US008042707B1

(12) **United States Patent**
Hopwood

(10) **Patent No.: US 8,042,707 B1**
(45) **Date of Patent: Oct. 25, 2011**

(54) **AUTOMATED TOOTHPICK DISPENSER**

(76) Inventor: **Richard E. Hopwood**, Fort Worth, TX (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 327 days.

(21) Appl. No.: **12/402,552**

(22) Filed: **Mar. 12, 2009**

(51) **Int. Cl.**
B65D 83/02 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **221/192**; 221/13

(58) **Field of Classification Search** 221/13, 221/191, 192
See application file for complete search history.

(56) **References Cited**

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

1,034,318 A * 7/1912 Sobretto et al. 221/192
3,938,701 A 2/1976 Jones
5,097,981 A * 3/1992 Degasperi et al. 221/3
5,452,832 A * 9/1995 Niada 225/11

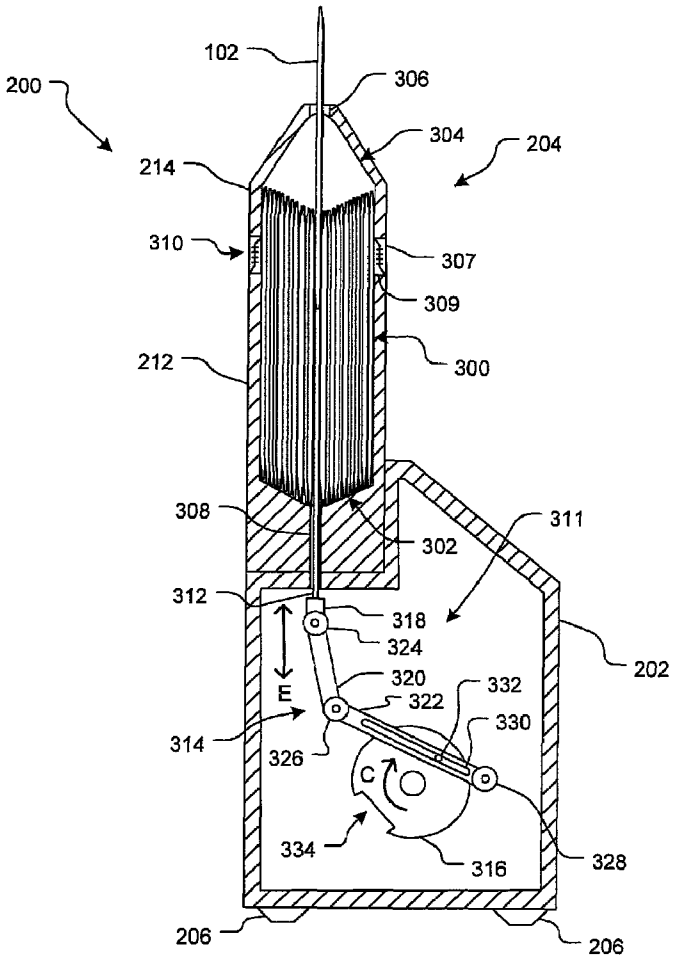
* cited by examiner

Primary Examiner — Patrick Mackey
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — James E. Walton; Richard G. Eldredge

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A automated toothpick dispenser includes a chamber for carrying a plurality of toothpicks and a lift system for dispensing a single toothpick to a position outside the dispenser. A drive system is coupled to the lift system and is activated by a sensor that detects the presence of a user.

14 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



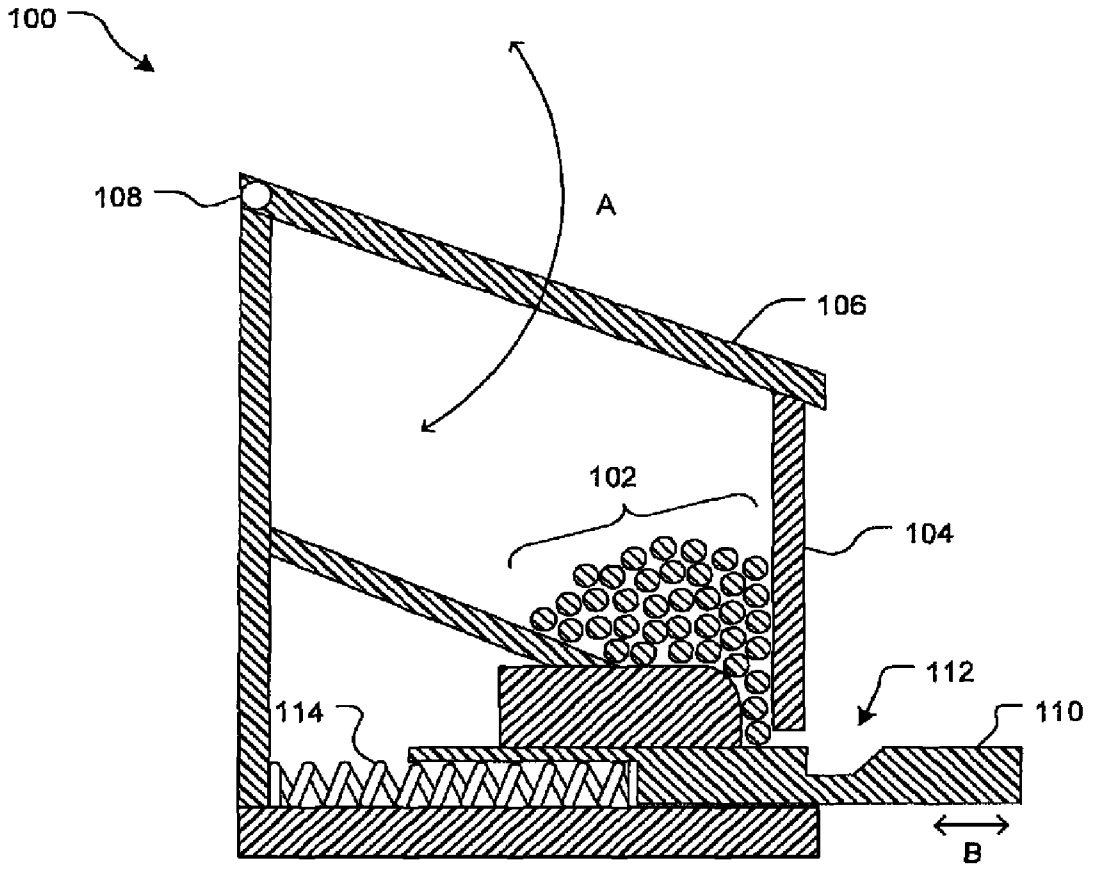


Fig. 1
(Prior Art)

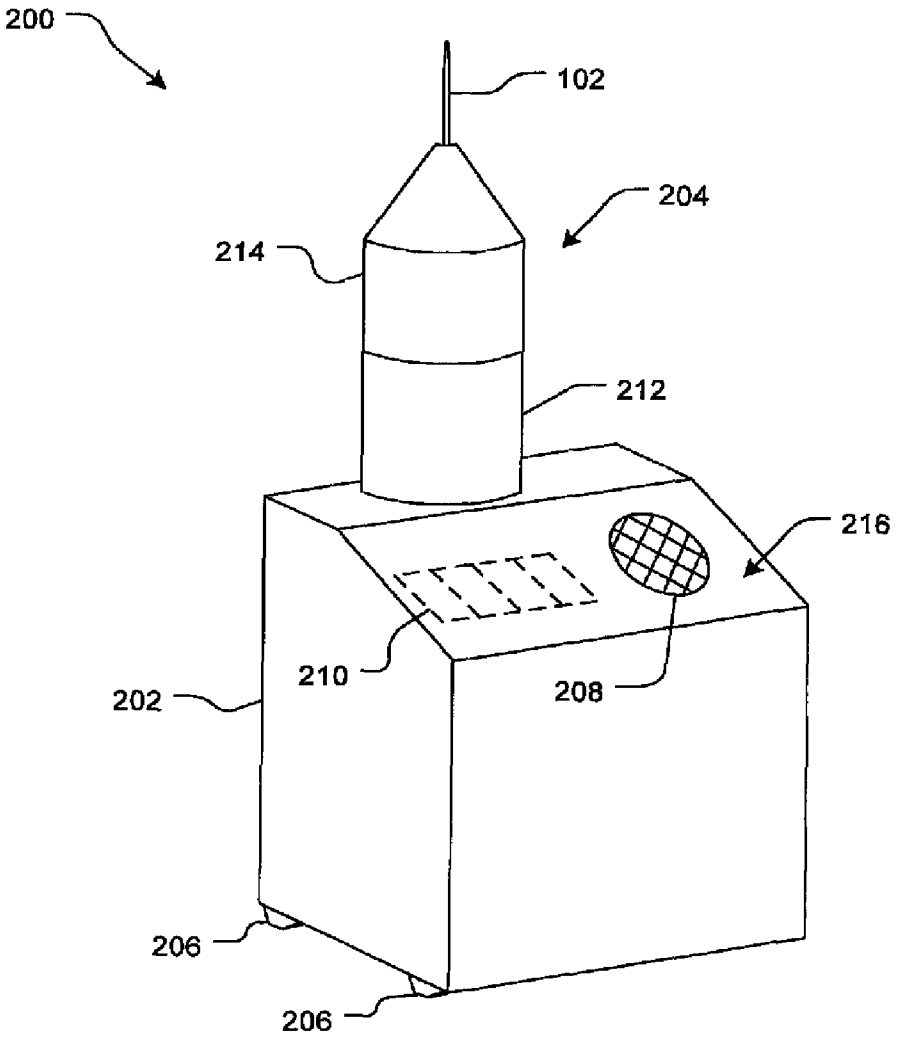


Fig. 2

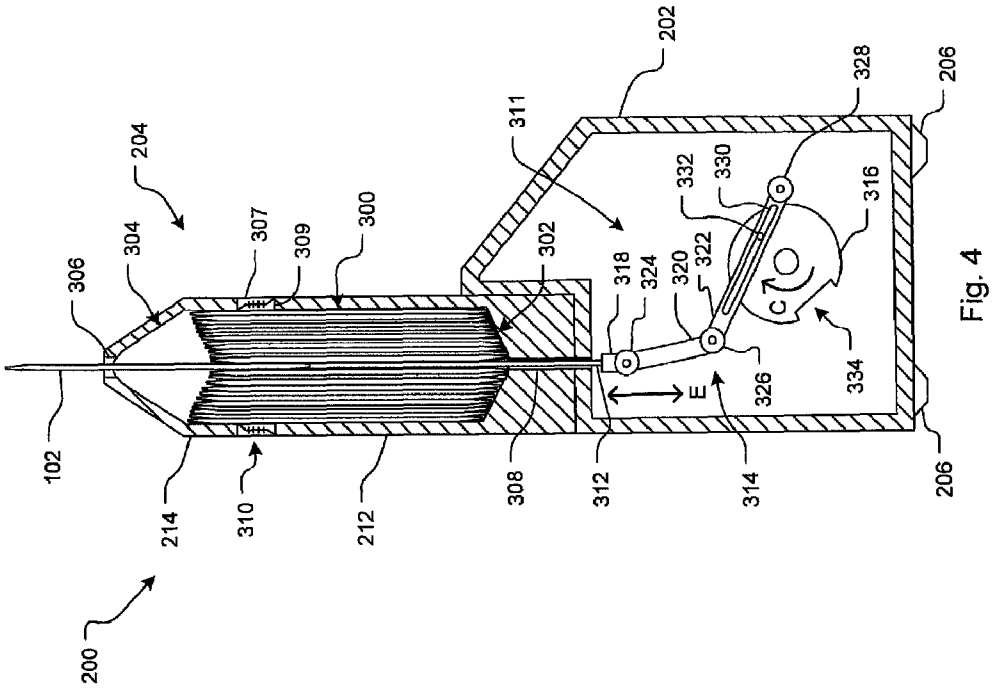

200
102
214
310
212
308
312
314
206
202
328
206
311
204
304
306
307
309
300
302
318
324
320
322
316
332
330
C
334
326
E

Fig. 4

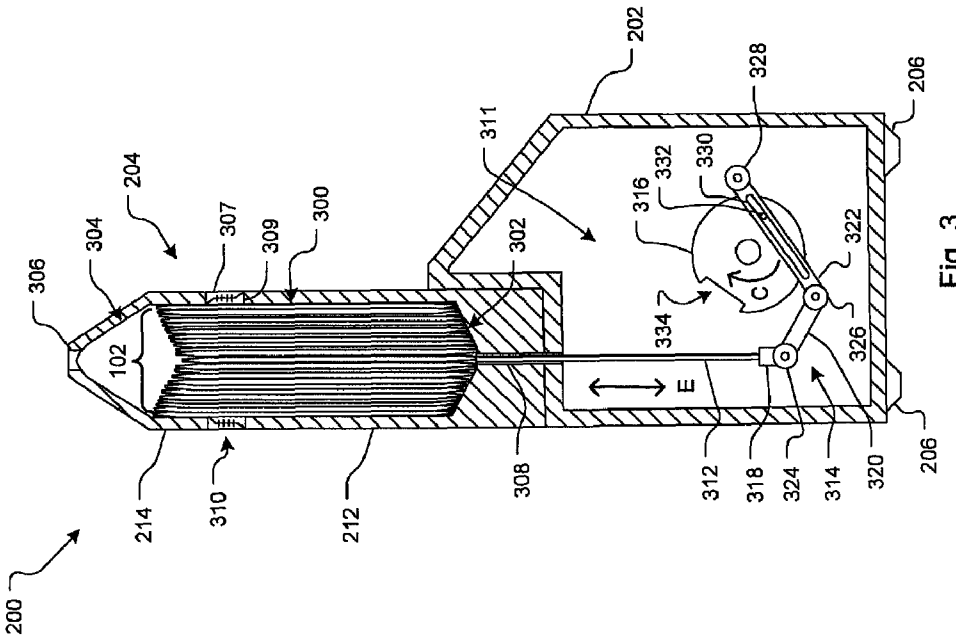

200
102
214
310
212
308
312
318
324
314
320
206
202
328
206
311
204
304
306
307
309
300
302
316
332
330
322
C
334
326
E

Fig. 3

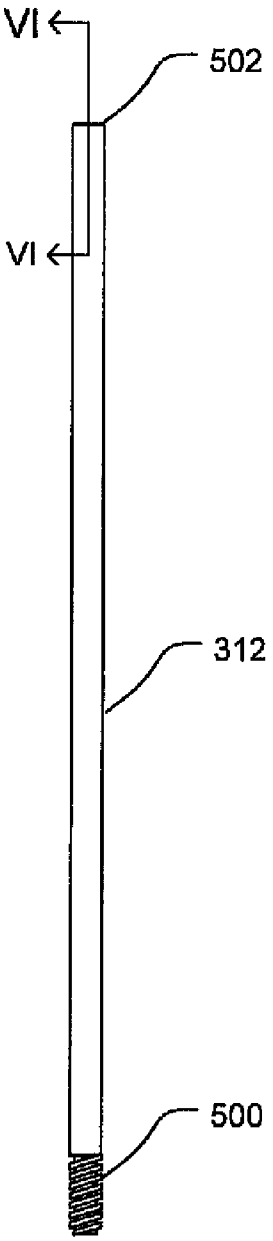


Fig. 5

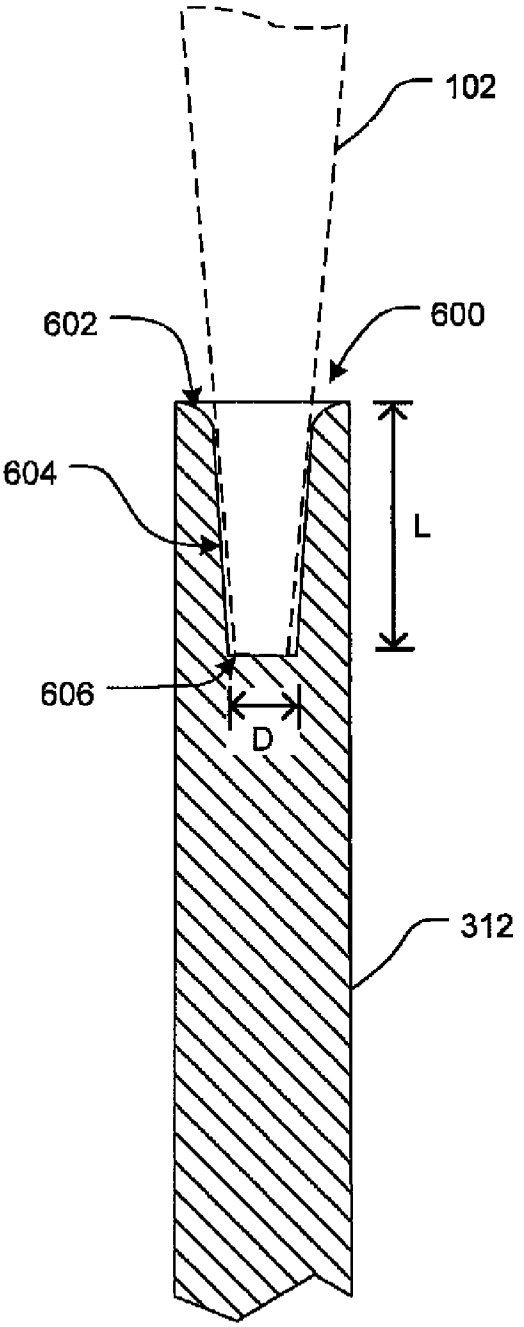


Fig. 6

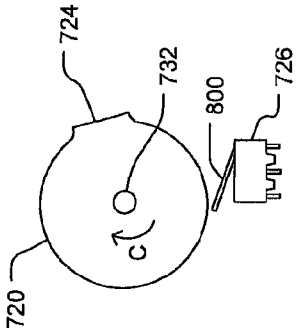


Fig. 8

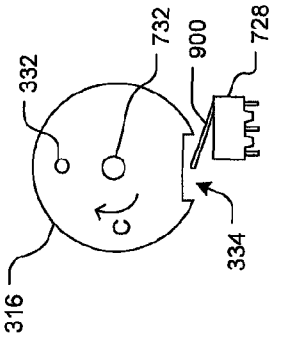


Fig. 9

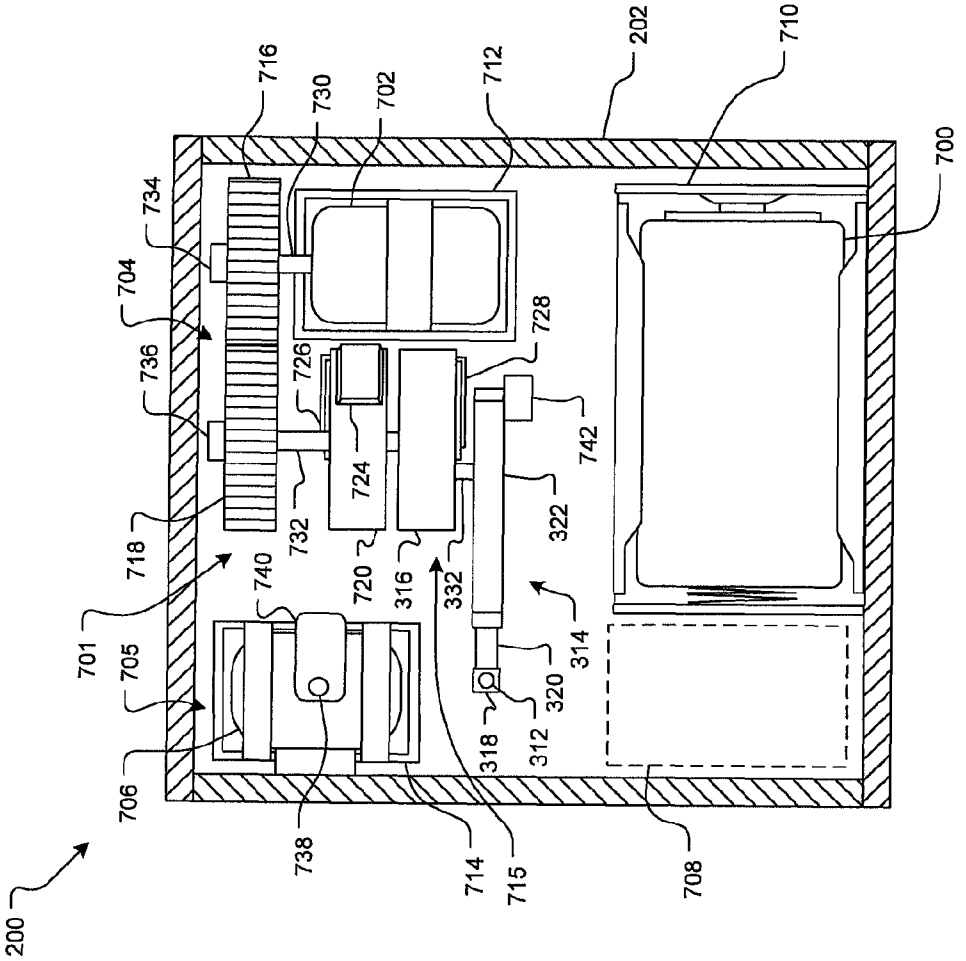


Fig. 7

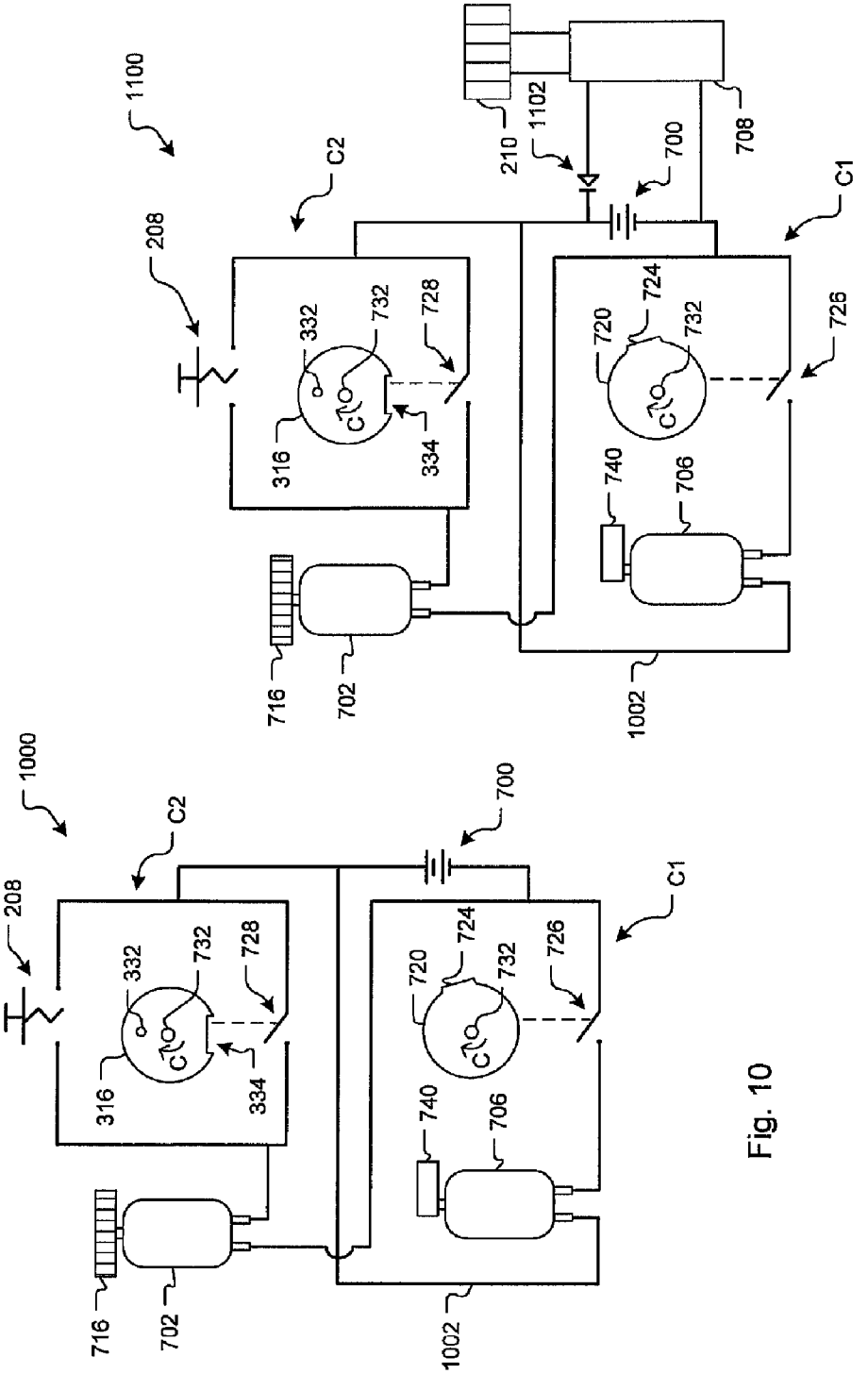

1100
C2
C1
208
210
1102
700
708
332
732
728
316
334
720
724
726
740
706
716
702
1002

Fig. 11

1000
C2
C1
208
700
332
732
728
316
334
720
724
726
740
706
716
702
1002

Fig. 10

AUTOMATED TOOTHPICK DISPENSER

BACKGROUND

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to toothpick dispensers, and more particularly, to automated sanitary toothpick dispensers.

2. Description of Related Art

Toothpick dispensers have been around for many years. For example, FIG. **1** shows a cutout, side view of a conventional toothpick dispenser **100**. Dispenser **100** includes a housing **104** that carries a plurality of toothpicks **102**. Top lid **106** pivotally attaches to joint **108** for pivotally rotation about arc A. A user may pivotally rotate lid **106** for restocking toothpicks **102** within housing **104**. The user pushes a slide member **110** for retrieving toothpick **102**, as shown with arrow B. Slide member **110** attaches to a spring **114** and includes a delivery slot **112** for placement of toothpick **102**.

Dispenser **100** is one of many known dispensers. The known dispensers share a common problem, i.e., the dispensers and toothpicks within the dispensers typically are contaminated with the germs from multiple users. For example, dispenser **100** provides means wherein the user could open lid **106**, reach into housing **104**, and grab several toothpicks **102**. As a result, the user contaminates unused toothpicks **102** and exposes the outside surface of dispenser **100** with germs.

Other types of toothpick dispensers use individually wrapped toothpicks. These embodiments create additional problems, such as increased manufacturing costs and litter caused by users failing to properly dispose of the paper wrappers.

Although great strides have been made in the are of toothpick dispensers, considerable shortcomings remain.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The novel features believed characteristic of the invention are set forth in the appended claims. However, the invention itself, as well as a preferred mode of use, and further objectives and advantages thereof, will best be understood by reference to the following detailed description when read in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, wherein:

FIG. **1** is a side cross-sectional view of a conventional toothpick dispenser;

FIG. **2** is an oblique view of the preferred embodiment of an automated toothpick dispenser according to the present application;

FIG. **3** is a longitudinal cross-sectional view of the toothpick dispenser of FIG. **2** shown in a retracted mode;

FIG. **4** is a longitudinal cross-sectional view of the toothpick dispenser of FIG. **2** shown in an extended mode;

FIG. **5** is an enlarged side view of a rod of the toothpick dispenser of FIG. **2**;

FIG. **6** is a cross-sectional view of the rod of FIG. **5** taken at VI-VI;

FIG. **7** is a transverse cross-sectional view of the toothpick dispenser of FIG. **2**;

FIG. **8** is a schematic of a shaker cam of the toothpick dispenser of FIG. **2**;

FIG. **9** is a schematic of a dispenser cam of the toothpick dispenser of FIG. **2**; and

FIGS. **10** and **11** are schematic diagrams of electrical and mechanical components of the dispenser of FIG. **2**.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

The automated toothpick dispenser of the present application overcomes the disadvantages of conventional toothpick dispensers. Illustrative embodiments are described below. It will of course be appreciated that in the development of any actual embodiment, numerous implementation-specific decisions will be made to achieve the developer's specific goals, such as compliance with system-related and business-related constraints, which will vary from one implementation to another. Moreover, it will be appreciated that such a development effort might be complex and time-consuming, but would nevertheless be a routine undertaking for those of ordinary skill in the art having the benefit of this disclosure.

Referring to FIG. **2** in the drawings, an oblique view of the preferred embodiment of an automated toothpick dispenser **200** according to the present application is illustrated. Dispenser **200** includes a housing **202** and a chamber **204** releasably coupled to housing **202**. Housing **202** houses and supports various components for the operation of dispenser **200**. Housing **202** may optionally include one or more footings **206** to support housing **202**, prevent housing **202** from slipping, and to provide vibration isolation, if desirable. Chamber **204** is configured to store a plurality of toothpicks **102**, and includes a first chamber portion **212** and a second chamber portion **214**. A used herein, first chamber portion **212** may also be referred to as lower chamber portion **212**, and second chamber portion **214** may also be referred to as upper chamber portion **214**. In addition, as explained in more detail below, chamber **204** is also configured to dispense a single toothpick **102** during operation of dispenser **200**.

Dispenser **200** preferably includes one or more sensors **208** for sensing the presence of a user. In the preferred embodiment, sensor **208** is a motion sensor that detects when a user's hand or finger passes near housing **202**. However, it will be appreciated that sensor **208** may be any of a wide variety of sensors, including motion detectors, proximity sensors, heat sensors, infrared sensors, or any other suitable type of sensor. In an alternative embodiment, sensor **208** may be replaced or augmented by a switch, activation button, or lever.

In addition, dispenser **200** preferably includes an automated electrical system powered by an electrical power source **700** (see FIG. **7**), such as a DC battery or DC battery pack. However, it will be appreciated that dispenser **200** may be powered by other means, such as a rechargeable electrical system, in which case, an optional solar energy system, represented by a solar collector **210** and a recharging system **708** (see FIG. **7**), may be used to partially or totally recharge the rechargeable electrical power source. In such alternative embodiments, the rechargeable electrical power source could be one or more rechargeable batteries, one or more rechargeable battery packs, or any other suitable rechargeable electrical power source. Other means for powering dispenser **200** and/or recharging the rechargeable electrical power source include the use of interchangeable battery packs, and the use of an AC power source, such as a wall outlet. In those embodiments in which dispenser **200** is connected to a high-voltage AC power source, it may be desirable to utilize a Voltage regulator and/or an AC/DC power converter or transformer.

In the preferred embodiment, housing **202** is rectangular in shape; however, it should be understood that housing **202** and/or chamber **204** may be configured in many different shapes and sizes, including fanciful or collectible shapes, such as animal shapes, monument shapes, and shapes of various inanimate objects. In addition, although chamber **204** has been shown as protruding from the top of housing **202**, it will be appreciated that chamber **204** may be partially or totally recessed or contained within housing **202**. In addition, although sensor **208** and optional solar collector **210** have been shown positioned on a top surface **216** of housing **202**, it

should be understood that sensor **208** and optional solar collector **210** may be located at various locations on housing **202** or chamber **204**.

Dispenser **200** is operable between a retracted mode, in which toothpicks **102** remain contained within chamber **204**, and an extended mode, in which a single toothpick **102** is at least partially exposed outside of chamber **204**. It is preferred that dispenser **200** remain in the retracted mode when not in use. This prevents toothpicks **102** from being exposed to contaminants. As explained in detail herein, when a user passes his hand or finger near sensor **208**, sensor **208** causes dispenser **200** to transition into the extended mode, thereby causing a single toothpick **102** to be partially or fully extended beyond chamber **204** and housing **202**.

Referring now also to FIGS. **3** and **4** in the drawings, dispenser **200** is shown in longitudinal cross-section views. FIG. **3** depicts dispenser **200** in the retracted mode, and FIG. **4** depicts dispenser **200** in the extended mode. As is shown, chamber **204** includes an inner surface **300**, a bottom surface **302**, and an upper surface **304**. An upper aperture **306** passes through upper surface **304**. A lower aperture **308** passes through bottom surface **302**. Upper chamber portion **214** is preferably coupled to lower chamber portion **212** by a releasable fastening means **310** to facilitate restocking of toothpicks **102** in chamber **204**. In the preferred embodiment, releasable fastening means **310** is a threaded coupling **307**, **309**; however, it will be appreciated that releasable fastening means may be a clip, clamp, quick-release, or any other suitable fastening means. it is also preferred that bottom surface **302** be configured to taper downwardly and inwardly toward lower aperture **308**. This causes toothpicks **102** to gravitate toward the center of chamber **204** and toward lower aperture **308**. Upper surface **304** is configured to taper upwardly and inwardly toward the center of chamber **204** and toward upper aperture **306**. This causes the single toothpick **102** to move toward the center of chamber **204** and toward upper aperture **306** as the single toothpick **102** is extracted.

Dispenser **200** includes a lift system **311** for extracting a single toothpick **102** out from chamber **204** in response to activation of sensor **208**. Lift system **311** includes an extraction rod **312** coupled to a link system **314**. Link system **314** preferably includes links **318**, **320**, and **322**, which are pivotally coupled together at pivot joints **324** and **326**. Link **322** is pivotally coupled at a pivot joint **328** to a support member **742** (see FIG. **7**), which is rigidly attached to housing **202**. As shown in FIG. **4**, extraction rod **312** slidingly passes through lower aperture **308** for elevating a single toothpick **102** through channel **306**. Extraction rod **312** is coupled to a dispenser cam **316** via link system **314**, such that rotation of dispenser cam **316** in a direction indicated by arrow C causes extraction rod **312** to translate relative to lower aperture **308** in a direction indicated by arrow E. Link **322** includes an elongated slot **330** for receiving a guide pin **332** that is eccentrically attached to dispenser cam **316**. This configuration causes link **322** to pivot about pivot joint **328** in response to rotation of dispenser cam **316**.

Referring now also to FIGS. **5** and **6** in the drawings, enlarged views of extraction rod **312** are shown. FIG. **5** is a side view of extraction rod **312**, and FIG. **6** is a cross-sectional view of extraction rod **312** taken at VI-VI of FIG. **5**. As shown in FIG. **5**, rod **312** includes a lower end **500** and an upper end **502**. Lower end **500** is adapted for releasable attachment to link **318**, preferably by a threaded coupling, as shown in FIG. **5**. In an alternative embodiment, extraction rod **312** is integrally formed with link **318**. Upper end **502** is configured with a bore **600** for receiving the lower end of a single toothpick **102**. As shown in FIG. **6**, bore **600** is preferably frusto-conical in shape, having a curved upper surface **602**, inwardly sloping side walls **604**, and a flat bottom surface **606**. This configuration ensures that a single toothpick **102** enters bore **600** as extraction rod **312** is pushed upward. Bore **600** has a depth L and a bottom diameter D. In the preferred embodiment, L is approximately 0.05 inches and D is approximately 0.028 inches. This configuration creates close tolerances between toothpicks **102** and slot **600**, thereby restricting movement of toothpick **102** relative to upper end **502** as extraction rod **312** elevates toothpick **102** during dispensing mode. It will be appreciated that a wide range of lengths L and diameter D may be used to facilitate use with toothpicks of varying shapes and sizes. It is preferred that in the retracted mode, upper end **502** is retracted to a position substantially level or just below bottom surface **302**. This ensures that a single toothpick **102** will fall into bore **600** during the retracted mode.

Referring now also to FIG. **7** in the drawings, dispenser **200** is shown in a transverse cross-section view. As is shown, housing **202** carries electrical power source **700**, a drive system **701**, a switch system **715**, a shaker system **705**, and optional recharging system **708**. In the preferred embodiment, electrical power source **700** is one or more DC batteries. Drive system **701** includes one more drive mechanisms, including a dispenser motor **702**, a gear system **704**, and link system **314**. Mounting brackets **710**, **712**, and **714** support electrical power source **700**, motor **702**, and motor **706**, respectively. In the preferred embodiment, gear system **704** includes a driving gear **716** and a driven gear **718**. Driving gear **716** is coupled to dispenser motor **702** via a shaft **730**. Dispenser cam **316** and shaker cam **720** are rotatably carried by a shaft **732** coupled to driven gear **718**. Shafts **730** and **732**, driving gear **716**, and driven gear **718** are supported by support members **734** and **736**, respectively. Switch system **715** includes dispenser cam **316** having a recessed notch **334**, a dispenser switch **728**, a shaker cam **720** having an upraised portion **724**, and a shaker switch **726**. Upraised portion **724** and recessed notch **334** are operably associated with shaker switch **726** and dispenser switch **728**, respectively.

A weight **740** is eccentrically coupled to a shaft **738** of shaker motor **706**. In addition, shaker motor **706** is coupled to chamber **204**, such that activation of shaker motor **706** and weight **740** causes chamber **204** to vibrate. The vibrations imparted to chamber **204** from shaker motor **706** cause toothpicks **102** to reposition within chamber **204** by sliding down surface **302** into slot **600**.

Referring now also to FIGS. **8** and **9** in the drawings, the operation of dispenser cam **316** and shaker cam **720** are illustrated. In the preferred embodiment, dispenser cam **316** and shaker cam **720** are configured, dimensioned, and oriented relative to each other, such that dispenser switch **728** and shaker switch **726** are selectively aligned, thereby activating at selected timing intervals. As is shown, both dispenser cam **316** and shaker cam **720** are simultaneously driven by shaft **732** and rotate at the same rotational velocity. As shown in FIG. **8**, shaker switch **726** includes a switch lever **800**. When upraised portion **724** engages switch lever **800**, an electrical circuit is completed, thereby activating shaker motor **706**. As shown in FIG. **9**, dispenser switch **728** includes a switch lever **900**. When switch lever **900** encounters recessed portion **334**, an electrical circuit is opened, thereby deactivating dispenser motor **702**. It will be appreciated that in alternative embodiments, other types of systems and components could be used in lieu of cams, gears, and linkages. For example, an electrical relay and timer could activate and

deactivate dispenser motor **702** and shaker motor **706**, or a piezoelectric telescoping actuator could be used in lieu of extraction rod **312**.

Referring now also to FIG. **10** in the drawings, a simplified schematic diagram of an electrical system **1000** for dispenser **200** is illustrated. Electrical system **1000** includes dispenser motor **702**, dispenser switch **726**, shaker motor **706**, shaker switch **728**, dispenser cam **316**, and shaker cam **720**, sensor **208**, and power source **700**. As is shown, the components of electrical system **100** are conductively coupled together via a plurality of conductors **1002**. In the interest of clarity, only one conductor **1002** is labeled. Electrical system **1000** includes two circuits C**1** and C**2**. Circuit C**1** includes shaker switch **728**, shaker motor **702**, and power source **700**. Circuit C**2** includes sensor **208**, power source **700**, dispenser switch **726**, and dispenser motor **702**. As shown in FIG. **10**, circuits C**1** and C**2** are open, i.e., dispenser motor **702** and shaker motor **706** are not provided electrical current from power device source **700**. When circuits C**1** and C**2** are closed, dispenser motor **702** and shaker motor **706** are activated, i.e., provided electrical current from power source **700**.

Upon detection of the user, sensor **208** closes circuit C**2**, thereby providing electrical current from power source **700** to dispenser motor **702**. Dispenser motor **702** rotates gear **716**, which in turn rotates dispenser cam **316** and shaker cam **720**. During this time, dispenser cam **316** pivots link system **314**, which elevates and retracts extraction rod **312**. Dispenser motor **702** remains activated until switch lever **900** of dispenser switch **728** encounters recessed portion **334**. After a short duration of time, sensor **208** resets and reopens circuit C**2**. Circuit C**1** remains open until upraised portion **724** comes into contact with switch lever **800** of shaker switch **726**. Electrical power is provided to the shaker motor **706** when circuit C**1** closes. Shaker motor **706** rotates weight **740**, which causes vibrations within chamber **204** for repositioning toothpicks **102**. This allows extraction rod **312** to receive a single toothpick **102** and push that toothpick **102** at least partially through aperture **306** in upper portion **304** of chamber **204**, where toothpick **102** may be easily grasped and taken by the user without contamination of the other toothpicks **102** within chamber **204**.

Referring now to FIG. **11** in the drawings, an alternative electrical system **1100** for dispenser **200** is illustrated. Electrical system **1100** is substantially similar in form and function to electrical system **1000**; however, electrical system **1100** includes optional recharging system **708** and solar collector **210** for recharging power source **700**, which in this embodiment, is a rechargeable electrical power source, such as rechargeable batteries. Electrical system **1100** includes a diode **1102** that prevents electrical current from returning to recharging system **708**.

It should be understood that other configurations for dispenser **200** may be utilized without departing from the scope of the present application. For example, although chamber **204** has been shown in a generally vertical orientation, chamber **204** may be oriented in a more horizontal orientation. In such an embodiment, the walls of chamber **204** may be configured in a different manner, such as V-shaped, to allow a single toothpick to be dispensed during operation.

It is evident by the foregoing description that the sanitary automated toothpick dispenser of the subject application has significant benefits and advantages over known dispensers, including: (1) it provides means wherein a user may retrieve a toothpick without being exposed to germs from other users; and (2) it eliminates the need for toothpicks to be individually wrapped.

The particular embodiments disclosed above are illustrative only, as the invention may be modified and practiced in different but equivalent manners apparent to those skilled in the art having the benefit of the teachings herein. It is therefore evident that the particular embodiments disclosed above may be altered or modified, and all such variations are considered within the scope and spirit of the invention. Accordingly, the protection sought herein is as set forth in the description. Although the present invention is shown in a limited number of forms, it is not limited to just these forms, but is amenable to various changes and modifications without departing from the spirit thereof.

What is claimed is:

1. A toothpick dispenser, comprising:
- a chamber for holding a plurality of toothpicks, the chamber having an aperture through which a single toothpick may be dispensed;
- a housing coupled to the chamber;
- an electrical power source carried by the housing;
- a drive system conductively coupled to the power source, the drive system having:
  - a dispenser motor;
  - a gear system coupled to the dispenser motor;
  - a shaft coupled to the gear system; and
  - a dispenser cam coupled to the shaft and to the lift system;
  - wherein rotation of the dispenser cam activates the lift system;
- a lift system coupled to the drive system, the lift system being adapted to dispense the single toothpick through the aperture of the chamber; and
- an electrical sensor conductively coupled to the drive system for detecting the presence of a user and for activating the drive system and the lift system in response to the detection of the user.

2. The toothpick dispenser according to claim **1**, wherein the chamber comprises:
- a bottom portion having an inclined surface; and
- a lower aperture passing through the bottom portion.

3. The toothpick dispenser according to claim **1**, wherein the chamber comprises:
- a first chamber portion; and
- a second chamber portion releasably attached to the first chamber portion to allow access to the toothpicks.

4. The toothpick dispenser according to claim **1**, wherein the chamber is configured such that the toothpicks are aligned in a generally vertical direction.

5. The toothpick dispenser according to claim **1**, wherein the electrical power source is a rechargeable electrical power source.

6. The toothpick dispenser according to claim **5**, further comprising:
- a solar energy recharging system for recharging the rechargeable electrical power source.

7. The toothpick dispenser according to claim **1**, wherein the lift system comprises:
- a link system pivotally coupled to the dispenser cam; and
- an extraction rod coupled to the link system;
- wherein rotation of the dispenser cam causes a corresponding translation of the extraction rod relative to the chamber.

8. The toothpick dispenser according to claim **7**, wherein the extraction rod has a bore for receiving the toothpick.

9. The toothpick dispenser according to claim **1**, wherein the sensor is a motion detector.

10. The toothpick dispenser according to claim **1**, wherein the sensor is a proximity sensor.

11. A toothpick dispenser, comprising:
a chamber for holding a plurality of toothpicks, the chamber having an aperture through which a single toothpick may be dispensed;
a housing coupled to the chamber;
an electrical power source carried by the housing;
a drive system conductively coupled to the power source;
a lift system coupled to the drive system, the lift system being adapted to dispense the single toothpick through the aperture of the chamber;
an electrical sensor conductively coupled to the drive system for detecting the presence of a user and for activating the drive system and the lift system in response to the detection of the user; and
a shaker system for shaking the chamber.

12. The toothpick dispenser according to claim 11, wherein the shaker system comprises:
a shaker motor; and
a weight eccentrically coupled to the shaker motor.

13. The toothpick dispenser according to claim 11, comprising:
a dispensing switch operably associated with the dispenser cam for controlling the dispenser motor; and
a shaker switch operably associated with a shaker cam for controlling the shaker motor.

14. The toothpick dispenser according to claim 13, wherein the timing of the dispensing switch and the shaker switch are selectively set, such that the shaker cam is activated for a selected time period after the dispenser cam has been activated.

* * * * *