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New at Walgreens-

By Greg Jacobson

CHICAGO — Walgreen Co. has recently deployed the first innovative approach to overhead signage to appear in years. The system, called Reel E-Z Display, was installed in all 4,247 Walgreens outlets in time for the holidays, and will be included in all of the chain's new stores.

Overhead signage is a vital medium for communicating information to customers, whether promotional messages or aisle directories. But it presents a number of operational challenges that the new system was designed to resolve.

Traditional overhead signage systems typically involve the use of hooks and strings that require one or more store-level employees to climb on ladders to install, maintain and change. According to Annette Ricci, who designed Reel E-Z Display, once installed the new system can be changed easily by one person without a ladder and in very little time.

The system consists of a simple hand-held unit that clips easily, without tools, onto the struts of a dropped or open ceiling. Once in place, signs are attached with "S" hooks to a self-leveling bar that is accessible from the ground using a specially designed pole.

"Changing overhead signage is much faster with the Reel E-Z Display system," says a spokesman for the chain. "It also has the advantage of improving the signs' appearance because it's much easier to hang the signs evenly. Employees don't have to spend a lot of time getting them to hang straight."

As a result, says Ricci, retailers and brand marketers can get the maximum return on their overhead marketing campaigns. "With Reel E-Z Display we are putting control back in the hands of visual merchandisers, allowing the timely and precise management of in-store ceiling displays," she says.

The system had its genesis two years ago, she says, when Walgreens' advertising agency approached her company, Design & Deliver Inc., to develop a solution that would enable any employee to change signs without a ladder. The fixture had to be able to hold signs weighing up to two pounds and address a number of safety issues as well. In addition, Walgreens wanted a unit that would hang signs at equal heights throughout a store and in stores with different ceiling heights.

In addition, of course, the system had to be cost effective. Ricci's strong relationship with manufacturers in China enabled her to deliver a system with highquality components at low cost.

After several months working with the retailer, the system that Ricci dubbed Reel E-Z Display emerged. She has since patented the system and established a separate company, Reel E-Z Display Inc.

The system, which won a Gold Award in the P-O-P Times' Design of the Times competition, has attracted interest from companies in several countries, and is being tested by retailer Canadian Tire Inc. and Motorola of Mexico.

Ricci has already refined the system further to make it adaptable to different store environments. "We have several new models in the works, including ones that hold more weight and some that can be used in open ceilings," she says. "We also have developed a swivel modification that allows the unit to swivel 90 degrees.

There are a number of other requests that we're working on as well."