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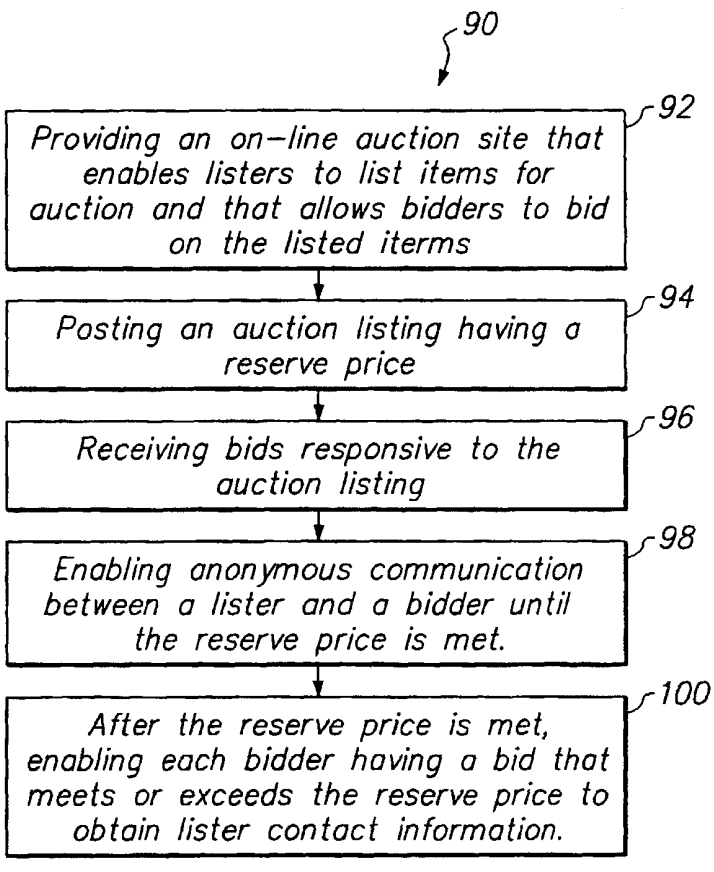
(54) Title: METHOD FOR PROMOTING LISTER ANONYMITY DURING AN ON-LINE AUCTION



(57) Abstract: A method of preserving bidder and lister anonymity during early stages of an on-line auction includes using an anonymous email server to facilitate communications between bidders and listers (prospective sellers). Typically, each auction listing includes a lister user ID, an item description, and a start price and a reserve price (94). The method includes receiving bids responsive to the listings from prospective buyers (96). The method includes enabling anonymous communication via the anonymous email server between the lister and the bidder during the auction (98). Only when the reserve price is met or exceeded by a bidder, the bidder is entitled to receive the lister's contact information (100). This enables serious bidders that have met or bid in excess of the reserve price, but lost the auction to another bidder, to later strike a deal with the seller. The seller remains anonymous to all but those serious bidders who have met the reserve price.

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METHOD FOR PROMOTING LISTER ANONYMITY DURING AN ON-LINE AUCTION

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 09/348,732, filed July 6, 1999.

The present invention pertains to online transactions, and more particularly to reverse transactions where the buyer initiates a transaction by posting an offer to buy goods or services, even more particularly the present invention pertains to online reverse auctions.

Background of the Invention

The concept of reverse online transactions is used to facilitate transactions on the Internet. Priceline.Com, Inc., for example, offers travel tickets and accommodations through a reverse transaction format on its web site located at www.priceline.com. The method employed by the priceline.com web site allows the buyer with a credit card to place a firm offer. The firm offer is communicated to predetermined ticket vendors. The first vendor to accept the offer binds the buyer into a sales contract. It is noteworthy that the buyer's offer price is not made public. A vendor can either accept or reject the offer. There is no further price competition between vendors. Various aspects of the reverse transaction format employed by Priceline.com are discussed in US Patent Number 5,794,207 to Walker et al. This US Patent is incorporated herein by reference.

Several drawbacks to reverse transactions have manifest. For example, in the reverse transaction format employed on the priceline.com web site, the buyer places a firm offer, secured by a credit card or other financial means. The buyer waits to see if a seller accepts the firm offer. Because the buyer has made a firm

offer, the buyer is practically prevented from considering alternate travel arrangements. This limits the buyer to the single firm offer. Limiting a buyer to a single offer prevents the buyer from seeking other vendors and may prevent the buyer from achieving the lowest possible price for goods or services. This is especially true for buyers that overbid.

What is desired is a way of providing a reverse transaction format where the buyer has a choice to consider multiple counteroffers. In this way the buyer is better protected because the buyer may choose among many counteroffers before entering into a binding contract.

Privacy is a concern for online buyers, generally. A popular online auction is presented by eBay, Inc. at www.ebay.com. Privacy is preserved by allowing only registered users to access another registered user's contact information (i.e. email address). This design has an apparent purpose to prevent the general public from gathering e-mail addresses of eBay users and generating spam mail. Fortunately, in a typical auction format any potential buyer remains anonymous until a bid is placed.

One drawback of the online auction used by eBay, Inc. is that registered users, including sellers, can obtain the contact information (i.e. e-mail addresses) of other registered users. Since there are thousands of registered users, privacy is relatively unprotected with respect to these registered users. Furthermore, anyone that bids on an item presents his or her email address to the thousands of registered users. This is so notwithstanding whether or not the bid is successful.

The buyer's e-mail address is a valuable resource for a pool of sellers. In some cases, multiple overzealous sellers with a sales lead such as an e-mail address may spam the buyer with a barrage of unwanted e-mails until the buyer buys or changes his e-mail address. Accordingly, what is desired is a way to maintain buyer anonymity in online transactions to prevent spam e-mails.

Respond.com, Inc. has a beta version of an online reverse transaction format on the web at http://www.respond.com/. This web site enables buyers to post an offer to buy and enables sellers to contact the buyer in an effort to satisfy the offer to buy. The buyer's email address is not apparent to the sellers from the offer to buy. This reverse sales format pioneered by Respond.com, Inc. fosters buyer anonymity by filtering the buyer's e-mail address from the posted offers to buy. General instructions quoted from this web site describe how anonymity is preserved:

> "Buyers remain anonymous to the Sellers. We require you to give Respond.com your email address so we can forward Seller's Response emails to you. However, we will not give your email address to anyone. When you receive emails from the Sellers, it is up to you to contact them (remember they don't have your email address.)"

The Respond.com, Inc. web site takes a good first step in protecting buyer anonymity, but it has been found that once the buyer receives offers from multiple sellers, the buyer must contact the sellers directly e.g. by e-mail. Anonymity with respect to the sellers disappears when the buyer directly contacts the seller. Accordingly, the buyer typically can not anonymously ask questions, or anonymously negotiate price with a seller.

Buyers may be weary of giving out an e-mail address to multiple sellers for fear of spam mail. This spam mail fear could limit the number of questions a buyer asks of a seller regarding the various qualities of the item to be bought. Fear of spam mail may also limit the buyer's desire to negotiate price with the sellers. Accordingly, what is desired is a way of reducing seller access to buyer contact information to improve buyer anonymity. What is also desired is a turnkey way of allowing the buyer to achieve an optimal bargain with a willing seller.

In on-line auctions such those hosted by at www.eBay.com, many sellers of items (listers) are private parties that are not normally engaged in commercial

retailing. Others retail items from a home office, or garage. Such listers desire to preserve their anonymity to the greatest degree possible. What is desired is an on-line auction that prevents the disclosure of lister contact information to the best possible degree to preserve the privacy of listers.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention includes a system and method of maintaining buyer anonymity in online transactions. The system includes a host server, an e-mail server and a database. The system is accessible by system users i.e. buyers and sellers. Each user has contact information including an e-mail address. Each user pre-registers with the system via the host server and provides the host with user contact information including e-mail address. The host assigns each user a user ID. The host stores the user contact information and assigned user ID in the database to enable the host server verify user ID's and enable anonymous e-mail forwarding between users.

The host server hosts a web site interface. This interface is accessible by registered system users via the communication network. The web site interface includes an online reverse auction operated by the host server.

In accordance with reverse auction principals, the host receives an offer to buy from a buyer. The host then receives at least one offer-response from at least one seller, preferably receives multiple offer-responses from multiple sellers. The offers to buy and the offer-responses are posted on the web site interface to enable registered users having access to the communications network to view the offers and offer-responses. In an alternate embodiment, the host server posts the offers to buy and offer-responses to the general public (i.e. non-users).

According to one aspect of the invention, the host permits offer-response modifications. The host virtually instantaneously posts new offer-responses and offer response modifications to enable the multiple sellers to bid down against each

other in a reverse-auction format. Bidding down assures that the buyers will have the lowest possible pricing and minimizes the need for buyers to communicate with sellers over item pricing.

The system anticipates a need for buyers to ask questions of sellers. Such questions (queries) may relate to item features, pricing, item condition, availability, shipping terms, warranty, and other terms. The e-mail server communicates with the host server and user database for facilitating anonymous communications between buyers and sellers. The e-mail server having an e-mail address filter for removing e-mail addresses from e-mail correspondences from a buyer to a seller. The terms "buyer(s)" and seller(s) as used herein includes prospective buyers and sellers).

Any posted offer-response by a seller includes the seller user ID. The buyer directs an e-mail to the seller user ID via the host server web interface and the e-mail server. The e-mail server filters any indicia of buyer contact information, sending only a query from the buyer with the buyer's user ID. The seller responds with a query-response to the buyer query via the e-mail server. The e-mail server accesses the database, associating an e-mail address with the buyer user ID. The e-mail server forwards the seller's query-response to the buyer. Accordingly, the seller never has access to the buyer's contact information.

According to a variation of the invention, the system includes a negotiation room server. The negotiation room server communicates with the host and the web interface. The web interface includes a negotiation toggle to enable a buyer to initiate a real-time chat with a particular seller. The chat can be pre-scheduled, or instantaneous. The negotiation room server communicates with the database to filter buyer contact information. According, an anonymous chat room is set up to facilitate anonymous negotiation between a buyer and a seller.

The present invention preserves buyer anonymity by supplementing a reverse auction system with and anonymous e-mail server for forwarding

anonymous e-mails between buyers and sellers. An anonymous chat room also supplements the reverse auction system to facilitate instantaneous and anonymous communication between buyers and sellers. The chat room and e-mail servers combined with the host server and reverse auction format can better facilitate arms length transactions, barter and other hybrid transactions between buyers and sellers. The reverse auction format makes transactions more efficient by allowing sellers to bid down against each other to give the buyer the lowest possible price. The reverse auction format minimizes the need to negotiate price between buyers and sellers.

Brief Description of the Drawing

FIG. 1 is a diagram of a system in accordance with the present invention.

FIG. 2 is a flow diagram showing a method of anonymously querying a seller.

FIG. 3 is a diagram of the system of FIG. 1 with multiple sellers.

FIG. 4 is a flow diagram of a reverse auction method employed by the system of FIG. 3.

FIG. 4(a) is a sample listing form for enabling a buyer to communicate an offer to buy.

FIG. 5 is a diagram of the system of FIG. 1 with a negotiation room server to facilitate chat between a buyer and a seller.

FIG. 6 is a flow diagram of a method of employing the system of FIG. 5.

FIG. 7 is a flow diagram of a method in accordance with the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. 1 shows a system in accordance with the present invention, generally designated with the reference numeral 10. The system 10 includes a host server, a

database 14, an e-mail server 16, a buyer 18 and a seller 20. The system 10 may be employed to preserve buyer anonymity in online transactions such as reverse transactions, online auctions, and reverse online auctions.

The term "item" is understood to include goods and services. The term "buyer(s)" are defined as including prospective buyers. The term "seller(s)" are defined as including prospective sellers. In accordance with the present invention buyers 18 and sellers 20 deal in items. Items include goods, services, or both.

The system 10 is particularly useful for reverse transactions and reverse auctions. A reverse transaction as defined herein is a transaction, which is initiated by a buyer in the form of an offer to buy an item. This offer to buy is directed to the general public, or to a predefined group of sellers.

A reverse auction is a reverse transaction where sellers are enabled to respond to a buyer's offer to buy. For the purposes of the present invention, seller responses to the buyer's offer to buy are termed "offer-responses". Each offer and each offer-response is published to the general public, or to a predefined group such as a group of registered system 10 users. According to reverse auction principals, posted offer-responses typically include a price term that is modifiable by the seller 20. Since the offer-responses are posted, a seller 20 may view other seller's offer-responses. This feature enables multiple sellers 20 to bid against each other provide the buyer 18 with a favorable price.

The system 10 is integrated into a communications network 22 accessible by any number of buyers 18 and sellers 20. The communications network 22 preferably is the Internet. According to an alternate aspect of the invention, the communications network 22 is a closed network such as an intranet. It can be appreciated that any communication network capable of communicating text, voice and/or images can be used in accordance with the present invention.

The host server 12 is in communication with the communications network. The host server 12 receives offers to buy from at least one buyer 18. The host

server 12 then receives at least one offer response pertaining to the buyer's 18 offer to buy. The host server 12 posts the offers to buy and the offer responses to the communications network. Preferably the host server is a web-based that posts a conventional web page for displaying the offers to buy, and the offer-responses.

The system 10 includes the database 14 stored on the host server 12 to store user ID's, pass codes and data associated with each user. The database 14 enables the host 12 to verify user ID's and pass codes.

User registration is a prerequisite to posting offers to buy and offer-responses on the host 12. The host verifies user ID's and pass codes, permitting only registered users to use the system.

The host, upon receipt of registration, is capable of automatically screening the registrations so that registrants may be rejected based on predetermined criteria. For example, the host may connect to credit reporting agencies and the like to screen undesirables from the system 10.

The system 10 enables anonymous communications between users. The user ID's employed by the host 12 and stored on the database typically do not include user data. Anonymous communication is accomplished by using the user ID's for posting offers and offer-responses. The host does not provide a mechanism for allowing users to obtain email addresses of other users. It can be appreciated, however, that a user may optionally share his e-mail to sellers if anonymity is not desired. Accordingly, the user e-mail address, name and other contact information are confidentially stored on the host server 12 via the database 14 and are not shared by the host server 12.

E-mail communications between users are routed through the system 10 via the host server 12 and the e-mail server 16. According to one aspect of the invention, the email server 16 communicates with the host server 16 and user database 14 for facilitating anonymous communications between a buyer 18 and a seller 20.

The e-mail server 16 accesses the database 14 to verify user IDs and to associate an e-mail address with each user IDs. The e-mail server 16 routs e-mails between users using the user IDs. The e-mail server 16 has an e-mail address filter for removing e-mail addresses from routed e-mail correspondences. Accordingly, the e-mail server functions as an anonymous e-mail forwarder.

Anonymous e-mail forwarding keeps buyer contact information, including e-mail address, a secret. Buyer anonymity is strongly desired to prevent overzealous sellers from spamming curious buyers. The concept of combining an anonymous e-mail forwarder in combination with a system for selling items is one of the novel features of the present invention.

The hardware configuration of a host server and an e-mail server results in the host server receiving communications (e.g. e-mail) initiated by users viewing web pages page hosted by the host server. Such communications are verified and forwarded via the e-mail server as appropriate. It can be appreciated, however, that the hardware configuration can be combined into a single machine, or into multiple machines.

It can be appreciated that e-mail is defined broadly to include all electronic communications regardless of format. For example, an e-mail can include sound attachments, video attachments, and even sound and video streams with compression. A user ID may be a digitally signed ID. The user's e-mail address is a generic term that is understood include any electronic address.

A buyer may not always have sufficient information to accept or reject an offer-response. Accordingly, the present invention provides for to two easy ways to anonymously enable the buyer to query the seller. One way is by anonymous e-mail. Another way is by anonymous chat.

Offers to buy and ans offer-responses are posted on the host with user IDs. According to one aspect of the invention, the e-mail server is capable of receiving a query-response from the seller. Upon receipt of a query-response the e-mail

server 16 accesses the database 14 to associate the query-response with a buyer 18 and then forwards the query-response to the associated buyer 18.

Preferably, the e-mail server 16 includes an offensive term filter to prevent the email server from forwarding e-mail with offensive terms. The host server 12 also includes an offensive term filter to prevent the host server 12 from posting offensive terms in the offers to buy and in the offer-responses.

FIG. 2 illustrates a method 24 employed by the system of FIG. 1. The method 24 includes the step 26 of posting an offer to buy on the host server, the step 28 of accessing the offer to buy, the step 30 of posting an offer-response on the host, the step 32 of anonymously querying the seller for information pertaining to the offer-response, the step 34 of receiving a query-response and the step 36 of forwarding the query-response to a buyer.

In the step 28, a seller 20 accesses the offer to buy and evaluates his ability to satisfy the buyer 18. In the step 30, the seller 20 posts a offer-response corresponding to the offer to -guy on the host server. In the step 32, the buyer anonymously queries the seller for information pertaining to the seller's offer-response. The query is typically via e-mail. The seller responds to the query in the form of a query-response addressed to the buyer's user ID. In step 34, the server receives the query response from the seller. The email server identifies the buyer user ID from the query response. The e-mail server associates the user ID with a buyer e-mail address. In step 36, the e-mail server forwards the query-response to the buyer.

It can be appreciated that although e-mail is preferred, when e-mail is not available snail mail, fax, or other means may be employed to communicate the query-response to the buyer.

FIG. 3 shows a system 40 for a reverse auction. The system 40 includes a first seller 42, a second seller 44, and an n^{th} seller 46. The first seller 42, the second seller 44 and n^{th} seller 46 each respond to an offer to buy initiated by the

buyer 18. Accordingly, when the buyer 18 posts an offer to buy to the communications network via the host 12, multiple sellers can review the offer to buy. In an effort to sell items, the host server 12 permits each sellers to post offer-responses relating to the offer to buy.

According to one aspect of the invention, the host enables each seller to post only one offer-response. According to another aspect of the invention, the host 12 permits a seller to post multiple offer-responses. Multiple offer-responses by the same seller is desirable when, for example, the seller is a car dealer and has many cars that fall within the scope of the buyer's offer to buy.

The multiple offer-responses are posted by the sellers 42,44 and 46 to the host server 12. The multiple offer-responses are viewable by each of the multiple sellers 42, 44 and 46, the buyer 18 and any other network user.

Any offer-responses posted by a particular seller is modifiable by that particular seller. The host server 12 is optimized to virtually instantaneously post such modifications to the network. Instantaneously posting modified offer-responses creates a reverse auction between the sellers 42,44 and 46 to minimize any need price negotiation between the buyer 18 and the sellers 42,44 and 46. According to one aspect of the invention, sellers are automatically notified when any offer-response is added or modified so that the reverse auction rapidly completes.

FIG. 4 shows the method 50 used by the system of FIG. 3. The method includes the steps of method 24 of FIG. 2 and the step 52 of deciding whether a response is satisfactory and the step 54 of modifying the offer response. The step 56 includes the buyer accessing the multiple offer-responses 30. The step 58 includes the seller blindly responding to the buyer's query. After the step 58 where seller blindly responds to the buyer's query, the seller receives the seller's query-response (step 34 of FIG. 2). The buyer evaluates the offer-responses and query responses to complete the step 60 of consummating a transaction with one or more

of the sellers.

A buyer posts an offer to buy on the host server, step 26. This offer to buy is posted on a web page and is accessed by three sellers, steps 28a, 28b and 28c. Each seller posts a offer-response to buy on the web page, steps 30a, 30b and 30c. Each seller checks the web page to view competing offers and determines if his offer-response is satisfactory, steps 52a, 52b, 52c. If the seller's offer-response is unsatisfactory, then the seller modifies his offer-response 54a, 54b, 54c. The buyer accesses the multiple offer-responses, step 56. Next the buyer may consummate a transaction with one or more of the sellers, step 60, or may anonymously query any of the sellers, steps 32a and 32b.

For example, the buyer may not have enough information to decide whether or not to consummate a transaction, step 60. Accordingly, the buyer anonymously queries the first and second seller 32a and 32b. Each seller blindly responds to the buyer's query 58a and 58b. The seller responses are communicated via e-mail and received (step 34 FIG. 2). The seller responses are not published on the host server's web page. With the offer-responses 30a, 30b, and 30c in conjunction with the query-responses 32a and 32b, the buyer may have enough information to consummate a transaction, step 60. A transaction may be consummated with any one, or more, of the sellers. Optionally, the buyer may opt out of any further communication with the sellers. It can be appreciated that the buyer is still anonymous to each of the sellers, unless the buyer decides to move to step 60 where the seller would need the buyer payment information and shipping address, for example.

FIG. 4(a) shows a buyer offer interface posted by the host server. The buyer offer interface includes a listing form 61 for posting offers to buy on the host server. The listing form includes a pricing criteria toggle 62 having at least three offer pricing criteria options, including a first option 64 for accepting all offers; a second option 66 for allowing all offers below a certain value; and a third

option 68 for allowing only the lowest offer. The toggle 62 enables a buyer to instruct the host server to selectively filter offer-responses based on desired pricing criteria. When the host receives offer-responses that meet the price criteria from the listing form 61, the host server posts the filtered offer-responses to the network.

FIG. 5 shows a system 70 including the host server 12, the database 14, the e-mail server 16, the buyer 18, the seller 20 and a negotiation room server 70. The negotiation room server 70 is in communication with the host server 12 for enabling anonymous online chat between the buyer 18 and seller 20.

Preferably the host server 12 post a web page interface a negotiation room toggle. Actuating the toggle, by the buyer, causes the e-mail server to dispatch an instant notification to the seller to indicate that a chat is requested. Simultaneously, the negotiation room server displays a negotiation interface simultaneously accessible by the buyer 18 and the seller 20. If the seller 20 is does not respond, the e-mail server sends an e-mail notification to the buyer 18 indicating that an appointment to chat should be set. The buyer 18 dispatches an anonymous appointment invitation via the negotiation room server 72 and the e-mail server 16 to the seller 20 to make an appointment to chat. The appointment invitation The appointment invitation specifies a suggested appointment time.

Preferably, the negotiation room interface is simultaneously accessible by a single buyer and a single seller for real-time communications. The negotiation room server 72 has an identity filter so that the buyer's identity remains anonymous when the buyer 18 uses the negotiation room interface.

The negotiation room server 72 includes an offensive term filter to prevent the negotiation room interface from posting offensive terms. The offensive term filter operates in real time to monitor and filter chat between a buyer and seller. This filter identifies and eliminates offensive terms used during the chat and drops buyers and sellers that use the offensive terms.

FIG. 6 shows a method 80 including the step 26 of posting an offer to buy, the step 28 of accessing the offer to buy, the step 30 of posting an offer-response, the step 82 of initiating chat on the negotiation room server, and the step 60 of consummating a transaction.

In Operation

The system of the present invention preserves buyer anonymity during online transactions such as reverse auctions and the like. The system includes a host server having a web-based interface and being in communication with the communications network, the host server receives and posts offers to buy from buyers and offer-responses from sellers via the web-based interface, each offer-response being responsive to an offers to buy, the host server posts the offers to buy and offer-responses to the communications network; a user database stored on the host server to store user ID's user contact information, the user contact information including e-mail address; and an anonymous e-mail server in communication with the host server and user database, the email server being capable of receiving a query from a buyer and anonymously forwarding the query to a seller, and for receiving a query-response from the seller and forwarding the query-responses to the seller.

The e-mail server includes an e-mail address filter. E-mails from buyers typically include the buyer's e-mail address. Upon receipt of an e-mail query from the buyer, the e-mail server filter's any e-mail address from the query before forwarding the query to the seller.

The host server is simultaneously accessible by multiple sellers to enable multiple sellers to post multiple offer-responses and to enable multiple sellers to simultaneously review the multiple offer-responses. The host server enables modification of each offer-response to encourage sellers to bid down against each other. The host server is optimized to virtually instantaneously post the

modifications, thus creating a real-time reverse auction.

FIG. 7 shows that method 90 of preserving buyer and seller anonymity during the early stages of an on-line auction. The method 90 includes the steps 92, 94, 96, 98 and 100. It can be appreciated that method of FIG. 7 pertains to typical auctions having a reserve price such as often presented at www.eBay.com. The lister is a prospective seller and bidders are prospective buyers until the auction closes. One goal of the method 90 is to preserve the anonymity of any lister (i.e., prospective seller) to the best practical degree. The method 90 is preferably practiced in conjunction with an auction system having an anonymous mail server 16 (FIG. 1) so that communications between bidders and listers during a pending auction are accomplished anonymously through the mail server 16. Auctions are for a finite duration. No communications via the email server are facilitated after the auction closes. Accordingly, spam mail after the close of auction to the various bidders is not facilitated by the auction.

It can be appreciated that any anonymous communication facilitate by the email server during the pending auction enables a bidder or lister to disclose contact information such as a phone number or email address. The auction web site, however, keeps such contact information anonymous to the best degree possible.

The step 92 provides an on-line auction site that enables listers to list items for auction and bidders to bid on the listed items. The step 94 posts an auction listing having a reserve price. The step 96 receives bids responsive to the auction listing. The step 98 enables anonymous communication between a lister and a bidder until the reserve price is met. The step 100 includes enabling each bidder having a bid that meets or exceeds the reserve price to obtain lister contact information. Accordingly, the only bidders that can obtain the lister contact information are those bidders having a bid that meets or exceeds the reserve price. Using the reserve price as a threshold limits the disclosure of the lister contact

information only to serious bidders who are contractually committed to buy the listers listed item (under commonly accepted auction rules).

The method 90 has the advantage of allowing disclosure of a seller's contact information to only serious bidders so that a seller's anonymity is preserved in the early stages of the auction. In later stages of the auction, after the reserve price has been met, the buyers that have met the reserve price can obtain seller information to contact the seller after the close of the auction. This is a boon the bidders that lost the auction because having the seller contact information enables the serious bidders to follow up with the seller. This is also a boon the seller with multiple items because the seller can negotiate deals with the serious buyers after the close of the auction. Since the seller contact information has not been provided to the less than serious bidders (who have not met the reserve price), the seller will not be spammed with unwanted emails.

All bidders having exceeded the reserve price can be winners in the sense that they could end up knowing the lister contact information and later striking deals with the lister.

While the foregoing detailed description has described various embodiments of the invention it is to be understood that the above description is illustrative only and not limiting of the disclosed invention. Multiple systems can screen communications in accordance with the present invention. Hosts can function as e-mail servers and chat servers. Accordingly, the present invention is not limited to a multi-machine network. The present invention can be implemented with a single host machine that provides multiple functions. Accordingly, the invention is to be limited only by the appended claims.

What is claimed is

1. A method of preserving lister anonymity in a reverse on-line auction comprising:

providing an on-line auction site wherein a bidder may post bid for an item, the bid being an auction listing having a description for the item and a start price;

receiving at the on-line auction site at least one offer to sell the item from a seller and posting the offer from each seller associated with the item;

anonymously querying the bidder for information pertaining to each offer associated with the item, the bidder generating a query-response thereto with respect to the offer; and

forwarding by the on-line auction site the query response to the seller associated with the offer.

2. A method as set forth in Claim 1 further comprising:

enabling anonymous communication between the bidder and the seller associated with the offer via an anonymous email server subsequent to forwarding the query-response.

3. A method as set forth in Claim 2 wherein the enabling includes displaying a negotiating interface between the bidder and the seller associated with the offer.

4. A method as set forth in Claim 3 wherein the negotiation interface is simultaneously accessible by the bidder and the seller associated with the offer.

5. A method as set forth in Claim 3 further comprising:

storing information for each seller in a database including an identity for each seller; and

filtering the identity for the seller associated with the offer from the negotiation interface.

6. A method as set forth in Claim 1 further comprising:

initiating anonymous chat between the bidder and the seller associated with the offer subsequent to forwarding the query-response.

7. A method as set forth in Claim 6 wherein the initiating includes communicating an invitation to chat each of the bidder and the seller associated with the offer.

8. A method as set forth in Claim 7 further comprising providing an negotiation room server at which the anonymous chat is maintained.

9. A method as set forth in Claim 1 further comprising:

displaying a web page at which the bid is initially displayed;

posting to the web page each offer for the item from each respective seller;

modifying the web page in response to each seller modifying its respective offer.

10. A method asset forth in Claim 4 wherein each seller remains anonymous to the bidder except for the seller posting the offer selected by the bidder in the event a transaction in consummated therebetween.

AMENDED CLAIMS

[received by the International Bureau on 21 May 2001 (21.05.01)
original claims 1 – 10 replaced by new claims 1- 9 (3 pages)]

1. A method for preserving lister anonymity on an on-line auction site comprising:

storing in a database on a host server a name and an e-mail address for each of a plurality of users;

assigning by the host server an anonymous user ID for each one of the users

receiving at the host server an offer to buy having at least a description of an item desired to be purchased, the offer being generated by one of the users being a bidder;

posting by the host server on the auction site the offer and the user ID of the bidder;

receiving at the host server at least one offer-response to sell the item, the offer-response having at least a price term and being generated by one of the users being a lister;

posting by the host server on the auction site the offer-response and the user ID of the lister;

receiving at an e-mail server in communication with the host server an e-mail query for sufficient information relating to the bid generated by the lister and addressed to the user ID of the bidder;

associating the user ID of the bidder with an e-mail address in said database for the bidder;

forwarding by the e-mail server the query to the e-mail address for the bidder, the query identifying the user ID of the lister;

receiving at the email server a query-response generated by the bidder and addressed to the user ID of lister;

forwarding by the email server the query-response to the e-mail address for the lister, the query-response identifying the user ID of the bidder

consummating a transaction for the item between the bidder and the lister upon the acceptance by the lister of information contained in the query-response by first

releasing to the bidder the name and e-mail address associated with the user ID of the lister.

2. A method a set forth in Claim 1 further comprising:

opening a communication channel between the bidder and the lister through a chat server; and

identifying the bidder and the lister in the communication channel by the respective user ID for the bidder and the lister.

3. A method as set forth in Claim 1 wherein the offer-response further has a reserve price and information in the query-response includes a price for the item, the releasing being performed upon the price in the information of the query-response exceeding the reserve price.

4. A method as set forth in Claim 3 repeating the receiving the query through the forwarding the query-response until price for the item in information in the query-response exceeds the reserve price.

5. A method as set forth in Claim 4 further comprising opting out of repeating the receiving the query through the forwarding the query-response selectively by election of the bidder and the lister.

6. A method as set forth in Claim 2 further comprising:

displaying the auction site on a web page to which the offer is posted;

posting to the web page each offer-response from a respective one of a plurality of listers;

modifying the web page in response to each offer-response being modified by the respective one of the listers; and

repeating the receiving the query through the forwarding the query-response between the bidder and individually with each of the listers until the reserve price is met with respect to one of the listers, the releasing being performed for only the one of the listers.

7. A method asset forth in Claim 6 wherein each one of the listers remains anonymous to the bidder except for the one of the listers posting the offer-response selected by the bidder in the event a transaction in consummated therebetween.

8. A method as set forth in Claim 2 wherein the opening includes communicating an invitation to chat to each of the bidder and the lister associated with the offer.

9. A method as set forth in Claim 7 further comprising providing an negotiation room server at which the anonymous chat is maintained.

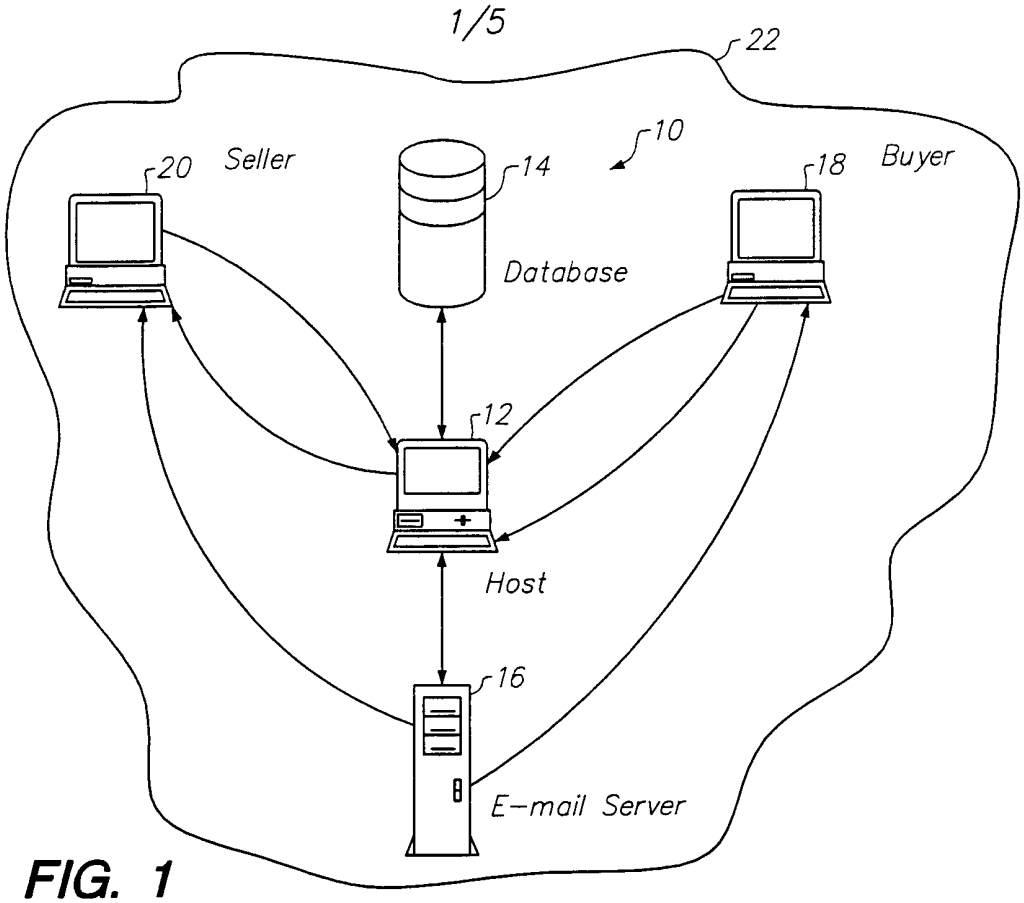
22
10
20
Seller
14
18
Buyer
Database
12
Host
16
E-mail Server

FIG. 1

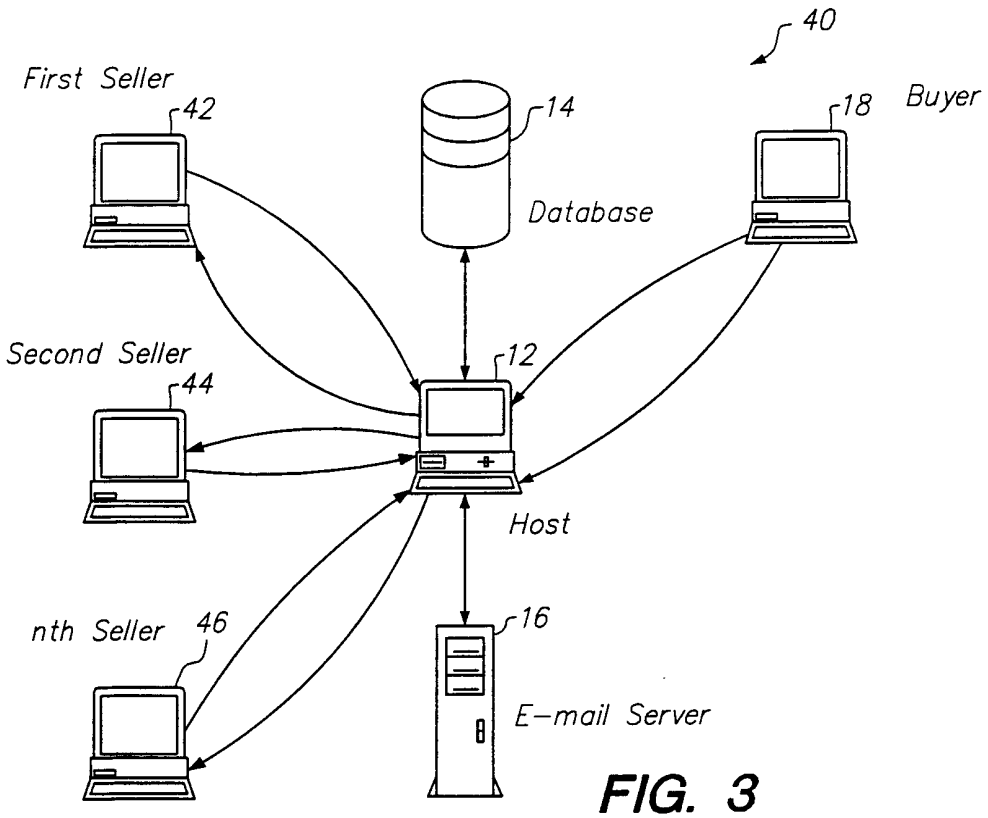
40
First Seller
42
14
18
Buyer
Database
Second Seller
44
12
Host
nth Seller
46
16
E-mail Server

FIG. 3

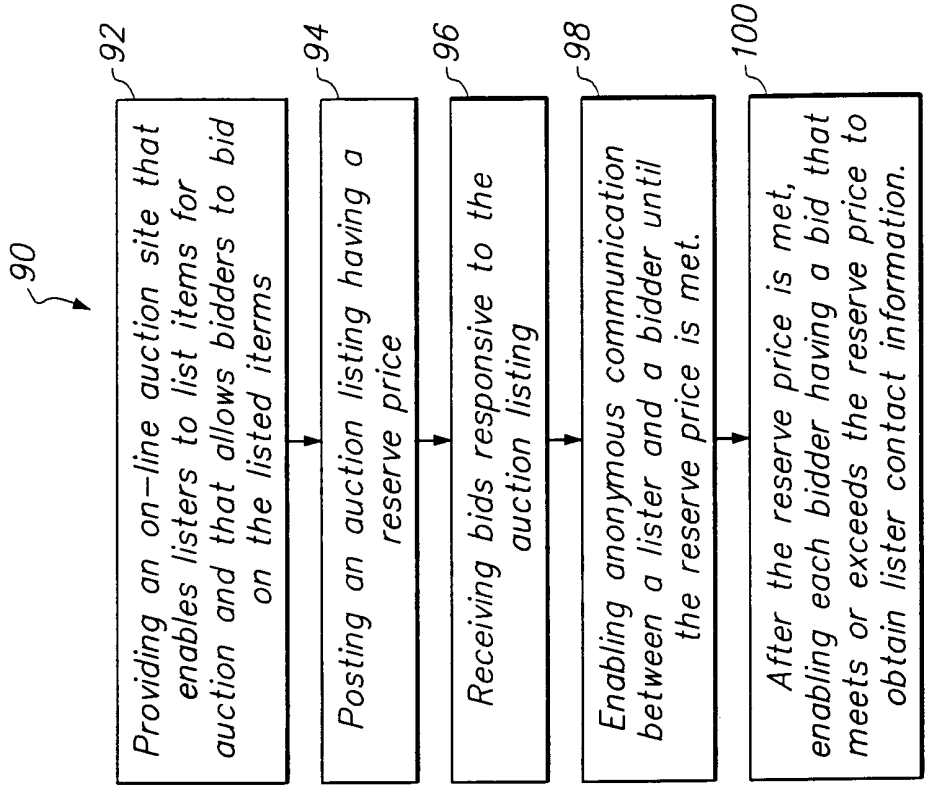

FIG. 7

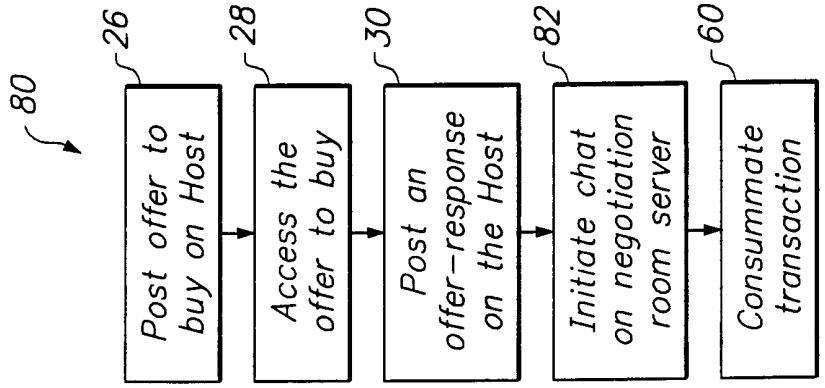

FIG. 6

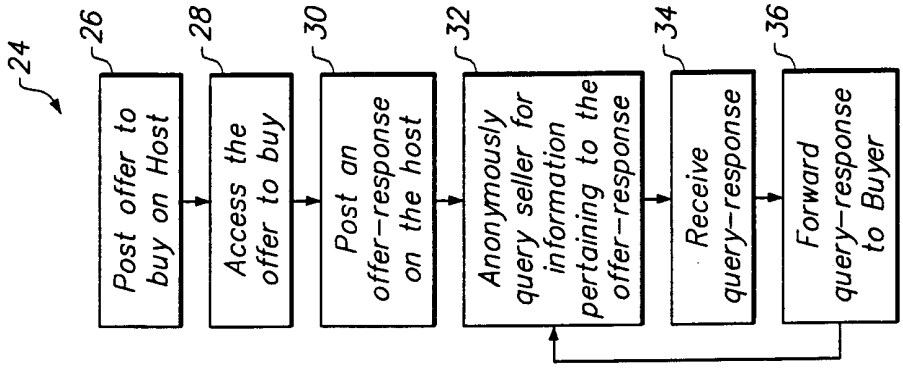

FIG. 2

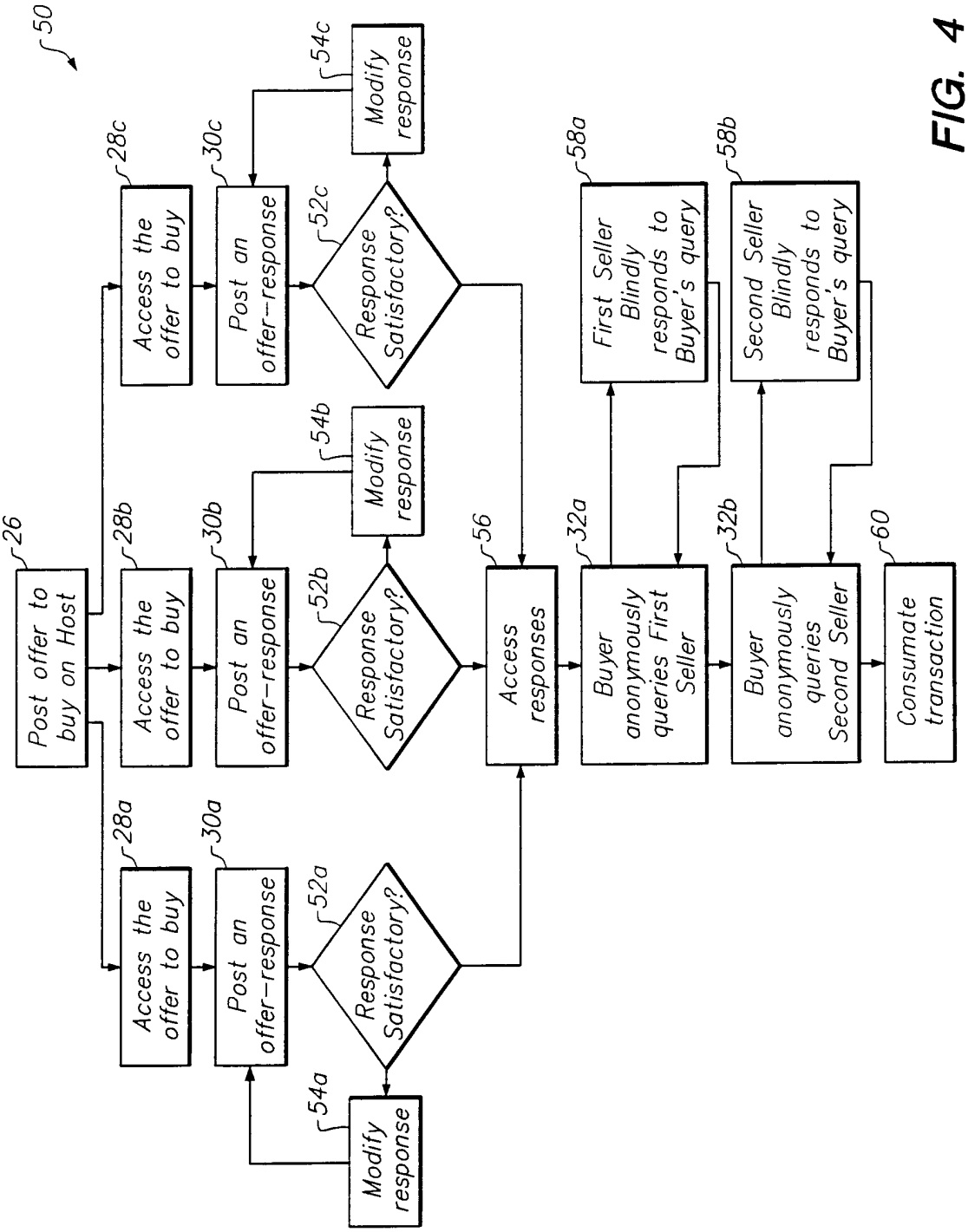
50
Post offer to buy on Host
26
Access the offer to buy
28a
Post an offer-response
30a
Response Satisfactory?
52a
Modify response
54a
Access the offer to buy
28b
Post an offer-response
30b
Response Satisfactory?
52b
Modify response
54b
Access the offer to buy
28c
Post an offer-response
30c
Response Satisfactory?
52c
Modify response
54c
Access responses
56
Buyer anonymously queries First Seller
32a
First Seller Blindly responds to Buyer's query
58a
Buyer anonymously queries Second Seller
32b
Second Seller Blindly responds to Buyer's query
58b
Consumate transaction
60

FIG. 4

eWanted.com™ Home | Register Free | User Portfolio

Reversing the Rules you Buy With!!™ Browse | Search | Post | Services | Help | Rewards

Listing Form *continued.....* 61

Category: Air Craft: AirCraft: Propeller Engines

62 64

Offers Considered	66 ○ All offers ● All Offers Below Amount Limit of $ 10,000 68 ○ Lowest Offer Below Amount Limit of $	
I will Pay for it by	☐ Visa ☐ American Express ☐ Cashier Check ☐ Personal Check ☐ I-Escrow ☐ Cash ☑ Financing	☐ MC ☐ Discover ☐ Wire Transfer ☐ Prepay ☐ COD ☐ Other
I am Looking for a Quantity	1 Unit (s)	
Will accept offers from	○ Private Party ○ Dealer Only ● Both	
Item Condition	○ Brand New ○ New/Open Box ● Used/Second Hand ○ Does not matter	
Will need Delivery	Immediately After closing of Offers ▽	
Shipping	☐ UPS ☐ US Postal ☐ Freight Forwarding ☑ Others/See Description	☐ FedEx ☐ DHL ☑ Personal Pickup
Listing Images	○ URL ● Upload ○ URL ● Upload ○ URL ● Upload	
Detail Description (Text of HTML is OK)	I would like a 70's vintage aircraft, single engine, two seats.	

Last Step Clear Form

FIG. 4(a)

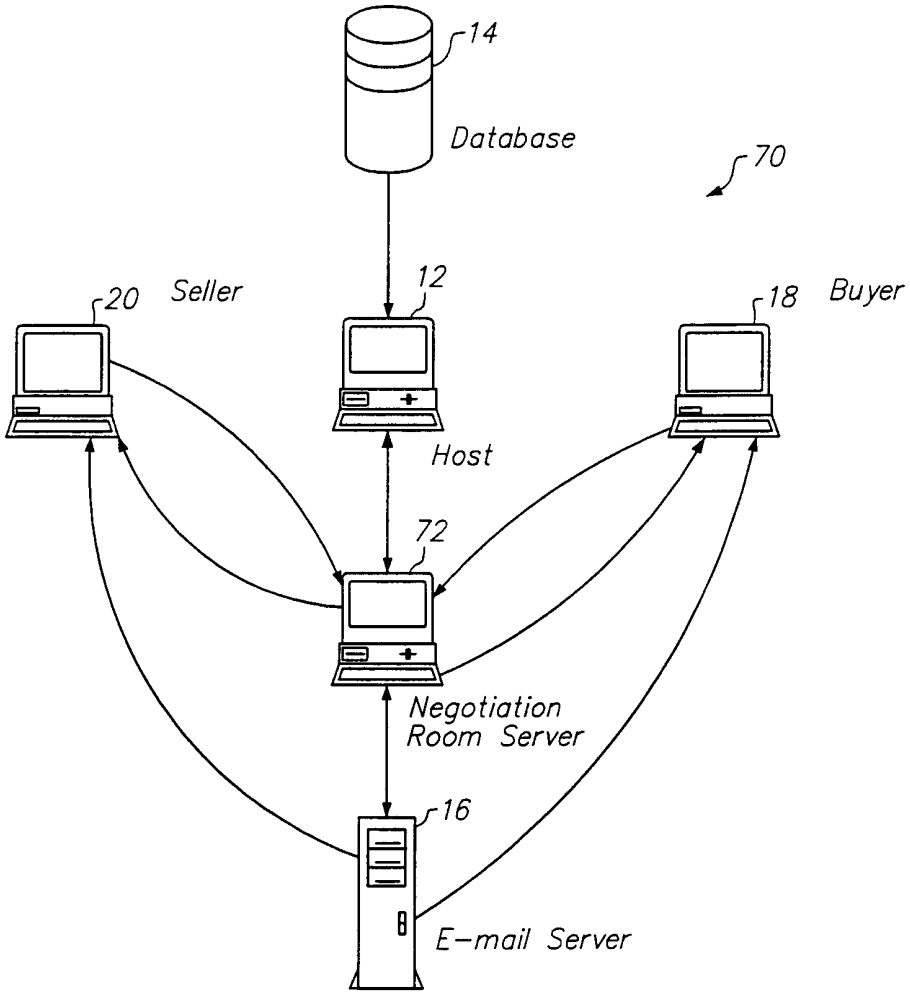
14
Database
70
20
Seller
12
18
Buyer
Host
72
Negotiation
Room Server
16
E-mail Server

FIG. 5

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US00/33279

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) : G06F 17/60
US CL : 705/74

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
U.S. : 705/74, 37, 26, 27

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	US 5,794,207 A (WALKER et al) 11 August 1998 (11.08.1998), See entire document	1-10
Y	US 5,884,272 A (WALKER et al) 16 March 1999 (16.03.1999), See entire document	3-8, 10
Y	US 5,924,082 A (SILVERMAN et al) 13 July 1999 (13.07.1999), See entire document	1-2
Y,P	US 6,014,643 A (MINTON) 11 January 2000 (11.01.2000), See entire document	1-2
Y,P	US 6,064,981 A (BARNI et al) 16 May 2000 (16.05.2000), See entire document	1-2
Y,P	US 6,026,383 A (AUSUBEL) 15 February 2000 (15.02.2000), See entire document	1, 9
A	US 5,890,138 A (GODIN et al) 30 March 1999 (30.03.1999), See entire document	1-10
A,P	US 6,055,518 A (FRANKLIN et al) 25 April 2000 (25.04.2000), See entire document	1-10
A	US 6,131,087 A (LUKE et al) 10 October 2000 (10.10.2000), See entire document	1-10
A	US 6,012,045 A (BARZILAI et al) 04 January 2000 (04.01.2000), See entire document	1-10

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. ☐ See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:

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"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means

"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art

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Date of the actual completion of the international search
24 January 2001 (24.01.2001)

Date of mailing of the international search report
19 APR 2001

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