



This Sheet Has Been Replaced

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REPLACED

MAIL SEPARATING DEVICE

The present invention relates to a mail separating device.

Mail sorting devices are known which provide for withdrawing flat rectangular mail items one at a time from a stack of superimposed items, and for feeding the items to a conveyor channel along which they travel separately.

European Patent Application EP-A-582.869 by FINMECCANICA S.p.A., for example, relates to a sorting device comprising an inclined rectangular surface for supporting a stack of mail items, which is pushed by a slide along the inclined surface to a stop device fitted to the upper end edge of the surface. The sorting device also comprises a gripping head movable in crank and slotted link manner to and from the inclined surface, and which provides for withdrawing the mail items one at a time from the stack and feeding them to the conveyor channel. More specifically, the gripping head conveniently comprises a number of suction cups which engage the front surface of the item contacting the stop

device.

Due to the adhesion (e.g. electrostatic adhesion) of adjacent items in the stack, pairs of adjacent, superimposed items may inadvertently be withdrawn (multiple withdrawal) and fed as such to the conveyor channel.

It is an object of the present invention to provide a separating device for determining multiple withdrawal, and for separating the items withdrawn simultaneously.

According to the present invention, there is provided a mail separating device, characterized in that it comprises:

- a conveyor channel presenting an input connected to a feed device for successively supplying the channel with flat mail items;

- conveyor means for feeding said items along the channel;

- first sensor means located along said channel, and for generating a double-withdrawal signal on detecting a pair of at least partly superimposed mail items traveling along the channel; and

- stop means located along said channel and cooperating with said first sensor means;

said stop means comprising at least one appendix movable by actuating means between an idle position, and an activating position wherein a stop portion of said appendix is located along said channel;

said stop portion being set to said activating position upon detection of said double-withdrawal signal; and

said stop portion in said activating position also intercepting an end edge (E2) of a first mail item in said pair of mail items.

A preferred, non-limiting embodiment of the present invention will be described by way of example with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 shows a top plan view of a separating device in accordance with the teachings of the present invention;

Figure 2 shows a section of the separating device along line II-II in Figure 1;

Figure 3 shows a larger-scale detail of the Figure 1 device;

Figure 4 shows a sorting device which may be used for supplying mail items to the separating device according to the present invention.

Number 1 in Figure 1 indicates a mail separating device located along a straight conveyor channel 3 extending between a known sorting device 5 (shown partly and schematically in Figure 1) and an unloading device 7 (also shown schematically).

Sorting device 5 may, for example, be of the type described in European Patent Application EP-A-582.869 by FINMECCANICA S.p.A., and may comprise (Figure 4) an inclined rectangular surface 10 for supporting a stack

11 of flat rectangular mail items 12 (letters, envelopes, magazines, newspapers, etc.) which is pushed by a slide 13 along inclined surface 10 to a stop device 14 fitted to the upper end edge 15 of surface 10. Sorting device 5 also comprises a gripping head 16 movable in crank and slotted link manner to and from inclined surface 10, and for withdrawing mail items 12 one at a time from stack 11, and feeding them to conveyor channel 3. More specifically, gripping head 16 conveniently comprises a number of suction cups for engaging the front surface 12' of the item 12 contacting stop device 14.

Due to the adhesion (e.g. electrostatic adhesion) of items 12 in the stack, pairs of adjacent, superimposed items 12a, 12b (Figure 3) may inadvertently be withdrawn and fed as such to conveyor channel 3.

Separating device 1 provides for detecting and separating such pairs of items 12a, 12b.

As shown particularly in Figures 1 and 2, straight channel 3 presents a rectangular cross section, and comprises a rectangular bottom wall 20; and two rectangular lateral walls 21, 22 cooperating with sheets 28, 29 of undulated synthetic material extending inside and along the full length of channel 3, for enabling smooth slide of items 12 along the channel.

Bottom wall 20 extends from an end edge 20a (corresponding to output 3a of channel 3) adjacent to unloading device 7, to an end edge 20b (corresponding to

input 3b of channel 3) adjacent to the output of a conveyor belt device 24 of sorting device 5. More specifically, conveyor belt device 24 comprises a straight horizontal belt 26 parallel to and beneath end edge 15, and which provides for feeding the mail items released on to it by gripping head 16 towards edge 20b.

Conveyor channel 3 comprises a number of known pinch roller devices 33 located along walls 21, 22 and which provide for moving items 12 along channel 3.

Each pinch roller device 33 comprises a first powered roller 36 fitted to wall 21; and a second powered roller 37 located close to a rectangular opening (not shown) in wall 22, and which is movable between an idle position wherein it is clear of channel 3, and an activating position wherein it engages the opening and roller 36. Rollers 36, 37 provide for engaging opposite bottom surfaces of item 12 inside channel 3, and in particular for rapidly accelerating item 12.

Conveyor channel 3 also comprises a bottom conveyor belt 34 parallel to bottom wall 20, and which extends from input 3b to output 3a of channel 3, and is moved from sorting device 5 to unloading device 7 by actuating means (not shown).

As shown particularly in Figure 1, separating device 1 comprises a stop assembly 40 substantially halfway along channel 3; and a laser sensor 42 located between input 3b of channel 3 and stop assembly 40.

Sensor 42 comprises a photoemitting device (not

shown), and a photoreceiving device (not shown) for receiving the light reflected and diffused by items 12. The photoemitting and photoreceiving devices (not shown) are positioned facing the channel, and define respective optical paths L, T extending through a hole F (Figure 1) in wall 21, and forming an angle of roughly 80° with channel 3. Sensor 42 cooperates with an electronic unit 43 for receiving, and detecting rapid variations in, the electric signal generated by the photoreceiving device (not shown), which rapid variations correspond to discontinuity of item 12, as explained in more detail later on.

Stop assembly 40 comprises a cylindrical electromagnetic actuator 45 fitted to a rectangular metal bracket 46 extending perpendicularly from wall 21 and outwards of channel 3; and actuator 45 presents an output shaft 47 parallel to walls 21, 22 and supporting an L-shaped plate 50. More specifically (Figure 3), plate 50 comprises a first straight portion 51 with a first end 51a fitted to shaft 47; and a second straight portion 52 perpendicular to and shorter than portion 51, and presenting a rounded end 52a with a reflecting surface 54, the function of which is explained later on. Plate 50 engages an elongated rectangular opening 58 (Figure 3) in wall 21, and is movable by actuator 45 between an idle position (shown by the continuous line in Figures 1 and 3) wherein portion 51 is parallel to wall 21, and rounded end 52a projects slightly from wall

21 into channel 3, and an activating position (shown by the dotted line) wherein portion 51 is inclined in relation to wall 21, and portion 52 engages opening 58 and penetrates inside channel 3 with rounded portion 52a positioned substantially halfway across the channel.

Stop device 40 also presents a sensor 60 (conveniently comprising a photocell) fitted to bracket 46 and defining an optical path 61 extending through wall 21 (through an opening shown in Figure 3) and which intersects rounded portion 52a when plate 50 is in the activating position.

In actual use, mail items 12 are withdrawn by gripping head 16 from pack 11 and released on to conveyor belt device 24 by which they are fed to conveyor channel 3 where they continue moving in known manner by means of conveyor belt 34 and pinch rollers 33 which close to engage bottom portions of items 12. In this way, items 12 travel from input 3b to output 3a of channel 3 at a speed of roughly 2.7-3 meters/second.

In the event of a multiple withdrawal (Figure 3), the two items 12a, 12b withdrawn simultaneously are parallel to each other but not completely superimposed, in that, for physical reasons not described, a first item (e.g. 12a) presents a vertical end edge E1 separated by length L (of at least 10 millimeters) from the corresponding vertical end edge E2 of the other item (e.g. 12b). End edge E2 of item 12b defines, on the flat surface 12a' of item 12a, a step-shaped discontinuity

which reflects light differently from the flat surfaces adjacent to it, and which is detected (in known manner) by unit 43 via sensor 42.

After a first time interval T1 from detection of the discontinuity, electromagnetic actuator 45 is activated to rapidly move plate 50 from the idle to the activating position, so that end 52a of portion 52 contacts the exposed portion of surface 12a' and hence end edge E2 of item 12b.

The impact of portion 52a on edge E2 stops item 12b, whereas item 12a continues moving along channel 3 either by inertia or conveyed by bottom conveyor belt 34, so that items 12a, 12b are detached from each other.

Correct engagement of edge E2 by end 52a interrupts optical path 61 (Figure 3), the detection of which interruption indicates correct stoppage of item 12b and hence detachment of it from item 12a.

After a second time interval T2 from detection of the interruption of optical path 61, electromagnetic actuator 45 is again activated to rapidly move plate 50 from the activating to the idle position.

As such, item 12b is detached from plate 50 and is once more fed along channel 3 by bottom conveyor belt 34.

Separating device 1 thus provides for detecting multiple withdrawals and separating the items withdrawn simultaneously.

Clearly, changes may be made to the separating

device as described and illustrated herein without, however, departing from the scope of the present invention.



CLAIMS

1) A mail separating device, characterized in that it comprises:

- a conveyor channel (3) presenting an input (3b) connected to a feed device (5) for successively supplying the channel (3) with flat mail items (12);

- conveyor means (33, 34) for feeding said items (12) along the channel (3);

- first sensor means (42) located along said channel (3), and for generating a double-withdrawal signal on detecting a pair of at least partly superimposed mail items (12) traveling along the channel (3); and

- stop means (40) located along said channel (3) and cooperating with said first sensor means (42);

said stop means (40) comprising at least one appendix (50) movable by actuating means (45) between an idle position, and an activating position wherein a stop portion (52a) of said appendix (50) is located along said channel (3);

said stop portion (52a) being set to said activating position upon detection of said double-withdrawal signal; and

said stop portion (52a) in said activating position also intercepting an end edge (E2) of a first mail item (12b) in said pair (12a, 12b) of mail items.

2) A device as claimed in Claim 1, characterized



in that said stop means (40) comprise actuating means (45) located along said channel (3) and presenting at least an output shaft (47) activating said movable appendix (50).

3) A device as claimed in Claim 2, characterized in that said movable appendix comprises an L-shaped plate (50).

4) A device as claimed in Claim 3, characterized in that said L-shaped plate (50) comprises a first straight portion (51) with one end (51a) fitted to said shaft (47); and a second straight portion (52) perpendicular to and shorter than said first portion (51).

5) A device as claimed in Claim 3 or 4, characterized in that said plate (50) presents a rounded end (52a) forming said stop portion.

6) A device as claimed in any one of the foregoing Claims, characterized in that said stop means (40) comprise second sensor means (60) defining at least an optical path (61) facing said channel (3) and which is intersected by the outer surface (54) of said stop portion (52a) in said activating position;

said optical path (61) being interrupted by said first item (12b) when the first item (12b) is correctly engaged by said stop portion (52a).

7) A device as claimed in any one of the foregoing Claims, characterized in that said channel (3) presents a substantially rectangular section.



8) A device as claimed in any one of the foregoing Claims, characterized in that said channel (3) is substantially straight.

9) A device as claimed in any one of the foregoing Claims, characterized in that said conveyor means comprise a number of pinch roller devices (33) located along the channel;

each pinch roller device (33) presenting at least two rollers (36, 37), at least one (37) of which is powered, and which engage opposite lateral portions of said mail item (12).

10) A device as claimed in any one of the foregoing Claims, characterized in that said conveyor means comprise a conveyor belt (34) extending along said channel (3).

11) A mail separating device, substantially as described and illustrated herein with reference to the accompanying drawings.