

HOBBY HISTORY

The Match Industry and ASTM

*[From S.F. Sunday Examiner & Chronicle, Sept.
14, 1975]*

Lots of items carry standards--automobile bumpers, meat, eggs, drugs, toy guns, BB guns, guns that kill and on and on. But matchbooks?

That's next. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission is readying a set of binding standards for all 13 matchbook manufacturers in the United States. It has taken over two years to get to this point.

As there is due process in law, there is also a technological due process, and it is watched over by an unusual outfit calling itself the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) in Philadelphia.

Strictly voluntary -- unaffiliated with either industry or government -- ASTM has been in business since 1898. In that time it has set standards for over 5,200 products, and it right now into such items as playpens, highchairs, surgical implants and the slippery surfaces of bathtubs and stall showers.

Nothing, it seems, escapes ASTM's purview -- not even matchbooks. There are other standards setting agencies, including many in government, but the ASTM is the oldest, largest, and, in the voluntary field, the most respected.

It got involved in matches, says Miss Martha Kirkaldy, an ASTM executive, because the federal government had found them anything but innocuous.

As a matter of fact, they are one of the most frequent causes of hospital emergency-room visits.

As is protocol in these matters, the ASTM asked the \$117 million-a-year matchbook industry to participate in a 100-member standards-writing committee designated F-15. It did -- albeit reluctantly.

The current issue of "New Engineer" explains that match manufacturers have a "history of anti-trust charges" and have been under a court order restraining them "from exchanging information on prices, sales, inventory and production."

"So the match manufacturers," the magazine article states, "had not worked on a cooperative project for more than 30 years. In fact, they were reluctant to be in the same town together, much less the same room." Standards were unheard of.

Work started in June, 1973. By November, 1973, the task group of manufacturers, consumers, suppliers and academic types was meeting monthly. By March 1, 1974, a draft was ready and submitted to all 25,000 ASTM members by mail ballot. It was not approved.

So the committee prepared another draft. Just then--September 1974--the Consumer Product Safety Commission stepped in.

The aim of the new standards is to make matchbooks "child-safe."

- "The friction striker must be located on the outside back of the cover near the bottom of the book." This eliminates (potential for) contact between the frictions strip and the match heads.
- The friction striker "must not burn nor peel away from the cover."
- "Each match, when struck, must ignite within two seconds and must not fragment, spark or break. The match must be constructed so that...the flame goes out within a half-inch of the top of the match splint or within a 15-second burn time, whichever comes first."

Afterglow is prohibited. And one-eighth of the total cover area is to contain safety messages. One is to be "Don't smoke in bed."