

Semi-Rigid Collapsible Container

Background To Invention

5 This invention relates to polyester containers, particularly semi-rigid collapsible containers capable of being filled with hot liquid, and more particularly to an improved construction for initiating collapse in such containers.

10 'Hot-Fill' applications impose significant mechanical stress on a container structure. The thin side-wall construction of a conventional container deforms or collapses as the internal container pressure falls following capping because of the subsequent cooling of the liquid contents. Various methods have been devised to sustain such internal
15 pressure change while maintaining a controlled configuration.

 Generally, the polyester must be heat-treated to induce molecular changes resulting in a container that exhibits thermal stability. In addition, the structure of the container must be designed to allow
20 sections, or panels, to 'flex' inwardly to vent the internal vacuum and so prevent excess force being applied to the container structure. The amount of 'flex' available in prior art, vertically disposed flex panels is limited, however, and as the limit is reached the force is transferred to the side-wall, and in particular the areas between the panels, of the
25 container causing them to fail under any increased load.

 Additionally, vacuum force is required in order to flex the panels inwardly to accomplish pressure stabilisation. Therefore, even if the panels are designed to be extremely flexible and efficient, force will still
30 be exerted on the container structure to some degree. The more force that is exerted results in a demand for increased container wall-thickness, which in turn results in increased container cost.

The principal mode of failure in all prior art known to the applicant is non-recoverable buckling, due to weakness in the structural geometry of the container, when the weight of the container is lowered for commercial advantage. Many attempts to solve this problem have been directed to adding reinforcements to the container side-wall or to the panels themselves, and also to providing panel shapes that flex at lower thresholds of vacuum pressure.

To date, only containers utilising vertically oriented vacuum flex panels have been commercially presented and successful.

In our New Zealand Patent 240448 entitled "Collapsible Container", a semi-rigid collapsible container is described and claimed in which controlled collapsing is achieved by a plurality of arced panels which are able to resist expansion from internal pressure, but are able to expand transversely to enable collapsing of a folding portion under a longitudinal collapsing force. Much prior art in collapsible containers was disclosed, most of which provided for a bellows-like, or accordion-like vertical collapsing of the container.

Such accordion-like structures are inherently unsuitable for hot-fill applications, as they exhibit difficulty in maintaining container stability under compressive load. Such containers flex their sidewalls away from the central longitudinal axis of the container. Further, labels cannot be properly applied over such sections due to the vertical movement that takes place. This results in severe label distortion. For successful label application, the surface underneath must be structurally stable, as found in much prior art cold-fill container sidewalls whereby corrugations are provided for increased shape retention of the container under compressive load. Such compressive load could be supplied by either

increased top-load or increased vacuum pressure generated within a hot-fill container for example.

Objects of the Invention

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It is an object of the invention to provide a semi-rigid container which is able to more efficiently compensate for vacuum pressure in the container and to overcome or at least ameliate problems with prior art proposals to date and/or to at least provide the public with a useful choice.

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Summary Of The Invention

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According to one aspect of this invention there is provided a semi-rigid container, a side wall of which has at least one substantially vertically folding vacuum panel portion including an initiator portion and a control portion which resists being expanded from the collapsed state.

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Preferably the vacuum panel is adapted to fold inwardly under an externally applied mechanical force in order to completely remove vacuum pressure generated by the cooling of the liquid contents, and to prevent expansion from the collapsed state when the container is uncapped.

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According to a further aspect of this invention there is provided a semi-rigid container, a side wall of which has a substantially vertically folding vacuum panel portion including an initiator portion and a control portion which provides for expansion from the collapsed state.

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Preferably the vacuum panel is adapted to fold inwardly under a vacuum force below a predetermined level and to enable expansion from

the collapsed state when the container is uncapped and vacuum released.

Further aspects of this invention, which should be considered in all its novel aspects, will become apparent from the following description.

Brief Description Of Drawings

Figure 1: shows diagrammatically a semi-rigid collapsible container according to one possible embodiment of the invention in its pre-collapsed condition;

Figure 2: shows the container of Figure 1 in its collapsed condition;

Figure 3: very diagrammatically shows a cross-sectional view of the container of Figure 2 along the arrows A-A;

Figure 4: shows the container of Figure 1 along arrows A-A;

Figure 5: shows a container according to a further possible embodiment of the invention;

Figure 6: shows the container of Figure 5 after collapse;

Figure 7: shows a cross-sectional view of the container of Figure 6 along arrows B-B; and

Figure 8: shows a cross-sectional view of the container of Figure 5 along arrows B-B.

Description Of Preferred Embodiments

The present invention relates to collapsible semi-rigid containers having a side-wall with at least one substantially vertically folding vacuum panel section which compensates for vacuum pressure within the container.

Preferably in one embodiment the flexing may be inwardly, from an applied mechanical force. By calculating the amount of volume reduction that is required to negate the effects of vacuum pressure that would normally occur when the hot liquid cools inside the container, a vertically folding portion can be configured to allow completely for this volume reduction within itself. By mechanically folding the portion down after hot filling, there is complete removal of any vacuum force generated inside the container during liquid cooling. As there is no resulting vacuum pressure remaining inside the cooled container, there is little or no force generated against the sidewall, causing less stress to be applied to the container sidewalls than in prior art.

Further, by configuring the control portion to have a steep angle, expansion from the collapsed state when the container is uncapped is also prevented. A large amount of force, equivalent to that mechanically applied initially, would be required to revert the control portion to its previous position. This ready evacuation of volume with negation of internal vacuum force is quite unlike prior art vacuum panel container performance.

The present invention may be a container of any required shape or size and made from any suitable material and by any suitable technique. However, a plastics container blow moulded from polyethylene tetrphalate (PET) may be particularly preferred.

One possible design of semi-rigid container is shown in Figures 1 to 4 of the accompanying drawings. The container referenced generally by arrow C is shown with an open neck portion 4 leading to a bulbous upper portion 5, a central portion 6, a lower portion 7 and a base 8.

The central portion 6 provides a vacuum panel portion that will fold substantially vertically to compensate for vacuum pressure in the container 10 following cooling of the hot liquid.

The vacuum panel portion has an initiator portion 1 capable of flexing inwardly under low vacuum force and causes a more vertically steeply inclined (a more acute angle relative to the longitudinal axis of the container 10), control portion 2 to invert and flex further inwardly into the container 10.

The provision of an initiator portion 1 allows for a steep, relative to the longitudinal, angle to be utilised in the control portion 2. Without an initiator portion 1, the level of force needed to invert the control portion 2 may be undesirably raised. This enables strong resistance to expansion from the collapsed state of the bottle 1. Further, without an initiator portion to initiate inversion of the control portion, the control portion may be subject to undesirable buckling under compressive vertical load. Such buckling could result in failure of the control portion to fold into itself satisfactorily. Far greater evacuation of volume is therefore generated from a single panel section than from prior art vacuum flex panels. Vacuum pressure is subsequently reduced to a greater degree than prior art proposals causing less stress to be applied to the container side walls.

Moreover, when the vacuum pressure is adjusted following application of a cap to the neck portion 4 of the container 10 and subsequent cooling of the container contents, it is possible for the

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collapsing section to cause ambient or even raised pressure conditions inside the container 10.

This increased venting of vacuum pressure provides
5 advantageously for less force to be transmitted to the side walls of the container 10. This allows for less material to be necessarily utilised in the construction of the container 10 making production cheaper. This also allows for less failure under load of the container 10, and there is much less requirement for panel area to be necessarily deployed in a
10 design of a hot fill container, such as container 10. Consequently, this allows for the provision of other more aesthetically pleasing designs to be employed in container design for hot fill applications. For example, shapes could be employed that would otherwise suffer detrimentally from the effects of vacuum pressure. Additionally, it would be possible
15 to fully support the label application area, instead of having a 'crinkle' area underneath which is present with the voids provided by prior art containers utilising vertically oriented vacuum flex panels.

In a particular embodiment of the present invention, support
20 structures 3, such as raised radial ribs as shown, may be provided around the central portion 6 so that, as seen particularly in Figures 2 and 3, with the initiator portion 1 and the control portion 2 collapsed, they may ultimately rest in close association and substantial contact with the support structures 3 in order to maintain or contribute to top-
25 load capabilities, as shown at 1b and 2b and 3b in Figure 3.

In a further embodiment a telescopic vacuum panel is capable of flexing inwardly under low vacuum force, and enables expansion from the collapsed state when the container is uncapped and the vacuum
30 released.

Preferably in one embodiment the initiator portion is configured to provide for inward flexing under low vacuum force. The control portion is configured to allow for vacuum compensation appropriate to the container size, such that vacuum force is maintained, but kept relatively low, and only sufficient to draw the vertically folding vacuum panel section down until further vacuum compensation is not required. This will enable expansion from the collapsed state when the container is uncapped and vacuum released. Without the low vacuum force pulling the vertically folding vacuum panel section down, it will reverse in direction immediately due to the forces generated by the memory in the plastic material. This provides for a 'tamper-evident' feature for the consumer, allowing as it does for visual confirmation that the product has not been opened previously.

Additionally, the vertically folding vacuum panel section may employ two opposing initiator portions and two opposing control portions. Reducing the degree of flex required from each control portion subsequently reduces vacuum pressure to a greater degree. This is achieved through employing two control portions, each required to vent only half the amount of vacuum force normally required of a single portion. Vacuum pressure is subsequently reduced more than from prior art vacuum flex panels, which are not easily configured to provide such a volume of ready inward movement. Again, less stress is applied to the container side-walls.

Moreover, when the vacuum pressure is adjusted following application of the cap to the container, and subsequent cooling of the contents, top load capacity for the container is maintained through side-wall contact occurring through complete vertical collapse of the vacuum panel section.

Still, further, the telescopic panel provides good annular strengthening to the package when opened.

Referring now to Figures 5 to 8 of the drawings, preferably in
5 this embodiment there are two opposing initiator portions, upper initiator portion 103 and lower initiator portion 105, and two opposing control portions provided, upper control portion 104 and lower control portion 106. When the vacuum pressure is adjusted following application of a cap (not shown) to the container 100, and subsequent cooling of the
10 contents, top load capacity for the container 100 is maintained through upper side-wall 200 and lower side-wall 300 contact occurring through complete or substantially complete vertical collapse of the vacuum panel section, see Figures 6 and 7.

15 This increased venting of vacuum pressure provides advantageously for less force to be transmitted to the side-walls 100 and 300 of the container 100. This allows for less material to be necessarily utilised in the container construction, making production cheaper.

20 This allows for less failure under load of the container 100 and there is no longer any requirement for a vertically oriented panel area to be necessarily deployed in the design of hot-fill containers. Consequently, this allows for the provision of other more aesthetically
25 pleasing designs to be employed in container design for hot-fill applications. Further, this allows for a label to be fully supported by total contact with a side-wall which allows for more rapid and accurate label applications.

30 Additionally, when the cap is released from a vacuum filled container that employs two opposing collapsing sections, each control portion 104, 106 as seen in Figure 7, is held in a flexed position and will

immediately telescope back to its original position, as seen in Figure 8. There is immediately a larger headspace in the container which not only aids in pouring of the contents, but prevents 'blow-back' of the contents, or spillage upon first opening.

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Further embodiments of the present invention may allow for a telescopic vacuum panel to be depressed prior to, or during, the filling process for certain contents that will subsequently develop internal pressure before cooling and requiring vacuum compensation. In this embodiment the panel is compressed vertically, thereby providing for vertical telescopic enlargement during the internal pressure phase to prevent forces being transferred to the side-walls, and then the panel is able to collapse again telescopically to allow for subsequent vacuum compensation.

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Although two panel portions 101 and 102 are shown in the drawings it is envisaged that less than two may be utilised.

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Where in the foregoing description, reference has been made to specific components or integers of the invention having known equivalents then such equivalents are herein incorporated as if individually set forth.

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Although this invention has been described by way of example and with reference to possible embodiments thereof, it is to be understood that modifications or improvements may be made thereto without departing from the scope of the invention as defined in the appended claims.

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CLAIMS

1. A semi-rigid container having a longitudinal axis and with at least one substantially vertically folding vacuum panel portion to compensate for vacuum pressure change within the container, characterised in that the vacuum panel portion is substantially transversely disposed relative to the longitudinal axis and the vacuum panel portion inverts vertically under an externally applied mechanical force substantially parallel with said longitudinal axis.
2. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 1 characterised in that said vertically folding vacuum panel portion includes an initiator portion and a control portion, said initiator portion providing for vertical folding before said control portion.
3. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 2 characterised in that said control portion resists being expanded from the collapsed state.
4. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 1 characterised in that the vacuum panel is adapted to flex inwardly under a mechanical force above a predetermined level and enables expansion from the collapsed state when the container is capped and under internal pressure.
5. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 1 characterised in that a side-wall has said vacuum panel portion provided between an upper portion and a lower portion of said sidewall.
6. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 5 characterised in that said vacuum panel includes an initiator portion and a control portion, said control portion having a more acute angle than the initiator portion relative to the longitudinal axis of the container and wherein the initiator portion causes said control portion to invert and flex further inwardly into the container.
7. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 6 characterised in that in the collapsed state, upper and lower portions of said vacuum panel portion are adapted to be in substantial contact.

8. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 7 characterised in that said vacuum panel portion includes a plurality of spaced apart supporting ribs adapted to be in substantial contact with said control portion when the vacuum panel portion is in its collapsed state to contribute to the maintenance of top-load capabilities of the container.
9. A semi-rigid container having a longitudinal axis and a wall with at least one substantially vertically folding pressure panel portion to compensate for pressure change within the container caused by a heating or cooling of a liquid contained within the closed container, characterised in that the pressure panel portion is substantially transversely disposed relative to the longitudinal axis, and the pressure panel portion inverts vertically under a longitudinally applied mechanical force substantially parallel with said longitudinal axis.
10. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 2 characterised in that said vacuum panel portion is provided between an upper portion and a lower portion of a wall of said container, the control portion being intermediate between a lower end of said upper portion and said initiator portion.
11. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 1 characterised in that said vacuum panel portion is provided between an upper portion and a lower portion of a wall of said container and wherein in the collapsed state said upper and lower portions of said container are adapted to be in substantial contact.
12. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 1 characterised in that said vacuum panel portion is inverted and held in a fixed position prior to or during filling of the container with a liquid.
13. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 1, characterised in that said container is filled with a liquid, said container is capped and said liquid is heated such that an internal pressure builds within the container, and wherein said vacuum panel portion inverts and expands to relieve said internal pressure and can collapse back to compensate for any pressure reduction thereafter following cooling of said liquid.

14. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 1, characterised in that said folding of said vacuum panel portion results in substantially all vacuum pressure being removed from said container.
15. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 1, characterised in that said folding of said vacuum panel portion results in a slight increase in internal pressure following vacuum pressure compensation.
16. A semi-rigid container having a longitudinal axis and with at least one substantially vertically folding vacuum panel portion to compensate for vacuum pressure change within the container, characterised in that the vacuum panel portion is substantially transversely disposed relative to the longitudinal axis and the vacuum panel portion folds vertically substantially parallel with said longitudinal axis, wherein at least a portion of said vacuum panel inverts with respect to said longitudinal axis under vacuum pressure force.
17. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 16 characterised in that said vertically folding vacuum panel portion includes an initiator portion and a control portion, said initiator portion providing for vertical folding before said control portion.
18. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 17 characterised in that said control portion expands from the collapsed state following release of vacuum pressure.
19. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 17 characterised in that the vacuum panel is adapted to flex inwardly under a vacuum force below a predetermined level and enables expansion from the collapsed state when the container is uncapped and vacuum released.
20. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 17 characterised in that a side-wall has said vacuum panel portion provided between an upper portion and a lower portion, the initiator portion being intermediate between a lower end of said upper portion and said control portion.
21. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 20 characterised in that said control portion has a more acute angle than the initiator portion relative to the longitudinal

axis of the container and wherein the initiator portion causes said control portion to invert and flex further inwardly into the container.

22. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 21 characterised in that in the collapsed state, upper and lower portions of said vacuum panel portion are adapted to be in substantial contact.
23. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 22 characterised in that said vacuum panel portion includes a plurality of spaced apart supporting ribs adapted to be in substantial contact with said control portion when the vacuum panel portion is in its collapsed state to contribute to the maintenance of top-load capabilities of the container.
24. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 17 characterised in that said vacuum panel portion is provided between an upper portion and a lower portion of a wall of said container, the control portion being intermediate between a lower end of said upper portion and said initiator portion.
25. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 16 characterised in that said vacuum panel portion is provided between an upper portion and a lower portion of a wall of said container and wherein in the collapsed state said upper and lower portions of said container are adapted to be in substantial contact.
26. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 16 characterised in that said vertically folding vacuum panel portion includes two initiator portions and two control portions, said initiator portions providing for vertical folding before said control portions.
27. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 26 characterised in that said control portions are held in a flexed position under vacuum pressure, such that upon release of said vacuum pressure, said control portions and said initiator portions revert back to their original position.

28. A semi-rigid container as claimed in claim 17 characterised in that said control portion is held in a flexed position under vacuum pressure, such that upon release of said vacuum pressure, said control portion and said initiator portion revert back to their original position.