

Walgreen signs on to a low-tech approach

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Walgreens touts the technology it uses in its pharmacies and in selecting the goods that line its shelves, but the pesky, low-tech advertising signs that hang from stores' ceilings had management stumped.

Workers dreaded climbing ladders and struggling to hang the signs from spindly string. Walgreen executives hated the resulting injuries to workers and their resulting workers' compensation claims, and not knowing whether or where the signs were hanging.

Enter Annette Ricci, 39, whose success in producing a sign-hanging technology prompted her to create a new company, Reel E-Z Display.

Ricci, who works from Lake Forest, relied upon the expertise she built in the three years she has run a product design company called Design & Deliver.

The result: Ricci now holds a patent for the sign-hanging device called the Reel E-Z Display.

Here's how it works: Employees have to climb a ladder only to hang the devices from the ceiling. After that, they stand on the floor to hang and change the signs -- an important issue because Walgreens changes its ceiling signs seven times a year.

After the 1-pound display unit is clipped to the struts of a drop ceiling, a worker uses a pole to pull down a bar on the unit and attach the sign to the bar.

The bar levels itself, and has adjustable cords with multicolored markings where a stopper can be placed. By using the markings as guides, workers can hang signs at the same height throughout a store.

Ricci thought about any number of scary scenarios when she designed the sign-hanging system with its stoppers: "I thought to myself, 'Maybe a 16-year-old hanging the sign would say, 'Let's race to the top,' and a sign would fly off and hit someone.'" The bar doesn't snap back up to the ceiling when the sign is placed on it. Instead, workers must use the pole to guide the sign back up.

The units can be detached from the ceilings and moved around. The price of the units varies with the size of the order, but the retail price is about \$15 to \$17 per unit.

Companies can lease the ceiling space to outside vendors to generate extra revenue, though Walgreen Co. will not do so.

"This is a big labor-saving device," said Walgreen spokesman Michael Polzin. "And it keeps the signs straight and looking good."

Ricci said she has negotiated sales of the Reel E-Z Display unit to two U.S. distributors in addition to Walgreens.

"If I don't have the particular experience, like the engineering, I can go to the [company's] engineer and say, 'How does this make sense? What could we do to make this even better?' Together, it's the creative thought process of several people," she said.

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