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Non-cash transaction incentive and commission distribution system

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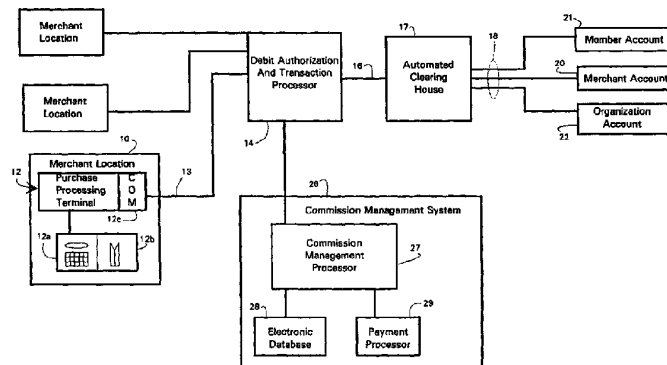
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(54) Title: NON-CASH TRANSACTION INCENTIVE AND COMMISSION DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM



(57) Abstract: A fund transfer system is disclosed wherein commissions for point-of-sale purchase transactions are determined and distributed to members of an organizational network for promoting use of a non-cash payment device for effecting purchase transactions. Purchase data is electronically transmitted from the point-of-sale to an automated clearing house (17) for effecting fund transfers to prepare the purchase, and also to a commission management system (26). The commission management system (26) maintains a database reflecting the structure of the organizational network, and further determines the distribution of purchase commission according to a predetermined schedule of proportions relating to the position and business volume of each member of the network. The commission management system (26) further comprises a payment processor (29) for effecting commission payments to the members on a scheduled basis.

**NON-CASH TRANSACTION INCENTIVE
AND COMMISSION DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM**

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to non-cash point-of-sale transaction systems for managing purchase transactions and for distributing of purchase
5 commissions among distributors and users of non-cash point-of-sale transaction systems.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Non-cash payment devices, such as debit
10 cards or credit cards, provide substantial convenience to purchasers of goods or services. However, such payment devices require electronic transaction management and accounting systems which incur operating expenses above the cost of goods and
15 services purchased with such devices. Traditionally, issuers of non-cash payment devices have entered into merchant agreements whereby participating merchants pay commissions to the card issuers in exchange for providing customers with the convenience of using non-
20 cash payment devices. More recently, competition among card issuers has decreased the commission rates that merchants are willing to pay. Consequently, card issuers have attempted to increase the transaction volume by providing various incentives to their
25 customers and by aggressive commercial promotion of such incentives.

In one known incentive program, such as described in U.S. Patent No. 4,941,090 to McCarthy, customers are paid personal bonuses based upon the
30 amount of personal purchases made with their non-cash payment device. Although such an incentive program is attractive to individual customers, such a program must also be effectively promoted to advertise the

program and to attract potential customers. Additionally, these incentive programs provides no particular advantage to the participating merchants, who must still be enrolled on a commission basis competitive with other non-cash payment systems. It would therefore be desirable to develop a non-cash payment system that provides incentives for consumers to use the system in preference to other non-cash payment systems, that would provide enrollment incentives to merchants, and would reduce promotional costs associated with attracting and maintaining cardholders.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with the present invention, a commission payment and accounting system organizes transaction data pertaining to holders of a non-cash payment device, such as a debit card or credit card, into a hierarchical database reflecting the organizational structure of an incentive program for using the debit cards and for enlisting new cardholders. Commissions on purchases are electronically transferred to the card issuer, and the commission payment and accounting system is configured to determine and dispense commission payments to cardholders according to the stored electronic funds transaction data, the organizational relationships among cardholders, and a predetermined schedule associating proportional commission rates with defined organizational relationships.

In accordance with a first aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method of distributing commissioners to promote use of a non-cash payment device, comprising the steps of:

organizing an electronic database to contain member records, each member record identifying a bearer of the non-cash payment device;

establishing a hierarchy of relationships among the member records, and storing positional data in the electronic database in association with the member records;

operating a purchase processing terminal to record a purchase by one of the members bearing the non-cash payment device;

electronically transmitting transaction data from the purchase processing terminal to a commission management processor connected with the electronic database;

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operating the commission management processor to determine, on the basis of the transaction data, a business volume value, and to record the business volume value in a member record identifying said one member;

5 determining a commission value for said one member on the basis of business volume values recorded in other member records and on the basis of the positional data relating said one member with the other members in the hierarchy; and

effecting a monetary payment in the amount of the commission value to said one member.

10 In accordance with a second aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method of promoting a non-cash payment device, comprising the steps of:

establishing hierarchical relationships among a plurality of members bearing non-cash payment devices;

15 recording the hierarchical relationships established among the members as positional data within an electronic database maintained by a commission management processor;

conducting electronic purchase transactions by the members using the non-cash payment devices at a plurality of locations remote from the commission management processor, and electronically transmitting purchase data to the commission management processor;

20 determining, by the commission management processor, a commission value for each member on the basis of (i) the purchase data pertaining to electronic purchase transactions made by other members, and (ii) the positional data relating each member to the other members in the electronic database; and

25 effecting a monetary payment to each member in the amount of the commission value.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing summary, as well as the following detailed description, will best be understood in conjunction with the attached drawing in which:

FIG. 1 is a functional block diagram of a

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transaction system according to a preferred embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 2 is a block diagram of an electronic data record maintained in a commission accounting and payment database of the transaction system of FIG. 1; and

FIG. 3 is a structural diagram of the organization of electronic data records in the commission accounting and payment data base.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Referring now to FIG. 1, there is shown an exemplary non-cash payment and commission system according to the invention. The system is adapted for managing purchases of goods or services by members (i.e. persons or distributors) of a network marketing, or multilevel marketing organization, and for managing payment of commissions to members of the organization according to a hierarchical commission accounting and payment method. As described further hereinbelow, each member is provided with a debit or credit card for making purchases at any of a plurality of merchant locations, of which merchant location 10 is exemplary. The debit or credit card includes means for encoding member information thereon, such as by magnetically encoding an account number of the member on a magnetic stripe. By prior arrangement with the network marketing organization, the proprietor of each merchant location agrees to provide a discount for each purchase of goods or services by the member as a proportion of the purchase price of such goods or services, or as a fixed amount per purchase. In addition, in exchange for providing the discount or in consideration for a further discount, the merchant may be provided with opportunities to market its goods or services to the members of the organization, such as by direct mail.

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A point-of-sale purchase processing terminal 12 (PPT) is located at location 10. The location may comprise a retail site or an operator taking orders by phone for a catalog or a computer site being used to sell products through a network. The purchase processing terminal 12 is of a known type including data entry means, such as a keyboard 12a and a magnetic stripe reader 12b, for acquiring data pertaining to a purchase; a digital memory (not shown) for temporarily storing purchase data; and an electronic communication interface, such as a modem 12c, for communicating purchase data and for receiving an authorization signal pursuant to a purchase.

When a member desires to make a purchase in connection with location 10, the member provides his or her debit card for entering the member's account number into the memory of the purchase processing terminal 12 via the magnetic stripe reader 12b. The amount of the purchase is entered into the memory of the POS terminal via the keyboard 12a (or other data entry means, such as a barcode scanner). The terminal 12 is then operative to activate the electronic communication interface 12c to establish an electronic data connection 13 with a debit authorization and transaction processor 14. In embodiments wherein the communication interface 12c comprises a modem, the data connection 14 may be a telephonic connection. In other embodiments, alternative known methods of electronic data transmission may be employed to establish the data connection 13.

The purchase processing terminal 12 is operative to transmit purchase data, including the member account number, the amount of the purchase, and the identity of the merchant, to the authorization and transaction processor 14. The processor 14 is preferably located at a remote location relative to

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the respective merchant locations, and is further configured to establish electronic data connections with each of the merchant locations. The processor 14 is operative for receiving purchase data and for
5 determining, for each purchase, whether to issue an authorization signal in response to the received purchase data. Such a determination may be made, for example, on the basis of risk data maintained by the processor 14 and relating to the members, for
10 assessing whether there is an acceptably low risk of default on the amount of the purchase. Alternatively, the authorization processor may make such a determination by obtaining access to a member's debit account balance.

15 If the proposed purchase is approved, the authorization processor 14 transmits an electronic authorization signal along the data connection 13 to the purchase processing terminal 12 at the merchant location 10. The purchase processing terminal 12 in
20 turn, signifies receipt of the authorization signal for the member to make the purchase.

When a purchase is approved by the processor 14, the processor 14 then establishes a data connection 16 with an automated clearing house (ACH) processor 17. The ACH processor 17 is preferably
25 established at a remote location relative to the authorization processor 14. The ACH processor 17 is further connected with an electronic funds transfer network 18 for effecting electronic transfers of funds among a merchant account 20, a member account
30 21, and an organization account 22. For each purchase, the authorization processor 14 instructs the ACH processor 17 to effect the following electronic fund transfers: a debit to the member account 21 in
35 the amount of the purchase, a credit to the merchant account 20 in the amount of the purchase, a debit to the merchant account 20 in the amount of the discount

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or fixed amount, and a credit to the organization account 22 in the amount of the discount or fixed amount. For example, for a \$20 purchase at a merchant having a discount rate of 10%, there will be a debit of \$20 charged to the member account 21, a credit of \$20 paid to the merchant account 20, and a debit of \$2 charged to the merchant account 20, and a credit of \$2 paid to the organization account 22.

In addition to instructing the ACH processor 17 to effect transfers of funds, the authorization processor 14 is configured to transmit purchase data to a commission management system 26 maintained by the network marketing organization. The commission management system 26 comprises a commission management processor 27, an electronic database 28 for storing member data and structural data pertaining to the organizational structure of the organization, and a payment processor 29, such as an automated printing and mailing facility, for effecting payment to members. The member data and structural data are stored in the database 28 in the form of a plurality of member records, such as member record 30 shown in FIG. 2. The database 28 is preferably implemented as a structured electronic database in a form compatible with a non-volatile mass data storage device, such as a magnetic disk or tape or other known electronic data storage device.

The member record 30 includes a plurality of data fields, such as an account number field 32 for storing an account number, a member identification field 34 for storing identifying data pertaining to a member (such as the member's name, address, etc.), a Personal Business Volume field 36 for storing a record of purchase discounts, or a portion thereof, attributable to the member's use of the debit card, and a hierarchy position data field 38 for storing data identifying the member's location in a commission

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distribution hierarchy. Such hierarchy position data may include, for example, pointers to locations within the mass data storage device of records of other members that are subordinate to the member within the hierarchy, as described further hereinbelow.

5 When the authorization processor 14 transmits purchase data to the commission management system processor 27, the commission management processor 27 associates the received member account number with a corresponding member record stored in
10 the database 28'. Then, the commission management system retrieves the contents of the corresponding Personal Business Volume field 36, adds the incoming purchase discount amount to the retrieved Personal
15 Business Volume, and then stores the new value of the member's Personal Business Volume in the member's record 30 in the database 28.

A structural diagram of relationships among member records within an exemplary database 28 is
20 shown relative to a representative Member A in FIG. 3. The sub-structure comprising the records of Members B-H shall be referred to herein as Member A's "downline network". Relationships within the database 28' are established as follows. When Member A recruits new
25 members to the organization, such new members are established at positions directly subordinate to Member A in the hierarchy. Such new members, for example Members B and C, would indicate the fact of their recruitment by Member A on respective
30 application forms for memberships, or recruitment and placement by an upline sponsor. Established members in the hierarchy are entitled to recruit new members, such that successive generations of members will be established to constitute Member A's downline network.

35

In order to provide an incentive for recruitment of new members and an incentive for

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members to use the debit card, commissions are paid out of the accumulated discount credits in the organization account 22. Preferably, the commissions are paid out at regular intervals, such as weekly, 5 monthly, semi-annually, or annually. In a particularly preferred embodiment, the commissions are paid at monthly intervals. Each member's commission is determined by the commission management processor 27 according to the net Personal Business Volume of 10 the members in his or her downline network. For example, a member's commission may comprise a specified proportion of the net Personal Business Volume of the members on successive levels of his or her downline network in accordance with a schedule 15 associating each successive level of the downline network with a selected proportion for that level. Such a schedule 40 is shown in FIG. 3 adjacent to the exemplary hierarchy. In accordance with the schedule 40, Member A will receive a commission proportional to 20 2% of the Personal Business Volume of Members B and C, 3% of the Personal Business Volume of Members D, E, and F, and 20% of the Personal Business Volume of members G and H, for a total of \$33.50. The schedule of proportions 40 is maintained by the commission 25 management system 26 for reference in computing commissions owed to each of the members at the specified interval.

As can be appreciated, a variety of commission schedules or multilevel payment plans may 30 be employed in order to optimize the incentives among the members to use the debit cards and to recruit new members. Further features of the commission management system 26 may be developed to enhance such incentives. As a further incentive to promote use of 35 the debit cards, the payment of commissions can be conditioned on achievement of a specified level of Personal Business Volume to qualify a member for

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receipt of commissions from successive levels of that member's downline network, according to a graduated scale of qualification threshold values. In the example of FIG. 3, Member A would be required to
5 accumulate \$50 of Personal Business Volume in order to qualify for receipt of commissions from the first three levels of his or her downline network, \$100 to qualify for the fourth through sixth levels, and \$200 to qualify for the seventh and eighth levels. In
10 alternative embodiments, a member's Personal Business Volume can provide a basis for computing a proportional factor for use in combination with the level-dependent schedule 40 of proportions employed to compute that member's commission.

15 After the commission management processor 27 has determined a commission to be paid to a member, the member identification data and the amount of the commission are transmitted to a payment processor subsystem 29. In a preferred embodiment, the payment
20 processor subsystem 29 comprises an automated printer/mailer for printing a commission check to be mailed to the member. In an alternative embodiment, the payment processor subsystem 29 may effect an electronic fund transfer of the commission amount from
25 the organization account 22 to the member account 21, and print a statement for mailing to the member.

The incentives among the members to use their non-cash payment devices and to recruit new members, may also be used to recruit merchants to
30 participate in entering into discount agreements with the organization. Because the members of the organization would be motivated to use the organization's payment vehicle in preference to other payment vehicles, and since the members would also be
35 desirous of achieving the requisite Personal Business Volume to qualify for increased commissions, the members are more likely to make purchases with

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merchant participants. To facilitate this incentive, the merchant can be provided with limited access to the organization's database for marketing purposes. For example, aggregate purchase data relating to categories of goods purchased by each member can be maintained by the commission management system in order to allow the merchant to achieve greater promotional efficiency by targeting his or her marketing material to particularly receptive members within the already motivated membership of the organization. Hence, by entering into a discount agreement with the organization, the merchant can also obtain increased marketing efficiency by directing promotional material to an audience that is readily motivated to make purchases from the merchant. For example, the relative frequency with which members purchase sporting goods would be valuable information to a sporting goods merchant desirous of directing his or her promotional material toward motivated consumers of sporting goods. The degree of marketing support provided to the merchant can be made contingent on the magnitude of the discount offered by the merchant.

The terms employed hereinabove are terms of description, not limitation, and the scope of the invention is intended to be defined by the following claims and equivalents thereunder. As can be appreciated, the invention is susceptible to variation within the skill of those knowledgeable in the pertinent art. For example, the practice of the invention may be extended to other non-cash payment devices. In such a variation, the term "discount" as used herein would be equally applicable to denote a premium paid by the merchant for conducting a purchase transaction, as well as a discount applied by the merchant to the purchase price. Similarly, the "debit account" of the member would, in such a variation, be applicable to a credit balance to be billed to the

member on a basis separate from, or concurrent with, the payment of commissions.

5 It should be understood that comprises/comprising and grammatical variations thereof, when used in this specification, are to be taken to specify the presence of stated features, integers, steps or components or groups thereof, but are not limited so as to preclude the presence or addition of one or more other features, integers, steps, components or groups thereof.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of distributing commissions to promote use of a non-cash payment device, comprising the steps of:
 - organizing an electronic database to contain member records, each member record identifying a bearer of the non-cash payment device;
 - establishing a hierarchy of relationships among the member records, and storing positional data in the electronic database in association with the member records;
 - operating a purchase processing terminal to record a purchase by one of the members bearing the non-cash payment device;
 - electronically transmitting transaction data from the purchase processing terminal to a commission management processor connected with the electronic database;
 - operating the commission management processor to determine, on the basis of the transaction data, a business volume value, and to record the business volume value in a member record identifying said one member;
 - determining a commission value for said one member on the basis of business volume values recorded in other member records and on the basis of the positional data relating said one member with the other members in the hierarchy; and
 - effecting a monetary payment in the amount of the commission value to said one member.
2. The method of claim 1, wherein said establishing step comprises establishing successive subordinate levels of member records relative to said one member

within the hierarchy, to identify subordinate members recruited by said one member and to identify further subordinate members at each successive level; and wherein said determining step comprises said commission management processor retrieving member records from each subordinate level and computing said commission value on the basis of the business volume recorded therein for each subordinate member.

3. The method of claim 2, wherein said determining step further comprises computing said commission value on the basis of a schedule of proportions associating proportional commission rates with each successive subordinate level of the hierarchy.

4. The method of claim 3, wherein said determining step further comprises computing said commission value on the basis of a predetermined schedule of qualifying business volume values.

5. The method of claim 4 wherein said determining step further comprises retrieving and consulting said schedule of qualifying business volume values to determine at least one of (i) a threshold business volume value for payment of a commission to said one member, and (ii) identifying the number of successive subordinate levels from which subordinate member records will be retrieved to determine the commission value.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein said non-cash payment device comprises a debit card, the method comprising:

operating a debit authorization processor to receive the purchase data from the purchase processing terminal and to forward the purchase data to the commission management

processor;
issuing an electronic authorization signal from the debit authorization processor to the purchase processing terminal; and
transmitting, from the debit authorization processor to an automated clearing house, electronic instructions for the automated clearing house to perform an electronic funds transfer, comprising the steps of:
deducting a first monetary amount from an account owned by said one member;
crediting a second monetary amount to an account owned by a merchant from whom the purchase is made;
deducting a third monetary amount from an account owned by a merchant from whom the purchase is made, and
crediting a fourth monetary amount to an account owned by a commission management organization; such that said first amount and second amount is equal to a purchase price, and said third amount and fourth amount is a predetermined discount applied to the purchase made from the merchant.

7. The method of claim 6 wherein said effecting payment step comprises transferring the commission value from the account owned by the commission management organization to said one member.

8. The method of claim 7 wherein said transferring step comprises printing a check payable to said one member in the amount of the commission value, and delivering the check to said one member.

9. The method of claim 7 wherein said transferring step comprises operating the automated clearing house

to perform an electronic fund transfer from the account of the commission management organization to the account of said one member.

10. The method of claim 1 wherein the non-cash payment device is one of a credit card and a debit card, said non-cash payment device comprising magnetically-encoded indicia identifying said one member thereon, the operating step comprising converting said magnetically-encoded indicia into electronic purchase data for transmission to the debit authorization processor.

11. A method of promoting a non-cash payment device, comprising the steps of:

- establishing hierarchical relationships among a plurality of members bearing non-cash payment devices;

- recording the hierarchical relationships established among the members as positional data within an electronic database maintained by a commission management processor;

- conducting electronic purchase transactions by the members using the non-cash payment devices at a plurality of locations remote from the commission management processor, and electronically transmitting purchase data to the commission management processor;

- determining by the commission management processor, a commission value for each member on the basis of (i) the purchase data pertaining to the electronic purchase transactions made by other members, and (ii) the positional data relating each member to the other members in the electronic database; and

effecting a monetary payment to each member in the amount of the commission value.

12. The method of claim 11 wherein said establishing and recording steps comprises the steps of:

5 each member recruiting new members and/or distributors to apply for the non-cash payment device;

each new member completing an application identifying a selected member or distributor responsible for recruiting the new member; and

10 creating a new member record in the electronic database to reflect a recruitment relationship between said new member and the selected member.

13. The method of claim 2 wherein the purchase processing terminal is a point of sale terminal.

14. The method of claim 1 wherein the transaction data comprises purchase data.

15 15. The method of claim 1 wherein the transaction data comprises discount data.

16. The method of claim 2 wherein the member is a distributor.

17. A method of distributing commissions as hereinabove described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

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18. A method of promoting a non-cash payment device as hereinabove described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

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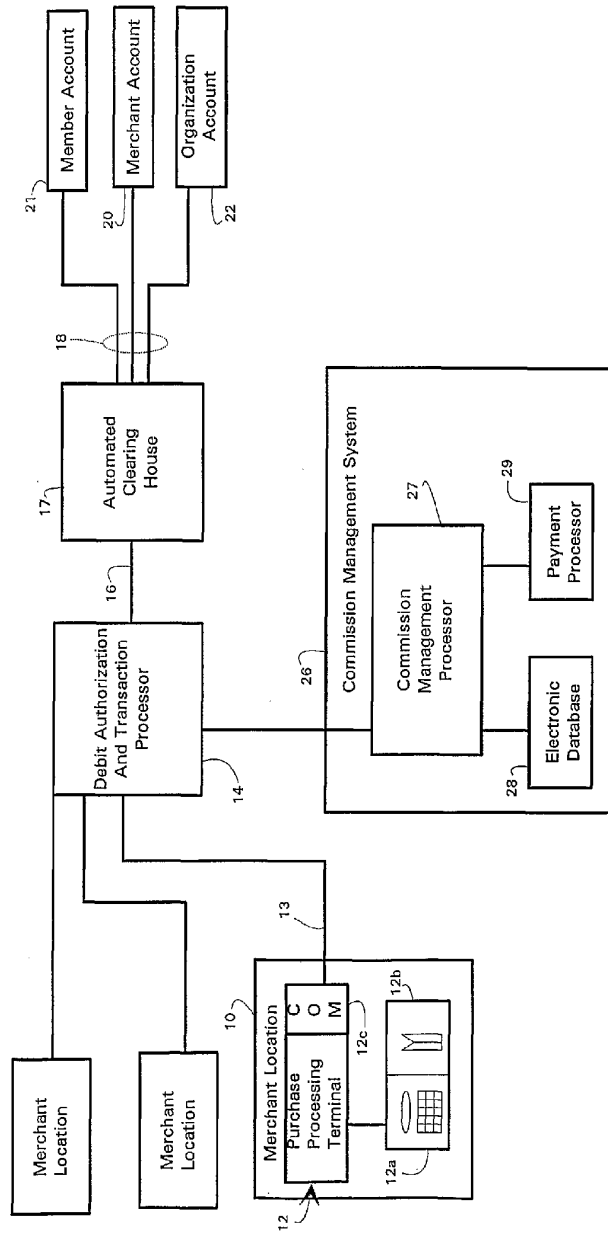


FIG. 1

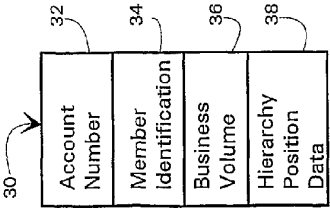


FIG. 2

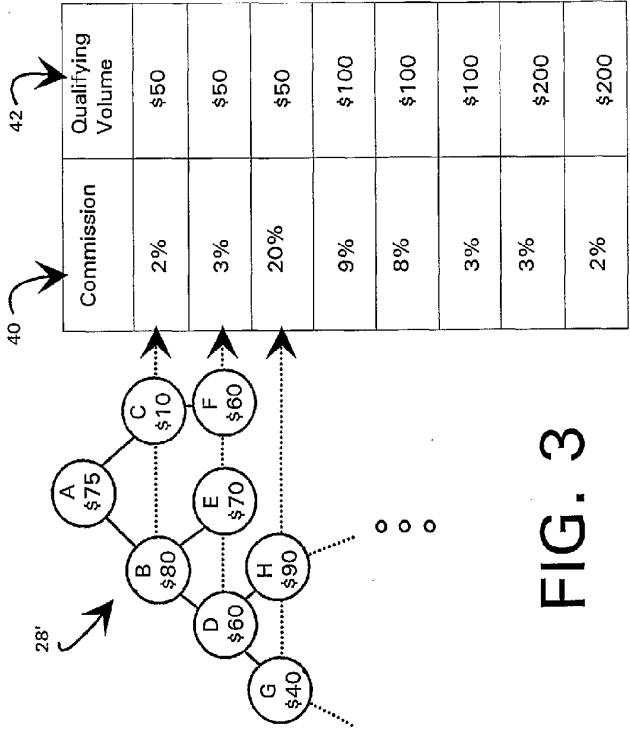


FIG. 3