

Downsizing

Given the current state of the economy...and my hairline...I thought this would be an appropriate time to take a look back in history and see how and why the match industry downsized its covers.

To the uneducated layman (*poor soul*), a cover is a cover is a cover. But, the discerning and unerring eye of the collector notices as once the subtle nuances of change heralded by each and every cardboard wonder. Over the decades, there have been no less than four aspects of the matchcover that have been downsized—the length, the striker, the staple, and the thickness.

We know the longer-length covers as ‘Talls’ or ‘XL’s’. They were the earlier covers and measured a few, but noticeable, millimeters more in length than later covers. Thus, the old Diamond SF’s, Atlas, Columbia, etc. issues are all XL’s. Around 1935, manufacturers began shortening the length of their covers as a necessary adjustment to the appearance and subsequent spread of vending machines. In cover types that spanned that era of change, the earlier issues are XL’s, while the later issues were the length we’re used to today. Thus, only *some* DQ’s, Federals, Stars, Universals, and the like are XL’s. By World War II, the XL’s were a thing of the past.

Much the same process took place with the width of the striker. Unlike the longer length of the cover, not all of the early strikers started off as uniformly wide, as they were applied by hand. They were definitely wider than today’s strikers, but not necessarily wide enough to be classified as ‘ws’, about 9-10 mm, although, as far as I know, there’s never been any official delineation in the hobby of just how wide a striker has to be to be called ‘ws’. Still, line up a modern cover along side of a wide-striker Match Corp. cover, for example, and you’ll see a big difference. The point at which the thinner strikers became universal was not so clear cut as that of the length changeover. Certainly, the wide-strikers were still common in the 1930s, but by World War II, again, almost all were gone. Superior Match Co. continued with its wide-strikers for somewhat longer.

The staples in matchbooks, although also not particularly uniform from the inception of the matchbook, basically started out as larger and heavier than those used today. Once again, the material shortages caused by World War II were a big impetus in the change here. As the story goes, that’s what caused the demise of the Midget, but I’ve never actually seen an ‘official’ source for that information. In any event, if you take a look at today matchbook staples, they’re pretty small and thin.

And, just compare today’s covers with just about any cover issued prior to 1960, and you’ll notice that the older issues used significantly thicker cardboard. It’s actually pretty amazing that all the older manufacturers used basically the same thickness in the first place. One has to wonder why none of them went to thinner versions sooner. And, conversely, it’s just as startling that the changeover took place so quickly and so universally across the industry—almost as if it had been legislated.

Now, those are the four ‘physical’ examples of downsizing in matchcovers over the decades, but, perhaps on a more philosophical level, one could rightly argue, I think, that the artwork has also been ‘downsized’—in, if not quality, then uniqueness [*sigh!*] The days of the manufacturers having their own legions of artists, ready to put down anything on a matchcover, are long gone. No more of those Crown Chinese Restaurants or Disney drawings. Now, it’s all scans and photos—all machine-generated. It’s not a total loss, though, not by any means. On the other side of the ledger, someone else could justifiably argue that cover art today can be slicker, more multi-hued—just as attractive, if not more so, simply in a different way.

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