment recited in Claim 1, wherein an adhesive material is applied to said shoulder portion surrounding each of said plurality of through openings to prevent slippage of at least one said first and second webs while in contact with the drum.

6. The equipment recited in Claim 1, wherein a recip-

roating pusher cooperating with said means of introducing, introduces said article onto either of said first and second webs.

7. The equipment recited in Claim 1, wherein a heating means is arranged in proximity to said through openings for thermally sealing said first web about said article to said second web. 5

8. The equipment recited in Claim 7, wherein said heating means comprises a heating element sandwiched between a thermally insulating block and a strip of insulating tape. 10

9. The equipment recited in Claim 7, wherein said heating means protrudes at least partially through said through openings for contacting said first and second webs for sealing. 15

10. Method of packaging an article, comprising the steps of: 20
 - providing a surface having at least one through opening, said through opening being generally somewhat larger than said article; 25
 - providing a first and second source of first and second flexible webs, respectively;
 - providing means for sequentially supplying the first and second flexible webs into the through opening from said first and second source; 30
 - providing means for dispensing said article into said through opening;
 - supplying said first flexible web into said through opening, said first flexible web being supplied so as to generally cover said through opening to form a first packaging layer; 35
 - dispensing said article onto said first packaging layer, said first packaging layer supporting said article in said through opening, and wherein said article and said first packaging layer defining a partially packaged article; 40
 - supplying said second flexible web onto said partially packaged article in an overlapping relations with said first flexible web, said second flexible web forming a second packaging layer about said article, and wherein portions of said first and second flexible webs overhang said article; 45
 - sealing said portions of said first flexible web overhanging said article to said portions of said second flexible web overhanging said article to form a sealed packaged article; and, 50
 - relieving said sealed package article from said through opening. 55

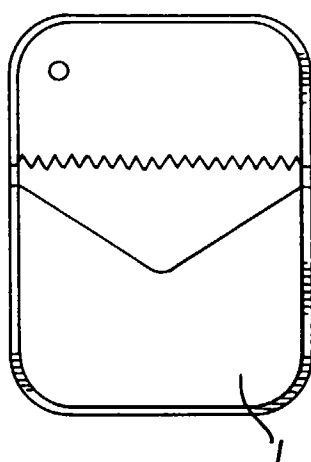


FIG. 1



FIG. 1a

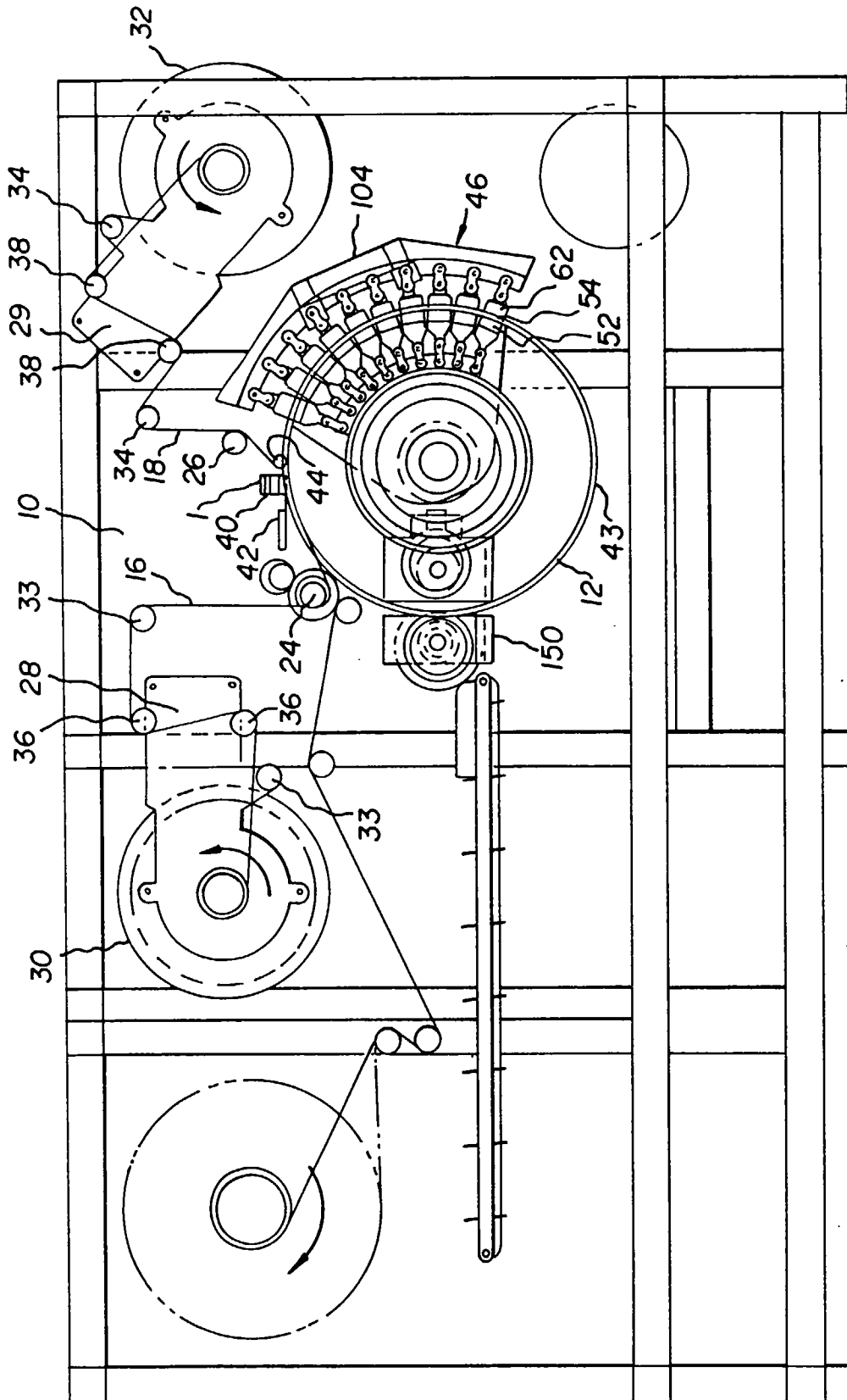
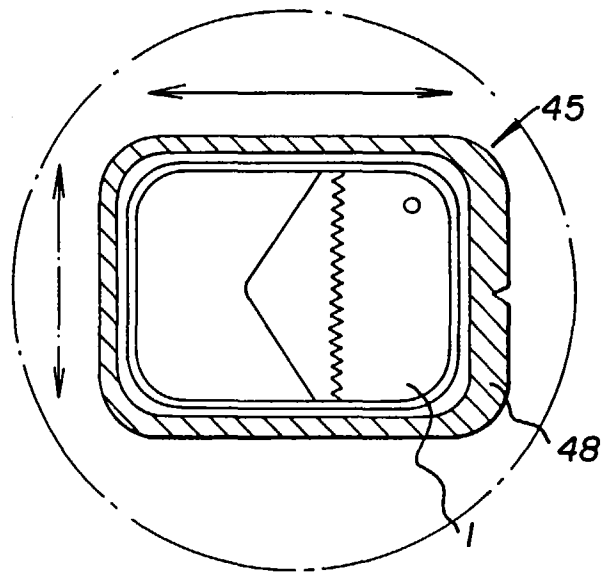
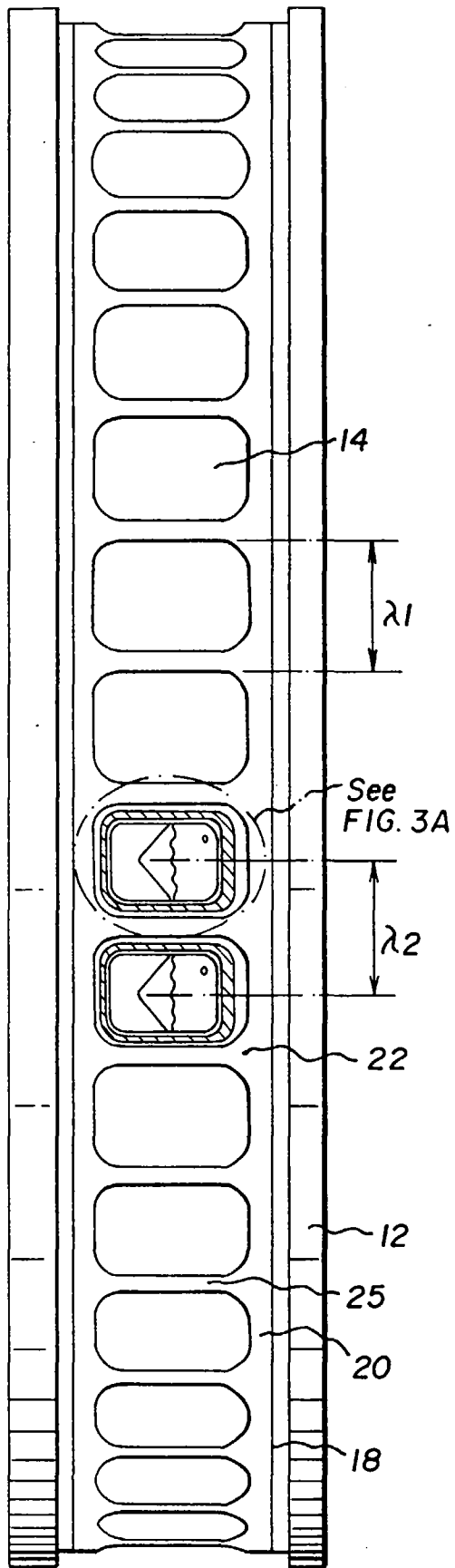


FIG. 2



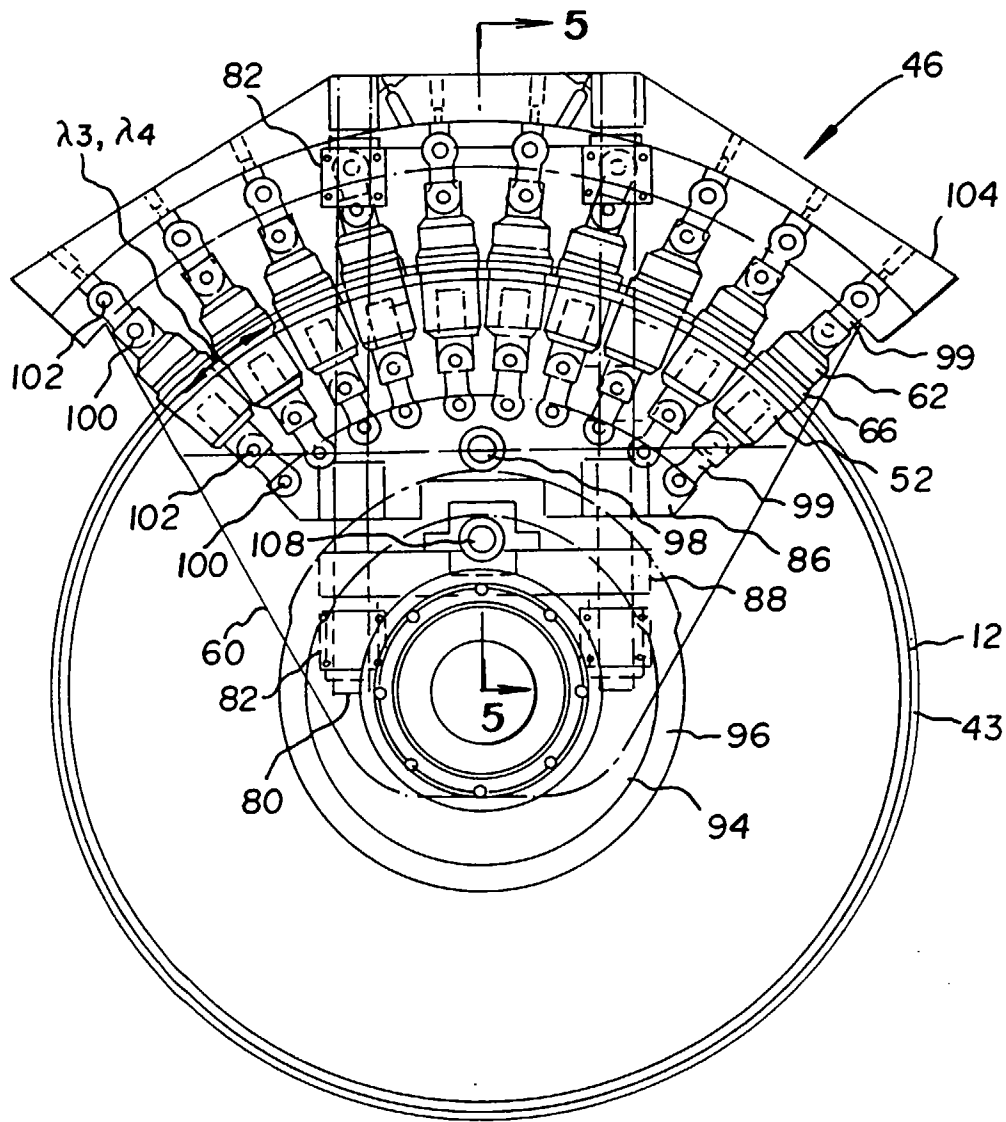
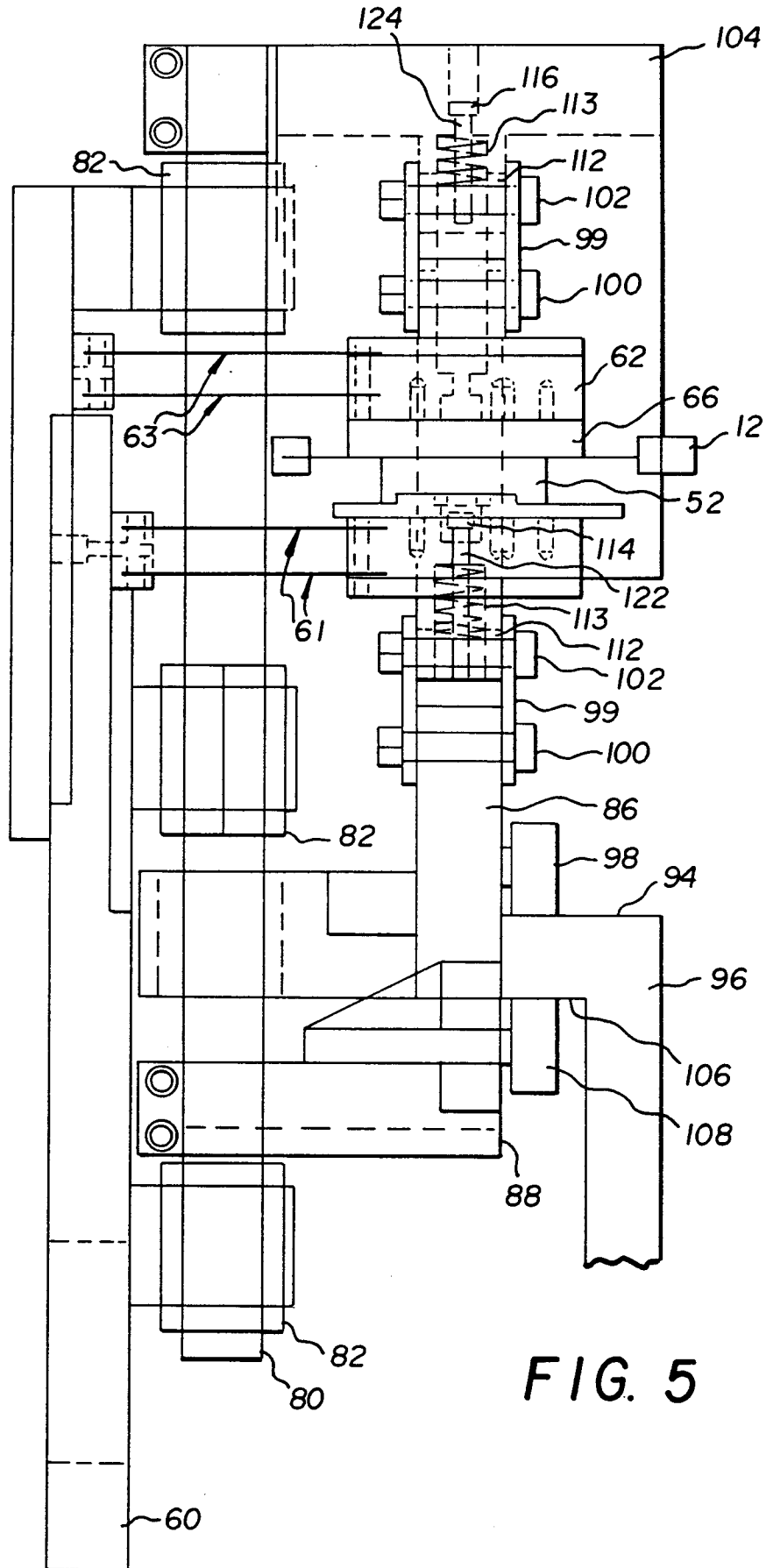


FIG. 4



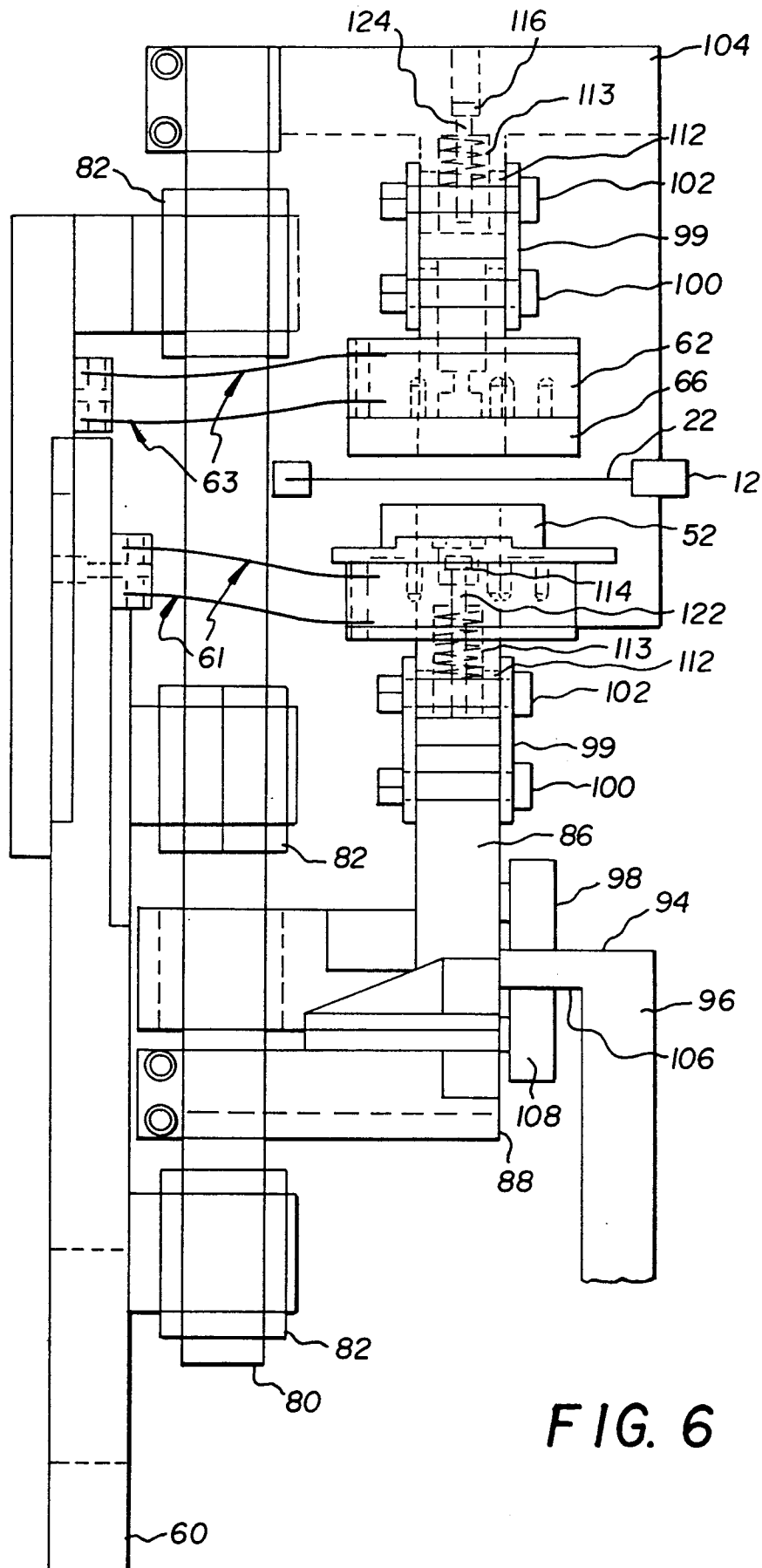


FIG. 6

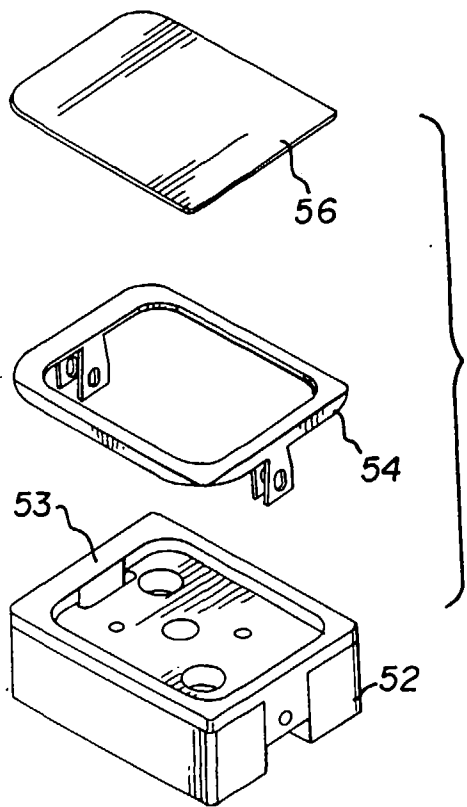


FIG. 7

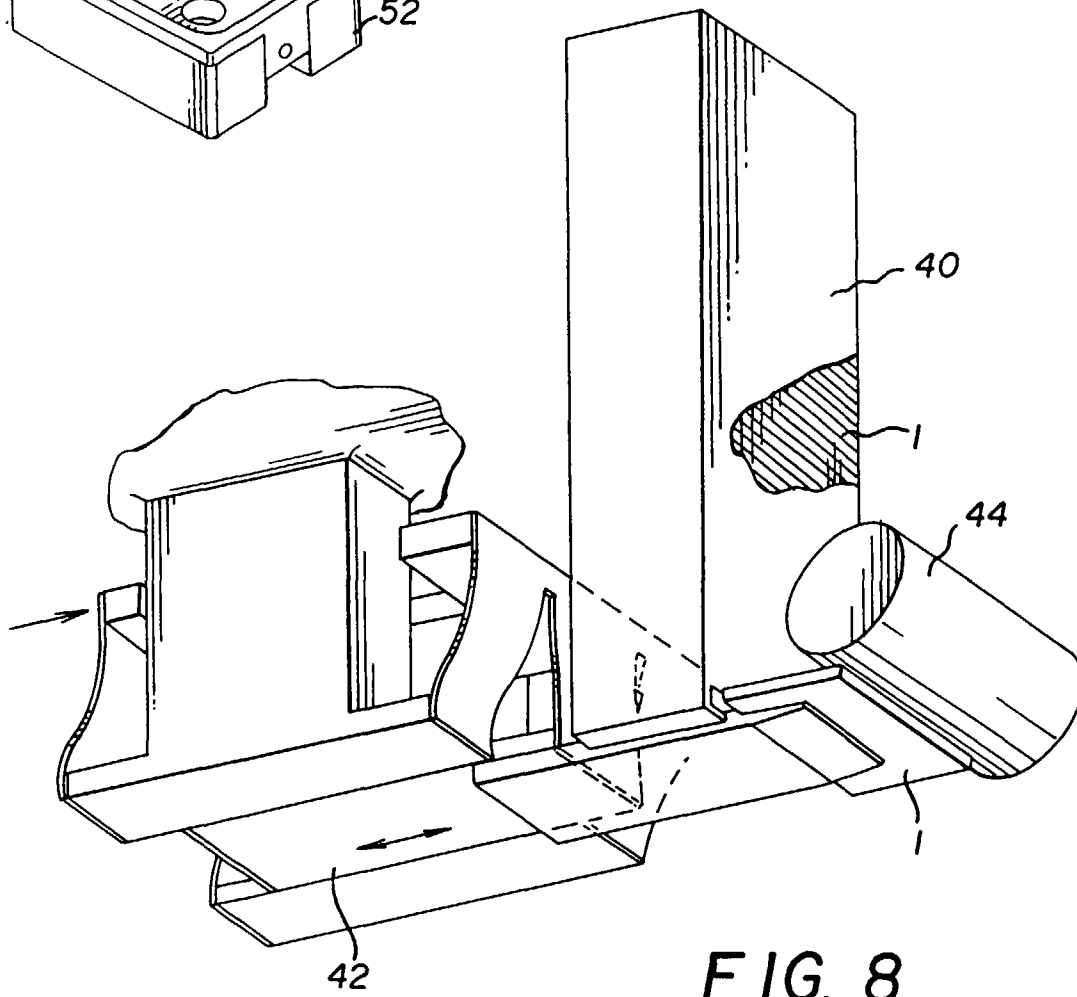


FIG. 8

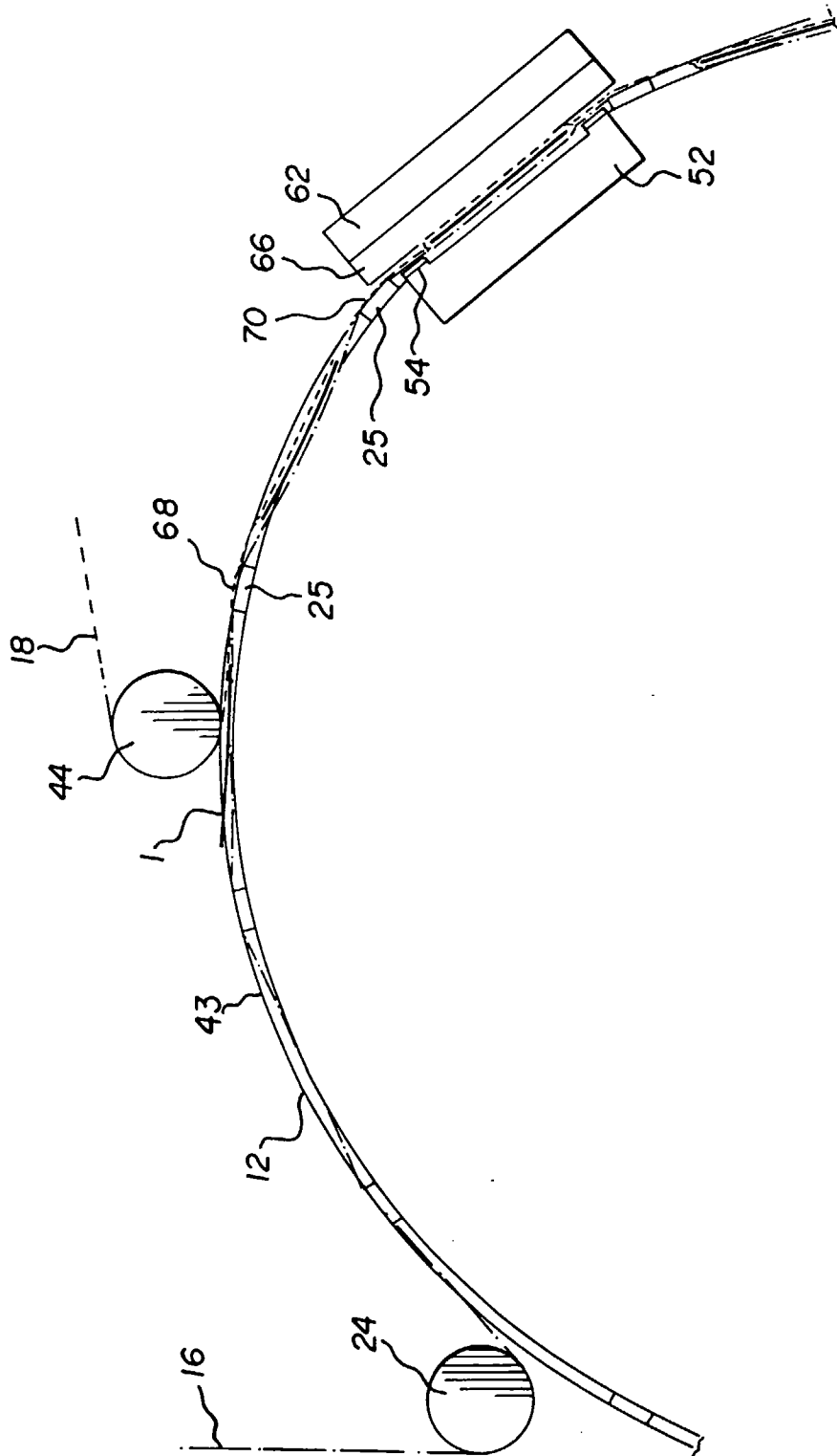


FIG. 9



European Patent
Office

EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 97 10 4494

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT			
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.6)
Y	GB 1 489 395 A (BAKER) * the whole document * ---	1-4,6,7, 10	B65B9/02
Y	EP 0 042 336 A (PAROISSIEN) * the whole document * ---	1-4,6,7, 10	
Y	US 3 732 666 A (NAKAMURA) * the whole document * ---	1-4,6,7, 10	
Y	US 3 465 492 A (JENSEN) * column 4, line 32 - line 44; figure 1 * ---	4	
Y	US 2 541 387 A (SALFISBERG) * column 4, paragraph 3; figures 7,8 * -----	6	
			TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.6)
			B65B
The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search THE HAGUE		Date of completion of the search 25 June 1997	Examiner Claeys, H
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