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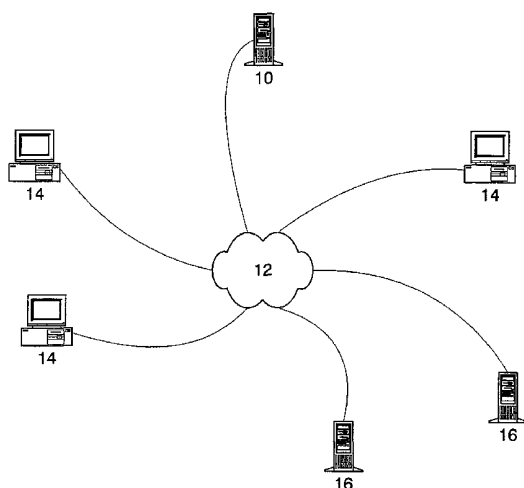
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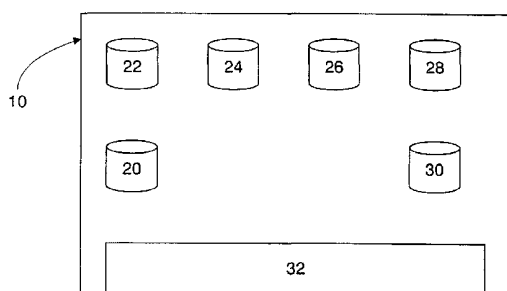
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(54) Title: SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR MANAGING PRODUCT DATA



(57) Abstract: A system and method is disclosed for managing product data and disseminating said product data via at least one affiliate, the system being in communication with a plurality of remote terminals (14) over a network (12), each affiliate having a web site provided on a remote web server (16). The system comprises a web site server (10) including a product database (28) and a statistic database (30). Registered contributors with the web site server (10) can add, edit and delete new product launch data to the product database. The product database is accessible by affiliates through an interface (32) which responds to requests for product data from affiliate web sites. Requests for product data are recorded in the statistic database (30), and the system is arranged to present to the contributor statistics regarding their product.



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“System And Method For Managing Product Data”**FIELD OF THE INVENTION**

This invention relates to a system and method for managing product data, disseminating this data via affiliates over a network and collecting information
5 about the use of this data.

BACKGROUND ART

In the fierce competition of the current market, organisations are increasingly turning to new products to differentiate themselves from other manufacturers and to win and sustain market share. Thus, new product launches are an important
10 part of an organisation's strategy and survival.

To launch new products, organisations have used a combination of three tools: advertising, promotion/direct marketing, and public relations.

To advertising on traditional media, an organisation typically engages an advertising agency to develop the advertising content. A media company is then
15 engaged to purchase media space for the organisation and to arrange the advertisements with each media provider, such as broadcaster and publisher.

To arrange promotions and public relations, a public relations agency is typically consulted. This agency arranges the press release and liaises with journalists in the relevant media. The journalists will then select which products are likely to be
20 well received by their media's audience, and may edit or rewrite information according to their own criteria.

Thus, the organisation is required to deal with a number of different entities to arrange a product launch and the associated promotion. Further, except for advertising, the organisation does not have direct control over the content of the
25 information present in the media. While the organisation may have developed a press release, it is most likely it will not reach the public in its original form.

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Further, there is also a risk that a journalist will choose not to publish information regarding the new product, effectively creating an embargo.

Recently, news and other information has become increasingly available in an electronic format on the Internet. However, the task of gathering information for presentation is still a significant undertaking in this format. Entities, referred to as newswires, have evolved which gather information and present it to news web sites on the Internet. The journalist at the news web site can then choose the content that they want, and edit it if desired, before incorporating it into their web site. However, both the newswire and the journalist at the news web site can still exercise embargo and/or modify the information before it is seen by the public at large. This situation is similar to that in the traditional media, in that the organisation has no control over the final form of the information presented to the public regarding their product.

DISCLOSURE OF THE INVENTION

Throughout the specification, unless the context requires otherwise, the word "comprise" or variations such as "comprises" or "comprising", will be understood to imply the inclusion of a stated integer or group of integers but not the exclusion of any other integer or group of integers.

This invention seeks to provide a system for managing products, and for disseminating the product information to users, in which the organisation retains control over the information content presented to the public.

In accordance with a first aspect of this invention, there is provided a system for managing product data and disseminating said product data via at least one affiliate, the system being in communication with a plurality of remote terminals over a network, each affiliate having a web site provided on a remote web server, the system comprising:

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a web site server including registration means for registering a contributor,
and product entry means for receiving product data from a contributor;

product database means for storing product data from said contributor;

5 retrieval means for receiving requests for product data from affiliate web
sites in response to a person requesting said data from said affiliate web
site, said requests including identification data unique to said affiliate, said
means arranged to access said product data from the product database
means and provide said product data to said person and/or said affiliate
web site; and

10 statistic database means arranged to record requests for product data and
the product and identification data relating to said requests, and to present
to the contributor statistics regarding their product.

Preferably, the system further comprises an affiliate database means arranged to
store, for each affiliate, said identification data unique to said affiliate and at least
15 one affiliate category, said product data including a product category field, and
said request including a requested product category, said retrieval means
arranged not to process a request if the requested product category does not
match any of the categories of the affiliate.

Preferably, said affiliate database means is further arranged to store, for each
20 affiliate, at least one affiliate country, said product data including a product country
field, said retrieval means further arranged to provide data only where the product
country field includes at least one country in common with one of the affiliate
countries.

Preferably, said retrieval means comprises a plurality of program modules that are
25 called from an affiliate web site in response to a person requesting said data from
said affiliate web site.

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Preferably, said affiliate web site is arranged to pass parameters to said program module, including said identification data, and category data.

Preferably, said product data includes a release date, whereby said retrieval means is arranged not to retrieve product data concerning a product before said
5 release date.

In accordance with a second aspect of this invention, there is provided a method for managing product data and disseminating said product data via at least one affiliate over a network, a plurality of remote terminals being in communication over said network, each affiliate having a web site provided on a remote web
10 server, the method comprising the steps of:

registering contributors and allowing registered contributors to enter product data;

storing product data from said contributors;

receiving requests for product data from affiliate web sites in response to a
15 person requesting said data from said affiliate web site, said requests including identification data unique to said affiliate, accessing said requested product data and providing said product data to said person and/or said affiliate web site; and

recording the request and the product and identification data relating to
20 said request, and presenting to the contributor statistics regarding their product.

Preferably, said method further comprises the steps of storing, for each affiliate, said identification data unique to said affiliate and at least one affiliate category, said product data including a product category field, and said request including a
25 requested product category, whereby said step of providing said data is aborted if the requested product category does not match any of the categories of the affiliate.

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Preferably, said method further comprises the steps of storing, for each affiliate, at least one affiliate country, said product data including a product country field, whereby said step of providing said data provides data only where the product country field includes at least one country in common with one of the affiliate countries.

Preferably, said product data includes a release date, whereby said step of providing said data does not provide product data before said release date.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

One embodiment of this invention will now be described, by way of example, with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 shows the system for managing product data connected to a network, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of this invention;

Figure 2 shows the databases and program modules in the system for managing product data;

Figure 3 is a flowchart of the process for registering as a contributor with the system shown in figure 1;

Figure 4 is a flowchart of the process for validating the request to register as a contributor;

Figure 5 is a flowchart of the process for a contributor to provide new product data; and

Figure 6 is a flowchart of the process for a contributor to delete or edit product data.

BEST MODE(S) FOR CARRYING OUT THE INVENTION

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The preferred embodiment of the invention is directed towards a method and system for managing product data relating to product launches. In the embodiment, the system is implemented as a web site server 10 and program modules operating in association therewith, as described in more detail below.

- 5 As shown in Figure 1, the web site server 10 is in communication with a public network 12, the Internet in this embodiment. A plurality of remote terminals 14 and remote web site servers 16 are also in communication with the network 12. Users operating the remote terminals 14 are able to view web sites provided on the remote web site servers 16 using software applications commonly referred to
- 10 as 'browsers', in known manner.

The web site server 10 of the embodiment includes a contributor database 20, a user database 22, a category database 24, an affiliate database 26, a product database 28 and a statistics database 30. The server 10 further includes an interface 32 through which external persons can access the databases 20-30 as

15 described below. The databases 20-30 are implemented as tables in the embodiment.

The contributor database 20 contains the following fields:

ContributorID	A Unique ID assigned to each Contributor
CompanyName	Company Name
Address	Address
Street	
City	
States	
CountryCode	
PostCode	
LogoPath	Storage path of the Company logo graphic file
URL	URL of the Company Web site
Fax_CtryCode	Fax number
Fax_AreaCode	
Fax	

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Phone_CtryCode	Phone number
Phone_AreaCode	
Phone	
Email	E-mail address of the main contact person
ContactName	Main contact person name
CategoryID	The Category ID in which the company's product mostly fall into.
Package	The Package which the company sign up.
Turnover	Annual turn over
NoOfEmployees	No of employees the company have
UserID	UserID assigned to the company
Approved	Y - If the company is approved to start posting content. N - If the company is not yet approved.

The contributor database 20 is linked to the user database 22 though the contributor ID field.

The user database 22 contains the following fields:

UserID	A Unique ID assigned to each Contributor
RoleID	CON - For contributor ADM - For administrator
Password	Password for login
Designation	Designation of the user
FirstName	First Name of the user
LastName	Last Name of the user
Email	E-mail address of the user
Phone	Phone number of the user
Fax	Fax number of the user
LastLogin_dt	Last login Date
BadTries	Number of unsuccessful login attempts due to wrong password since the last successful login
Effective_dt	The Date when the user can start to login
Termination_dt	Date of the termination of this user ID

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PasswordExpiry_dt	Date where the current password will expire
Creator_id	The administrator ID who approved this user.
Creation_dt	The Date when the user was created
LastModified_id	The administrator ID who last modified the information for this user.
LastModified_dt	The date when the information for this user was last modified
Lock	Y – the user is locked from login due to three consecutive incorrect passwords N – the user is able to login
Deleted	Y - if the user is being deleted N - if the user is still valid

The category database 24 contains two tables, each defining a hierarchical list of product categories. Each of the tables contain the following fields:

CategoryID	The unique ID assigned for each Category
CatLevel	1, 2 or 3 - indication of which Level this Category fall under.
ParentID	If CatLevel = 1 then the parent ID will be 0. If CatLevel = 2 then the parent ID will be the Category ID of the Level 1 Category which this Category belongs to. If CatLevel = 3 then the parent ID will be the Category ID of the Level 2 Category which this Category belongs to.
CatName	Category Name
Deleted	Y - if this Category is deleted N - if this Category is till valid

Two tables are used in the embodiment to allow different product categories to be used for business-to-business (B2B) products and for business-to-consumer (B2C) products.

The affiliate database 26 contains an affiliate information table, an affiliate category table and an affiliate country table. The affiliate information table contains following fields:

Affiliate ID	Affiliate ID given to each affiliate.
Name	The Name of the affiliate.
URL	The URL link to the affiliate Web site

The affiliate category table contains following fields:

Affiliate ID	Affiliate ID given to each affiliate.
Category ID	The product Category signup by the affiliate
Type	B2B or B2C

The affiliate country table contains following fields:

Affiliate ID	Affiliate ID given to each affiliate.
Country	The country that the affiliate is interested in receiving data concerning product launches

If an affiliate registers for more than one country, then that affiliate will have more than one record in the affiliate country table.

- 5 The affiliate category table and the affiliate country table are used to provide each affiliate with information regarding product launches customised to the categories and countries of interest to it. In other embodiments, further selection criteria may be provided for the affiliate to select, such as a price range, and/or country of origin of the product.
- 10 The product data database 28 contains the following fields:

Headline	Product launch headline, eg company name, product name, product category
Release Date	Date the product will be released
Nature	Whether the product is a B2B product, a B2C product, or both
Description	Text description of the product, such as from a press release or other launch information
Technical Characteristic	Text description of the technical features of the product
Pictures	Thumbnail and normal images of the product

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Audio	
Video	
Summary	A list of product information, including: Product category Product Brand Model Name Country of origin of the brand Countries of launch Price Company e-mail contact Links to other web sites

The statistics database 30 contains the following fields:

Function	The program that the browser accessed.
Af	The affiliate ID
Visitor	Unique ID assigned to browser through cookie
Releaseid	The release ID number of a particular news
Type	B2B or B2C
CatID	The category select by the browser
IP	The IP address of the browser computer
Host	The computer name of the browser computer
Browser	The browser type e.g Internet Explorer or Netscape etc
Idate/time	The date/time which the browser access to the news

Before an organisation can use the services offered by the server 10, they need to register themselves as a contributor, using the process illustrated in figure 3. The registration process shown in figure 3 is performed over the network 12. Initially, the organisation uses their remote terminal 14 to access a registration homepage stored on the web site server 10 via the network 12, shown in figure 3 as step 101.

Next, the organisation enters the relevant information on the registration homepage, shown in figure 3 at step 102. In the embodiment, the registration

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homepage is an HTML form, however, it should be appreciated in other embodiments other formats may be used.

Once the organisation has completed the registration form, the information on the form is submitted to the web site server 10, shown in figure 3 at step 103. After
5 submitting the registration information, the organisation waits for approval of the application shown at step 104.

When the information submitted by the organisation is received at the website server 10, an approval process 200 is performed, which is shown in figure 4.

As shown, the process 200 commences with the receipt of the submitted
10 registration information at step 201.

A check is then performed at step 202 as to whether the received information is complete. If the check at step 202 determines that some information is missing, the organisation is contacted at step 203 to provide the missing the information.

If the check at step 202 determines that all of the information is complete, or
15 alternatively after the missing information has been provided by the organisation at step 203, a check is then performed at step 204 to determine the authenticity of the organisation's identity. This check is performed by cross-referencing the information submitted by the organisation with external corporate information databases.

20 If the check at step 204 determines that the submitted information is most likely bogus, the organisation is informed of the application's rejection at step 205. Otherwise, the application is approved and the organisation is assigned a user ID and password at step 206. The information provided by the organisation is part of the application and the assigned user ID and password are used to populate a
25 new entry in the contributor and user databases 20 and 22.

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Next, the user ID and password are sent to the organisation at step 207, following which the organisation can commence posting information regarding product launches as a contributor at step 208.

5 Once the organisation is registered as a contributor, it can post information regarding new product launches using the process 300 shown in figure 5. As shown, the contributor initially accesses the web site server 10 via the network 12 and provides their user ID and password to login to the server 10 as shown at step 301.

10 Next, the contributor is presented with a list of product launches they have previously entered, along with an option to add a new product launch. When the contributor selects the add new product launch at step 302, they are presented with a new product details form at step 303.

15 The user then completes the data on the add new product details form and submits the information to the web site server 10 via the network 12. The new product information, once submitted, is used to populate a new entry in the product database 28, shown in figure 3 at step 304.

20 The information submitted by the contributor includes a product release date, indicating when the product will be available, whether the product is intended for a B2B or a B2C market, and the category of the product selected from the relevant table in the category database 24.

The category database 24 contains relatively broad product descriptions as level 1 descriptions, with increasingly specific products descriptions in levels 2 and 3. An example of level 1, 2 and 3 product descriptions is set out in the table below.

	Level 1		Level 2		Level 3
Cat ID	Cat Des	Cat ID	Cat Des	Cat ID	Cat Des
	4 Cars				
		47	Car Security		
				195	Auto Alarms
				196	Auto Locks
				332	Central Locking Systems

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				851	Security Products
		48	Cars		
				349	City Cars
				373	Convertibles
				445	Electric Cars
				472	Family Cars
				627	Limousines
				887	Sports Cars
				1076	Standard Utility Vehicles
				1077	Leisure Vehicles
				1290	Coupes

The contributor also provides information concerning the name, technical specification and price of the new product. Further, the contributor is able to select one or more countries or regions in which the product will be launched.

5 The contributor is also able to provide a text description of the product release, such as would appear in a press release. Further, the contributor is able to provide multimedia data regarding the product, including sound, image and video.

If desired, the contributor is able to edit or delete information regarding product launches by following the process 400 shown in figure 6.

10 To edit or delete information regarding product launches, the contributor initially accesses the web site server 10 and provides their user ID and password to login to the server 10, shown in figure 6 at step 401.

15 The user is then presented with a list of product launches that they have provided data for, which is obtained from the product data database 28. The contributor is then able to select whether they wish to edit or delete a particular product launch at step 402.

The web site server 10 then determines whether the user selected the edit or delete function at 403.

If the contributor selected the edit facility, the user is presented with the data previously entered for that product launch and is provided an opportunity to

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amend any of the data, shown in figure 6 at step 404. The user then submits the edited data, which replaces the previous data in the product database at step 405.

Alternatively, if the user selected the delete function at step 403, the contributor is presented with a confirmation message as to whether they wish to delete this product launch. If the contributor confirms the deletion, the product data is deleted from the product database 28 at step 406.

Product launches from contributors are disseminated to their target audience in two ways. The first is by direct access to a website provided on the website server 10, from which users can search and browse products in the product data database 28. It should be noted that products are not visible to users before their product release data.

A further manner in which product launches are disseminated to their target audience is by the use of affiliates. Affiliates, which operate other websites stored on remote web servers 16 may register with the website server 10 using a similar process to that described above in relation to contributors. When registering, an affiliate indicates one or more categories from the category database 24 that they would be interested in receiving product information about. Each affiliate has one entry in the affiliate information table which is part of the affiliate database 26, and has one entry in each of the affiliate category table and the affiliate country table for each category and country they indicate they are interested in, respectively. Each affiliate is provided with a unique ID, which is stored in the affiliate information table.

Once registered, an affiliate is provided with access to the product data database 28 via the interface 32. However, it is important to note that the product database 28 is retained on the web site server 10, and is not copied to any of the affiliates. Rather, each affiliate accesses the product database 28 via the interface 32 when users using the affiliate's website wish to obtain information about product launches. In this manner, the organisation launching a product is able to provide information regarding that product launch to a single source, the web site server 10 and have that product data disseminated via a number of affiliate websites,

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and be assured that the information content of their product release is the same at each website and is not the subject of an embargo or other subjective modifications.

Further, each affiliate is provided with information regarding only those product launches that match the country and category criteria that the affiliate selected when they registered. Thus, the system is able to provide each affiliate with product launch data that the affiliate believes is relevant to its audience.

In the embodiment, the interface 32 is implemented as a common gateway interface (CGI) series of program modules that are executed upon being accessed by a person browsing either the website server 10 or an affiliate's website. In the embodiment, the affiliate passes parameters to the web site server 10 along with a request for information regarding products. One of these parameters is the affiliate's unique ID assigned to them during registration.

The CGI interface 32 in the embodiment accepts the following parameters:

AF	ID of the affiliate. This ID is provided to the affiliate during registration. From this ID we are able to determine the hits are coming from which affiliate.
TYPE	The type of New product News: B2B , B2C or All for both.
CATID	The ID of the category (Level 1)
FORMAT	The format for returning data, either HTML or XML . HTML - If affiliate uses our standard template XML - Raw data feed, the affiliate are able to design their own look and feel.
MAX	Maximum number of releases to be retrieved.
CONTENT	ALL - This will retrieve the headline and sub-category.
SEARCH	0 - No search box. 1 - Search box with no B2B/B2C/ALL search criteria 2 - Search box with B2B/B2C/ALL search criteria.

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The CGI interface 32, upon receiving a request, accesses the product database 28 to retrieve product releases and return formatted information regarding product launches the user.

In the embodiment, the following CGI interface program modules are provided:

- 5 **Search.cgi** - This program module retrieves news headline for a particular Type and Category selected by the browser. The Type, Category ID and affiliate ID parameters are passed into this program.

- 10 **Release.cgi** - This program retrieves news details when the browser click on a particular news headline. The release ID and affiliate ID parameters are passed into this program.

Techspec.cgi - This program module retrieves the Technical specs for the particular product when the browser clicks on the Technical Specs icon. The release ID and affiliate ID parameters are passed into this program module.

- 15 **Thumb.cgi** - This program module retrieves the Thumbnail picture for the particular product when the browser clicks on the Thumbnail icon. The release ID and affiliate ID parameters are passed into this program module.

Audio.cgi - This program module retrieves the audio attachment for the particular product when the browser clicks on the audio icon. The release ID and affiliate ID parameters are passed into this program module.

- 20 **Video.cgi** - This program module retrieves the video attachment for the particular product when the browser clicks on the Video icon. The release ID and affiliate ID parameters are passed into this program module.

- 25 **Printable.cgi** - The browser will get a printout of the particular product when the printable version text is clicked. The release ID and affiliate ID parameters are passed into this program module.

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Contributor.cgi - The browser will be diverted to the contributor web site upon clicking the hyperlink within the particular product. The release ID and affiliate ID parameters are passed into this program module.

5 The use of the interface 32 provides a flexible mechanism for affiliate websites to incorporate product data into their existing website whilst retaining the control desired by contributors.

10 Each time a CGI program module is executed by the interface 32, the interface 32 creates a new entry in the statistics database 30. This entry indicates the name of the CGI program module that was accessed, the affiliate ID from which the program module was called, an unique idea signed to the user using a "cookie" via the user's browser, the product release ID number of the item, whether the product was a business-to-business or a business-to-consumer product, the category identification passed to the interface 32 the time the request was received and further information regarding the user's computer such as the type of
15 browser software.

A contributor is able to access information from the statistics database 30 regarding their product launches. Upon providing their user ID and password to the website server 10, the contributor is able to view statistics on the number of "hits" for each of their product releases both in terms of the number of users
20 viewing the product release directly from the website server 10, or from affiliate websites. Thus, the contributor is able to ascertain the success of the product launch and be provided with meaningful statistical information regarding their product launch.

25 It should be appreciated that this invention is not limited to the particular embodiment described above.

THE CLAIMS DEFINING THE INVENTION ARE AS FOLLOWS

1. A system for managing product data and disseminating said product data via at least one affiliate, the system being in communication with a plurality of remote terminals over a network, each affiliate having a web site provided on a remote web server, the system comprising:
- 5 a web site server including registration means for registering a contributor, and product entry means for receiving product data from a contributor;
- 10 product database means for storing product data from said contributor;
- 15 retrieval means for receiving requests for product data from affiliate web sites in response to a person requesting said data from said affiliate web site, said requests including identification data unique to said affiliate, said means arranged to access said product data from the product database means and provide said product data to said person and/or said affiliate web site; and
- statistic database means arranged to record requests for product data and the product and identification data relating to said requests, and to present to the contributor statistics regarding their product.
- 20 2. A system as claimed in claim 1, wherein the system further comprises an affiliate database means arranged to store, for each affiliate, said identification data unique to said affiliate and at least one affiliate category, said product data including a product category field, and said request including a requested product category, said retrieval means arranged not
- 25 to process a request if the requested product category does not match any of the categories of the affiliate.

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3. A system as claimed in claim 1 or 2, wherein said affiliate database means is further arranged to store, for each affiliate, at least one affiliate country, said product data including a product country field, said retrieval means further arranged to provide data only where the product country field includes at least one country in common with one of the affiliate countries.
4. A system as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein said retrieval means comprises a plurality of program modules that are called from an affiliate web site in response to a person requesting said data from said affiliate web site.
5. A system as claimed in claim 4, wherein said affiliate web site is arranged to pass parameters to said program module, including said identification data, and category data.
6. A system as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 5, wherein said product data includes a release date, whereby said retrieval means is arranged not to retrieve product data concerning a product before said release date.
7. A method for managing product data and disseminating said product data via at least one affiliate over a network, a plurality of remote terminals being in communication over said network, each affiliate having a web site provided on a remote web server, the method comprising the steps of:
- registering contributors and allowing registered contributors to enter product data;
- storing product data from said contributors;
- receiving requests for product data from affiliate web sites in response to a person requesting said data from said affiliate web site, said requests including identification data unique to said affiliate, accessing said requested product data and providing said product data to said person and/or said affiliate web site; and

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recording the request and the product and identification data relating to said request, and presenting to the contributor statistics regarding their product.

- 5 8. A method as claimed in claim 7, further comprising the steps of storing, for each affiliate, said identification data unique to said affiliate and at least one affiliate category, said product data including a product category field, and said request including a requested product category, whereby said step of providing said data is aborted if the requested product category does not match any of the categories of the affiliate.
- 10 9. A method as claimed in claim 8, further comprising the steps of storing, for each affiliate, at least one affiliate country, said product data including a product country field, whereby said step of providing said data provides data only where the product country field includes at least one country in common with one of the affiliate countries.
- 15 10. A method as claimed in any one of claims 7 to 9, wherein said product data includes a release date, whereby said step of providing said data does not provide product data before said release date.

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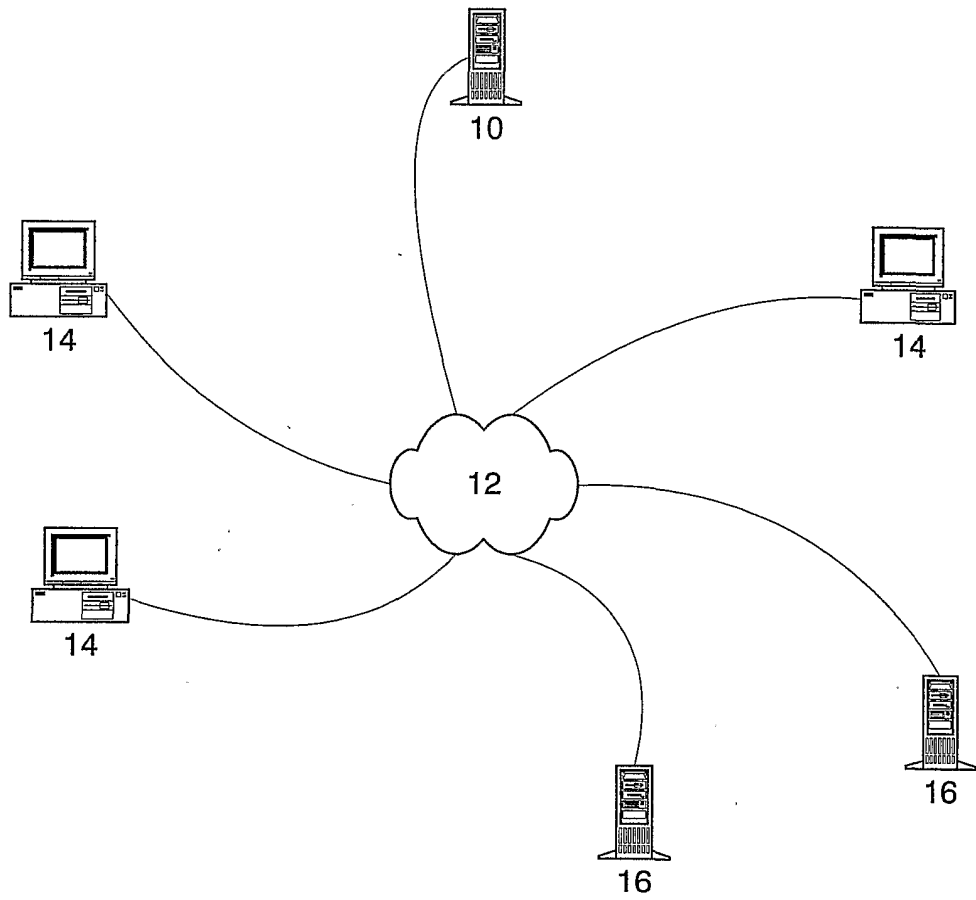


Figure 1

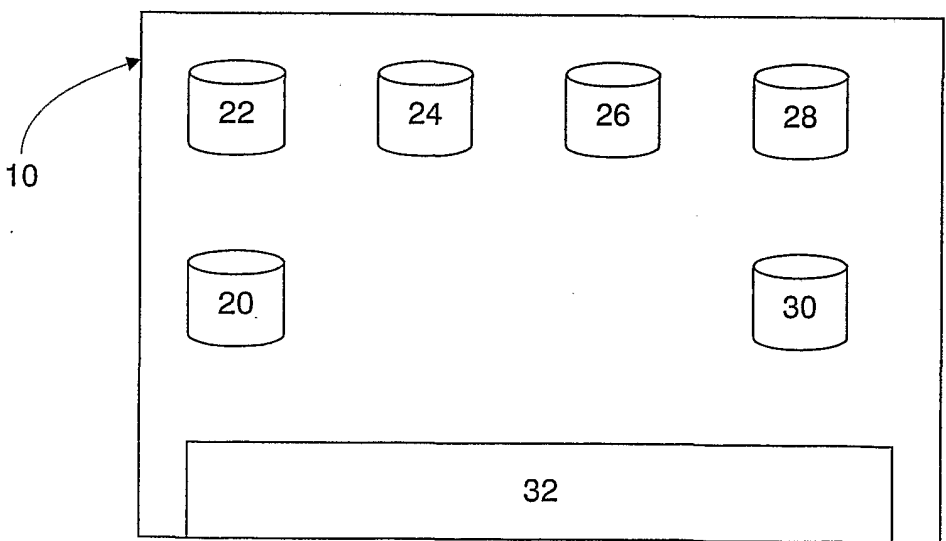


Figure 2

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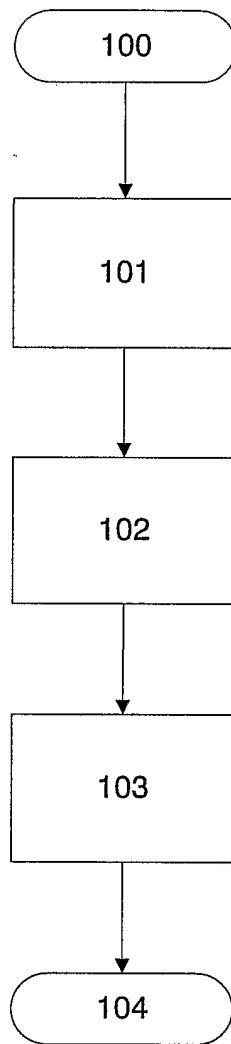


Figure 3

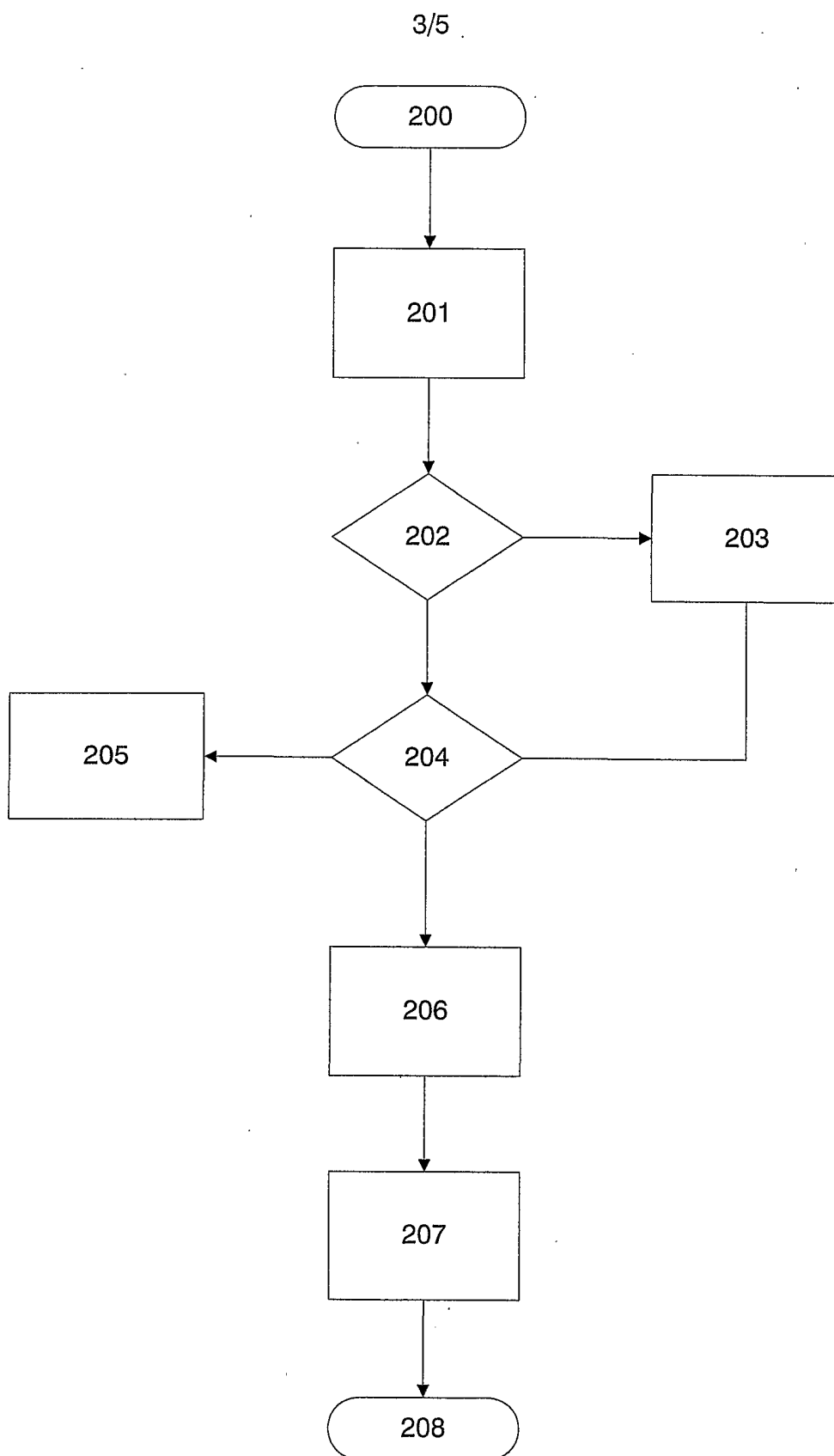


Figure 4

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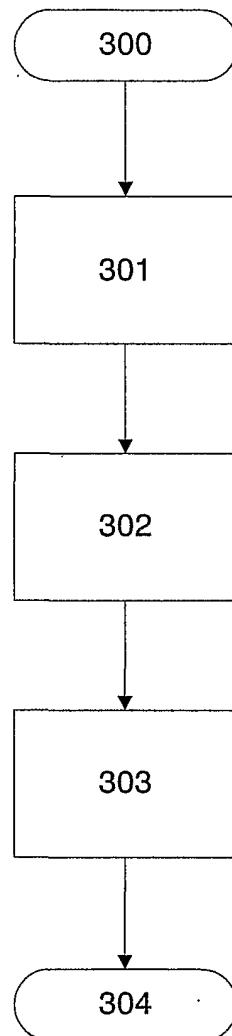


Figure 5

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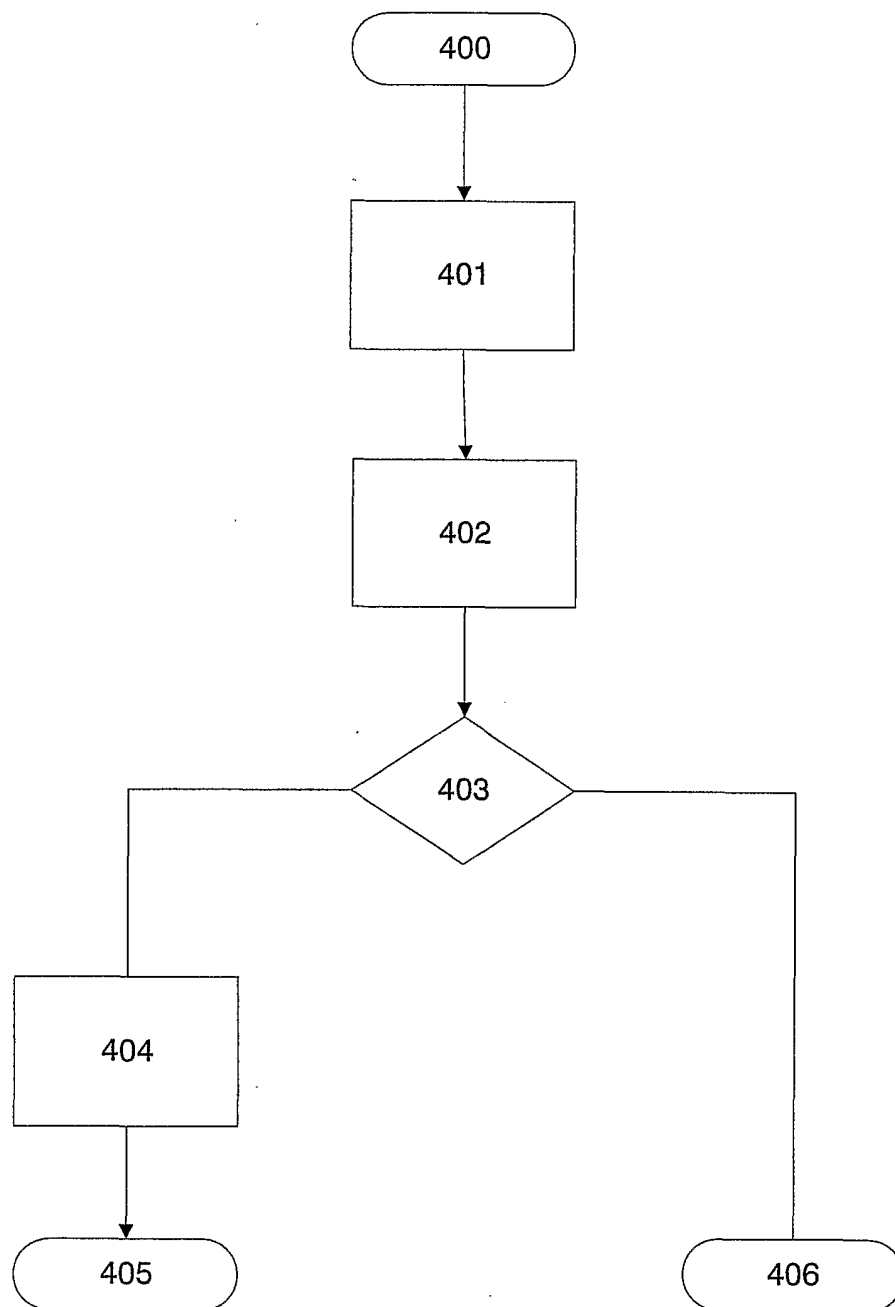


Figure 6