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(54) **Merchandising unit with display assembly**

(57) A merchandising unit (10) for consumer goods comprises a first compartment for housing the consumer goods, the first compartment having a first opening and comprising a first display assembly (20) including a first plurality of closure panels (24). The closure panels (24) are pivotable such that the first display assembly is moveable between a closed state in which the closure panels cover the first opening and an open state in which the first opening is at least partially uncovered. The merchandising unit (10) also comprises actuating means (26) for pivoting the first plurality of closure panels (24) substantially simultaneously.

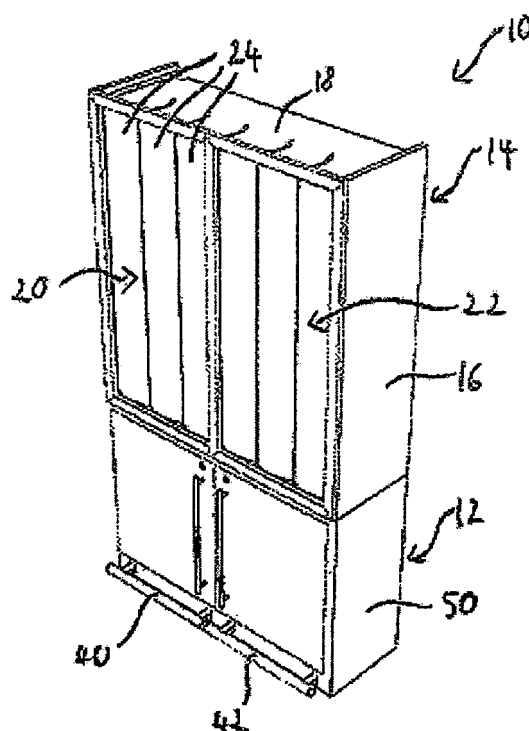


Figure 1

Description

[0001] The present invention relates to a merchandising unit having at least one compartment provided with a display assembly. The invention finds particular application as a merchandising unit for smoking articles.

[0002] A wide variety of different types of merchandising units are used to store, dispense and display consumer goods at the point of sale. For example, in shops and kiosks, the majority of consumer goods are displayed on free standing or wall mounted shelving units and racks. However, it may be preferred to dispense certain items from units which can be optionally covered or closed between purchases. This would prevent items from being directly accessed or viewed by consumers.

[0003] It would therefore be desirable to provide a novel consumer goods merchandising unit which provides increased flexibility in the storage and display of the consumer goods at the point of sale.

[0004] According to the present invention there is provided a merchandising unit for consumer goods comprising a first compartment for housing the consumer goods, the first compartment having a first opening and comprising a first display assembly. The first display assembly includes a first plurality of closure panels, each of which is pivotable or rotatable. Through the pivoting or rotating of the closure panels, the first display assembly is moveable between a closed state in which the closure panels cover the first opening and an open state in which the closure panels are pivoted or rotated such that the first opening is at least partly uncovered. The merchandising unit further comprises actuating means for pivoting or rotating the plurality of closure panels substantially simultaneously.

[0005] The closure panels, or slats, in the first display assembly form a type of "louvre" arrangement, as is commonly used in window blinds or shutters. Preferably, the closure panels of the first display assembly are arranged substantially parallel to each other.

[0006] The merchandising unit according to the invention offers greater flexibility in the display and access of the consumer goods at the point of sale. The first compartment can remain closed or sealed such that the consumer goods are inaccessible until the retailer chooses to move the first display assembly to the open state. This may be beneficial for a number of reasons. For example, it may be desirable to control the visibility of the consumer goods at the point of sale. By using a display assembly that can be readily moved between a closed state and an open state, the retailer is able to choose whether to display or hide the consumer goods. Alternatively or in addition, it may be advantageous for the retailer to retain the display assembly in a closed state where the conditions within the first compartment are controlled. For example, it may be advantageous to use the present invention where control of the temperature or humidity of the first compartment is required. Access to the consumer goods can be provided conveniently and quickly by mov-

ing the first display assembly to the open state for a short time, so that the conditions within the first compartment can be affected as little as possible.

[0007] The closure panels may be formed in any suitable shape or size but are preferably rectangular in shape and elongate, such that the length of each panel is significantly greater than the width. Typically, the closure panels will be substantially the same size and shape as each other, although this will depend upon the shape of the opening of the first compartment.

[0008] Preferably, each closure panel is mounted along a longitudinal axis extending along its length and most preferably, the plurality of closure panels are mounted with their longitudinal axes substantially parallel to each other. The closure panels of the first display assembly may be mounted with their longitudinal axes in a substantially horizontal or vertical direction. Preferably, the closure panels are each mounted in a substantially vertical direction such that they pivot about a vertical axis.

[0009] Each closure panel is pivotable or rotatable about the longitudinal axis along which it is mounted. The transverse position of the longitudinal axis across the width of the panel may be varied, depending on the direction and extent of pivotal movement required. The closure panels may be pivotable in a clockwise or anti-clockwise direction, or both. Where the closure panels are mounted along a longitudinal axis positioned at an edge of the panel or towards an edge thereof, the panels may pivot or rotate outwardly from the opening of the first compartment or inwardly, into the space of the first compartment.

[0010] The closure panels may be formed of any suitable material, including but not limited to metal, plastics, glass or stiff, fibrous materials. The closure panels may be substantially transparent, in the case where control over the visibility of the consumer goods is not required. However, preferably, the closure panels are formed of a material with a low light transmission so that it is not possible to see through the panels. More preferably, the closure panels are completely opaque. This means that when the closure panels cover the first opening, the consumer goods within the compartment cannot be seen.

[0011] In the closed state of the first display assembly, the closure panels preferably lie such that there are substantially no gaps between adjacent panels, and the plurality of panels form a solid wall or screen over the first opening. The panels may lie flush to each other in substantially the same plane, such that only the edges of adjacent panels are in contact. Alternatively, the edges of adjacent panels may overlap with each other. The spacing of the panels may be selected depending on the width of the panels and the degree of overlap required in the closed state, if any.

[0012] To move the display assembly from the closed state to the open state, the closure panels are pivoted or rotated by an angle of up to 110 degrees. All of the closure panels are pivoted or rotated substantially simultaneously and preferably, all of the closure panels are pivoted or

rotated by the same or a similar angle. The further the closure panels pivot or rotate from their closed starting position towards 90 degrees, the larger the area of the first opening that is uncovered and consequently, the greater the visibility of the consumer goods within the first compartment. Preferably, in the open state, the closure panels are substantially perpendicular to the plane of the first opening in the first compartment so that the first opening is uncovered to the maximum extent possible. In the open state the consumer goods are visible through the spaces between the closure panels. Preferably, the closure panels are relatively thin. Therefore, in the open state when the panels are at approximately 90 degrees to the plane of first opening, the side edges of the panels occupy as little of the first opening as possible.

[0013] The spacing of the closure panels of the first display assembly may be varied depending upon whether it is desired to provide access to the consumer goods within the compartment through the display assembly. For example, the closure panels may be spaced relatively close together such that the gaps or spaces between the panels when the display assembly is in an open state are smaller than the dimensions of the consumer goods within the compartment. In this case, although the consumer goods will be visible to the consumer, it will not be possible to remove them from the first compartment of the merchandising unit and the first compartment will provide a display only. Alternatively, the closure panels may be more widely spaced such that the gaps or spaces between the panels when the display assembly is in an open state are sufficiently wide that the retailer is able to remove the consumer goods from the first compartment through the gaps.

[0014] The actuating means of the merchandising unit of the present invention acts on the closure panels to bring about their simultaneous pivoting or rotation. Suitable actuating means would be well known to the skilled person and may resemble the actuating means in a conventional louvre assembly. In one preferred embodiment of the present invention, the actuating means includes a plurality of substantially parallel rods, or arms, wherein each closure panel of the first display assembly is mounted on a rod and wherein each rod is moveable such that movement of the rod brings about pivoting or rotation of the mounted closure panel. The rods provide the longitudinal axes about which the closure panels are pivotable or rotatable.

[0015] The rods are preferably directly or indirectly connected or linked together such that the simultaneous movement of the rods and resultant simultaneous pivoting or rotation of the closure blades can be achieved. For example, the plurality of rods in the display assembly may be mounted as in a typically louvre assembly. The rods may be mounted such that during movement of the display assembly between the closed state and the open state the rods rotate to bring about movement of the closure panels, but remain fixed in position. Alternatively and preferably, the rods may be mounted such that they

are moveable in a direction that is perpendicular to the longitudinal axes of the rods. The position of the rods therefore changes as the display assembly is moved between the closed state and the open state. This arrangement may advantageously reduce the space required to allow the closure panels to pivot between an open and closed state.

[0016] Preferably, the rods and closure panels are mounted in one or more guide tracks that define the movement of the rod and closure panel as the display assembly moves between the open state and the closed state.

[0017] Preferably, merchandising units according to this preferred embodiment of the present invention further comprise first control means associated with the actuating means for operatively moving the first display assembly between the open state and the closed state. The first control means may be an electrical control means, such as an electrical switch, or a mechanical control means. Preferably, the first control means is provided on the exterior of the merchandising unit so that it can be conveniently accessed and used by the retailer.

[0018] The first control means may be adapted to provide various open states of the closure panels used by the display assembly. Alternatively, the control means may be adapted such that it is only possible to select the closed state or the open state and nothing in between.

[0019] Particularly preferably, the first control means includes a handle or pedal which is arranged such that upon depression of the handle or pedal during use the first display assembly moves from the closed state to the open state. Therefore, through the application of a single force to the control means, all of the closure panels are caused to pivot or rotate in order to open the first display assembly. In the normal, default position of the merchandising unit, the display assembly is therefore in a closed state such that the consumer goods within the compartment are not visible. However, the retailer can readily and instantly open the display assembly using the first control means, in order to display the consumer goods and gain access thereto if desired.

[0020] The first compartment of merchandising units according to the present invention may further comprise means for mounting the consumer goods to be housed therein. It may be desirable to incorporate such mounting means in order to facilitate the arrangement and dispensing of the consumer goods. For example, within the first compartment there may be provided one or more racks or stands for stacking the consumer goods. Alternatively, the consumer goods may be stacked within one or more cassettes, which optionally include spring loaded mechanisms to aid the dispensing of the consumer goods.

[0021] The first compartment may further comprise a light for illuminating the consumer goods housed within the compartment when the first display assembly is in an open state, such that the consumer goods are more visible. Alternatively, or in addition, means for controlling at least one of the temperature or humidity of the first com-

partment may be provided in the merchandising unit.

[0022] The outer surfaces of the closure panels may be provided with graphics or text, for example, to reflect the branding of the consumer goods within the first compartment, or related consumer goods, or to advertise entirely different consumer goods. Alternatively, or in addition, the closure panels may include one or more areas in which graphics or text are provided on the inner surface such the graphics and text become visible only when the display assembly is moved to its open state.

[0023] In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the merchandising unit further comprises a second compartment for housing the consumer goods, the second compartment having a second opening and comprising a second display assembly. The second display assembly includes a second plurality of closure panels, wherein the closure panels are pivotable or rotatable such that the second display assembly is moveable between a closed state in which the closure panels cover the second opening and an open state in which the second opening is at least partially uncovered. Second actuation means are preferably provided such that the second plurality of closure panels in the second display assembly can be simultaneously pivoted or rotated.

[0024] The closure panels, or slats, in the second display assembly form a type of "louvre" arrangement, as is commonly used in window blinds or shutters. Preferably the closure panels of the second display assembly are arranged substantially parallel to each other.

[0025] Merchandising units according to this embodiment of the present invention providing two separate compartments provide even greater flexibility in the display and dispensing of consumer goods.

[0026] The second display assembly is similar in form and function to the first display assembly. The second display assembly may have any of the features described above in relation to the first display assembly.

[0027] Second control means associated with the second actuation means are preferably provided for operatively moving the second display assembly between the open state and the closed state. The second actuation means and second control means may be similar or identical to the first actuation means and first control means described above.

[0028] Preferably, the second control means move both the first and second display assemblies between a closed state and an open state. This enables the first display assembly and the second display assembly to be simultaneously opened so that the consumer goods within the first compartment and the second compartment are displayed at the same time. In this case, the retailer can choose to open only the first display assembly using the first control means, or to open both display assemblies using the second control means.

[0029] Preferably, both the first control means and the second control means comprise a pedal which the retailer can operate using their foot, such that their hands remain free to access the consumer goods.

[0030] The first and second compartments may be provided anywhere within the merchandising unit and may, in combination, occupy all or just a part of the unit. However, preferably the first and second compartments are adjacent to each other at the top or front of the merchandising unit to facilitate access to the consumer goods.

[0031] The first and second display assemblies may be provided at any side of the merchandising unit and may be provided on the same side as each other, or a different side. Each display assembly may cover all or just a part of one side of the unit. Preferably, at least one of the display assemblies is provided at the side of the unit through which the consumer goods will be displayed and potentially accessed once the display assembly has been opened. This will typically be the front side of the unit, facing the consumer when the unit has been mounted or positioned.

[0032] The walls of the first and second compartments that do not include the display assemblies may be formed from any suitable material. Preferably, the material for forming the other walls of the first and second compartments has a low level of light transmission, so that the consumer goods are not visible through those walls. This provides the possibility of keeping the consumer goods fully hidden or covered until the associated display assembly is moved to its open state.

[0033] The consumer goods within the second compartment may be the same as the consumer goods within the first compartment. Alternatively, the second compartment may house different consumer goods to the first compartment, for example, consumer goods of a different type or brand. The size and shape of the first and second compartments may be adapted to suit the consumer goods to be housed therein. The second compartment may be the same or a different size and shape to the first compartment.

[0034] The merchandising units according to the present invention may further comprise one or more additional storage compartments for housing consumer. This may be particularly desirable where it is not possible to access the consumer goods in the first or second compartment due to the spacing of the closure panels, as described above. Any additional storage compartments provided in the merchandising unit may be accessed by means of a moveable wall, such as a slidable wall or panel, or a hinged door. Alternatively, the additional storage compartments may themselves be moveable relative to the remainder of the merchandising unit. For example, the additional compartments may be in the form of one or more drawers which are slidably moveable into and out of the remainder of the merchandising unit.

[0035] The merchandising unit may be adapted such that it can be used independently, either as a free standing or wall mounted unit. Alternatively, the merchandising unit may be suitably adapted such that it may be integrated into an existing counter fixture at the point of sale.

[0036] The size and shape of merchandising units according to the invention can be adapted to suit the con-

sumer goods to be housed within the unit. In addition, the size and shape can vary to fit the space in which the merchandising unit is to be positioned. The outer surfaces of the merchandising unit, including surfaces of the closure panels, may be provided with any desired surface finish. The outer surfaces may optionally display graphics or text, such as branding or product information relating to the consumer goods to be housed within the unit, or the retail outlet in which the unit is placed.

[0037] The merchandising units according to the present invention find particular application as merchandising units for the display and dispensing of packs of smoking articles. The merchandising unit may be adapted to house different numbers, sizes and shapes of packs of smoking articles and may be adapted to display the packs in a wide variety of ways.

[0038] The invention will be further described, by way of example only, with reference to the accompanying Figure 1 which shows a front perspective view of a merchandising unit according to the invention with the first and second display assemblies in a closed state.

[0039] The merchandising unit 10 of Figure 1 is substantially rectangular cuboidal in shape and comprises a bottom unit 12 and a top unit 14 mounted on the top of the bottom unit 12. The top unit 14 comprises a back wall, a left side wall, a right side wall 16, a top wall 18 and a bottom wall.

[0040] The terms "front", "back", "left" and "right" are from the point of view of a consumer standing in front of the unit.

[0041] The top unit 14 is divided into a left compartment and a right compartment by a central, vertical partition, which is substantially parallel to the right 16 and left side walls. The left and right compartments are of approximately equal size and each has an opening at the front face of the top unit 12. Both compartments house a plurality of packs of smoking articles, which are stacked in rows of spring loaded cassettes. The front packs within the cassettes are arranged with their front faces displayed.

[0042] The opening of the left compartment is covered by a left display assembly 20 and similarly, the opening of the right compartment is covered by a right display assembly 22.

[0043] Figure 1 shows the merchandising unit 10 with the left 20 and right 22 display assemblies both in a closed state, such that the opening in each compartment is fully covered. In this state, the left 20 and right 22 display assemblies provide the front wall of the top unit 14.

[0044] Each of the display assemblies 20,22 is formed of a louvre assembly of three rectangular, elongate panels 24 which are mounted vertically at the opening of the associated compartment. The length of the panels 24 corresponds to the height of the opening. Each panel 24 is mounted on a vertical rod 26, which extends between the top wall and the bottom wall of the top unit. The ends of the vertical rods are mounted within guide tracks within the louvre assembly such that they can be simultaneous-

ly rotated.

[0045] Each display assembly 20,22 is moveable between the closed state shown in Figure 1 and an open state. In the closed state, the closure panels 24 lie flat in the plane of the opening, with no gaps between adjacent panels. The opening is therefore entirely covered by the closure panels 24 and the packs of smoking articles within the compartments are not visible. In the open state, the closure panels 24 have each been pivoted or rotated by 90 degrees, so that they lie perpendicular to the plane of the openings. In the open state of either display assembly 20,22, the packs of smoking articles within the corresponding compartment can be seen through the gaps between the closure panels 24.

[0046] The display assemblies are operated by a pair of foot pedals 40,42 at the base of the merchandising unit 10. The foot pedals 40,42 are connected to the louvre assemblies by means of an actuation frame within the bottom unit 12, such that depression of the pedals 40,42 generates a pushing motion against the louvre assembly. This brings about the simultaneous movement of the vertical rods and the resultant simultaneous pivoting of the closure panels 24 into the space within the compartment.

[0047] The left pedal 40 is connected to the left display assembly 20 such that upon depression of the left pedal 40, the left display assembly 20 moves from a closed state to an open state. The right display assembly 22 is unaffected and remains in a closed state. The right pedal 42 is connected to both the left display assembly 20 and the right display assembly 22 such that upon depression of the right pedal 42, both assemblies move from a closed state to an open state. The retailer can gain access to the packs of smoking articles within the compartments when the associated display assembly is in the open state.

[0048] The bottom unit 12 of the merchandising unit 10 comprises a back wall, left side wall, right side wall 50 and bottom wall. Access to the bottom unit 12 is possible through the opening at front side of the unit. A pair of hinged doors 52 is provided at the front of the bottom unit 12 to cover the opening. Each door comprises a handle 54 to facilitate opening and closing of the door.

[0049] The bottom unit 12 provides storage space for further packs of smoking articles and in addition, houses the actuation frame which links the foot pedals 40,42 to the display assemblies 20,22. The top face of the bottom unit 12 is open to allow the actuation frame to communicate with the louvre assemblies within which the vertical rods and closure panels 24 are mounted, through the bottom walls of the first and second compartments.

Claims

1. A merchandising unit for consumer goods comprising:

a first compartment for housing the consumer

goods, the first compartment having a first opening and comprising a first display assembly including a first plurality of closure panels, wherein the closure panels are pivotable such that the first display assembly is moveable between a closed state in which the closure panels cover the first opening and an open state in which the first opening is at least partially uncovered; and actuating means for pivoting the first plurality of closure panels substantially simultaneously.

2. A merchandising unit according to claim 1 further comprising first control means associated with the actuating means for operatively moving the first display assembly between the open state and the closed state.
3. A merchandising unit according to claim 2 wherein the actuation means comprises a plurality of substantially parallel rods wherein each closure panel of the first display assembly is mounted on a rod and wherein each rod is moveable such that movement of the rod brings about the pivoting of the closure panel mounted thereon.
4. A merchandising unit according to claim 2 wherein the first control means includes a handle or pedal which is arranged such that upon depression of the handle or pedal during use the first display assembly moves from the closed state to the open state.
5. A merchandising unit according to any preceding claim further comprising:

a second compartment for housing the consumer goods, the second compartment having a second opening in a second wall thereof and comprising a second display assembly including a second plurality of closure panels, wherein the closure panels are pivotable such that the second display assembly is moveable between a closed state in which the closure panels cover the second opening and an open state in which the second opening is at least partially uncovered; and

second actuation means and second control means for moving the second display assembly between the open state and the closed state.
6. A merchandising unit according to claim 5 wherein the second control means are arranged to substantially simultaneously move the first and second display assemblies between the open state and the closed state.
7. A merchandising unit according to any preceding claim for housing packs of smoking articles.

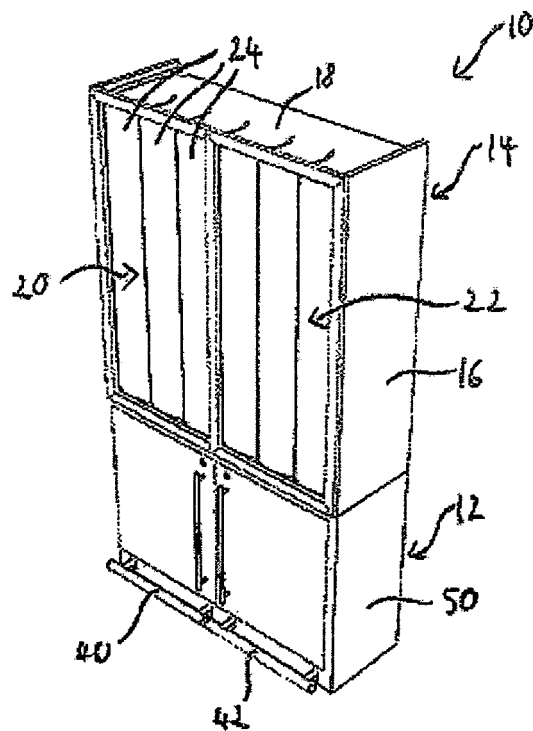


Figure 1



EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 09 25 2901

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT			
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (IPC)
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The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search Munich		Date of completion of the search 12 May 2010	Examiner Alff, Robert
CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document		T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons & : member of the same patent family, corresponding document	

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EPO FORM 1503 03.82 (P04C01)

**ANNEX TO THE EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT
ON EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION NO.**

EP 09 25 2901

This annex lists the patent family members relating to the patent documents cited in the above-mentioned European search report.
The members are as contained in the European Patent Office EDP file on
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12-05-2010

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