

How the Striking Surface Was Reversed

by Ed Cohen*

The decade between 1965 and 1975 was the golden age of consumer protection legislation, including a particular emphasis on consumer safety. New laws governing motor vehicles, medical devices, toys, poison prevention packaging and a broad array of other consumer products were added to the statute books during those years. But not everything was done through legislation – a case in point, the reverse striking surface on matchbooks.

Warren Magnuson (D. WA), the legislatively prolific Chairman of the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee, observed that consumers were being burned by lighting matches on the striking surface when mounted on the front without first closing the matchbook. At the time, every matchbook bore the warning to “Close Before Striking,” but that warning had proved to be inadequate. The Chairman summoned the staff to his office and asked if there were a non-regulatory means of getting the issue addressed quickly by the industry. Magnuson was obviously impatient with leaving this matter in the lap of the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) which only began in 1972.

His solution was to write letters to each of the major matchbook manufacturers, citing injury statistics and asking whether they would be willing, on a voluntary basis, to manufacture all matchbooks with a reverse striking surface. The response was a unanimous agreement. Within a short time – and far less than if there had been a full regulatory proceeding at the newly formed CPSC – an eminently remediable hazard was eliminated. Eventually, the CPSC issued a ruling that made this mandatory. To this day, matchbooks are produced with the striking surface on the back – and it was done through legislative leadership and by responsible companies willing to help solve a problem.

**Ed lives in Washington DC and was formerly staff counsel to the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee
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