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Venders Find Homes In Unusual Locations With Unlikely Merchandise

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In any fiercely competitive market, the ability to stand out from the crowd is critical to survival. The bulk vending industry is no different, and in many ways, even more competitive than other industries. Operators are limited to the selection of machines offered by the manufacturers and often limited by capsuled products carried by suppliers. Taking all of this into consideration, operators must have incredible imagination, ingenuity and foresight.

As a manufacturer of vending machines, we often hear of the different types of products our customers are trying to vend from one of our machines. At times, we just shake our heads in wonder at their creativity. Today, an increasing number of operators are vending unusual items in equally unusual locations.

Vending machines have been traditionally thought of mediums for selling snacks and other such items for people. However, some operators are thinking outside the box by placing pet treats in machines. There are now parks and pet stores in North America that have vending machines that dispense edible treats for man's best friend.

This concept of offering vendible snacks for pets opens up another door for operators. One of the most popular and unconventional product lines our customers vend is animal and fish feed. Locations such as petting zoos, amusement parks and fishing ponds distribute bulk venders around their complexes to vend food for the children to feed to the animals. You can even see these machines in places such as Walt Disney World. Trent Augenstein of Delaware, OH-based Olentangy Indian Caverns, dispenses such items as crushed bananas, rice and corn for the goats at his petting zoo. Trent tells us that with the cost of animal feed being minimal, the 25¢ vend provides a healthy profit margin.

Museum vending, which is increasingly popular in Europe, is also becoming a great niche location for bulk vending. Among the items successfully vended in this niche are art and collector pins. There are also an increasing number of operators vending "art rocks" – large, usually polished, stones that come in many different colors, shapes and sizes. Machines with these rocks have also been placed in nature stores, specialty shops,

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new-age stores and souvenir shops.

And here in North America, we were recently informed that vended dice is a large and growing market. While this category has not been seen in our machines since the 1960s, the specialty dice currently being vended are far different than the standard white and black versions that accompany board games. These specialty dice come in a wide variety of colors, shapes and designs. Capsuled, they are currently selling for anywhere between 50¢ and \$1. Although largely confined to specific locations, such as gaming stores, these dice are in high demand.

WHAT'S THAT I SMELL?

One of the most unusual vended products we have heard about is fertilizer for soil. In this particular case, the gentleman, who owns and operates a greenhouse, wanted to sell small portions of specialized fertilizer to his customers. A standard 3-in. capsule, along with a bulk vender, provided the perfect delivery system. An immediate hit, greenhouse customers were soon able to purchase the small amount of fertilizer they wanted, rather than the large portions previously available, and all while

avoiding the lines at the cashier.

A number of companies have been vending golf balls, placing machines at mini putt courses as well as regular golf courses. Their idea has been a total success, and what started off very small, soon grew into a large business with operators branching out into vending golf tees.

Some operators came up with the notion of using bulk venders to dispense sunscreen in tanning salons. The machines are placed near the tanning beds and are utilized by those who forgot their own sunscreen. Meanwhile, operators in Russia and Japan have been placing sex toys, condoms and even g-strings in vending machines with success. In bars and nightclubs, the products sold so well at first that operators were soon having difficulty keeping the machines full.

Vending machines are also being used in pool halls to dispense chalk for pool cues. The chalk is placed in capsules, while the machines are placed in different areas around the halls. Operators have mentioned that pool halls are thrilled with this dispensing method as they no longer have to take the time to sell the chalk.

Sticker machines have also been used to dispense innovative products. Some operators have been vending baseball cards from them, alleviating the need for customers to go through checkout lines. Other creative-thinking operators have placed sticker machines in stores in order to dispense gift cards.

Traditional bulk vending machines are also being used in hardware stores to dispense driver bits. After the bits are capsuled, each machine is filled with a different style bit. Customers are then able to look at a rack of machines and select the exact bit they are looking for, which, again, avoids the need to go through a checkout line.

BETTER THAN A RABBIT

However, perhaps the most unusual story we've heard is, well, magical. Ray Lum, a magician, actually worked a vending machine into his act. After seeing a rack of machines at a Safeway grocery store some 18 years ago, he proceeded to devise an illusion involving a vender. He takes a ring from a member of the audience and gives that person two quarters.

Lum then stands away from the machine and tells the audience member to place the first coin in the machine to retrieve a capsule. When the second quarter is used, the ring is dispensed. As he toured throughout the world, Lum found his concept was so well received that his firm – the Lum Entertainment Group – began supplying other magicians with the vending machine prop.

All of these anecdotal marketing stories reinforce the idea that bulk vending continues to hold great opportunities for those who use a little ingenuity and imagination to find niche markets for. You just have to think outside the conventional vending machine!