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(54) **ARTICLE DISPENSING SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR SAME**

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(58) **Field of Classification Search** None
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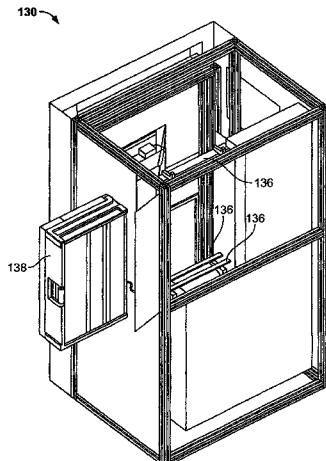
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

An article dispensing machine and article transport storage unit are shown that permit articles slated for inventory to be delivered in secure manner from a centralized inventory supply center to an article dispensing machine forming part of an article distribution system. The article transport storage unit is locked during transport from the supply center to the machine and does not become unlocked until fully installed within the machine.

20 Claims, 23 Drawing Sheets



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2004/0158504	A1	8/2004	Gross	2007/0156578	A1	7/2007	Perazolo
2004/0158871	A1	8/2004	Jacobson	2007/0162183	A1	7/2007	Pinney
2004/0162783	A1	8/2004	Gross	2007/0162184	A1	7/2007	Pinney
2004/0172274	A1	9/2004	Gross	2007/0169132	A1	7/2007	Blust
2004/0172275	A1	9/2004	Gross	2007/0175986	A1	8/2007	Petrone
2004/0172342	A1	9/2004	Gross	2007/0179668	A1	8/2007	Mellin

2007/0185776 A1 8/2007 Nguyen
 2007/0210153 A1 9/2007 Walker
 2008/0027835 A1 1/2008 LeMasters et al.

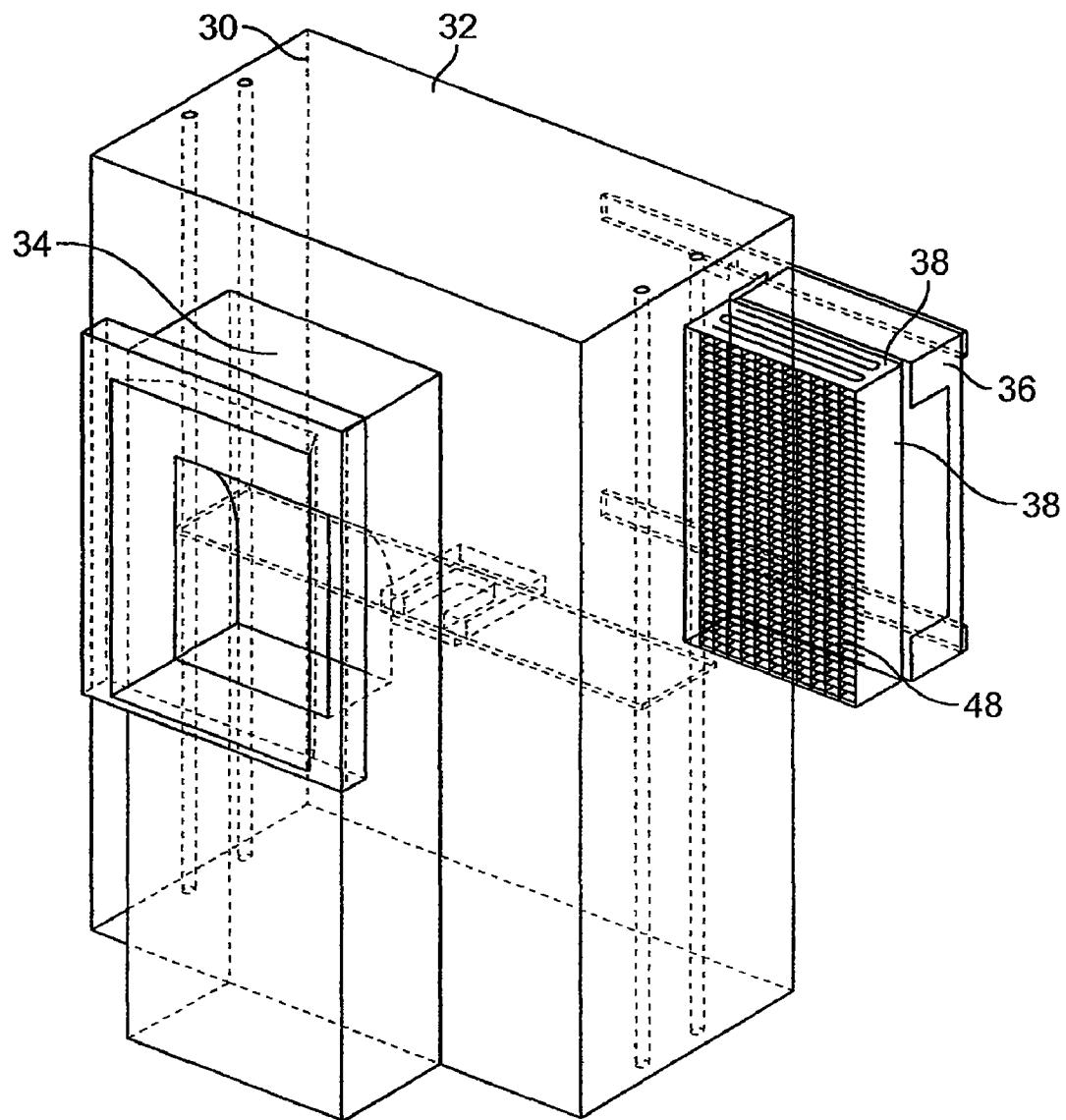
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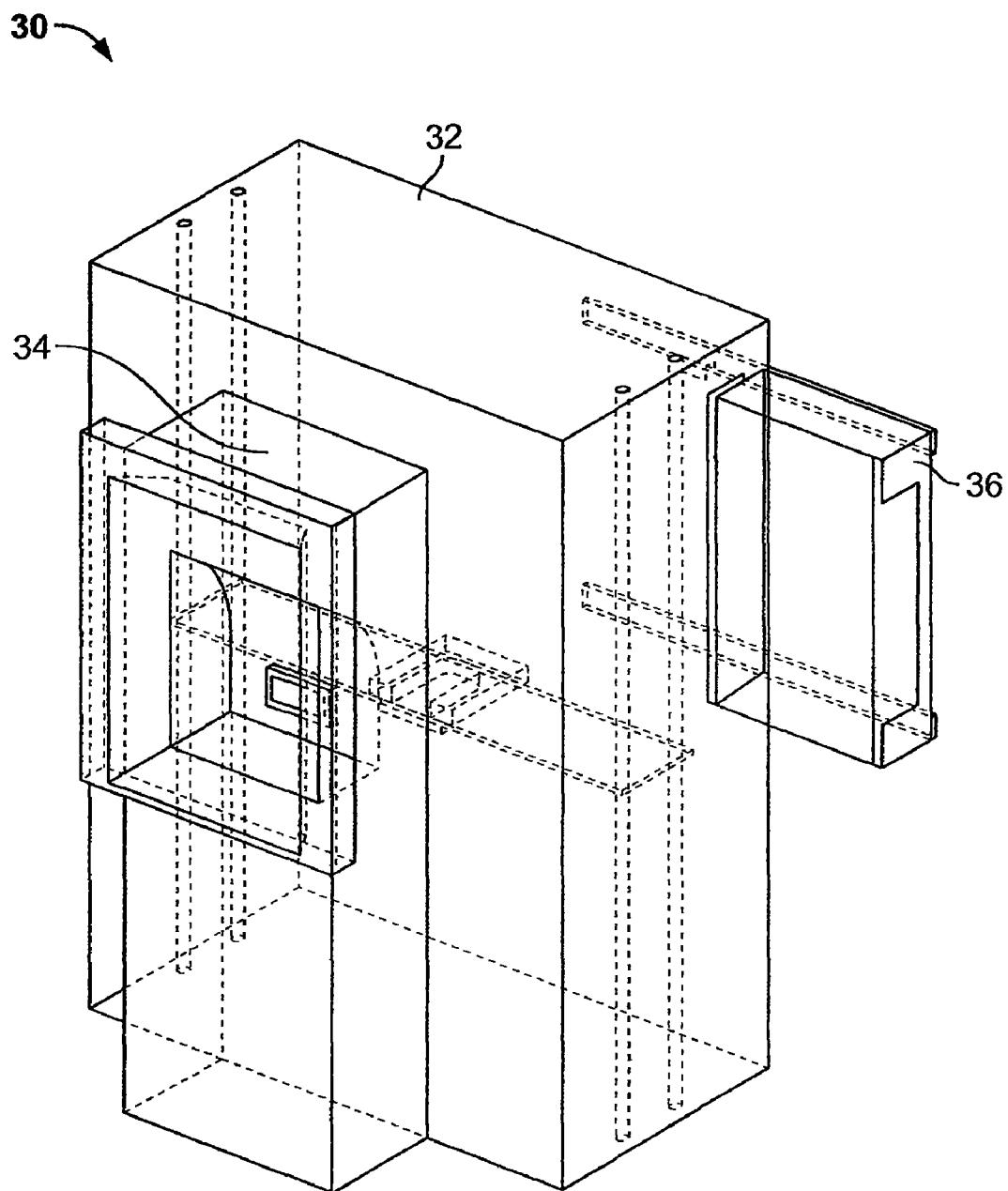
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DE	35 29 155	2/1987	An Office Action mailed Sep. 27, 2007 for U.S. Appl. No. 11/409,260.
EP	0060643	9/1982	An Office Action mailed Sep. 27, 2007 for U.S. Appl. No. 11/408,610.
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EP	1367549	12/2003	Notice of Allowance mailed Dec. 7, 2007 for U.S. Appl. No. 11/409,516.
FR	2549624	1/1985	Notice of Allowance mailed Jun. 26, 2008 for U.S. Appl. No. 11/408,607.
FR	2559599	8/1985	Notice of Allowance mailed Oct. 29, 2008 for U.S. Appl. No. 11/408,630.
FR	2562293	10/1985	Office Action mailed Jan. 24, 2008 for U.S. Appl. No. 11/408,607.
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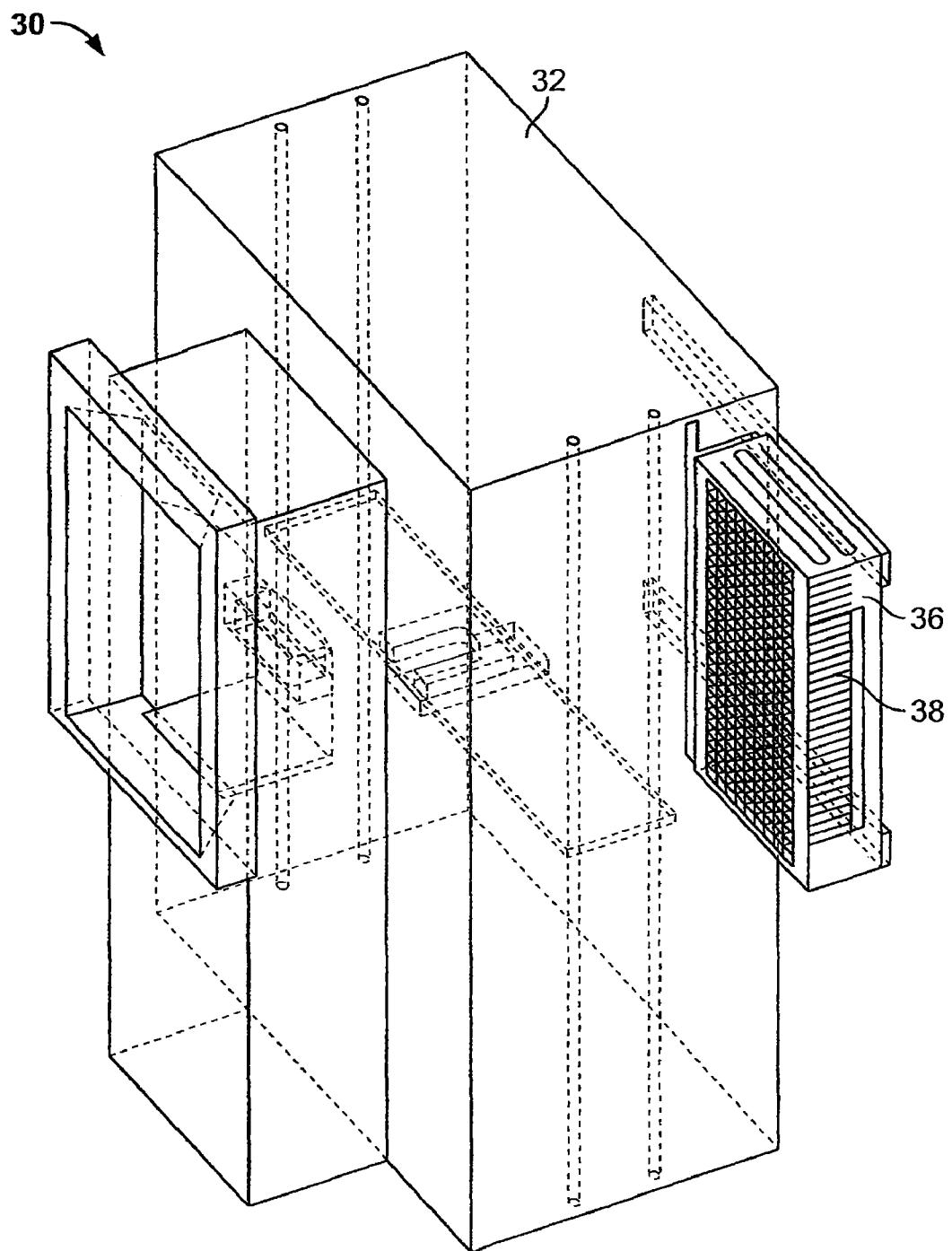
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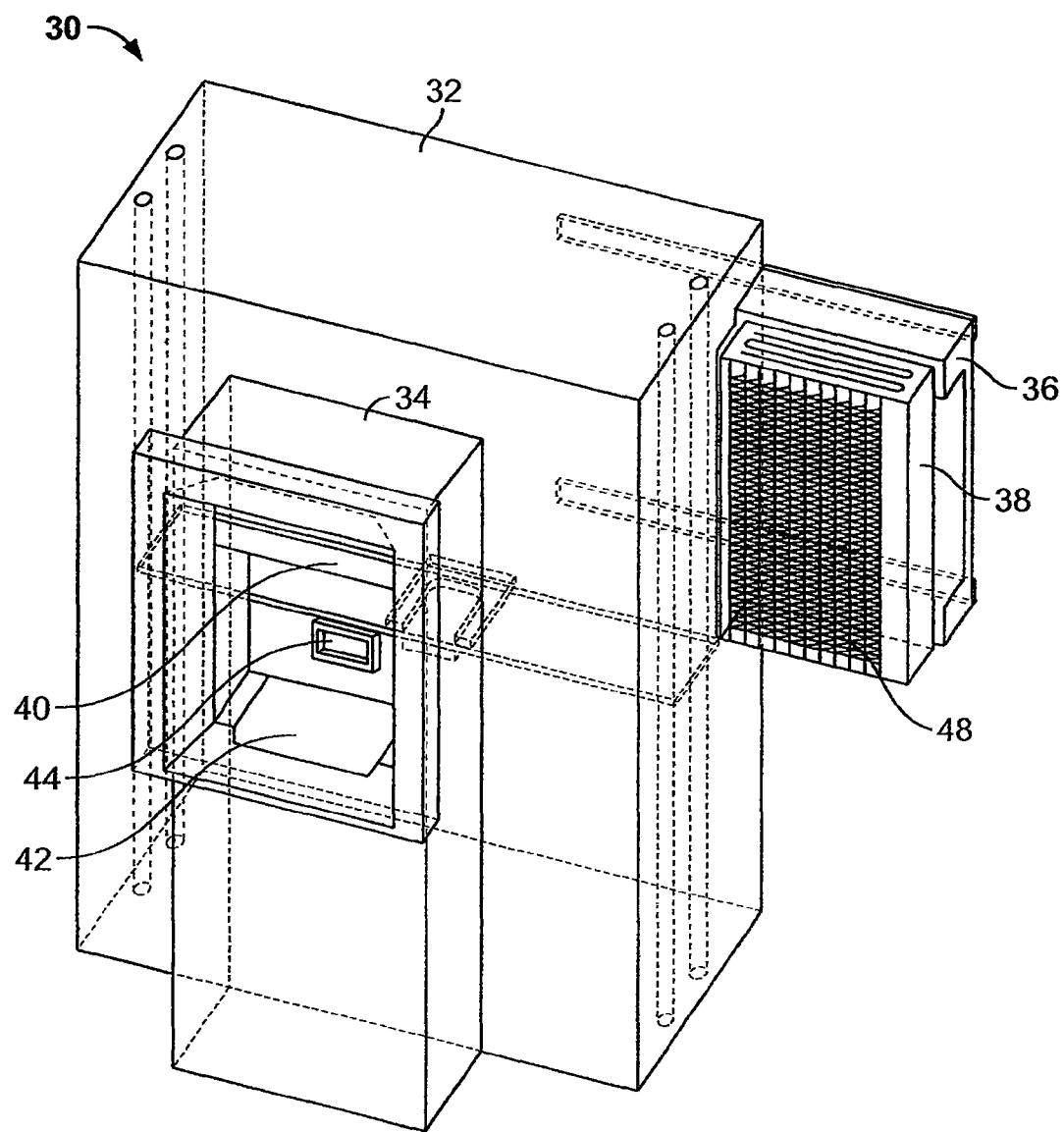
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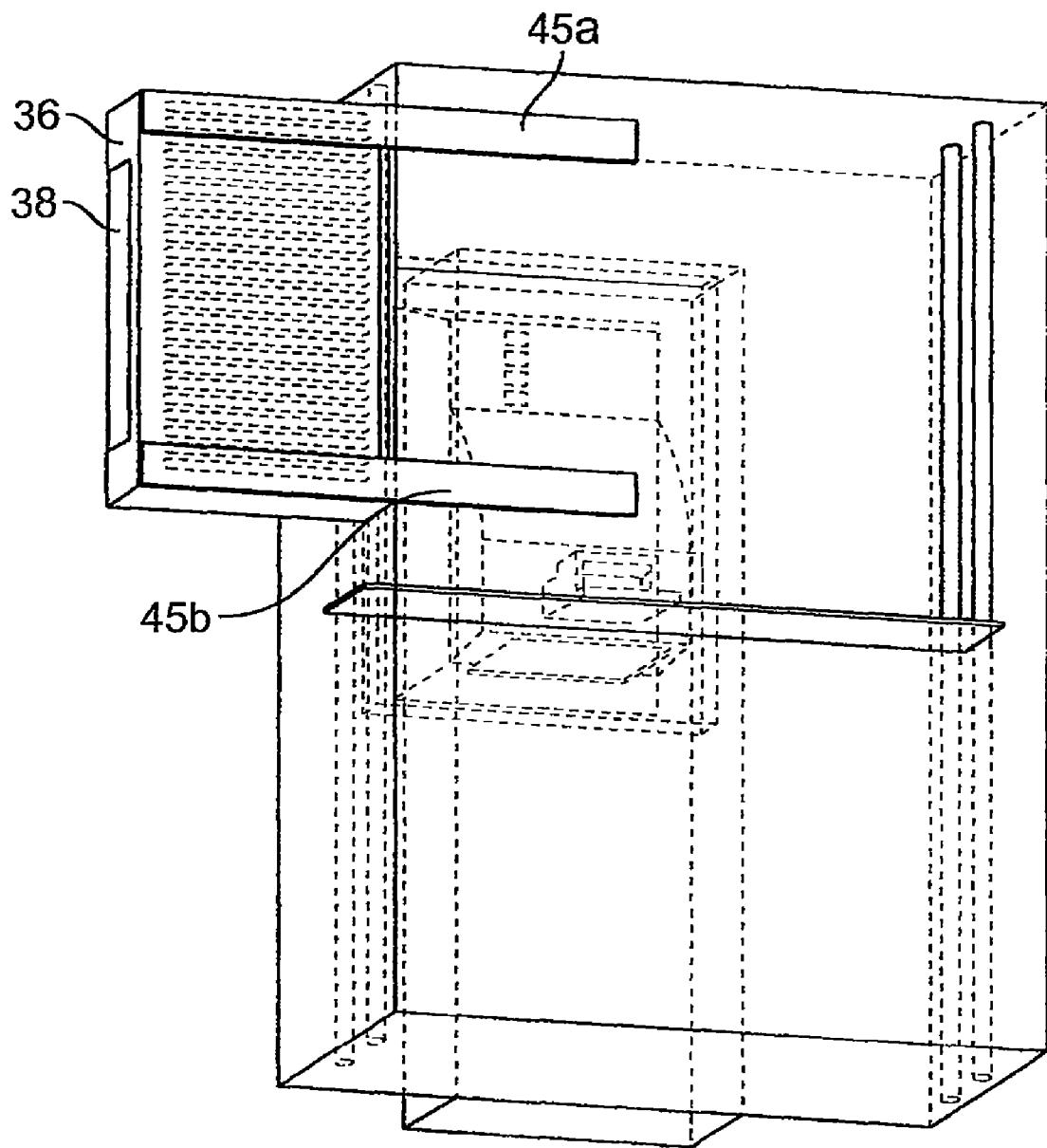
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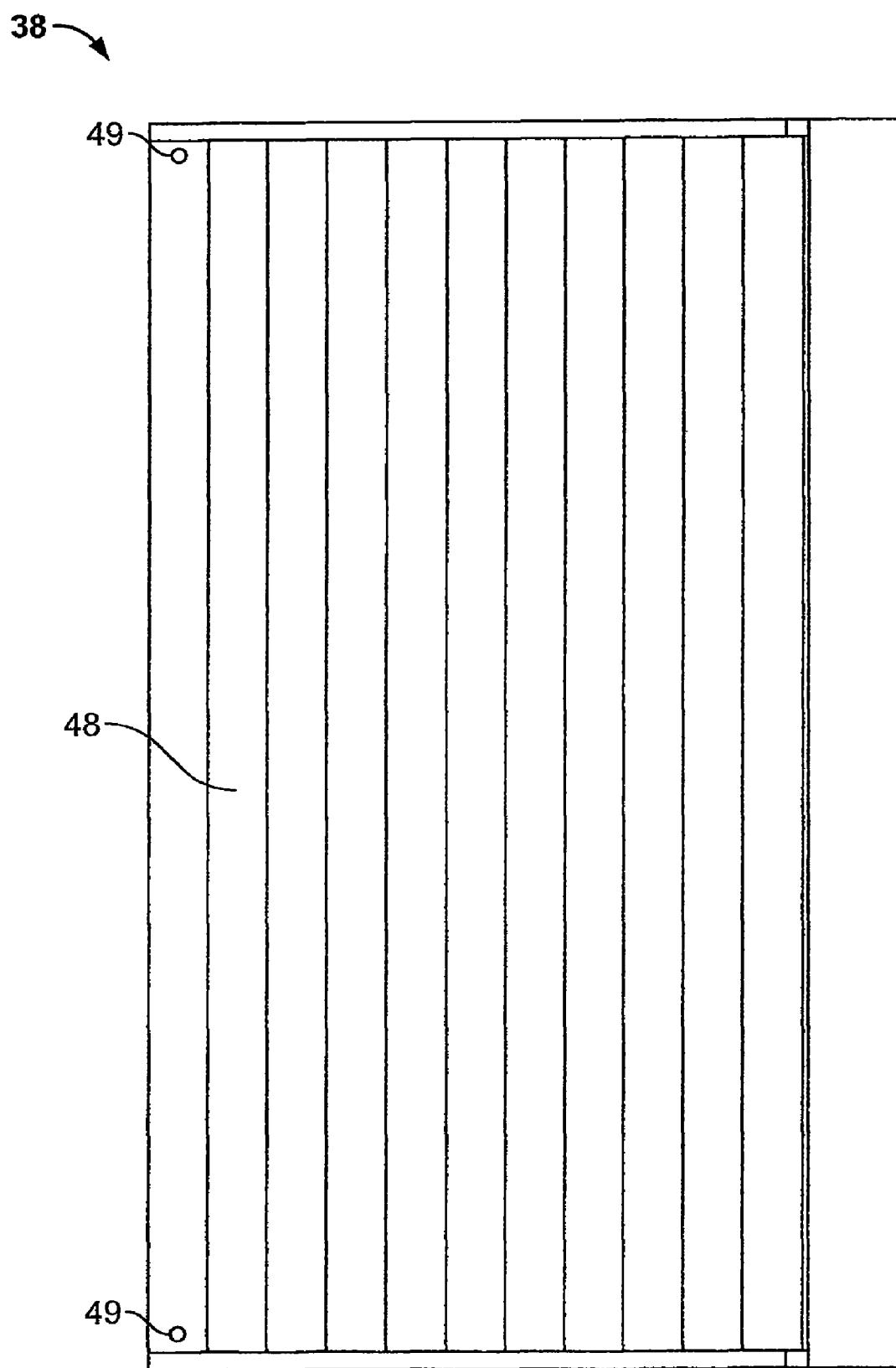
**FIG. 1**

**FIG. 2**

**FIG. 3**

**FIG. 4**

**FIG. 5**

**FIG. 6**

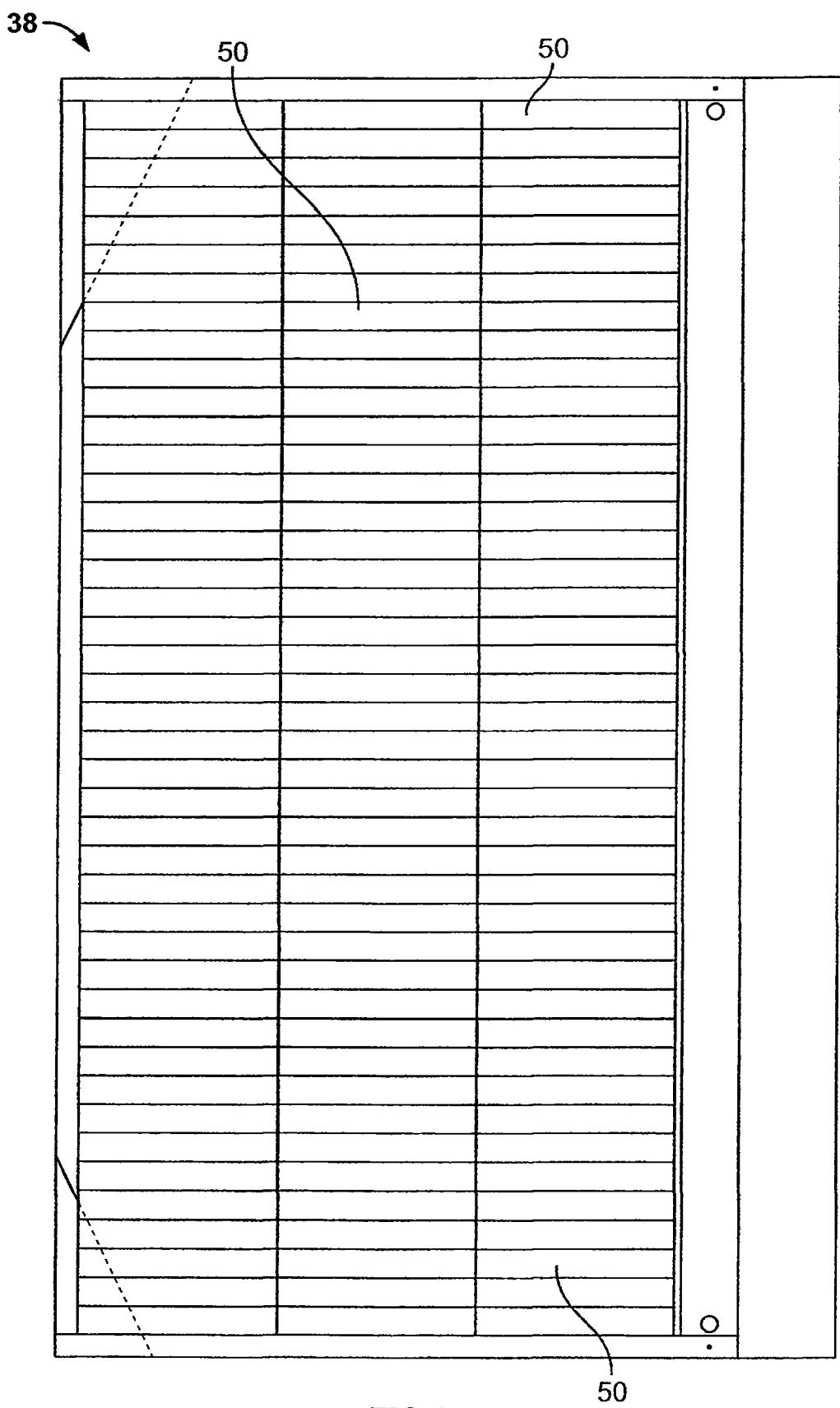
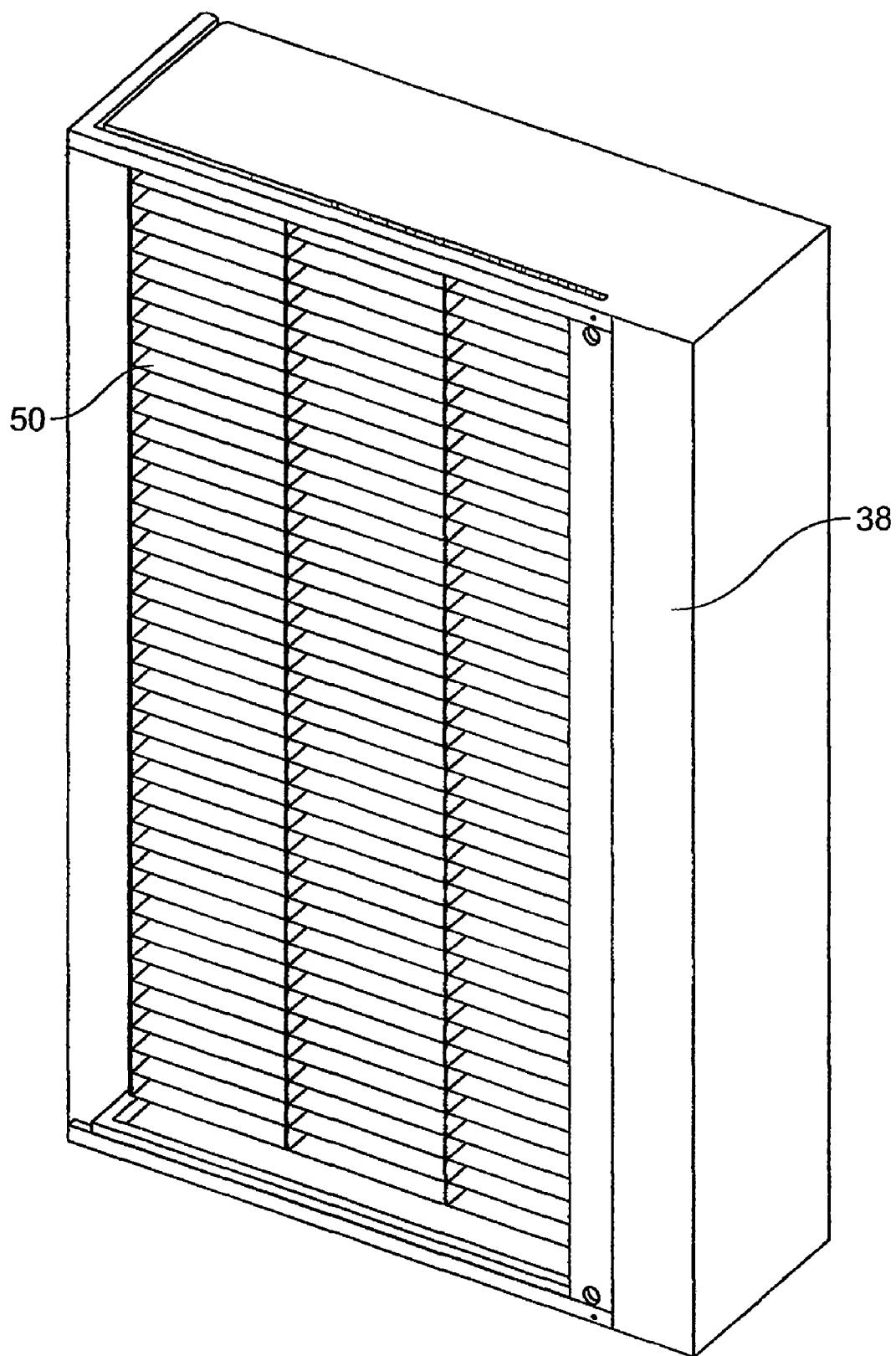


FIG. 7

**FIG. 8**

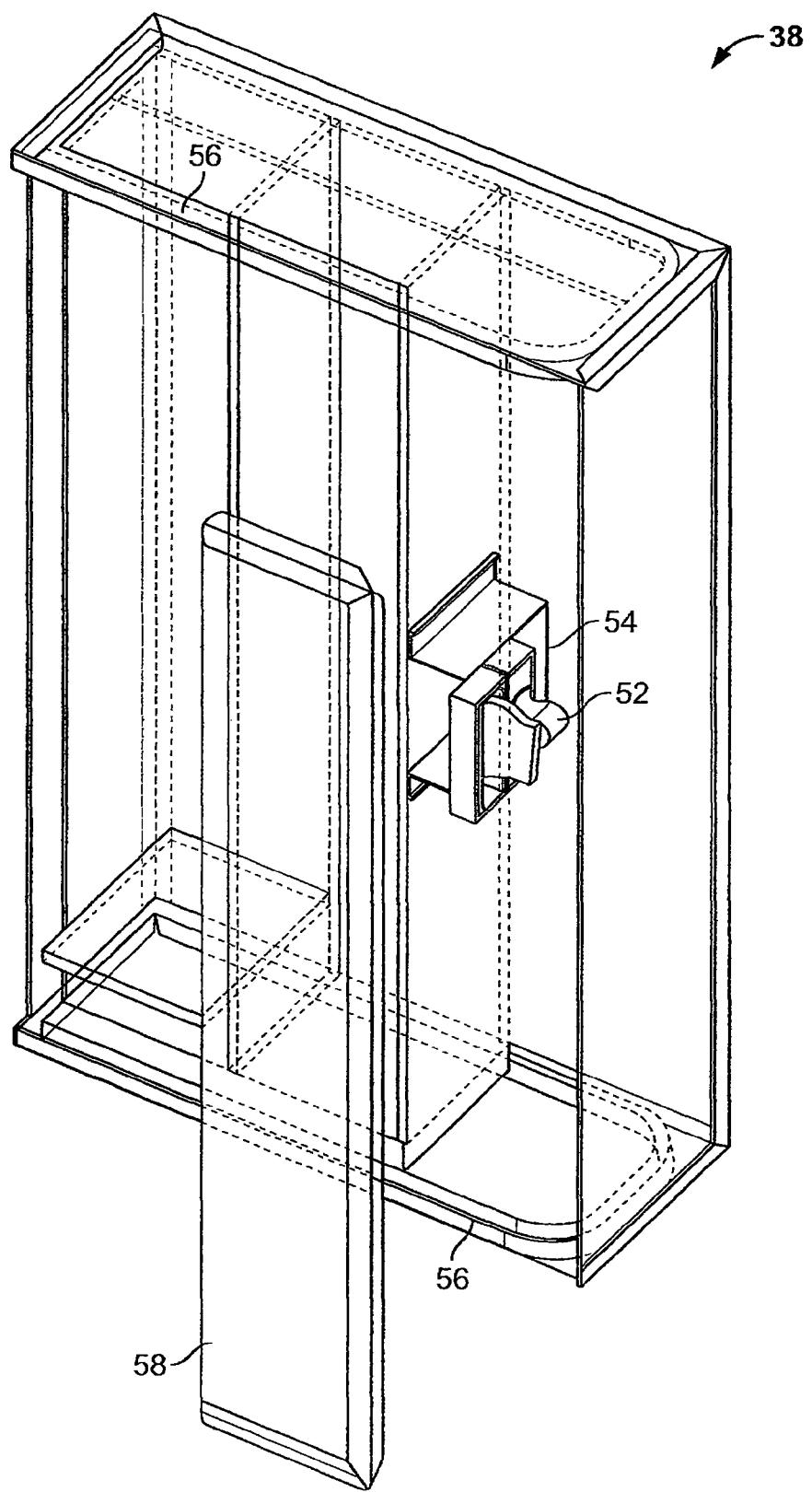
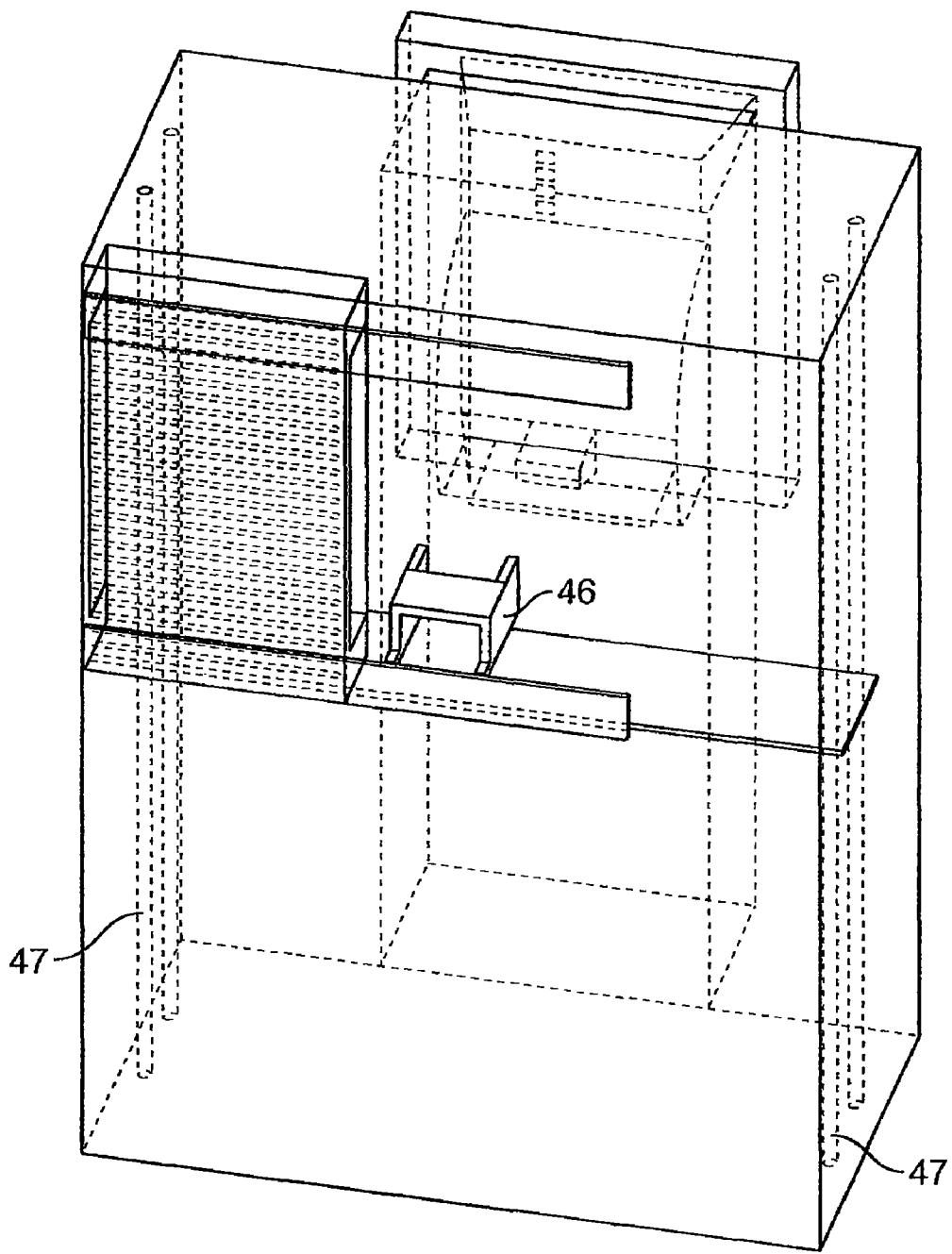
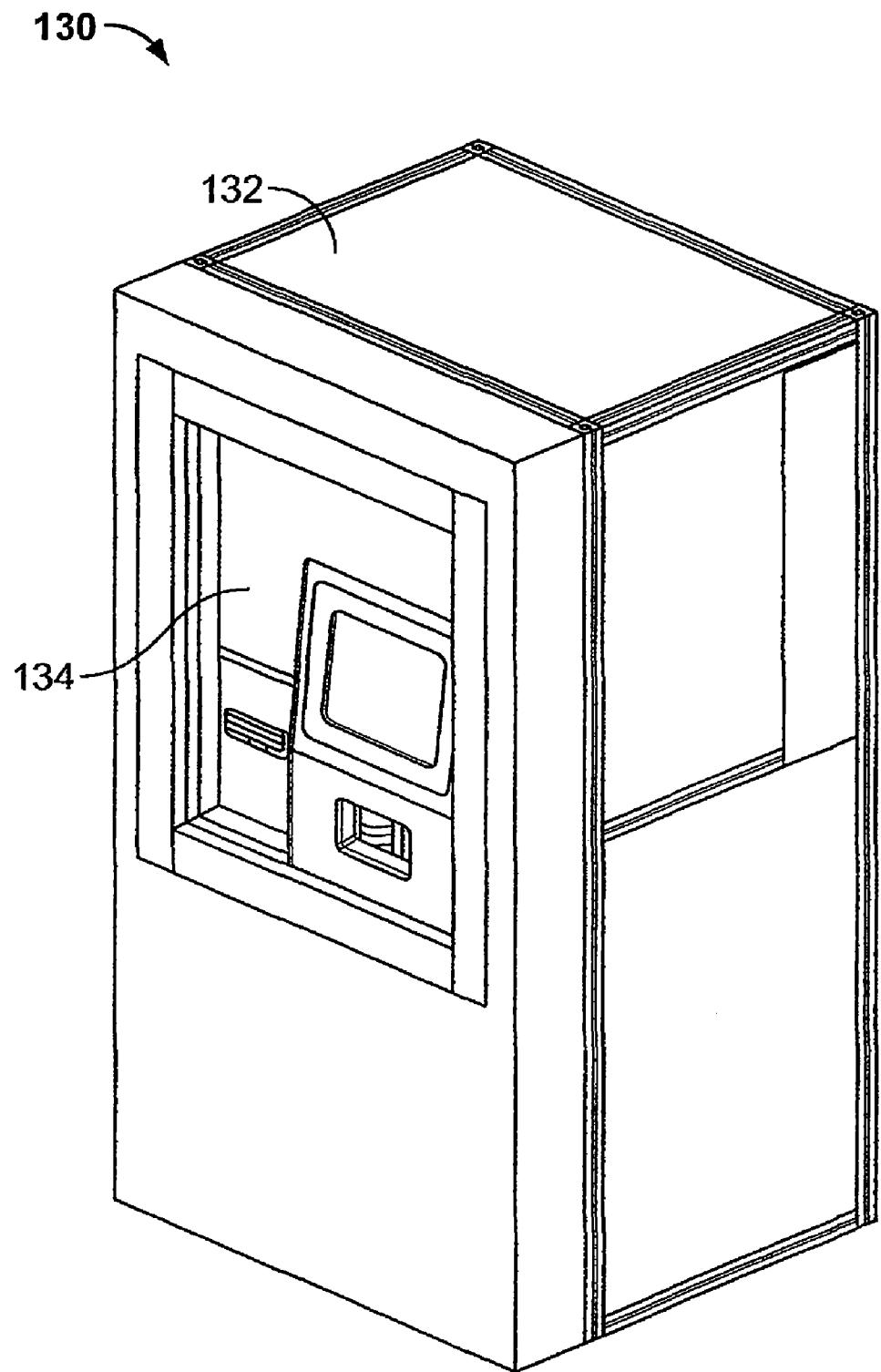


FIG. 9

**FIG. 10**

**FIG. 11**

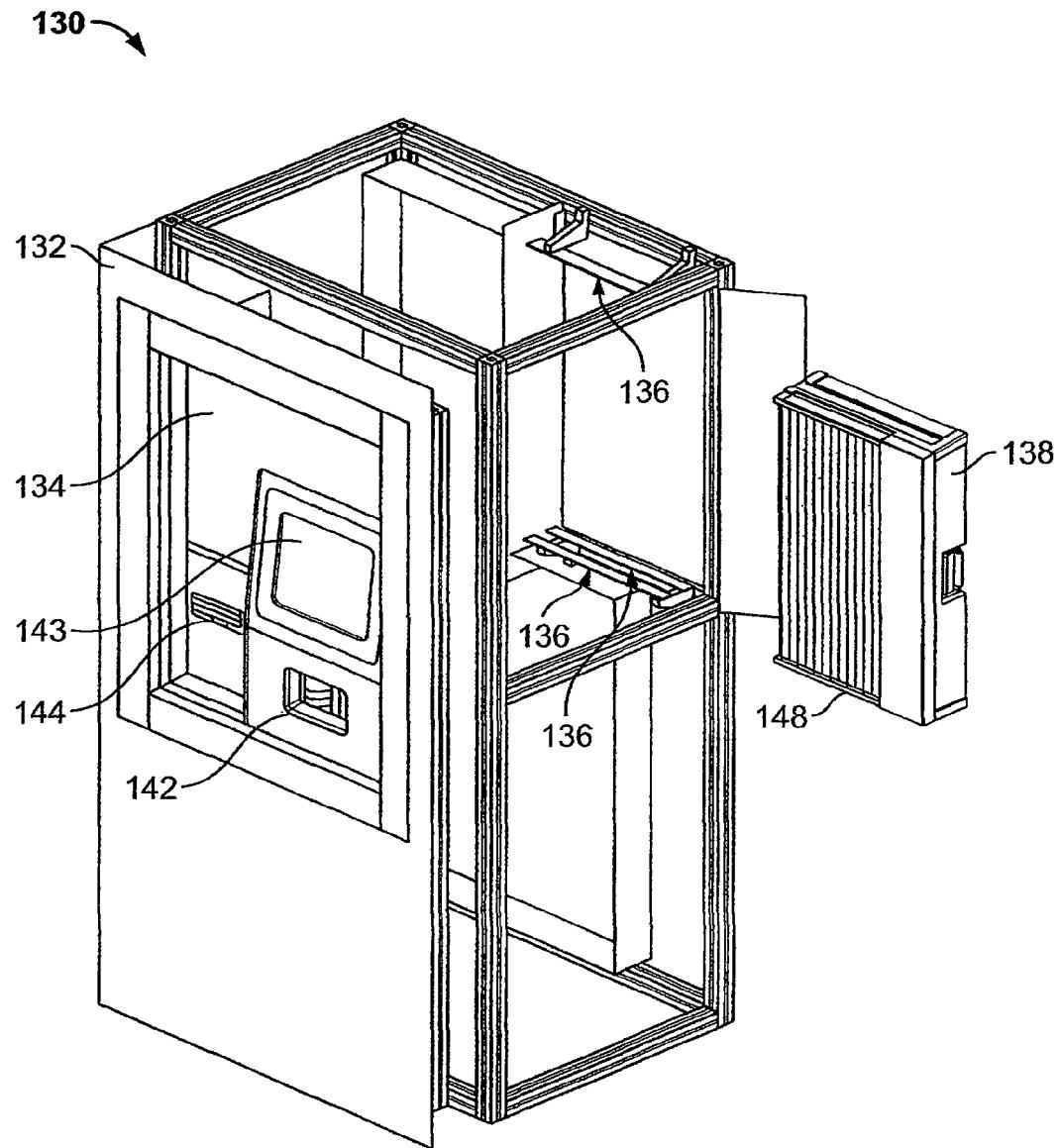


FIG. 12

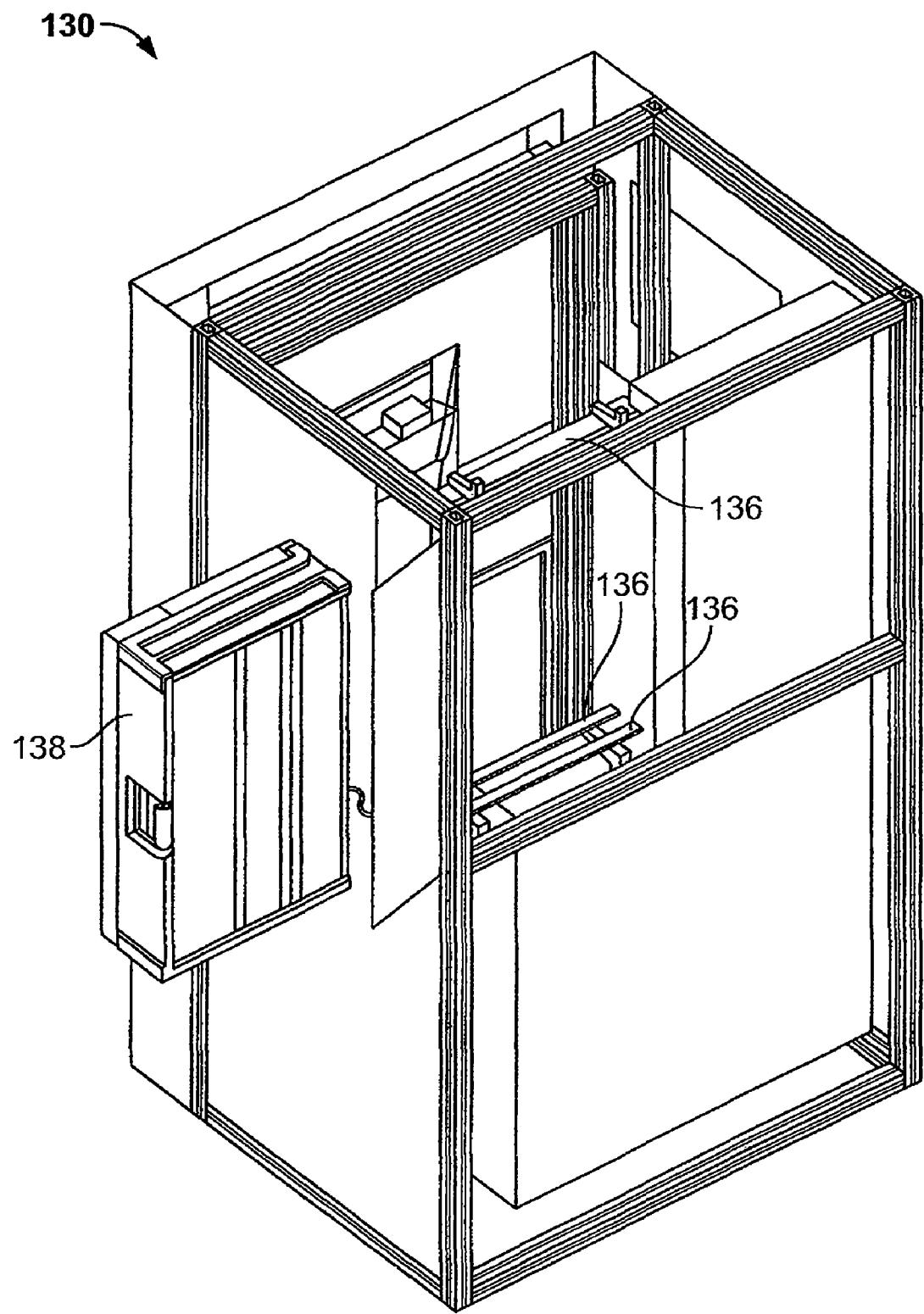


FIG. 13

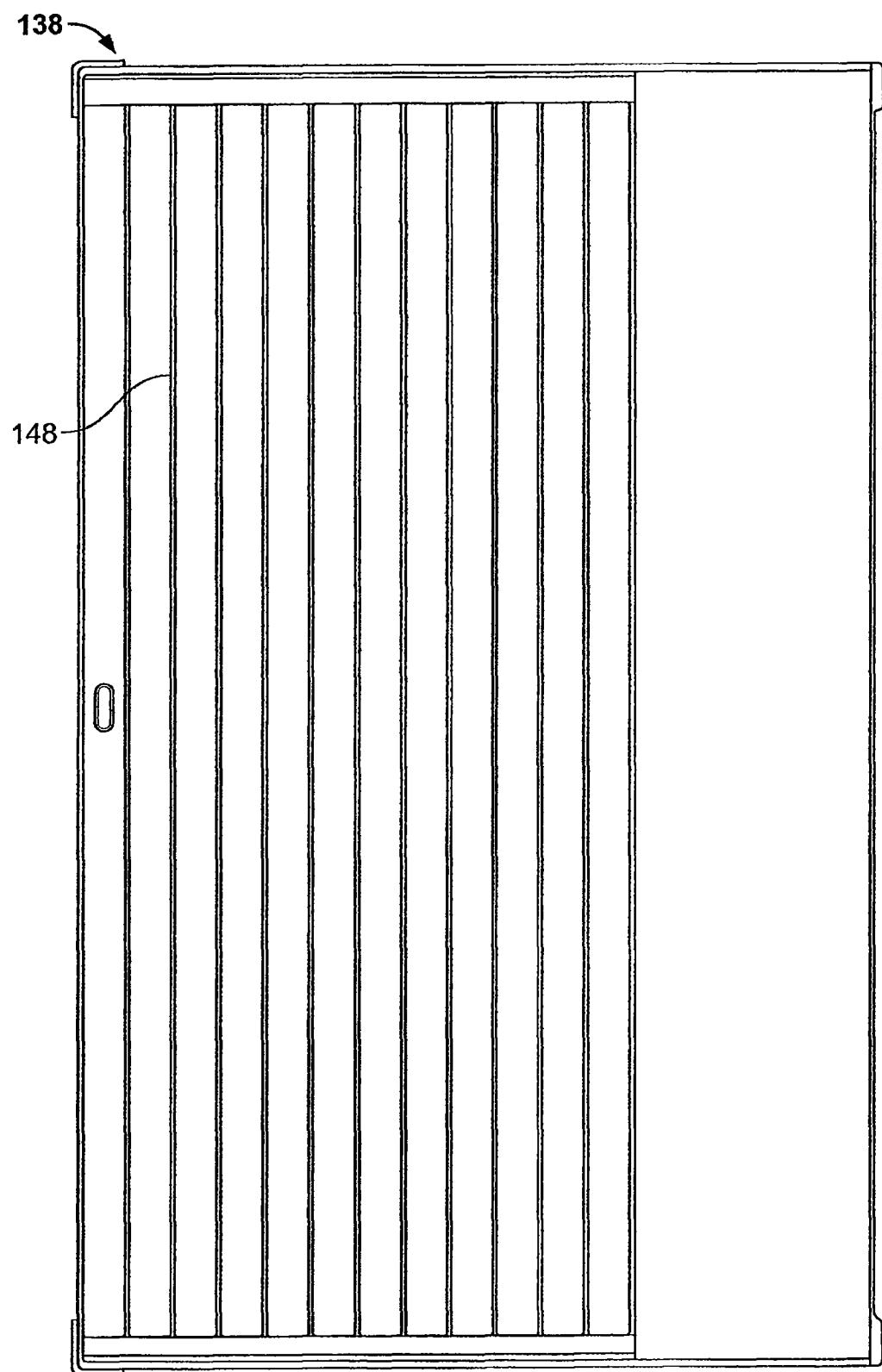


FIG. 14

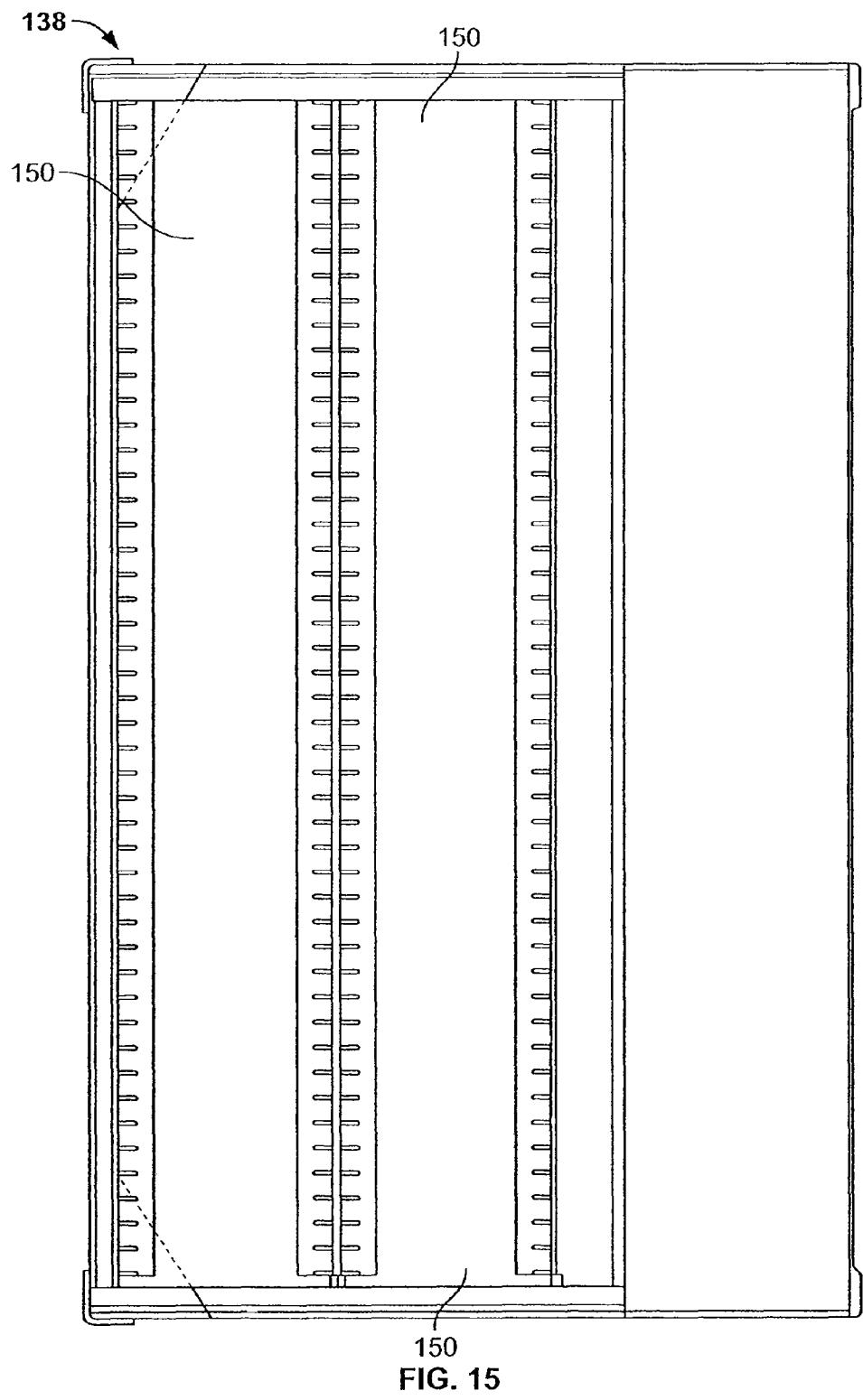


FIG. 15

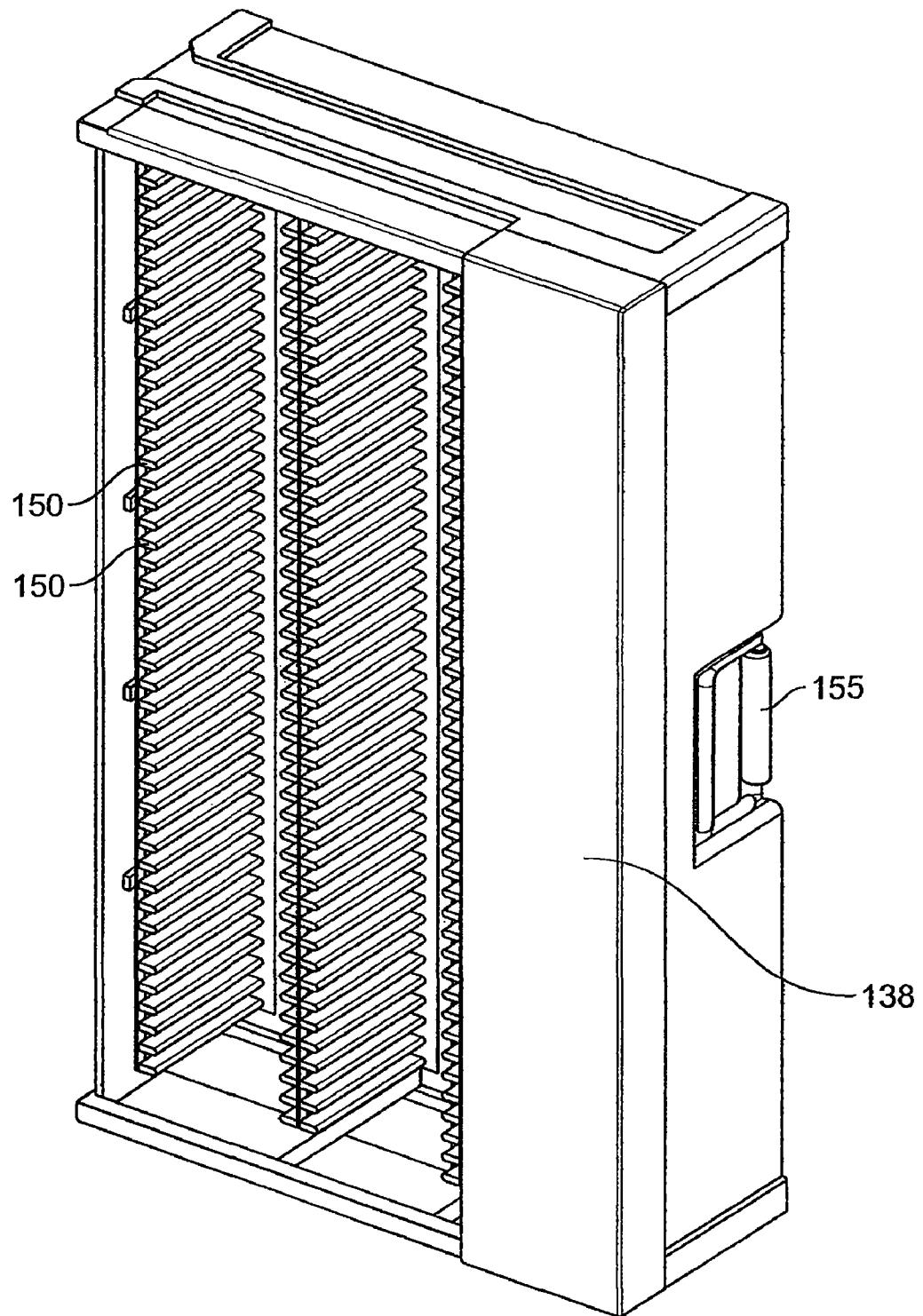


FIG. 16

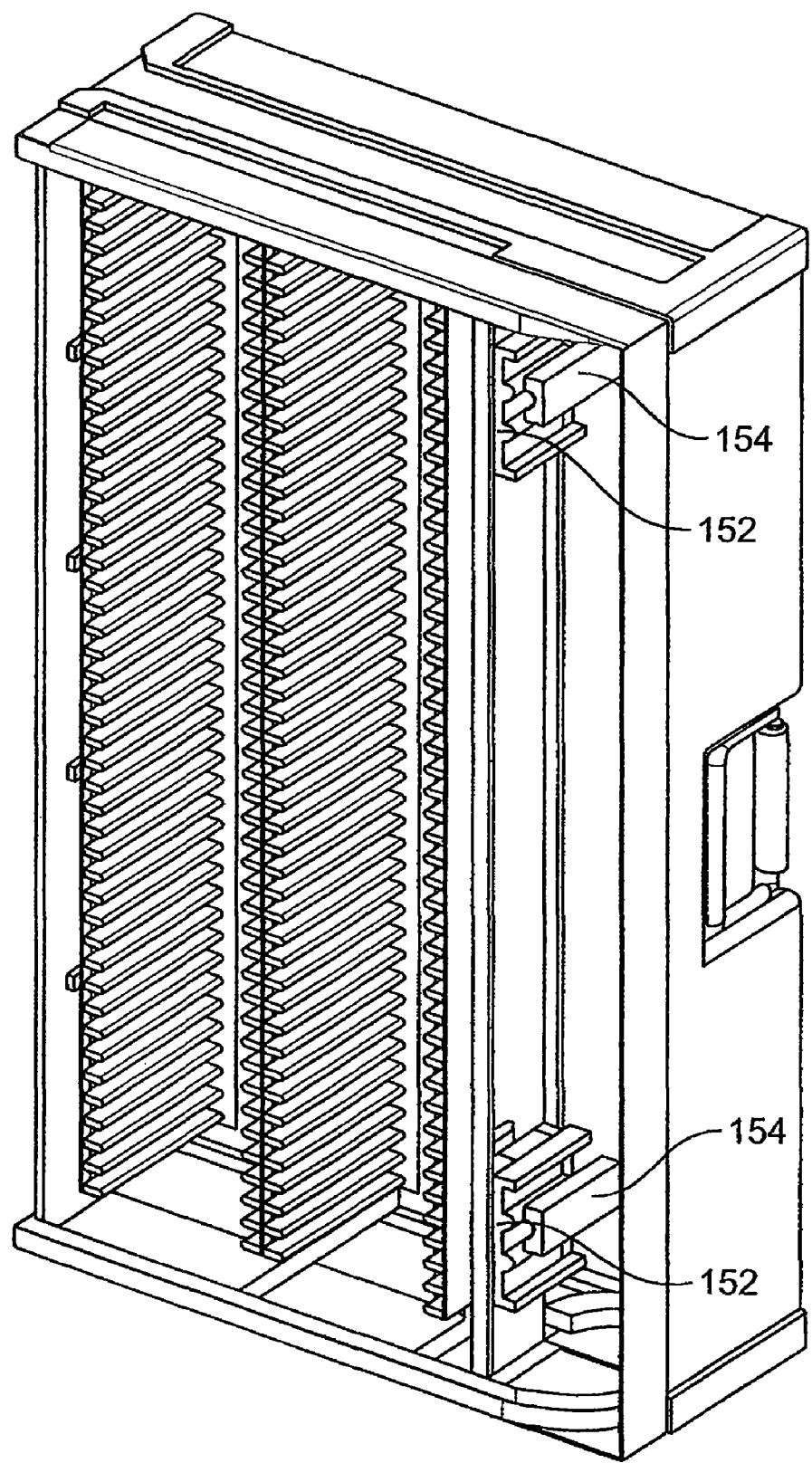


FIG. 17

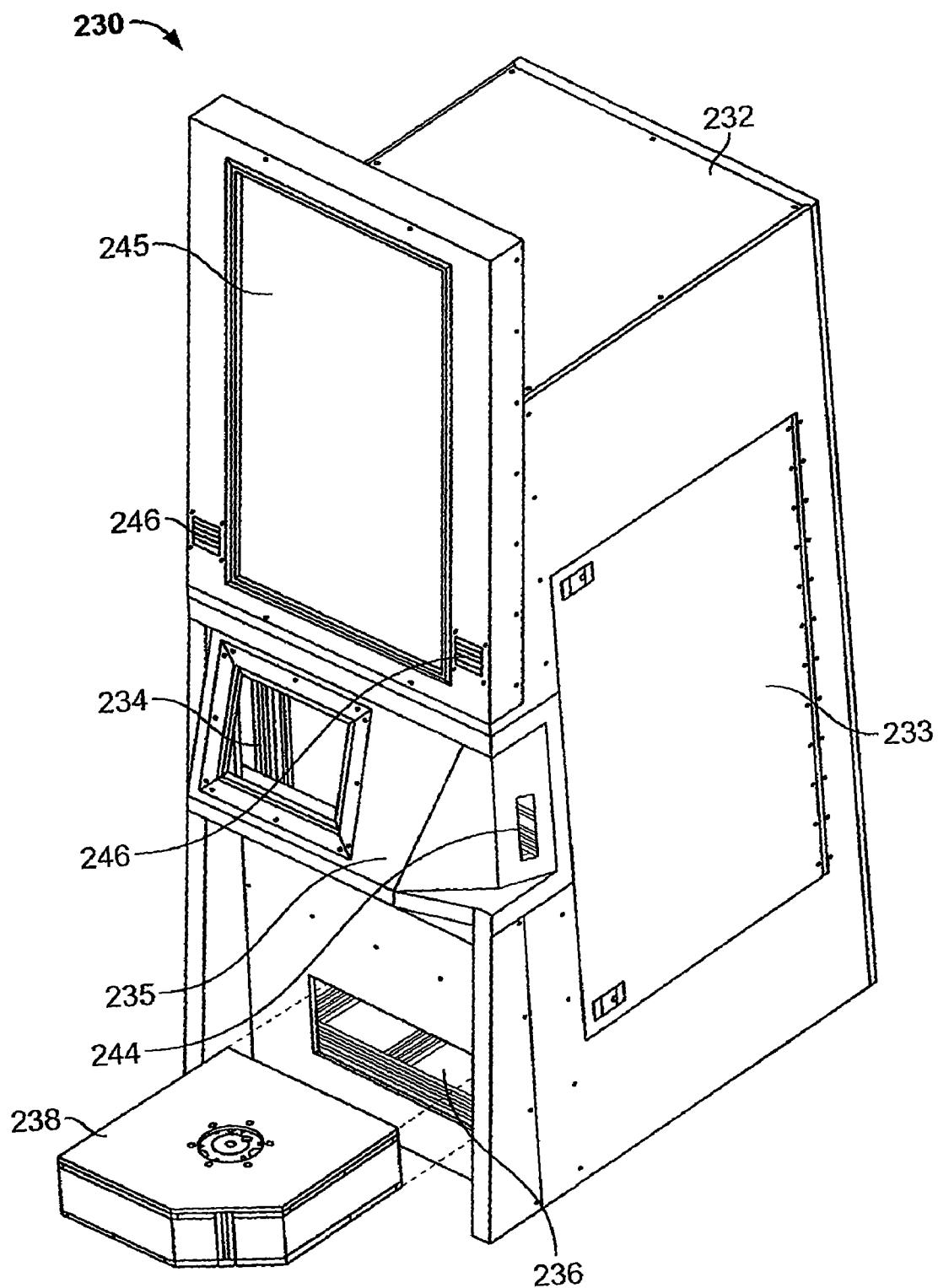


FIG. 18

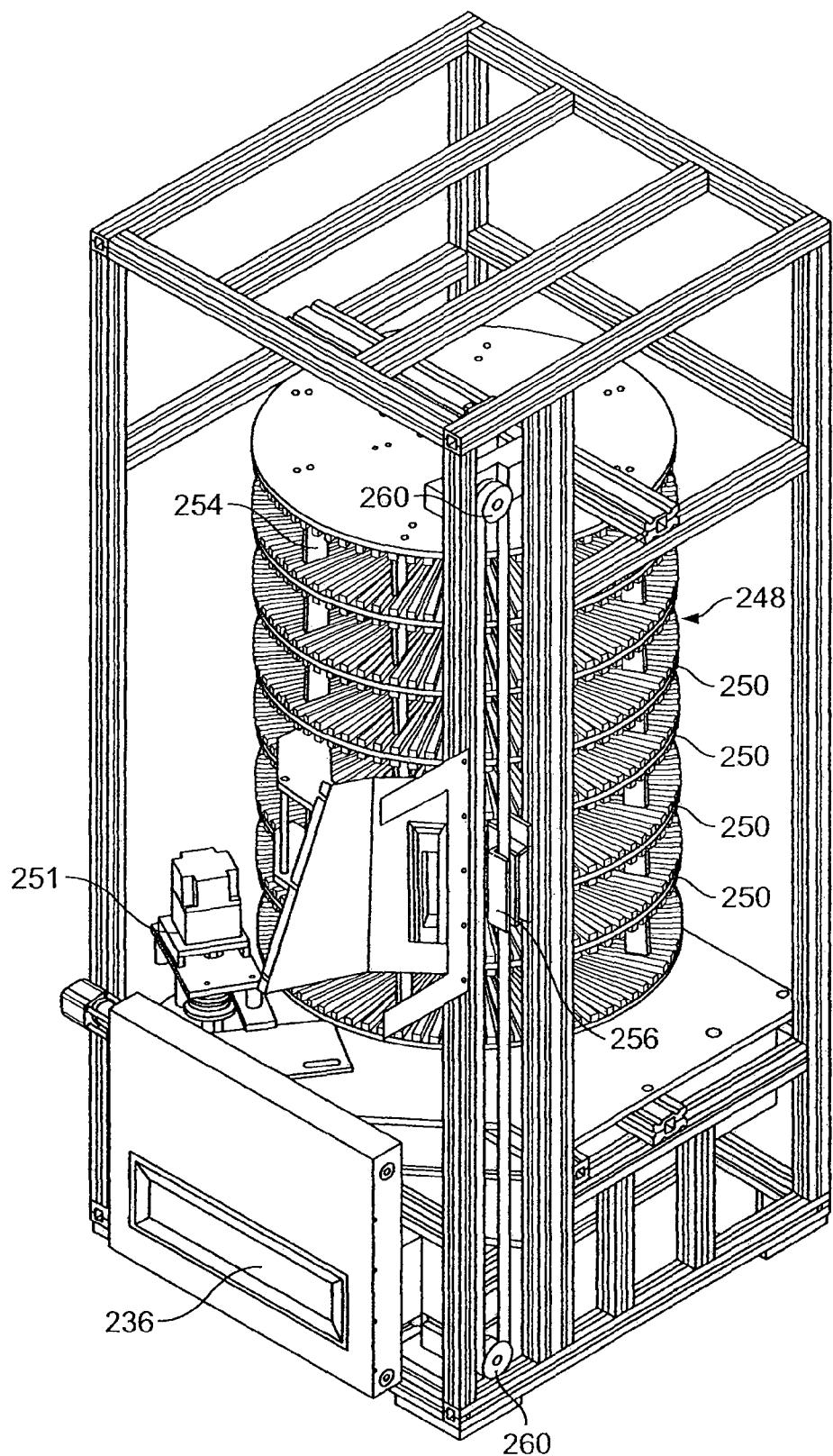


FIG.19

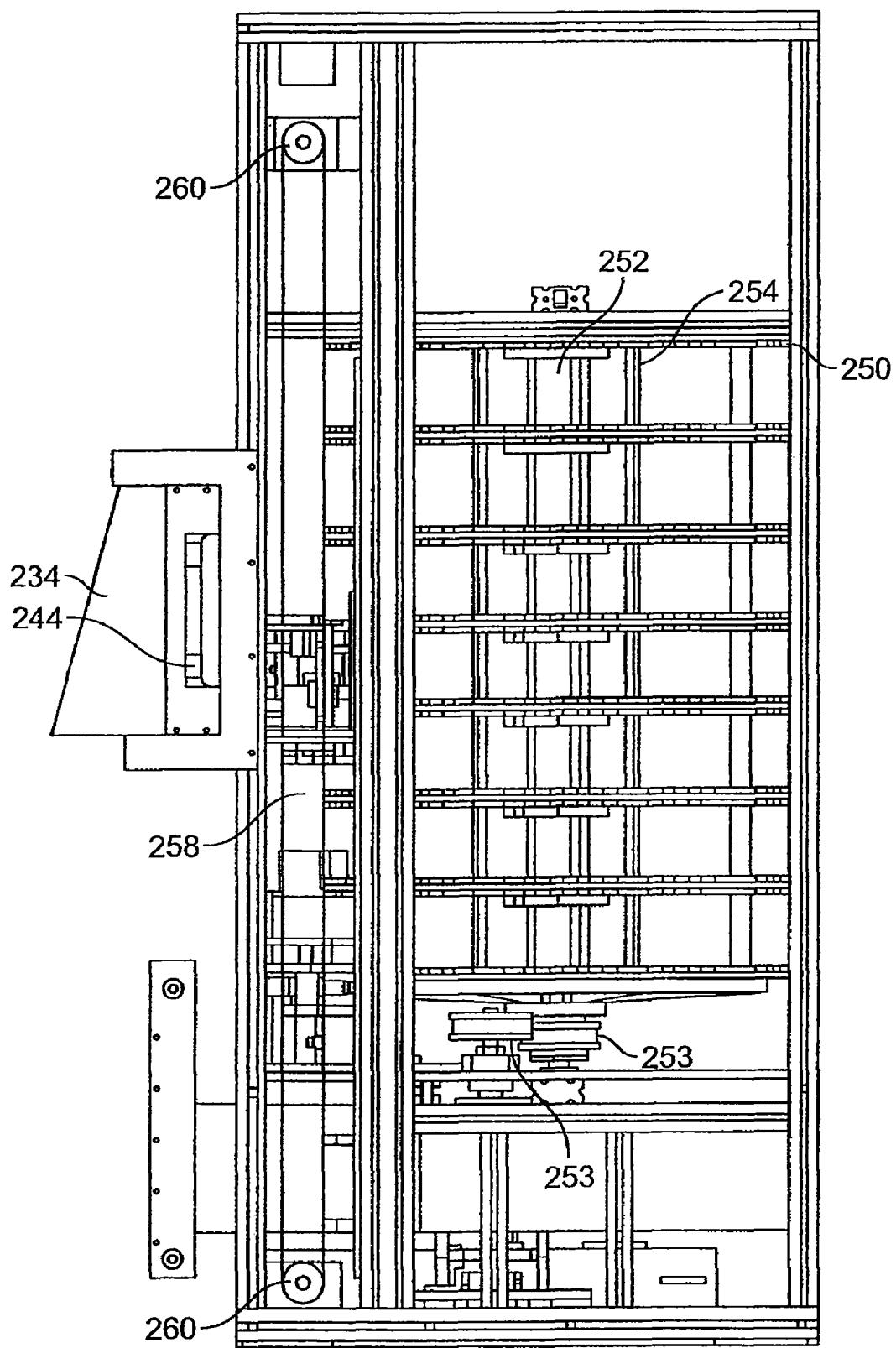
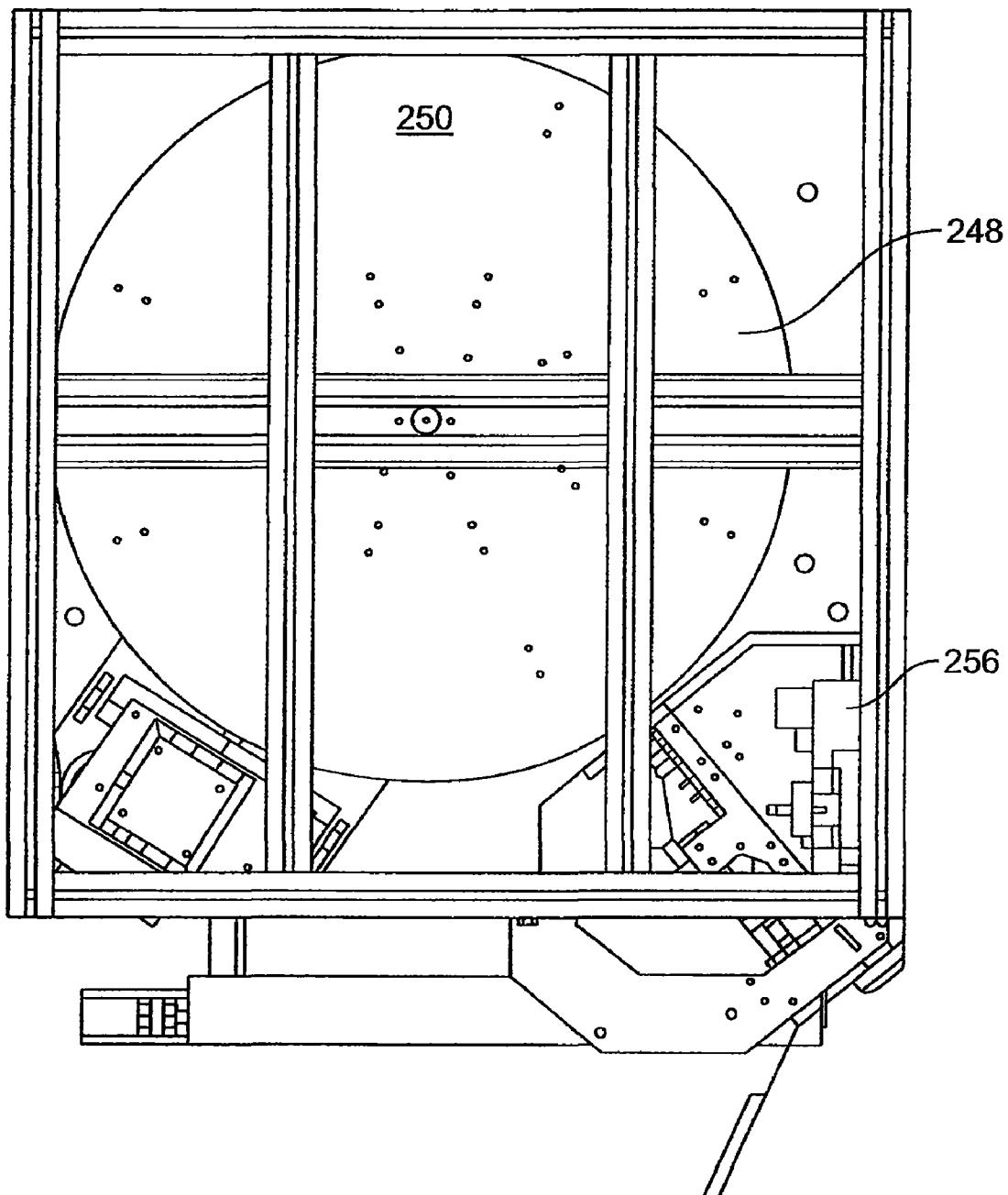
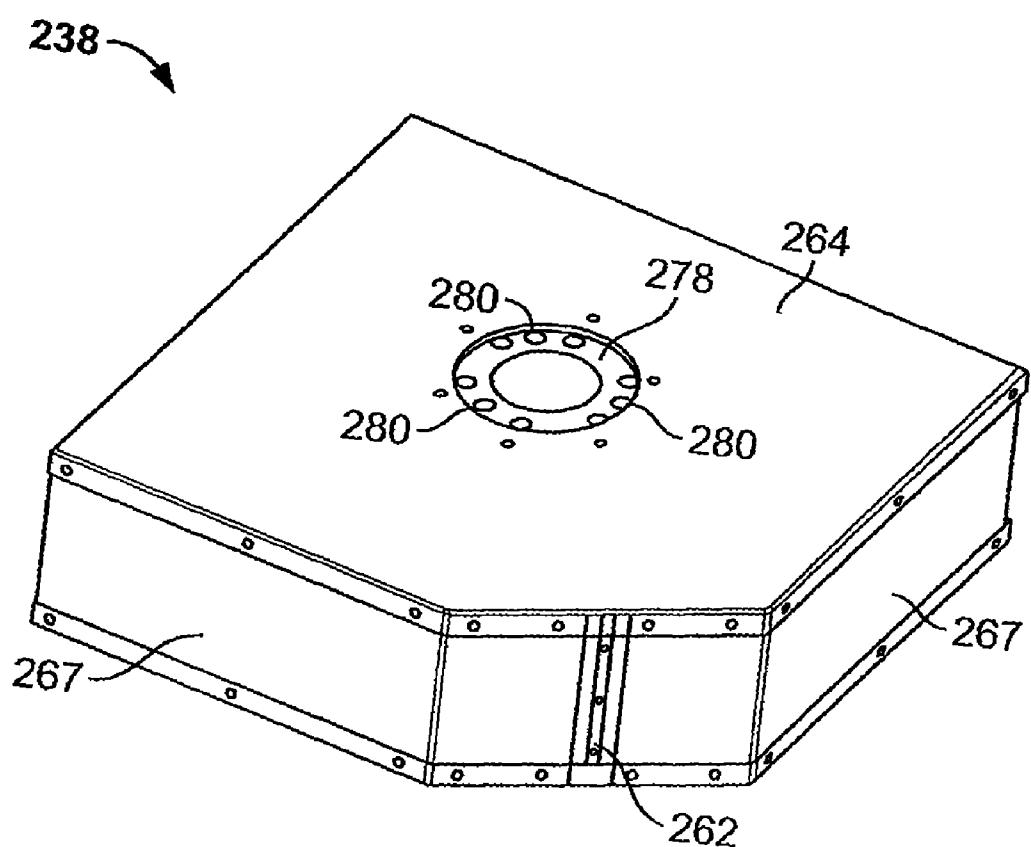
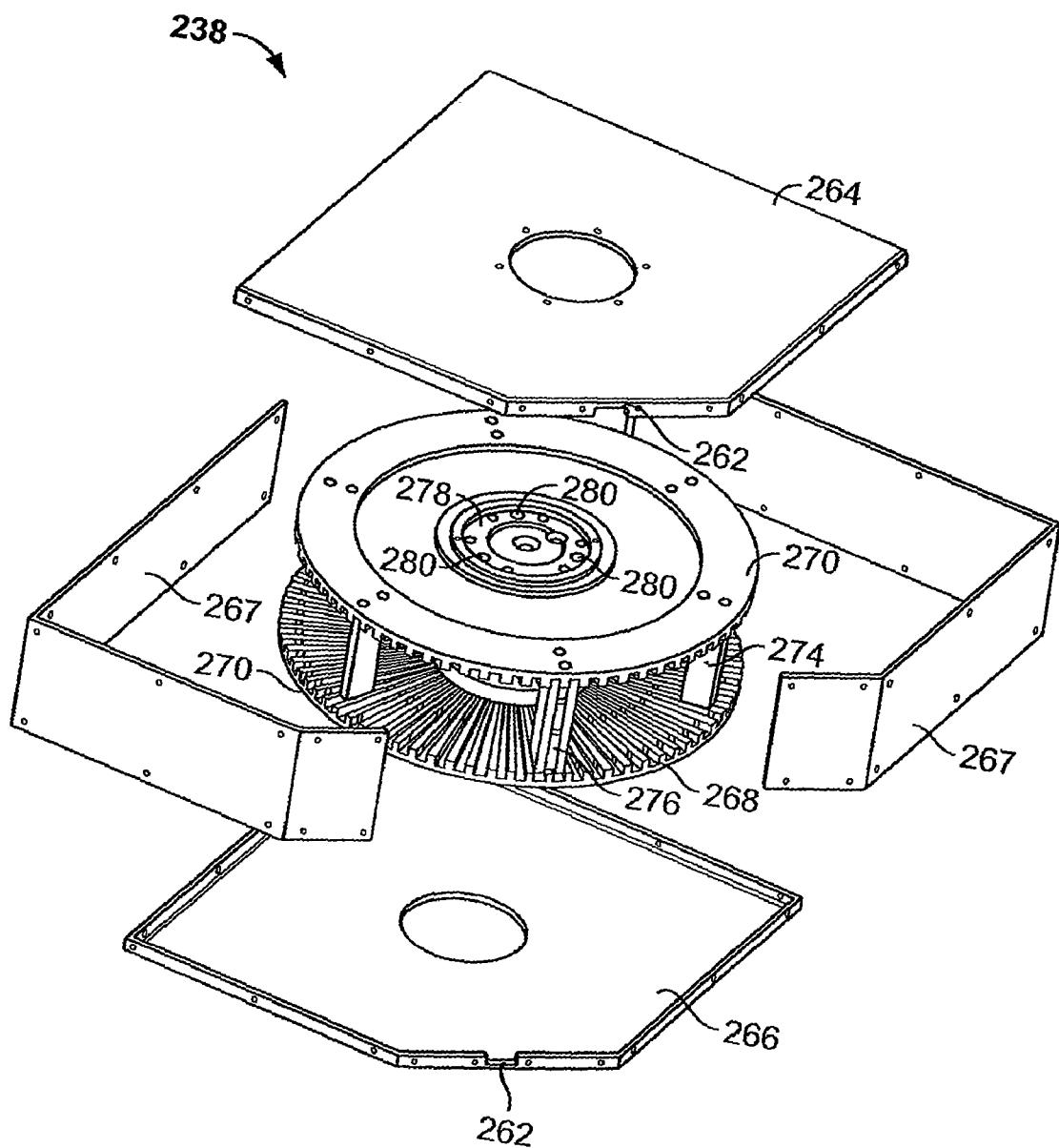


FIG. 20

**FIG. 21**

**FIG. 22**

**FIG. 23**

1

ARTICLE DISPENSING SYSTEM AND
METHOD FOR SAMECROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED
APPLICATIONS

This application is a divisional application of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/824,781 filed on Apr. 15, 2004; which is now U.S. Pat. No. 7,234,609, which is hereby incorporated by reference herein.

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates to improvements in article dispensing systems and components and methods related to same. More particularly, the present invention relates to a digital video disc (DVD) distribution system.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

While the present invention is often described herein with reference to a digital video disc distribution system, an application to which the present invention is advantageously suited, it will be readily apparent that the present invention is not limited to that application and can be employed in article dispensing systems used to distribute a wide variety of dispensable articles.

The digital video disc (DVD) player has been the most successful consumer electronics product launch in history. The market for DVD movie video and video game rentals is enormous and growing. Millions of households have acquired DVDs since they were introduced in 1997. In the first quarter of 2003 alone, it was estimated that well over three million DVD players were shipped to U.S. retailers.

Shipments of movies and music videos on DVD totaled approximately one hundred twenty million discs in the first quarter of 2002. In addition to the foregoing, one of the largest grocery store chains in the United States has reported that DVD movie video and video game rentals are growing at rapid rates in the grocery chain channel of distribution.

It has been estimated that, by 2005, more than thirty-nine million U.S. households will have DVD players, over twenty million households will have DVD video game machines, and over nineteen million will have DVD read only memory (DVD-ROM) players. According to surveys, it has been determined that twenty-five percent of the people who shop at retail stores on weekends have plans to either rent a movie or go to the movies and thirty percent of those people either owned or planned on purchasing a DVD player within the survey year.

Currently, brick-and-mortar stores dominate the movie video and video game rental landscape in the U.S. Statistics show that two brick-and-mortar companies control nearly sixty-five percent of the home video rental business. One element repeatedly cited for success of certain brick-and-mortar store video rental franchises is perceived high availability of new video releases. Consumers want their entertainment on demand, and through stocking multiple units of each new release, successful brick-and-mortar companies deliver as promised.

Pay-per-view video services and Internet-based video rental services are also known. Internet based video rental services have been plagued by their inability to meet the demands of consumers for new video releases during peak viewing times, leading to increased customer dissatisfaction. Pay-per-view video services offer only limited selections to

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viewers during any time period, resulting in significantly less rentals per any given period of time.

The foregoing indicates that there is a tremendous market potential for aligning regular routines of consumers (e.g., shopping, getting coffee or gas or going to a convenience store) with their DVD movie video and video game rental activities.

DVD dispensing machines are known, but have been operated as stand-alone kiosk units positioned at conventional brick-and-mortar video rental stores to extend the hours of such stores.

The present invention can function as a DVD dispensing machine-based distribution system that recognizes the consumer demand recognized by traditional video rental stores by having multiple units of each new release per video dispensing machine. The dispensing machines can stock up to two thousand DVDs (movies and/or games), making them competitive with existing brick-and-mortar video rental superstores.

20 The present invention distinguishes itself from such stores by offering major benefits not conventionally offered by such stores, including additional cross-marketing programs (e.g., promotional rentals for a certain amount of dollars spent at the hosting store) and convenience (e.g., open always).

25 The present invention yields a competitive advantage in the DVD rental marketplace by offering consumers cross-marketing/promotional programs, convenience of selection (e.g., computer-based searches for movies and recommendations based on consumer profiles), and extended hours. The present

30 invention employs a more cost-effective, convenient platform than brick-and-mortar stores. In addition, with the present invention, DVD dispensing machines can be situated in hosting locations having high foot traffic, such as at a popular hosting location and/or a high foot traffic area at a hosting location.

35 The present invention can be operated at a substantial savings over the costs associated with traditional brick-and-mortar video rental stores. For example, the present invention does not require hourly employees manning the dispensing machines or restocking them with inventories, due to the ability of the article transport storage units to be delivered to/picked up from host locations by third-party delivery services, such as overnight courier services.

40 Unlike brick-and-mortar stores, the present invention does not require an on-site store manager because all operational decisions can be made at a centralized location by a management team office remote from the hosting locations. Unlike brick-and-mortar stores, the present invention does not require a great deal of physical space. Unlike brick-and-mortar stores, the present invention has low operating costs because no heating or air conditioning is required for the dispensing machines and they consume a relatively low level of electrical energy. In addition, the present invention has low maintenance costs and downtime.

45 55 The present invention addresses all of these shortcomings of traditional brick-and-mortar stores in a convenient and cost-effective delivery vehicle having the added bonus of serving as an effective promotional platform that drives incremental sales to hosting locations. In addition, the present invention overcomes these disadvantages by offering more new releases and older selections for any given time period, lower cost per viewing, and more convenience than internet-based and pay-per-view services.

50 55 Dispensing machines are known. Dispensing machines have been traditionally used to distribute a wide variety of goods, including, among other things, snack foods. Conventional dispensing machines used in article dispensing systems

must be restocked with inventory manually. In the conventional machines, the inventory articles are uploaded to the machines and offloaded from the machines by dedicated route servicemen, who are provided access to the storage space. Route servicemen conventionally are employed to control inventory of a plurality of dispensing machines situated at a plurality of hosting locations. In order to stock the machines with inventory, a serviceman typically first removes the articles of inventory designated for offloading one by one prior to uploading new articles of inventory one by one. An alternative manner of removing inventory designated for offloading from a dispensing machine is by removal of all inventory in the machine by removing a drawer containing all articles of inventory. This latter approach of removing inventory articles is particularly suitable for dispensing machines that are either directly connected or in close proximity to manned dispensing locations.

Most dispensing machines must be serviced by a serviceman to upload new dispensable articles of inventory into the machines in multiple quantities. Conventional drawers used to stock dispensing machines with inventory and remove articles designated for offloading from dispensing machines require a dedicated serviceman for carrying out the stocking and removal tasks. In addition, conventional drawers do not permit automated access to the article dispensing machines. Such conventional drawers allow the servicemen to have access to the articles of inventory being stocked into the dispensing machine and the articles of inventory being removed from the dispensing machine.

An important aspect of the present invention is that it overcomes the aforementioned disadvantages of conventional drawers employed to remove articles of inventory designated for offloading from dispensing machines and stock articles of inventory into dispensing machines. The present invention provides a removable article transport storage unit for the handling of flat-pack type articles of inventory. The unit has a particularly simple, yet reliable, construction for use in article dispensing machines. This aspect of the present invention makes it particularly suitable for use in association with DVD dispensing machines.

Preferably, each unit is configured to receive a plurality of articles of inventory to be stocked into and/or removed from an article dispensing machine. In that regard, each unit is configured to have an interior with a volume sufficiently large enough to receive and store an appropriate quantity of the particular kind of inventory to be dispensed. The articles of inventory are preferably stored within the unit in an aligned relationship, and most preferably in racks contained within the unit.

Each unit can be received within a receptacle associated with a dispensing machine and preferably is opened automatically once the unit is received into the receptacle to permit rapid stocking of inventory articles into the dispensing machine. In that regard, a robotic arm preferably positioned in the dispensing machine is actuated and upon opening of the inventory transport and stocking unit, the robotic arm causes uploading and/or offloading of inventory articles, as desired. In one embodiment, the unit may be quickly received on and/or removed from a drawer at the dispensing machine for stocking of the machine or replenishment of inventory into the unit for subsequent stocking of an article dispensing machine with inventory.

The flow of inventory can be controlled at a centralized inventory control or supply center. In addition, the removal of offloaded articles of inventory from a received article transport and storage unit can be carried out at the inventory control or supply office. Furthermore, the replenishment of

articles of inventory into the units can be carried out at the inventory control or supply office, translating into increased quality control and security associated with the articles dispensable at dispensing machines.

5 The article transport storage unit is tamper and theft proof and easy to handle. The article transport storage units reduce theft and personnel costs and ensure a steady supply of new releases suitable for each dispensing machine.

Following installation into a dispensing machine, the 10 article transport storage unit can be unlocked and opened automatically to release the DVDs. The article transport storage units cannot be opened prior to installation, thus deterring and preventing theft that typically plagues video rental stores. The resident article transport storage unit is closed and locked 15 automatically and then removed from the machine and returned to a system inventory control or supply office via the third party delivery service. Only authorized personnel at the system inventory control or supply office are able to unlock and open the returned article transport storage unit and 20 remove the individual DVDs, preferably stored within racks within the interior of the unit.

The present invention provides a system for distributing 25 DVD movie videos and video games for home entertainment or other use. The present invention links the regular routines of consumers to renting and/or purchasing movie videos and/or video games from a dispensing machine.

The dispensing machines can include a user-friendly control interface resembling the interface conventionally used in association with an automated teller machine. The dispensing 30 machines also preferably have a graphical user interface with touch screen interface control capability. In addition, if desired, multiple control interfaces can be incorporated in dispensing machines situated at high traffic locations, such as by being positioned on each side panel of such machines.

The dispensing machines also preferably include plasma 35 video display monitors to run video trailers of movies and other promotional or paid advertising, and also incorporate known technology making them capable of broadcasting focused audio that can be directed to relatively small (e.g., three square feet) locations in front of the machines and/or in other designated locations at a hosting site. The highly focused sound will draw the attention of potential customers to the article dispensing machines without annoying in-store personnel with the repeated playing of the same trailers and/or advertisements.

The dispensing machines used in the present invention 40 preferably incorporate a slot loading DVD drive associated therewith that permits video related to a desired advertisement or trailer to be read from DVD media at the machine location. The video content read from the DVD media will preferably be stored in a storage unit (e.g., hard drive) associated with the dispensing machine and can be accessed, played and presented on the associated video display monitor, as desired.

55 The dispensing machines used in the present invention are fully automated, integrated DVD movie video and video game rental and/or purchase systems. The present invention preferably incorporates robust, secure, scalable software that provides a fully personalized user experience and real-time feedback to hosting locations and advertisers, scalable hardware that leverages existing technologies such as touch screen, focused audio speakers and plasma video monitors, technology utilizing the Internet through a system website, and an article transport storage unit that facilitates the 60 exchange of new DVDs for old DVDs in each machine with virtually no need for human intervention. These technologies and others fill long-felt needs in the art and give advantages

over conventional video distribution options. The present invention functions as much as a promotional platform as it does a rental kiosk.

By situating the dispensing machines at hosting locations where there is both high repeat foot traffic and the opportunity to utilize cross-marketing/promotional programs to leverage the synergies between hosting locations, such as grocery stores, consumers are enticed to use the dispensing machines. For example, a grocery store hosting a machine could offer its preferred cardholders reduced price DVD rentals or even free rentals for a specified dollar amount of groceries purchased by linking certain aspects of its preferred cardholder promotional program with the promotional software used by the present invention. This and other types of creative promotions can be implemented to ensure that the dispensing machines are valuable to the hosting locations and their patrons alike.

Renting DVDs from the dispensing machines is seen as more rewarding because of such promotional programs. The rental experience is more convenient for the consumer versus renting from traditional brick-and-mortar video stores as the rental experience is closely tied to the shopping routines of the consumer and the hours of hosting locations. The present invention fosters enhanced customer loyalty, satisfaction and goodwill for the hosting locations, as well as the opportunity to share revenues generated by the dispensing machines at their hosting site.

By utilizing the dispensing machines and the fully-interactive, real-time, linked Internet website, consumers can rent one or more DVD movie videos and/or video games directly from dispensing machines as well as indirectly by making a rental reservation through the website for later pickup at a conveniently located machine. The dispensing machines will preferably be fully networked with each other, with the inventory control or supply office and with the system website via satellite links at each hosting location. Through this linked network, the rental experience for each consumer can be customized based on a profile for each consumer, such as via personalized home pages and rental screens.

In addition, the rental experience can be customized for each hosting location. For example, a large number of Spanish language films can form the basis for the inventory in dispensing machines situated at a hosting location with predominately Spanish speaking patrons. Furthermore, by leveraging the real-time satellite network, the present invention is able to run customized promotional programs tailored to the unique needs of each hosting location and provide feedback as to the success of such promotion in real time via network links to the hosting location computers.

The present invention has the advantage of generating revenue from the following sources: movie and video game rentals, cross-marketing promotional programs whereby preferred customer or other targeted customer segments at a hosting location are encouraged to patronize the store and repeatedly rent from the dispensing machines, advertising revenues resulting from video advertisements displayed on plasma video display monitors incorporated as part of the dispensing machines, advertisements presented on DVD jacket case covers dispensed from the dispensing machines, and banner ads displayed on the system website. The present invention can also generate revenues from sales of new and pre-viewed movie videos and new and used video games via the system website and dispensing machines, and recurring revenue generated through membership-based rentals (e.g., monthly fees paid by a consumer in exchange for a fixed number of rentals over a specified period of time on a discounted basis).

Through use of the present invention, new customers are drawn to the hosting locations to take advantage of the added service and convenience of renting DVD media from within the locations and the cross-marketing promotions, such as reduced DVD rental rates that are offered to preferred customers and/or those spending a specified amount of money on the products and services offered by the host locations. The host locations can also share in the revenue generated by the dispensing machines at its location.

10 In its most preferred form, the present invention offers substantial benefits to three distinct consumer segments. First, the present invention benefits those DVD consumers who go to the grocery store on a regular basis. Next, the present invention benefits the one-hundred million preferred grocery chain cardholders. Preferred grocery chain cardholders can purchase and/or rent media from the dispensing machines employed with the present invention to take advantage of the cross-marketing/promotional programs available through the rental and/or purchase experience. Finally, the 15 present invention will benefit consumers who have access to the Internet and a dedicated website for easy selection and reservation. The rental and/or purchase experience can then be concluded by picking up and dropping off articles at a system dispensing machine.

20 25 Several aspects of the present invention distinguish it from conventional options. The present invention utilizes software designed to provide real-time monitoring of the inventory at each dispensing machine, customer history and demographic information, and inventory management, among other things. 30 The interactive system website will be linked to the dispensing machines and provide customers with the ability to query machine locations and select and reserve DVDs for rental.

The present invention also incorporates a unique article transport storage unit that provides the ability to exchange the 35 inventory of the dispensing machines with little need for human intervention. The present invention also is designed to provide for automatic query of rental patterns. Furthermore, on a per machine basis, the present invention also provides for automatic survey of the system inventory of existing movies/ 40 games and new releases. By comparing these two sources of information, the present invention provides for automatic selection of the DVDs in each dispensing machine that are experiencing a low rental rate and therefore should be automatically pulled by the robotic arm for offloading and loaded 45 into the article transport storage unit residing inside the machine.

The present invention includes a user-friendly website to 50 facilitate the consumer experience. The website permits a consumer to browse new releases and older titles, query titles in stock for viewing or purchase, read reviews and recommendations from critics and other users, locate a machine based on inputting a preferred geographical area such as a particular zip code, enroll as a member, and view movie trailers and promotions. Members are able to do all of the 55 foregoing tasks, and are able to modify their preferences, alter or cancel their membership, and view special members-only promotions. Additionally, existing members are greeted by a customized homepage which is personalized for each member based on their inputted preferences and viewing habits (e.g., preferred genres, already viewed movies, etc.). The website is preferably accessible from a variety of hardware units and in a variety of formats. For example, the website may be accessed from personal digital assistants, cell phones and personal computers.

60 65 Each dispensing machine is a "smart" machine such that each machine has a satellite Internet uplink that networks all of the machines together through the Internet, coordinates the

user experience via the system website, and permits the system administrator to manage all of its operations at a centralized location. The present invention permits coordinated roll-out of promotional programs across all or select dispensing machines, real-time feedback from each machine as to its use and functionality, and coordinates distribution of movie trailers and promotional programs across all or select machines.

The present invention can generate revenue by selling time slots to movie studios, food manufacturers and other select parties to play their trailers and/or promotions on the plasma video display monitors. The trailers and/or promotions can be loaded into the dispensing machines and stored in a storage unit associated with the machine through the use of a DVD drive. These promotional efforts can be complemented by selling ad space on the DVD rental jacket covers and selling banner ads on the system website and/or ad space on the panels of the dispensing machines.

When desired, the existing/resident article transport storage unit will be swapped out for a new article transport and storage unit containing new releases and popular existing titles, which can be delivered by a third party overnight courier service. The foregoing process is entirely automated, and the only need for human intervention occurs when authorized personnel from the third party delivery service approaches a designated unit with the new article transport storage unit. Each article transport storage unit contains a radio frequency identification transmitter that triggers a proximity sensor positioned at each dispensing machine. As the delivery person approaches a specified unit, the transmitter communicates with the proximity sensor in known manner to cause the dispensing machine to release the resident article transport storage unit, which the delivery person will swap for the new article transport storage unit being delivered. The entire process takes just a few minutes and can be done without causing any dispensing machine downtime.

One benefit of the present invention is that it can provide a unique means for automatic inventory control and restocking of flat-pack type products such as DVD jewel cases and the like from an article dispensing machine.

Another benefit of the present invention is that it can permit unmanned loading and offloading of DVD cases in large quantity through remote networking of dispensing machines to an inventory control or supply office.

Another benefit of the present invention is that it can provide an article transport and storage unit that is readily removable from a dispensing machine by authorized personnel from a third party delivery company without requiring the use of a dedicated serviceman.

Another benefit of the present invention is that it can provide for efficient, automated stocking of inventory articles into a dispensing machine and removal of inventory articles from a dispensing machine.

A further benefit of the present invention is that it can provide an improved method of initiating the steps of stocking articles of inventory into a dispensing machine and removing articles of inventory from a dispensing machine.

Another benefit of the present invention is that it can provide a unique coupling and actuating mechanism carried by a dispensing mechanism for causing the dispensing and restocking of articles from a removable article transport storage unit.

Another benefit of the present invention is that it can be adapted to receive a pair of trays or racks contained within an article transport and storage unit-to allow distribution of either two different types of articles or a double quantity of the

same type of article, with articles being removed selectively from each tray or rack to stock dispensing machines with inventory, as desired.

Another benefit of the present invention is that it can provide a method for automated inventory control so that electronic data records can be kept related to inventory control for each dispensing machine within a network of such machines.

Another benefit of the present invention is that it can provide for a linked network of dispensing machines all in communication with each other and with an inventory control office, preferably via the Internet, such that the inventory of each dispensing machine on the network can be reviewed so that inventory decision-making functions can be centralized and carried out at the inventory control or supply office.

Further benefits of the present invention are to substantially reduce the time and expense involved in the stocking and maintenance of article dispensing machines situated at a plurality of hosting locations over a given period, and to reduce any losses due to pilferage of articles.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

These and other benefits of the present invention can be achieved by the use of compact article dispensing machines in which a removable and substitutable article transport storage unit is used to carry out inventory functions for an article dispensing machine. Each unit is locked in transport and the articles cannot be extracted from the unit unless the unit is installed within the locked dispensing machine.

These units are preferably furnished with articles slated for inventory at a central location and then locked and provided to authorized personnel of third party freight companies who, in turn, deliver the locked units to a plurality of dispensing machines. At each location, the servicing of the machine consists essentially in initiating the resident unit removal process by entering the appropriate commands at the machine. This will cause the unit residing within the dispensing machine to be automatically ejected from the machine. The previously installed unit is then removed from the machine, and the new unit delivered from the central location is then installed into the machine. Preferably, the machine automatically pulls the unit into the machine and the unit is locked in place. The unit is unlocked and opened, preferably within the locked dispensing machine and the machine then has access to the articles in the unit. Removed units are returned to the central location by the third party freight company and are processed for the next shipment of inventory. Authorized customers can then select articles from the inventory of the dispensing machines.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of an article dispensing machine and an article transport storage unit constructed in accordance with the principles of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is another perspective view of the article dispensing machine illustrated in FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is another perspective view of the article dispensing machine illustrated in FIG. 1;

FIG. 4 is another perspective view of the article dispensing machine illustrated in FIG. 1;

FIG. 5 is a rear view of the article dispensing machine illustrated in FIG. 1;

FIG. 6 is an elevational view of the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 1, shown in a closed condition;

FIG. 7 is an elevational view of the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 6, shown in an open condition;

FIG. 8 is a perspective view of the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 6;

FIG. 9 is a rear perspective view of the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 6;

FIG. 10 is a partially open rear perspective view of the article dispensing machine illustrated in FIG. 1;

FIG. 11 is a perspective view of another embodiment of an article dispensing machine constructed in accordance with the principles of the present invention;

FIG. 12 is a partially exploded perspective view of the article dispensing machine illustrated in FIG. 11, along with another embodiment of an article transport storage unit constructed in accordance with the principles of the present invention;

FIG. 13 is a partially exploded rear perspective view of the article dispensing machine and article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 13;

FIG. 14 is a front elevational view of the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 13, shown in a closed condition;

FIG. 15 is a front elevational view of the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 14, shown in an open condition;

FIG. 16 is a perspective view of the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 14, shown in an open condition;

FIG. 17 is another perspective view of the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 14, shown in an open condition;

FIG. 18 is a partially exploded perspective view of another embodiment of an article dispensing machine constructed in accordance with the principles of the present invention and another embodiment of an article transport storage unit constructed in accordance with the principles of the present invention;

FIG. 19 is a partially open perspective view of the article dispensing machine illustrated in FIG. 18;

FIG. 20 is a partially open side elevational view of the article dispensing machine illustrated in FIG. 18;

FIG. 21 is a partially open top view of the article dispensing machine illustrated in FIG. 18;

FIG. 22 is a perspective view of the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 18; and

FIG. 23 is an exploded perspective view of the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIG. 18.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIGS. 1-5 illustrate an article dispensing machine generally designated 30. Article dispensing machine 30 is one of a plurality of article dispensing machines included within an article distribution system having a plurality of such machines situated at a plurality of hosting locations. The article dispensing machines of a particular article distribution system preferably from a network. As such, those machines are preferably in electrical communication with each other and with a central office from which inventory decisions can be made.

In a preferred application, the article dispensing machines 30 of the system are directed to DVD dispensing machines that can be utilized by consumers to purchase and/or rent movie videos and/or video games embodied on DVD discs. Nonetheless, those skilled in the art will appreciate that article dispensing machine 30 is not limited to the application of DVD distribution, but rather will have applicability for use in the distribution of a variety of articles.

As illustrated, article dispensing machine 30 includes a cabinet housing 32 with front, rear, top, bottom and side

panels. Dispensing machine 30 further includes a user interface portion 34 and an article transport storage unit holder 36 designed to receive an article transport storage unit 38, as desired.

The machine housing 32 is preferably a combination molded fiberglass and sheet metal cabinet. However, those skilled in the art will appreciate that the housing can be constructed from a variety of other suitable materials and with a variety of other suitable manufacturing techniques.

In the article dispensing machine embodiment illustrated in FIGS. 1-5, the article dispensing machine 30 preferably has a total height of eighty-one inches, a total width of fifty-seven inches, and a total depth of forty-six inches. Assuming the construction described above with reference to this illustrated embodiment of the article dispensing machine, machine 30 and article transport storage unit 38 (when empty) preferably have an approximate combined weight of six hundred sixty pounds.

As shown most clearly in FIG. 4, the user interface portion

20 34 of housing 32 includes a card reader 40, a keypad and/or touch screen 42 and an article transfer opening 44. The card reader 40 is preferably designed in known fashion to read magnetically encoded membership and/or credit cards for authorizing the distribution of articles of inventory through 25 the article transfer opening 44. Keypad and/or touch screen 42 permits consumers and/or inventory stocking personnel to communicate with the dispensing machine 30 and/or a central office linked in electrical communication with the dispensing machine. Keypad and/or touch screen 42 also permits consumers and/or inventory stocking personnel to enter appropriate commands directed to carrying out specific machine tasks. It will be appreciated that the optional touch screen includes a monitor made with known technologies making it capable of being utilized as a user interface for entry of 30 commands designed to carry out machine tasks. Additionally, known audio technology could be incorporated with article dispensing machine 30.

Furthermore, it will be appreciated that additional user interface portions having additional or even identical user 40 interface components could be incorporated within article interface components could be incorporated within article dispensing machine 30. For example, these components 45 could be incorporated on other panels of the housing 32 of machine 30 so that the machine can be used simultaneously by multiple consumers, translating into more efficient distribution of articles in high traffic areas.

The article transport storage unit holder 36 is able to slide in and out of housing 32. Holder 36 is connected to two generally spaced and parallel rails 45a, 45b positioned within housing 32. The holder 36 can be manually slid into and out of housing 32, as desired. Alternatively, a drive motor (not shown) can be used to slide holder 36 into and out of housing 50 32, as desired.

Referring now to FIG. 10, a robotic arm 46 positioned within article dispensing machine 30 is illustrated. The position of robotic arm 46 can be due to a powered drive motor (not shown). Rails 47, at least some of which are illustrated in FIG. 8, are included to define paths for movement of robotic arm 46. Robotic arm 46 can preferably move in all the x, y and z directions. Using known electromechanical technology, 55 robotic arm 46 can be used to open and close the article transport storage unit 38, as desired, and can further be used to move returned articles into the unit and grab and dispense requested articles from the unit, as desired.

FIGS. 6-9 illustrate a generally rectangular-shaped article 60 transport storage unit 38. As best illustrated in FIG. 6, the article transport storage unit 38 includes a roller door 48 shown closed but designed to be selectively opened to grant

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access to the interior of the unit. The roller door 48 can incorporate catches 49 to facilitate the opening and closing process, as described below. FIGS. 7 and 8 illustrate the article transport storage unit 38 with its roller door 48 open. As shown, the interior of article transport storage unit 38 preferably includes a plurality of compartments 50 forming racks configured to receive articles slated for inventory within the article dispensing machine. The interior compartments 50 in the illustrated article transport storage unit 38 are formed by a plurality of laterally and longitudinally extending compartment boundary panels and are designed to receive a plurality of articles. Generally, a thirty inch wide; thirty-six inch long and eight inch deep article transport storage unit can store one hundred twenty DVD cases.

While the compartments 50 of the illustrated article transport storage unit 38 are particularly suitable for flat pack type articles, such as DVD cases, it will be appreciated that the compartments of a particular article transport storage unit can be designed to receive a variety of types of articles, as desired. It will further be appreciated that the number of compartments in the interior of a unit can be varied to accommodate a different quantity of articles slated for inventory at a dispensing machine. In addition, an article transport storage unit may be designed to hold a plurality of types of articles and articles having a plurality of sizes and shapes, as desired.

FIG. 9 illustrates a latch block 52 positioned and designed to selectively lock the roller door 48 of the article transport storage unit. The unit also includes an electrical switch 54 in the form of a solenoid positioned and designed to cause the latch block 52 to move between two distinct positions, one of which enables movement of the roller door along its J-shaped track 56, the other of which prevents such movement. A removable cover 58 for the locking mechanism is also illustrated in FIG. 9.

With the present invention, the article transport storage units are filled with inventory at a centralized inventory supply center. Once filled with articles slated for dispensing machine inventory, the roller doors 48 of the article transport storage units 38 are closed and locked by system administration personnel. Thereafter, a particular article transport storage unit is then delivered to a particular article dispensing machine as illustrated in FIG. 1. This delivery can be made by third party delivery companies, such as overnight courier services.

The authorized serviceman initiates the appropriate routine for removal of the previously installed article transport storage unit. A variety of mechanisms can provide access to the machine by the serviceman. For example, a personal digital assistant having an infrared transmitter can actuate an optional drive motor associated with the holder mechanism and cause the previously installed article transport storage unit to be carried outside the dispensing machine housing. Additionally, the delivered article transport storage unit can include a radio frequency identification tag that can similarly actuate an optional holder mechanism drive motor. Additionally, the serviceman can enter appropriate commands at the user interface keypad to initiate the unit removal process. Furthermore, ejection of the holder can be accomplished manually.

In any event, the previously installed article transport storage unit is ejected from the housing of the dispensing machine during the removal process. The ejected unit is locked upon removal from the holder to prevent access to the articles forming the contents of the unit. In that regard, the electrical switch 54 is de-energized when the unit is removed from the holder, causing the block to move to its locked position. The removed article transport storage unit can be delivered back to

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an inventory supply center by the third party freight company for restocking of appropriate articles slated for inventory of a particular dispensing machine.

When the removed article transport storage unit arrives back at the inventory supply center, it can be unlocked and opened, its contents can be emptied and it can be refilled with articles, based on the desired inventory at its newly assigned dispensing machine. Thereafter, that unit can be delivered to its assigned dispensing machine to update the inventory of articles available for consumption at that machine.

Following removal of the previously installed article transport storage unit, the delivered article transport storage unit is placed on the holder mechanism. In particular, the top and bottom panels of the article transport storage unit will rest upon the extracted holder mechanism.

Upon placement of the unit onto the holder mechanism, the electrical switch is actuated, causing the block to move to its unlocked position. This allows the unit door to be opened so the interior of the unit can be accessed.

The holder mechanism can then be slid into the dispensing machine along its associated rails. This sliding can be done manually, or more preferably, under the power of the drive motor, as desired. In the event that a drive motor is used for automatic installation of the article transport storage unit, the motor can be actuated by a sensor mechanism that detects that the unit is secure within the holder mechanism. As a result, the automated installation of the delivered article transport storage unit can be done by simply placing the unit onto the holder mechanism.

In the embodiments of the dispensing machine and the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIGS. 1-10, the back panel of the article transport storage unit acts as the cover door for the dispensing machine to prevent access therein. The holder mechanism secures the article transport storage unit within the cabinet.

Upon installation of the article transport storage unit into the dispensing machine, the robotic arm positioned within the dispensing machine can open the roller door of the article transport storage unit and has access to the articles delivered for dispensing machine inventory. Alternatively, the door catches can be caught by cooperating fingers positioned within the machine housing while the holder mechanism is slid into the housing. This allows the unit to be installed into the machine housing, but prevents the door from being inserted into the housing much past the fingers to cause the door to slide along its J-shaped track, thereby opening the unit to permit access to its interior by the robotic arm.

During subsequent removal of the article transport storage unit, the roller door is closed by the robotic arm or alternatively by the action of sliding the holder mechanism out of the machine housing. The electrical switch is de-energized upon removal of the unit from the holder mechanism, causing the latch mechanism to shift into its locked position to prevent the roller door from opening and exposing the contents of the unit.

FIGS. 11-13 illustrate another article dispensing machine generally designated 130 forming one of a plurality of article dispensing machines included within a networked article distribution system.

Article dispensing machine 130 includes a cabinet housing 132 with front, rear, top, bottom and side panels. Dispensing machine 130 further includes a user interface portion 134 and opposing rails 136 designed to receive an article transport storage unit 138, as desired. The machine housing 132 is preferably a combination molded fiberglass and sheet metal cabinet.

The user interface portion 134 of housing 132 preferably includes a card reader 142, a display monitor 143 and an article transfer opening 144. The card reader 142 is preferably designed in known fashion to read magnetically encoded membership and/or credit cards for authorizing the distribution of articles of inventory through the article transfer opening 144.

Display monitor 143 permits consumers and/or inventory stocking personnel to communicate with the dispensing machine 130 and/or a central office linked in electrical communication with the dispensing machine. Display monitor 143 also permits consumers and/or inventory stocking personnel to enter appropriate commands directed to carrying out specific machine tasks.

Display monitor 143 provides for a user interface presenting visual display of pertinent information during the servicing and distribution processes of machine 130. Display monitor 143 preferably incorporates known plasma video technology and known touch screen technology. As such, display monitor 143 preferably operates as a user interface for entry of commands designed to carry out machine tasks. Optionally, a keypad can be included to permit all or some of those functions to be carried out.

Additionally, known audio technology could be incorporated within article dispensing machine 130. Preferably, known audio technology is incorporated within dispensing machine 130 to broadcast focused audio directed to relatively small (e.g., 3 square feet) locations in front of the machines and/or in other designated locations at a hosting site.

Furthermore, it will be appreciated that additional user interface portions having additional or even identical user interface components could be incorporated within article dispensing machine 130. For example, these components could be incorporated on other panels of the housing 132 of machine 130 so that the machine can be used simultaneously by multiple consumers, translating into more efficient distribution of articles in high traffic areas.

The article transport storage unit 138 can be slid in and out of housing 132. Each article transport storage unit 138 has guides 144 positioned along the top and bottom panels of the unit. The guides 144 are designed to cooperate with the associated rails 136 contained within machine 130.

A robotic arm (not shown) is positioned within article dispensing machine 130. A powered drive motor (not shown) can be used to move the robotic arm. Rails are preferably included to define paths for movement of the robotic arm, and the robotic arm can preferably move in all the x, y and z directions. Using known electromechanical technology, the robotic arm can be used to open and close the article transport storage unit 138, as desired, and can further be used to move returned articles into the unit and grab and dispense requested articles from the unit, as desired.

FIGS. 14-17 illustrate a generally rectangular-shaped article transport storage unit 138. The article transport storage unit 138 includes a roller door 148 shown closed but designed to be selectively opened to grant access to the interior of the unit. FIGS. 15-17 illustrate the article transport storage unit 138 with its roller door 148 open. As shown, the interior of article transport storage unit 138 preferably includes a plurality of compartments 150 configured to receive articles slated for inventory within the article dispensing machine. The interior compartments 150 in the illustrated article transport storage unit 138 are formed by a plurality of longitudinally extending compartment boundary panels and a plurality of laterally extending compartment boundary panels extending from a longitudinally extending boundary panel partially towards another longitudinally extending boundary panel.

The laterally extending boundary panels can be aligned to retain opposite ends of the same side of flat-pack type article.

While the compartments 150 of the illustrated article transport storage unit 138 are particularly suitable for flat-pack type articles, such as DVD cases, it will be appreciated that the compartments of a particular article transport storage unit can be designed to receive a variety of types of articles, as desired. It will further be appreciated that the number of compartments in the interior of a unit can be varied to accommodate a different quantity of articles slated for inventory at a dispensing machine. In addition, an article transport storage unit may be equipped with racks having compartments of different types so that it is designed to hold a plurality of types of articles and articles having a plurality of sizes and shapes, as desired.

FIG. 17 illustrates latch blocks 152 positioned and designed to selectively lock the roller door 148 of the article transport storage unit. The unit also includes electrical switches 154 positioned and designed to cause the latch blocks 152 to enable and prevent the roller door to be opened.

With the present invention, the article transport storage units are filled with inventory at a centralized inventory supply center. Once filled with articles slated for dispensing machine inventory, the roller doors 148 of the article transport storage units 138 are closed and locked by system administration personnel. Thereafter, a particular article transport storage unit is then delivered to a particular article dispensing machine. The article transport storage unit 138 preferably includes a handle 155 to facilitate delivery. Delivery of an article transport storage unit to the hosting site can be made by third party delivery companies, such as overnight courier services.

The authorized serviceman initiates the appropriate routine for removal of the previously installed article transport storage unit. A variety of mechanisms can provide access to the machine by the serviceman. For example, a personal digital assistant having an infrared transmitter can unlock a side door panel of the machine and provide access by the serviceman. Additionally, the delivered article transport storage unit can include a radio frequency identification tag that can similarly actuate the holder mechanism drive motor. Additionally, the serviceman can enter appropriate commands at the user interface keypad to initiate the unit removal process.

In any event, the previously installed article transport storage unit is accessible and removable from the housing of the dispensing machine during the removal process. The previously installed unit is locked prior to it being accessible, thereby securing the articles forming the contents of the unit. In particular, once the previously installed unit is moved from its fully inserted position, the electrical switches are deactivated (de-energized), causing the latch blocks to move into their locked positions. Once removed, the previously installed article transport storage unit can be delivered back to an inventory supply center by the third party freight company for restocking of appropriate articles slated for inventory of a particular dispensing machine.

When the removed article transport storage unit arrives back at the inventory supply center, it can be unlocked and opened, its contents can be emptied and it can be refilled with articles, based on the desired inventory at its newly assigned dispensing machine. Thereafter, that unit can be delivered to its assigned dispensing machine to update the inventory of articles available for consumption at that machine.

Following removal of the previously installed article transport storage unit, the delivered article transport storage unit is installed into the dispensing machine. In particular, the guides

are slid into cooperating relationship with the rails within the machine so that the unit rests upon the rails and is secured thereby.

In the embodiments of the dispensing machine and the article transport storage unit illustrated in FIGS. 11-17, the rails and guides cooperate to secure the article transport storage unit within the cabinet.

Upon installation of the article transport storage unit into the dispensing machine to its fully inserted position, the electrical switches are actuated, causing the latch blocks to move to their unlocked positions. As a result, the roller door associated with the unit is permitted to be opened. Opposing latches on opposite sides of the unit allow the unit roller door to be opened only when mating latches meet up with their counterparts. When actuated, these elements unlock the door and the door will open or close as the unit moves in or out of the machine. An electronic solenoid in the article transport storage unit is actuated and unlocks the roller door only when the proper electronic connection is made between the unit and the machine. Under these circumstances, the roller door will open or close as the magazine moves in or out of the machine. As the magazine is pulled into the vending machine the magazine will lock into place allowing new articles to be uploaded into the vending machine. The robotic arm positioned within the dispensing machine then opens the door and thereafter has access to the articles delivered for dispensing machine inventory.

During subsequent removal of the article transport storage unit, the roller door is closed by the robotic arm and the latch mechanism is shifted into its locked position to prevent the roller door from opening and exposing the contents of the unit. This closing and locking of the roller door can be carried out prior to unlocking the side door panel and making the article transport storage unit accessible. These actions will take place once the unit moves from its fully inserted position.

FIGS. 18-21 illustrate another embodiment of an article dispensing machine generally designated 230 forming one of a plurality of article dispensing machines included within a networked article distribution system. Article dispensing machine 230 includes a cabinet housing 232 with front, rear, top, bottom and side panels. The illustrated side panel of cabinet housing 232 preferably includes a door panel 233 that can be opened for repair of components included within machine 230.

The machine housing 232 is preferably a combination 45 molded fiberglass and sheet metal cabinet. However, those skilled in the art will appreciate that the housing can be constructed from a variety of other suitable materials and with a variety of other suitable manufacturing techniques.

[Dispensing machine 230 further includes a user interface portion and an article transport storage unit transfer opening 236 with associated door designed to receive an article transport storage unit 238, as desired. The user interface portion of housing 232 can include a touch-activated display screen 234 for input of commands, a card reader 235 and an article transfer opening 244 is also included. The article transfer opening 244 permits distribution of requested articles through the opening and receipt of returned articles through the opening.

The card reader 235 (details not shown) is preferably designed in known fashion to read magnetically encoded membership and/or credit cards for authorizing the distribution of articles of inventory through the article transfer opening 244. The touch screen 234 permits consumers and/or inventory stocking personnel to communicate with the dispensing machine 230 and/or a central office linked in electrical communication with the dispensing machine. Touch

screen 234 also permits consumers and/or inventory stocking personnel to enter appropriate commands directed to carrying out specific machine tasks.

In particular, the display monitor of the dispensing machine 230 preferably incorporates known touch screen technology. As such, it provides for a user interface presenting visual display of pertinent information during the servicing and distribution processes of machine 230 and operates as a user interface for entry of commands designed to carry out machine tasks.

10 The dispensing machine 230 preferably includes an additional display monitor 245. Display 245 preferably incorporates known plasma video technology and provides for display of trailers, advertisements and other desired point-of-purchase video effects.

15 Dispensing machine 230 also preferably includes speaker units 246. Preferably, known audio technology is incorporated within dispensing machine 230 to broadcast focused audio directed to relatively small (e.g., three square feet) 20 locations in front of the machines from speaker units 246 and/or in other designated locations at a hosting site.

25 Referring now to components positioned in the interior of dispensing machine 230, the machine includes a storage rack unit 248 having a plurality of circular-shaped storage racks 250 sharing a common central axis. A motor 251 is configured to drive and coupled to a shaft 252, which is positioned along the common central axis of storage rack unit 248 to provide for rotation of the storage racks 250, as desired. Wheels 253 are included to receive a belt used to rotate the wheels and, in turn, rotate shaft 252.

30 Each storage rack 250 includes radially extending angularly separated compartment panels defining article receiving compartments designed to receive and retain flat-type pack articles, such as DVD cases, as desired. The compartment panels are preferably axially aligned to retain the opposing sides of DVD cases at the top and bottom ends thereof. In that regard, the DVD cases are preferably retained between successive vertical pairs of storage racks 250. The storage racks 250 are vertically spaced by axially extending support members 254.

35 The dispensing machine includes a robotic arm 256 that is connected to a conveying belt 258 carried by rollers 260. At least one of the rollers 260 is driven by a motor to provide for movement of robotic arm 256.

40 FIGS. 22-23 illustrate an article transport storage unit 238 having a generally square configuration with a cut off corner. The article transport storage unit 238 is designed to have an opening 262, which permits articles to be removed from and inserted into the unit.

45 Article transport storage unit 238 includes a top panel 264 having a shaft aligned bore extending through it, a bottom panel 266 also having a shaft aligned bore extending through it, side panels 267, and a storage rack unit 268 illustrated as having two axially aligned circular-shaped storage racks 270. 50 As shown, top panel 264, bottom panel 266 and side panels 267 are constructed to form opening 262 when assembled.

55 Each storage rack 270 includes radially extending angularly separated compartment panels defining article receiving compartments designed to receive and retain flat-type pack articles slated for inventory, such as DVD cases, as desired. The compartment panels are preferably axially aligned to retain the opposing sides of DVD cases at the top and bottom ends thereof. In that regard, the DVD cases are preferably retained in compartments illustrated as slots formed by 60 between successive vertical pairs of storage racks 270.

65 The storage racks 270 are vertically spaced by axially extending support members 274. In addition, a closing mem-

ber 276 configured from two adjacent locked slots extends between the storage racks and is designed to prevent access to the articles stored within article transport storage unit 238 when the closing member is axially aligned with opening 262.

Again, it will be appreciated that the compartments of a particular article transport storage unit can be designed to receive a variety of types of articles, as desired. It will further be appreciated that the number of compartments in the interior of a unit can be varied to accommodate a different quantity of articles slotted for inventory at a dispensing machine. In addition, an article transport storage unit may be designed to hold a plurality of types of articles and articles having a plurality of sizes and shapes, as desired.

The storage rack unit 268 also includes a centrally positioned locking rotational mechanism 278 designed to permit selective rotation of the storage rack unit within the interior of article transport storage unit 238. It will be appreciated that storage rack unit 268 cannot be rotated within article transport storage unit 238, absent locking rotational mechanism 278 being actuated by a cooperating unlocking mechanism. It will further be appreciated that the shaft 252 within article dispensing machine 230 includes a cooperating unlocking mechanism and that additional unlocking mechanisms are available at a centralized inventory supply center. In the arrangement shown, the article transport storage unit 238 includes locking pins 280 that, when depressed, permit the storage rack unit to be rotated.

With the present invention, the article transport storage units 238 are filled with inventory at a centralized inventory supply center. Once filled with articles slotted for dispensing machine inventory, an unlocking mechanism is brought into cooperating engagement with locking mechanism 278 and implemented to cause rotation of storage rack unit 268 to align closing member 276 with opening 262. In particular, pins 280 are depressed and the storage rack unit 268 is rotated until closing member 276 is aligned with opening 262. Thereafter, the unlocking mechanism is removed from engagement with locking mechanism 278 and access to the contents within article transport storage unit 238 is prevented. These steps are preferably performed by authorized system administration personnel.

Thereafter, a particular article transport storage unit 238 is then delivered to its destined article dispensing machine 230. This delivery can be made by third party delivery companies, such as overnight courier services.

The authorized serviceman initiates the appropriate routine for removal of the previously installed article transport storage unit. A variety of mechanisms can provide access to the machine by the serviceman. For example, a peripheral device, such as a personal digital assistant having an infrared transmitter, can initiate the removal process. Additionally, the delivered article transport storage unit 238 can include a radio frequency identification tag that can similarly initiate the removal process. Additionally, the serviceman can enter appropriate commands at the user interface (e.g., touch screen and/or keypad) to initiate the unit removal process.

In any event, any additional inventory to be offloaded is delivered from storage rack unit 248 to storage rack unit 268 in the article transport storage unit 238 and loaded into unit 238. This offloading process is carried out by robotic arm 256 and shaft 252, which has been brought into engagement with the locking rotational mechanism 278 of the previously installed unit.

The article transport storage unit ejection process is then commenced. Shaft 252 is actuated to rotate storage rack unit 268 until closing member 276 is axially aligned with opening 262. Thereafter, shaft 252 is raised, or alternatively article

transport storage unit 238 is lowered, to bring the shaft out of engagement with the locking rotational mechanism 278 of the previously installed article transport storage unit 238. In particular, fingers (not shown) associated with the shaft can be brought out of engagement with locking pins 280 so that the pins are no longer depressed. This causes the previously installed article transport storage unit 238 to be locked and prevents access to the articles forming the contents of the unit. The door associated with opening 236 is opened. The previously installed article transport unit 238 is then automatically ejected from dispensing machine 230 so that it can be removed through opening 236.

The article transport storage unit is then removed and delivered back to an inventory supply center by the third party freight company for restocking of appropriate articles slotted for inventory of a particular dispensing machine.

When the removed article transport storage unit arrives back at the inventory supply center, its contents can be emptied and it can be refilled with articles, based on the desired inventory at its newly assigned dispensing machine. Thereafter, that unit can be closed, locked and then delivered to its assigned dispensing machine to update the inventory of articles available for consumption at that machine.

Following removal of the previously installed article transport storage unit, the delivered article transport storage unit 238 is inserted into article transfer opening 236 for installation within dispensing machine 230. After being partially inserted into opening 236, a tractor (not shown) completes the installation process. The article transport storage unit 238 is automatically positioned so that it is centrally aligned with shaft 252. The automatic positioning and installation of article transport storage unit 238 can be actuated by a sensor mechanism that detects that the unit has been inserted into article transfer opening 236.

Upon installation of the article transport storage unit into the dispensing machine, the unit is raised so that the unlocking fingers associated with shaft 252 are brought into engagement with and press against pins 280 of locking rotational mechanism 278 and an inventory storage process is then commenced. Shaft 252 rotates storage rack unit 278 successively causing articles stored within article transport storage unit 238 to be aligned with opening 262. Robotic arm 256 is then actuated to grab each article of inventory, remove that article from the unit, carry that article to its desired location on one of the storage racks 250 of storage rack unit 248 and insert that article into the proper compartment.

In its preferred form, electronic records are stored within a storage unit (e.g., hard drive unit) related to each of the inventory supply and removal process. For example, the delivered article transport storage unit is preferably identified and accepted by the dispensing machine prior to commencement of the removal and installation processes.

In addition, each article of inventory removed from the storage rack unit fixed within the dispensing machine housing and delivered to the storage rack unit contained within the article transport storage unit are preferably scanned and identified by the dispensing machine. Similarly, each article of inventory removed from the storage rack unit contained within an installed article transport storage unit and delivered to the storage rack fixed within the dispensing machine housing is preferably scanned and identified by the dispensing machine, along with an identification of its stored position on the storage rack unit. Electronic records are preferably stored in the system regarding this information.

Each article of inventory dispensed from a dispensing machine is also preferably scanned and an electronic record is created indicating the consumer who rented and/or purchased

the media. In addition, articles of inventory returned to a dispensing machine by a customer and inserted into the article transfer opening thereof are preferably scanned and identified by the dispensing machine, along with an identification of its later stored position on the storage rack unit.

These electronic records can be shared among dispensing machines within a network thereof, and can also be shared with a centralized office via the Internet or any other electronic data communication link. These electronic records can be used to ensure that the inventory process is carried out efficiently and accurately.

Each dispensing machine is connected to the Internet via a peripheral device like modem or satellite connection and commands can be sent from a centralized office to a specific machine in the network to inform a specific machine to off-load specific articles into the article transport storage unit magazine for shipment to a centralized office.

Electronic records will also be transmitted to the machines indicating the new articles slated for inventory and upload into the machine. Therefore, when new inventory is loaded into a machine, each article can be inspected and scanned for verification.

Article dispensing machine 230 incorporates a slot loading DVD drive in electronic communication with a storage unit (e.g., hard drive) for the machine. The DVD drive can receive an uncased DVD from the robotic arm. The DVD drive then reads the content from the DVD media. The content is stored on the storage unit in the form of one or more computer files. The content is then available for fast access and presentation on the plasma video monitor. Accordingly, video, such as video related to a desired advertisement or trailer, can be read from DVD media at the machine location. The video content read from the DVD media is stored in the storage unit and can be accessed and played on display monitor 245, as desired.

As a consumer approaches a dispensing machine, the consumer observes the display monitor and the user interface. The consumer then enters the appropriate commands at the user interface control system associated with the dispensing machine to select a DVD to be dispensed by the machine. The user interface control system can employ simple menus and a fixed set of keys for consumers to make their selections, it can employ break-resistant touch screens, or it can employ a combination of both. Once a selection has been made, the consumer would then merely insert his/her magnetically encoded dispense activation card into the card reader slot positioned at the front of the dispensing machine and, in response, the machine will dispense the selected DVD without the need for further input by the consumer.

It is not necessary for a consumer to become a member of a video rental program in order to rent a movie. As an alternative, consumer can simply pay for rentals by credit card instead. With appropriate hardware, the machine is also configurable to accept currency.

For those consumers having a rental membership, the DVD rental experience can more readily be customized. The member can insert his/her membership card into the card reader and enter his/her personal identification number ("PIN") when prompted through the user interface control system. In response to these commands, the consumer is presented with a customized, personal start-up menu. From this personalized menu, which can be customized to have suggested titles scroll across the screen based on past renting patterns of the particular member and/or all members at the particular hosting location, the member selects a previously reserved movie or selects a new movie from the list of titles embodied in DVD media contained within the inventory of the dispensing machine. Once the selection has been made, the robotic arm

incorporated in the machine will grab and cause the selected DVD to be dispensed, preferably in less than twenty seconds. The specific user request made at the machine (e.g., renting a new movie or payment by credit card) is then sent via satellite feed to a centralized system office in real-time for processing. Such a procedure ensures accurate and rapid handling of every user request as well as secure billing to any credit card account of the consumer.

When a consumer returns a DVD to a dispensing machine, he/she inserts the membership card into the card reader on the front of the machine, enters his/her personal identification number when prompted and inputs the appropriate additional commands to initiate the return process. The consumer then inserts the DVD into the dispensing/receiving receptacle on the front of the machine. A bar code reader inside the machine then scans the returned DVD for its unique code and places the returned DVD back into the physical inventory of the machine to await the next rental of that DVD. As an added convenience, consumers will have the option of returning a DVD to machines other than the one from which they originally rented the movie, preferably for an additional charge to cover any additional incremental administrative costs.

The machines and software are preferably configured to automatically produce and deliver a printed receipt to consumers renting or purchasing DVDs from a machine. They can also preferably send an email receipt to a consumer, or cause a hardcopy receipt to be delivered to a consumer by mail upon request.

In addition, consumers can rent and/or purchase DVDs remote from the dispensing machines through use of the system website, already described.

While certain embodiments of the present invention have been described, it will be appreciated that changes and modifications can be made and that other embodiments may be devised without departing from the true spirit and scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of transporting and installing articles slated for inventory to an article dispensing machine, comprising the steps of:

loading a plurality of articles of inventory into an article transport storage unit, wherein the article transport storage unit comprises an opaque housing which is constructed to prevent the plurality of articles of inventory from being visually identified from outside of the article transport storage unit after the articles of inventory are loaded into the article transport storage unit;

assigning the article transport storage unit to an article dispensing machine, wherein the article dispensing machine comprises an article transport storage unit receiving station;

causing the article transport storage unit to be in a locked condition wherein the plurality of articles of inventory cannot be accessed;

causing delivery of the locked article transport storage unit to the article dispensing machine;

permitting installation of the locked article transport storage unit into the article transport storage unit receiving station of the article dispensing machine; and,

following installation of the article transport storage unit into the article transport storage unit receiving station of the article dispensing machine, causing the article transport storage unit to enter an unlocked condition for allowing access to the plurality of articles.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the article transport storage unit comprises a housing having a single opening into

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which and from which the plurality of articles of inventory can be loaded and unloaded, respectively.

3. The method of claim 1 wherein the article dispensing machine further comprises at least one article storage rack, the method further comprising the steps of automatically unloading the plurality of articles of inventory from the unlocked article transport storage unit and transferring the plurality of articles of inventory to the at least one storage rack for later rental or purchase of the plurality of articles of inventory. 10

4. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of automatically unloading the plurality of articles from the unlocked article transport storage unit and transferring the plurality of articles to the at least one storage rack for later rental or purchase of the plurality of articles. 15

5. The method of claim 1 wherein delivery of the locked article transport storage unit is carried out by an independent delivery company.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein the article of inventory is a flat-pack type article of inventory. 20

7. The method of claim 1 wherein each of the plurality of articles of inventory is a digital video disc and a case associated with said digital video disc.

8. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of causing the article transport storage to enter the unlocked condition occurs automatically proximate in time just following installation of the article transport storage unit into the article dispensing machine, and irrespective of selection, rental, and/or purchase of one of the plurality of articles of inventory. 25

9. The method of claim 1 wherein the article transport storage unit comprises a housing having an opening into which and from which the plurality of articles of inventory can be loaded and unloaded, respectively, and having a circular storage rack for receiving and storing the plurality of articles of inventory, wherein the circular storage rack can rotate within the housing for aligning each of the plurality of articles of inventory with the opening for unloading each of the articles from the article transport storage unit, and wherein the circular storage rack is prevented from rotating when the article transport storage unit is locked. 30

10. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of permitting installation of the locked article transport storage unit into the article dispensing machine is carried out by use of infrared technology.

11. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of permitting installation of the locked article transport storage unit into the article dispensing machine is carried out by use of a radio frequency identification tag associated with at least one of the article transport storage unit and the article dispensing machine. 35

12. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of automatically unloading the first plurality of articles of inventory occurs automatically after the step of causing the first article transport storage unit to enter an unlocked condition.

13. A method of installing articles slotted for inventory to an article dispensing machine, comprising the steps of:

receiving an article transport storage unit at an article dispensing machine, the article transport storage unit having loading therein a plurality of articles of inventory,

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wherein the article transport storage unit comprises an opaque housing which is constructed to prevent the plurality of articles of inventory from being visually identified from outside of the article transport storage unit after the articles of inventory are loaded into the article transport storage unit, wherein the article transport storage unit is assigned for being received at an article dispensing machine, wherein the article dispensing machine comprises an article transport storage unit receiving station, and wherein the article transport storage unit is in a locked condition wherein the plurality of articles of inventory cannot be accessed;

permitting installation of the locked article transport storage unit into the article transport storage unit receiving station of the article dispensing machine; and, following installation of the article transport storage unit into the article transport storage unit receiving station of the article dispensing machine, causing the article transport storage unit to enter an unlocked condition for allowing access to the plurality of articles. 15

14. The method of claim 13 further comprising the step of loading the plurality of articles of inventory into the article transport storage unit.

15. The method of claim 13 further comprising the step of causing delivery of the locked article transport storage unit to the article dispensing machine.

16. The method of claim 13 wherein the article transport storage unit comprises a housing having a single opening into which and from which the plurality of articles of inventory can be loaded and unloaded, respectively. 20

17. The method of claim 13 wherein the article dispensing machine further comprises at least one article storage rack, the method further comprising the steps of automatically unloading the plurality of articles of inventory from the unlocked article transport storage unit and transferring the plurality of articles of inventory to the at least one storage rack for later rental or purchase of the plurality of articles of inventory. 25

18. The method of claim 13 further comprising the step of automatically unloading the plurality of articles from the unlocked article transport storage unit and transferring the plurality of articles to the at least one storage rack for later rental or purchase of the plurality of articles. 30

19. The method of claim 13 wherein the article transport storage unit comprises a housing having an opening into which and from which the plurality of articles of inventory can be loaded and unloaded, respectively, and having a circular storage rack for receiving and storing the plurality of articles of inventory, wherein the circular storage rack can rotate within the housing for aligning each of the plurality of articles of inventory with the opening for unloading each of the articles from the article transport storage unit, and wherein the circular storage rack is prevented from rotating when the article transport storage unit is locked. 35

20. The method of claim 13 further comprising the step of automatically unloading the first plurality of articles of inventory automatically after the step of causing the first article transport storage unit to enter an unlocked condition. 40

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