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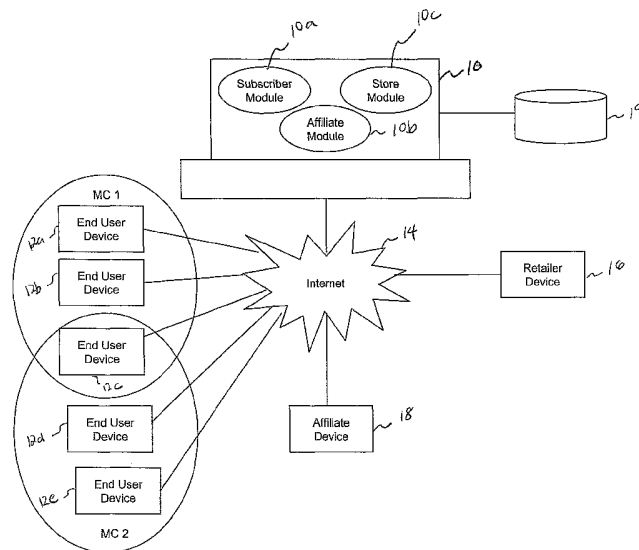
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(54) Title: INFERRED ENDORSEMENT SYSTEM AND METHOD



(57) Abstract: An inferred endorsement (IE) system and method allows members of a micro-community (MC) to share information on experiences with purchased products or services with other members of the MC, via a webpage dedicated to the MC. Once a member of the MC, the member's purchases at participating e-commerce sites may be exposed to the MC by posting it on the webpage. The posting information may be maintained in private so that only the members of the MC may view and comment. The MC creator may populate the MC by inviting potential members to join the MC. An invitee joins the MC upon registering with an IE server hosting the MC webpage. Once a member, the invitee may access the MC webpage and exchange product and service experience information with other MC members.

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1 According to a further embodiment of the invention, the invitee is restricted from further inviting a second invitee to the online community. In this manner, an MC creator may control the degrees of separation between the creator and each member of the MC.

5 According to another embodiment, the present invention is directed to an inferred endorsement server and method. The server includes a processor and a memory operably coupled to the processor that has program instructions stored therein, where the processor is operable to execute the program instructions. The program instructions include detecting purchase of an item at a merchant site; posting information about the purchased item at a
10 second site; limiting access to the second site to members of a micro-community; and electronically charging the merchant in response to the posting of the information.

 According to one embodiment, the instructions further include generating a dedicated electronic bulletin board for the purchased item on the second site.

15 It should be appreciated, therefore, that the claimed system and method provides a safe environment where members of a micro-community may exchange product experiences in an un-intrusive manner. Furthermore, user purchases from diverse e-commerce sites may be aggregated at a central location. Such exposure of consumer purchase information to the micro-community for viewing and discussion act as an endorsement of the purchase itself,
20 and leads to new business from the community members. Because such an inferred endorsement is valuable to retailers, advertising fees are charged for exposing the purchase information to the micro-community.

 These and other features, aspects and advantages of the present invention will be more
25 fully understood when considered with respect to the following detailed description, appended claims, and accompanying drawings. Of course, the actual scope of the invention is defined by the appended claims.

30 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

 In the drawings, which constitute part of this specification, exemplary embodiments demonstrating various features of the invention are set forth as follows:

 FIG. 1 is a schematic block diagram of an inferred endorsements (IE) system according to one embodiment of the invention;

35 FIG. 2 is an architecture block diagram of an IE server, an end user device, and retailer and affiliate devices according to one embodiment of the invention;

1 FIG. 3 is an illustration of an exemplary home page displayed to a user upon access to his micro-community according to one embodiment of the invention;

5 FIG. 4 is a screen shot of an MC listings page displaying listings of products purchased by one or more members of a micro-community according to one embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 5 is a screen shot of an add listings page for adding a purchase listing to the MC listings page of FIG. 4 according to one embodiment of the invention;

10 FIG. 6 is a screen shot of a purchase archive page according to one embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 7A is a screen shot of a page displaying various private forums according to one embodiment of the invention;

15 FIG. 7B is a screen shot of a public listings page according to one embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 8 is a screen shot of a page displaying various general forums according to one embodiment of the invention;

20 FIG. 9 is a screen shot of a page displaying information on members of a micro-community according to one embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 10 is a flow diagram of a process implemented by an IE server for populating a micro-community according to one embodiment of the invention;

25 FIGS. 11A-11B are screen shots of pages displayed to a user by a retailer device upon completion of a purchase from the retailer according to one embodiment of the invention; and

FIG. 12 is a flow chart of an inferred endorsement process according to one embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

30 In general terms, the present invention is directed to an inferred endorsement system and method which allows members of a micro-community (MC) to share product or service purchase information, including experiences with purchased products, product reviews, and the like, with other members of the MC. A user may set up his or her own MC, or be invited to join an existing MC. According to one embodiment, the MC is composed of a circle of
35 friends and family, but may also extend to include other people, such as, for example, friends-of-friends, neighbors, other social acquaintances, and the like.

1 Once a member, the user's purchases at participating e-commerce sites may be
automatically exposed to his or her MC upon approval from the user. Because the mere
purchase of the product acts as an endorsement of the product and the retailer from whom the
product was purchased, the exposing of such purchase to the MC members serves to promote
5 the retailer and the product. Accordingly, the retailer benefiting from such promotion pays a
promotion fee to the posting entity.

 The MC provides different forums where the user may then share his or her
experience with the purchased product or service (collectively referred to as a product).
10 Because the MC is composed of a circle of friends and family, a reader of comments for a
particular product benefits from knowing who the writer is. Thus, there is an added
dimension of trust that accompany the reviews and comments of different products.

 FIG. 1 is a schematic block diagram of an inferred endorsements (IE) system
according to one embodiment of the invention. The system includes an IE server 10 coupled
15 to various end user devices 12a-12e (collectively referred to as 12) over a data
communications network 14 such as, for example, a public Internet. The users of the end
user devices 12 are subscribed with the IE server 10 and belong to one or more MCs hosted
by the IE server 10. For example, in the illustrated example, the end user devices 12a and
20 12b belong exclusively to MC1, end user device 12c belongs to both MC1 and MC2, and end
user device 12d and 12e belong exclusively to MC2.

 The IE server 10 is also coupled to one or more participating retailers via their retailer
devices 16, and to one or more affiliates via their affiliate devices 18.

25 The IE server 10 includes one or more software modules for providing various
inferred endorsement services to the participating end users, retailers, and affiliates. Such
software modules may include a subscriber module 10a for interfacing with the end users via
the end user devices 12, store module 10c for interfacing with the retailers via the retailer
30 devices 16, and affiliate module 10b for interfacing with the affiliates via the affiliate devices
18.

 The IE server 10 is also coupled to a mass storage device 19 such as, for example, a
disk drive or drive array, for storing information used by the IE server 10 for providing the
inferred endorsement services. For example, the mass storage device maintains information
35 on each MC hosted by the IE server 10, including membership and product purchase
information. The product purchase information may be maintained for each subscribed user,

1 MC, and/or retailer. The mass storage device also stores profile and account information for each user, retailer, and affiliate.

5 According to one embodiment of the invention, the end user devices 12 and/or retailer and affiliate devices 16, 18 may connect to the data communications network using a telephone connection, satellite connection, cable connection, radio frequency communication, or any wired or wireless data communication mechanism known in the art. To this end, the devices may take the form of a personal computer (PC), hand-held personal computer (HPC), television and set-top-box combination, personal digital assistant (PDA), or 6 any consumer electronics device known in the art.

10 FIG. 2 is an architecture block diagram of the IE server 10, end user devices 12, and retailer and affiliate devices 16, 18 according to one embodiment of the invention. These devices each include one or more processors 20 operatively coupled via a system bus 22 to a main memory 24 and an input/output (I/O) interface control unit 26. The I/O interface control unit 26 is operatively coupled via an I/O local bus 28 to a storage controller 30. The processor 20 is coupled via the I/O interface control unit 26, the I/O local bus 28, and the storage controller 30, to a storage device 32. Computer program instructions 34 for implementing different functionalities of the IE server 10, end user devices 12, or retailer and affiliate devices 16, 18 are stored in the storage device 32 until the processor 20 retrieves the computer program instructions and stores them in the main memory 24. The processor 20 then executes the computer program instructions stored in the main memory 24 to implement a particular functionality. Such functionality may include web browsing functionality for displaying and interacting with web pages transmitted according to a web application protocol such as, for example, a Hypertext Transfer Protocol.

20 The IE server, end user devices 12, and retailer and affiliate devices 16, 18 may further include a screen 36 coupled to the I/O local bus 28 via a display controller 38. The screen is used to display images, text, video, and the like. The screen 36 may be coupled to the display controller 38 via a Universal Serial Bus (USB) communications link or by any wired or wireless video display connection known in the art.

30 The IE server 10 and the various devices 12, 16, 18 may also include one or more user input devices 40 coupled to the I/O local bus 28 via an input device controller 42. The user input devices 40 may include a keyboard, keypad, mouse, joystick, remote controller, microphone, and the like.

1 According to one embodiment, a user of an end user device 12 subscribes to the
services provided by the IE server 10 via the subscriber module 10a. In this regard, the user
accesses a registration web page provided by the subscriber module, and provides the user's
5 registration information such as, for example, the user's name, e-mail address, credit card
information, and the like. Upon receipt of the user registration information, the subscriber
module automatically charges a subscription fee to the user's credit card. A notification may
then be sent to the user of the user's successful subscription. According to another
embodiment, the charging of the subscription fee is deferred until an expiration of a free
10 promotional period. The user's registration information is then stored in the mass storage
device 19 as part of the user's profile/account information.

A subscribed user may then invite friends, family, and others, to join the user's MC.
In this regard, the user transmits to the subscriber module 10a, contact information of the
15 people that the user wishes to invite to join the user's MC. The contact information may
include, for example, an e-mail address, a telephone number, a physical address, or the like.
The IE server uses the contact information to automatically generate invitations to the
potential MC members. The invitation may take the form of an electronic mail, an instant
message, an "evite", or the like.

20 According to one embodiment of the invention, the invitation includes an URL link to
the IE server 10. Selection of the URL link by an invitee causes the invitee's end user device
to connect to the IE server 10 and display a registration page provided by the subscriber
module 10a. The registration is then filled-out and submitted to the subscriber module 10a
25 for joining the user's MC. The newly joined member may further generate his or her own
MC, and invite a number of other people to join the new MC. However, the newly joined
member may or may not be authorized to invite people to join the MC to which he or she was
invited, depending on the degree of separation allowed by the MC creator. For example, if
30 the maximum degree of separation between the MC creator and any invitee is two, the
members of the MC may include the MC creator, people directly invited by the MC creator
(referred to as direct members), and people invited by the direct members (referred to as
indirect members). The indirect members, however, may not invite their family and friends
to join the MC.

35 Once subscribed, the user may access the IE server 10 and view all posted
transactions made by each member of the MC. The user may further search for particular
transactions based on product descriptions, brand names, retailer information, member

1 information, and the like. The user may also view or post on a bulletin board dedicated to the user's MC, reviews or comments on purchased products. Private messages may also be exchanged between members of the user's MC.

5 FIG. 3 is an illustration of an exemplary home page displayed to a user upon access to his MC according to one embodiment of the invention. The home page provides various navigation tabs for accessing different MC services and/or information. A "my page" tab 90 allows the user to return to his home page from other navigation pages. The user's home page is automatically displayed upon login by the user.

10 A "listings" tab 92 allows the user to view a private MC listings page displaying listings of products purchased by members of the user's MC, or a public listings page displaying listings of products purchased by members of other communities. The private MC listings page is viewable to only the members of the MC. The public listings page is viewable by all subscribed users from all communities. However, in the public listings page,
15 the posting people may remain anonymous via usernames instead of real names. In the private listings page, although usernames are used, the MC members are provided with the real identity of people using the usernames.

20 Selection of a "photo galleries" tab 94 causes display of different photo galleries generated by the members of the MC, and further allows the user to share his own photo gallery with the members of his or her MC and/or other communities.

25 A "forums" tab 96 displays various types of bulletin boards accessible to the user, including, for example, a private forum, listings forum, and general forum. The private forum is a private bulletin board where members of the user's MC may post and view comments on different subjects. The listings forum is also a private bulletin board accessible to only the members of the user's MC, but is dedicated to discussions relating to products or services. The general forum is a public bulletin board accessible to any subscriber of the system even if the subscriber is a not a member of the user's MC. The public bulletin board
30 allows members of different communities to engage in discussion about products or any other desired topic in an anonymous manner.

35 A "messages" tab 98 allows the user to access his or her private inbox that stores messages directed to the user by other MC members, and a public inbox that stores messages directed to the user by members of other communities. The separation of the private and public inboxes allow filtering of relevant messages from MC members, from possibly spam messages from members of other communities.

1 An "admin" tab 101 allows the user to manage the MC, edit and manage exposure of the user's personal profile information, and perform other administrative tasks.

5 A "merchants" tab 103 provides a merchant directory of the various merchants with whom members of the MC have had experiences, and provides information such as rating information about these merchants.

10 According to one embodiment of the invention, the user's home page is displayed upon login with the IE server 10. The home page includes a "My Details" portion 100 with information about the user, including the user's picture 102 and other profile and demographic information (not shown) about the user. A direct members link 104 identifies the direct members of the MC that have been invited by the user himself. An indirect members link 106 identifies the indirect members of the MC that have been invited to the MC by a direct member.

15 A my listings link 110 identifies the number of postings made to the private MC listings page by the user regarding products and services experienced by the user. An MC listings link 112 identifies the total number of postings made to the MC listings page regarding product experiences by all MC members.

20 A new private messages link 112 and new public messages link 114 identify the number of new messages in respectively the user's private and public inboxes.

25 A manage community link 118 allows the user to view and edit his or her MC. The user may further view a report of the people invited by the user via an invite report link 120. The user may conveniently invite friends and family to join the user's MC by entering the e-mail addresses of those people in an invite new member section 122.

30 A most recent posts section 124 of the user's home page provides a private forum link 126 identifying a number of recent postings 126 in one or more private bulletin boards accessible to the MC members, along with one or more thread topics 128 and information on one or more posting people 130. The most recent posts section also provides a public forum link 132 identifying a number of recent postings 132 in one or more public bulletin boards accessible to members of all communities, along with one or more thread topics 134 and information on one or more posting people 136. Selection of a listed private or public thread topic 128, 134, causes display of the posted message in the private or public bulletin board.

35 A latest community listings section 140 displays the latest product listings 142 posted on the MC listings page regarding products purchased by the MC members, and the particular

1 MC members 144 posting the listings. Selection of a particular listing causes display of
rating and other informati relating to the purchase.

5 A my community section of the home page displays pictures 146 of the members of
the user's MC. In this manner, the user may visually identify the people with whom
comments and other information are shared.

10 FIG. 4 is a screen shot of a private MC listings page displaying listings of products
purchased and/or experienced by one or more members of the MC according to one
embodiment of the invention. The illustrated page may be displayed, for example, upon
selecting the listings tab 92 or the MC listings link 112. The user may view listings posted by
all members of the MC, or filter the displayed listings based on individual members,
including the user himself, by selecting the appropriate person in a selection window 200.

15 The items are listed by name 202 and associated with an item rating 204, item
description 206, store rating 208, posting member identifier 210, and merchant country 212
information. The listed items may be sorted by name 202, item rating 204, store rating 208,
and posting member identifier 210. The store rating 208 is the aggregate of all the ratings
collected for the listed store or merchant. The member information 210 is the username for
20 the posting member. Selection of the username causes display of the member's real identity
and profile information, allowing the decloaking of members making the postings.

FIG. 5 is a screen shot of an add listings page for adding an entry to the MC listings
page according to one embodiment of the invention. The add listings page may be displayed,
for example, upon selection of an "add listings" sub-tab 216 under the listings tab 92.

25 A user desirous of adding an entry to the listings page provides listing details such as,
for example, a listing type 230, item type 232, purchase date 234, and purchase price 236.
The listing type 230 is selected to indicate the listing as being an online or offline listing. An
offline listing is a listing for a product that is manually generated by a user. An online listing
is a listing for a product that is automatically generated in response to the purchase of the
30 product from a participating retailer. An online listing may be validated since the listing
information is provided directly from the retailer, and thus, there is verification that the user
indeed made the purchase. The item type 232 is selected to indicate whether the listing is for
a product or service.

35 Setting an activate option 238 causes the listing details to be posted on the private MC
listings page, the public listings page, or both, depending on whether a private listings setting
has been set for the user's profile. For example, if the private listings setting has been set, the

1 listing is only posted on the private MC listings page and thus, visible to only the members of
the MC. If the private listings setting has not been set, the listing is posted on both the MC
listings page and the public listings page. According to an alternative embodiment of the
invention, whether a listing is private or public may be made on a listing-by-listing basis.

5 An adult content setting 240 indicates whether the listing is appropriate for only
adults. In this regard, the IE server 10 may filter display of adult content listings based on the
member's age. For example, listings with the adult content setting option set may not be
displayed to members who are under 18 years of age.

10 In addition to the listing detail, the user further provides details on the product to be
listed such as, for example, a product name 242 and description 244. The user then rates the
product by selecting one of various rating levels 246. The user may explain the reasons for
the rating and provide other commentaries in a product commentary area 248.

15 The user also provides a merchant name 220 from whom the product was purchased,
and rates the merchant by selecting one of various rating levels 222. The user may also
provide a commentary on the store in a store commentary area 224. Additional information
that may be posted on the MC listings page include a URL link 226 to the merchant
providing the product, and a picture 228 of the product.

20 In addition to the MC listings page, the IE server 10 provides a public listings page
(not shown) upon selection of an "all" sub-tab 214 under the listings tab 92. The public
listings page include listings of products purchased by members of other communities, and
are publicly viewable to all subscribed members.

25 FIG. 6 is a screen shot of a purchase archive page according to one embodiment of the
invention. The purchase archive page may be displayed, for example, upon selection of an
archives sub-tab 218 under the listings tab 92. The purchase archive page displays the
products purchased by the user as stored in a purchase listings database in the mass storage
device 19. The user may view all listings, active listings, or inactive listings, by selecting a
30 corresponding filter from a selection window 262. Active listings are listings that are
exposed to the MC by causing it to appear on the private MC listings page, public listings
page, or both. Inactive listings are listings that have not yet been exposed to either the MC or
other communities. The user may modify the active/inactive status of one or more products
35 by selecting these products via a selection option 280, and invoking an activate 282 or
deactivate 284 button.

1 FIG. 7A is a screen shot of a page displaying various private forums according to one
embodiment of the invention. The illustrated screen shot may be displayed, for example,
upon selecting the forums tab 96 or a private sub-tab 251 under the forums tab. In the
illustrated page, a general category section 252 lists one or more types of general forums
5 accessible to the MC members. In the illustrated example, a My Community forum 256 is a
private bulletin board where members of the MC may discuss any desired topic in an open
and transparent manner.

 A transaction category section 254 lists one or more products 258 for which a
10 dedicated bulletin board has been generated for discussing the products. Selection of a
particular product causes the display of the relevant bulletin board for allowing the user to
view what other members' experiences have been with the product, and posting the user's
own experience with the product.

15 Unlike other bulletin boards where the discussing members may remain anonymous,
the discussing members in any of the private bulletin boards are people whose real identity is
exposed to the MC, making the conversations more meaningful and interesting. A search
field 250 provides various search options for searching and displaying posts matching the
search. For example, the user may only want to search and view postings made by the user.

20 FIG. 7B is a screen shot of a public listings page according to one embodiment of the
invention. The illustrated screen shot may be displayed, for example, upon selection of a
listings sub-tab 253 under the forums tab 96. Unlike the listings in the transactions category
section 254 of FIG. 7A, the listings on the public listings page reference public bulletin
25 boards dedicated to discussions related to the particular listed product or service, which
members from all communities may access.

 Such public bulletin boards allow the user to search for user experiences on a
particular product for which similar information is not available in the user's MC. In this
30 scenario, the user may access the public listings page and search for discussions about the
product. According to one embodiment, the IE server may provide a search option (not
shown) for allowing the user to search the product databases maintained for the other MCs
for the particular product. A successful match may identify the buyers of the particular
product, people who had comments on the product, and/or whether a public bulletin board
35 exists for the particular product. If no dedicated public bulletin boards exist for the particular
product, the IE server may automatically generate one, and allow the user to post an inquiry
for the particular product on the generated public bulletin board in an anonymous manner.

1 According to one embodiment of the invention, if a particular non-MC subscriber is identified as having information on the inquired product, the IE server notifies the subscriber of the inquiry placed on the particular product. If the notified subscriber provides an answer to the inquiry, the answer is posted on the public bulletin board.

5 FIG. 8 is a screen shot of a page displaying various general forums according to one embodiment of the invention. The illustrated screen shot may be displayed, for example, upon selecting a "general" sub-tab 300 under the forums tab 96, or upon selection of the general forum link 132 on the user's home page. In the illustrated page, a general category section 302 lists one or more types of general forums available to all communities. In the illustrated example, a General forum 304 is a public bulletin board where members of the various communities may discuss different topics. Specialized categories may also be provided, such as, for example, current events, music, books, and the like, for generating public bulletin boards for the general categories.

10 FIG. 9 is a screen shot of a page displayed to the user for managing the user's MC according to one embodiment of the invention. The illustrated screen shot may be displayed, for example, upon selecting the "admin" tab 101, or upon selection of the "manage community" link 118 on the user's home page. In the illustrated page, a "my community" section 350 lists the direct members of the user's MC who have been invited to the MC directly by the user, based on their first names 352, last names 354, and usernames 356. The user may set the relationship of each direct MC member via a relationship selector 358. The user may exclude a member from his or her MC by setting a "drop" option 368 for that member.

15 According to one embodiment of the invention, a direct MC member may not in turn invite other members to join the MC unless authorized by the user. Such an authorization is given on a member by member basis by setting a friends-of-friends option 360. In this manner, the user controls how far removed the members of the MC are to the user.

20 Invitees of direct members (e.g. friends-of-friends) become indirect members of the MC, and are identified according to their usernames and relationship to the inviting direct member. The user may limit an indirect member's access to the MC by selecting a limit option 362. For example, the indirect members may be limited from accessing the user's profile, certain private forums, the user's photo gallery, and the like. In this manner, the user has ultimate control on how much information to expose to people other than immediate friends and family.

1 An "invite friends" section 364 allows the user to invite friends and family to join the user's MC. According to one embodiment of the invention, the invitation is transmitted as an evite that is delivered to the invitee's email address.

5 According to one embodiment of the invention, the user may also set different interest groups 366 and invite people to join the particular interest groups. The user may also control if a particular interest group is public or private.

10 FIG. 10 is a flow diagram of a process implemented by the IE server's subscriber module 10a for populating an MC according to one embodiment of the invention. In step 400, the module receives an electronic address, such as, for example, an e-mail address, of a person to be invited to the MC. In step 402, the process generates an electronic invitation such as, for example, an evite, email message, instant message, and the like, and transmits the electronic invitation to the indicated address. According to one embodiment, such an
15 electronic invitation is not generated if the person doing the inviting is restricted, by the creator of the MC, from inviting other invitees to join the MC. Such a determination may be made by the IE server by determining if the person doing the inviting has a friends-of-friends option set.

20 In step 404, the module receives an electronic acceptance indication to the invitation from the invitee. In generate the acceptance indication, the invitee accesses the module via, for example, a link provided in the invitation, and provides the invitee's registration information. According to one embodiment, the module is configured to maintain track of outstanding invitations for the user, and as acceptances are received, correlate the acceptances
25 with the invitations. Any of various well known mechanisms may be utilized to allow such correlation of acceptances with invitations and relevant MCs.

In step 406, the module identifies the MC to which the invitee is to be added, and proceeds to add the invitee to the MC in step 408.

30 According to one embodiment of the invention, a retailer may also subscribe to the inferred endorsement service provided by the IE server via a store module 10c. In this regard, the retailer accesses a registration web page provided by the store module, and provides the retailer's registration information such as, for example, the retailer name, website, types of products and services offered by the retailer, contact information, credit
35 card information, and the like. The retailer's registration information is then stored in the mass storage device 19 as part of the retailer's profile/account information.

1 A participating retailer provides via its retailer device 16, a website that allows on-line
purchases of products offered on the website. According to one embodiment of the
invention, a subscribed retailer provides on its website a mechanism for MC members to
submit a query for products purchased from the retailer by other MC members. In this
5 regard, the retailer server first determines whether the user accessing the retailer website is a
current subscriber of the inferred endorsement service. This may be accomplished, for
example, by transmitting the user's identification information to the IE server for a match.
The user's identification information may be, for example, the user's e-mail address. A query
10 for a particular product or products submitted by a subscribing user is forwarded to the IE
server for generating a response.

According to one embodiment of the invention, a subscribed retailer further provides
on its website a mechanism that allows the automatic posting of an MC member's product
15 purchases from the retailer, to the user's MC. Because the purchase of a product in-of-it itself
acts as an endorsement of the product by the purchaser, the retailer has great incentive to
make such product purchases known to others.

According to one embodiment of the invention, the retailer's website includes a
shopping cart module that includes next to each item stored in the user's shopping cart, an
20 "endorsement check box." The user may select the box for each item that the user wishes to
disclose to the other MC members.

Upon the completion of a current purchase transaction, all items with a checked
endorsement check box are posted to the purchasing user's MC. In this regard, the
25 purchasing user's archive page (FIG. 6) is updated with the endorsed products. The endorsed
products may then be posted on the MC listings page, public listings page, or both.
Individual notifications may also be sent to the MC members via e-mail, instant messaging,
and/or the like, upon posting on the MC listings page.

30 According to one embodiment of the invention, an inferred endorsement of a product
by a purchasing MC member by posting the purchase information to the MC causes the IE
server to automatically calculate a commission amount for the endorsement, and debit the
retailer's account for the calculated amount. A notification may then be transmitted to the
retailer of the endorsement and account debit.

35 In another embodiment of the invention, an MC member's purchase information from
a retailer may be submitted to the IE server even if the retailer is not yet registered with the
IE server 10. In this regard, the MC member may provide to the retailer the IE server's e-mail

1 address for sending a purchase confirmation to the IE server's e-mail address. The IE server
receives the purchase confirmation and updates the MC member's archive page based on the
purchase confirmation information. The IE server may then automatically prompt the retailer
5 to subscribe to the IE server if the purchase information is to be activated and made viewable
by other MC members. Alternatively, the purchase information may be activated without
requesting registration by the retailer.

FIGS. 11A-11B are screen shots of pages displayed to the user by the retailer device
16 upon completion of a purchase from the retailer according to one embodiment of the
10 invention. A message 500 displayed upon completion of the purchase indicates that the
retailer is a participating merchant, and inquires whether the purchase should be added to the
user's purchase listings. If the user selects a "submit" button 502, the retailer device 16
causes display of a confirmation message 504 asking the user to confirm the addition of the
15 purchase information to the user's purchase listings. Upon confirmation, the purchase
information is transmitted to the IE server 10. In this regard, the retailer device 16 bundles
the purchase information with information on the merchant from whom the purchase was
made, and transmits the bundled information to the IE server's store module 10c.

The store module 10c receives the purchase and merchant information, and
20 automatically generates a product listing based on the received information. The
automatically generated product listing may include information similar to the information
provided in the add listings page of FIG. 5. For example, the automatically generated product
listing may include the listing type 230, item type 232, purchase date 234, purchase price
25 236, product name 242, product description 244, merchant name 220, item link 226, and item
picture 228.

According to one embodiment of the invention, the automatically generated product
listing is posted on the user's archive page. In order to expose the newly generated listing on
30 the MC listings page and/or public listings page, the user accesses his or her archive and sets
the activate option for the product listing. Alternatively, the listing may be automatically
posted on the MC listings page and/or public listings page even without the manual
activation.

If the posting user desires to edit the listing or add further information for the listing,
35 he or she may do so by invoking an edit page. The edit page may be invoked, for example, by
double clicking on the listing on the MC listings page, public listings page, and/or archive.
The edit page may be similar to the add listings page of FIG. 5. Via the edit page, the user

1 may add information such as, for example, product or store rating, product or store comments, and the like.

5 The store module 10c is configured to maintain track for all listings activated and made viewable for a particular merchant, and automatically bill the merchant for such activated listings. The merchant may electronically make payments for the billed amount. Alternatively, the price for the activated listings may be automatically deducted from an electronic account maintained for the merchant.

10 FIG. 12 is a flow chart of an inferred endorsement process according to one embodiment of the invention. In step 600, the store module 10c detects purchase of a product at a merchant site. This may occur, for example, upon receipt of a purchase confirmation receipt that is forwarded directly by the merchant to the store module 10c upon purchase of the product by an MC member.

15 In step 602, the store module generates a product purchase listing based on the information transmitted in the purchase confirmation receipt. According to one embodiment of the invention, the information in the purchase confirmation receipt is tagged with computer-readable tags so as to allow the store module to automatically identify and retrieve the relevant information for automatically generating the purchase listing.

20 In step 604, the product purchase information is added to the purchase listings database and/or the purchasing member's archive page.

25 According to one embodiment of the invention, the purchase information is not exposed to the MC or to other communities absent activation of the listing from the user. Thus, in step 606, a determination is made as to whether the listing has been activated. If the answer is YES, the store module, in step 608, posts the purchase listing in the private MC listings page, public listings page, or both.

30 In step 610, the store module proceeds to calculate an inferred endorsement price to be charged to the merchant that is being promoted via the posting.

In step 612, the store module charges the merchant's account with the calculated amount.

35 According to one embodiment of the invention, any revenues calculated by the IE server from subscription fees, commission fees, and/or the like, are shared with affiliate partners who promote the IE service on their websites and draw new subscribers to the IE server. Affiliate partners may include web portals such as, for example, Yahoo!, MSN, and AOL. These web portals may, upon their own subscription with the IE server via the affiliate

1 module 10b, provide a link to the IE server and allow users of such portals subscribe to the IE
service. For each subscribed MC user, therefore, information may be maintained of the
affiliate, if any, that facilitated the subscription of the user. Payments may then be
5 automatically calculated for the affiliate, and credit the affiliate's account based on generated
revenues.

Although this invention has been described in certain specific embodiments, those
skilled in the art will have no difficulty devising variations to the described embodiment
which in no way depart from the scope and spirit of the present invention. For example, it
10 should be apparent that in addition to product and service purchase information, the inferred
endorsements may be of other items that a person may experience and may want to rate, such
as movies, restaurants, vacation spots, and the like. The MC may also be used to allow
members of the MC to stay connected by sharing pictures, events, and the like.

15 Furthermore, to those skilled in the various arts, the invention itself herein will
suggest solutions to other tasks and adaptations for other applications. It is the Applicant's
intention to cover all such uses of the invention and those changes and modifications which
could be made to the embodiments of the invention herein chosen for the purpose of
disclosure without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. Thus, the present
20 embodiments of the invention should be considered in all respects as illustrative and not
restrictive.

25

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1 WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1 1. A method for generating an online community, the method comprising:
generating an electronic invitation for an invitee to join a particular online
community;
5 transmitting the electronic invitation to the invitee;
receiving an electronic acceptance indication to the invitation;
adding the invitee to the particular online community;
providing a website for the particular online community; and
10 exchanging product and service experience information among the online community
members via the website.

15 2. The method of claim 1 further comprising:
automatically posting on the website information on purchases made by the online
community members.

20 3. The method of claim 2 further comprising:
generating a dedicated electronic bulletin board for a particular purchased product or
service.

25 4. The method of claim 2, wherein the information is a product or service rating
information.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein the invitee is restricted from further inviting a
second invitee to the online community.

30 6. An inferred endorsement method comprising:
detecting purchase of an item at a merchant site;
posting information about the purchased item at a second site;
limiting access to the second site to members of a micro-community; and
electronically charging the merchant in response to the posting of the information.
35

7. The method of claim 6 further comprising:

1 generating a dedicated electronic bulletin board for the purchased item on the second
site.

5 8. The method of claim 6, wherein the information is an item rating information.

9. A system for generating an online community, the system comprising:

a first end user device generating a request to invite an invitee to join a particular
online community;

10 a server coupled to the first end user device, the server receiving the request and in
response, transmitting the electronic invitation to the invitee;

a second end user device coupled to the server, the second end user device receiving
the electronic invitation and generating an electronic acceptance indication in response,

15 wherein the server adds the invitee to the particular online community and provides a
website for the particular online community for allowing exchange of product and service
experience information among the online community members.

20 10. The system of claim 9, wherein the server automatically posts on the website
information on purchases made by the online community members.

25 11. The system of claim 10, wherein the server provides a dedicated electronic
bulletin board for a particular purchased product or service.

12. The system of claim 10, wherein the information is a product or service rating
information.

30 13. The system of claim 9, wherein the invitee is restricted from further inviting a
second invitee to the online community.

14. An inferred endorsement server comprising:

a processor; and

35 a memory operably coupled to the processor and having program instructions stored
therein, the processor being operable to execute the program instructions, the program
instructions including:

1 detecting purchase of an item at a merchant site;
posting information about the purchased item at a second site;
limiting access to the second site to members of a micro-community; and
5 electronically charging the merchant in response to the posting of the
information.

15. The server of claim 14, wherein the instructions further comprise:
generating a dedicated electronic bulletin board for the purchased item on the second
10 site.

16. The server of claim 14, wherein the information is an item rating information.

15

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35

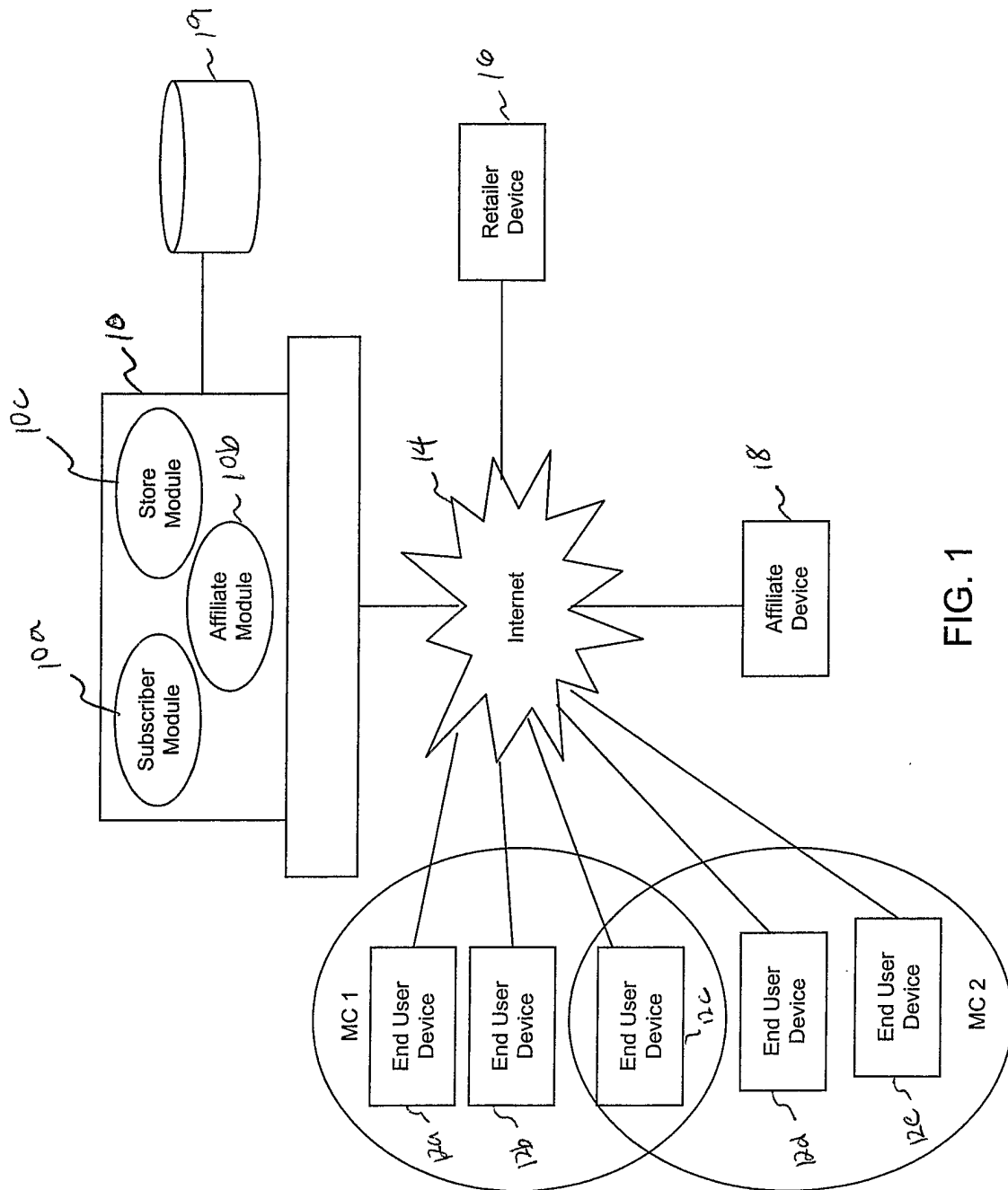


FIG. 1

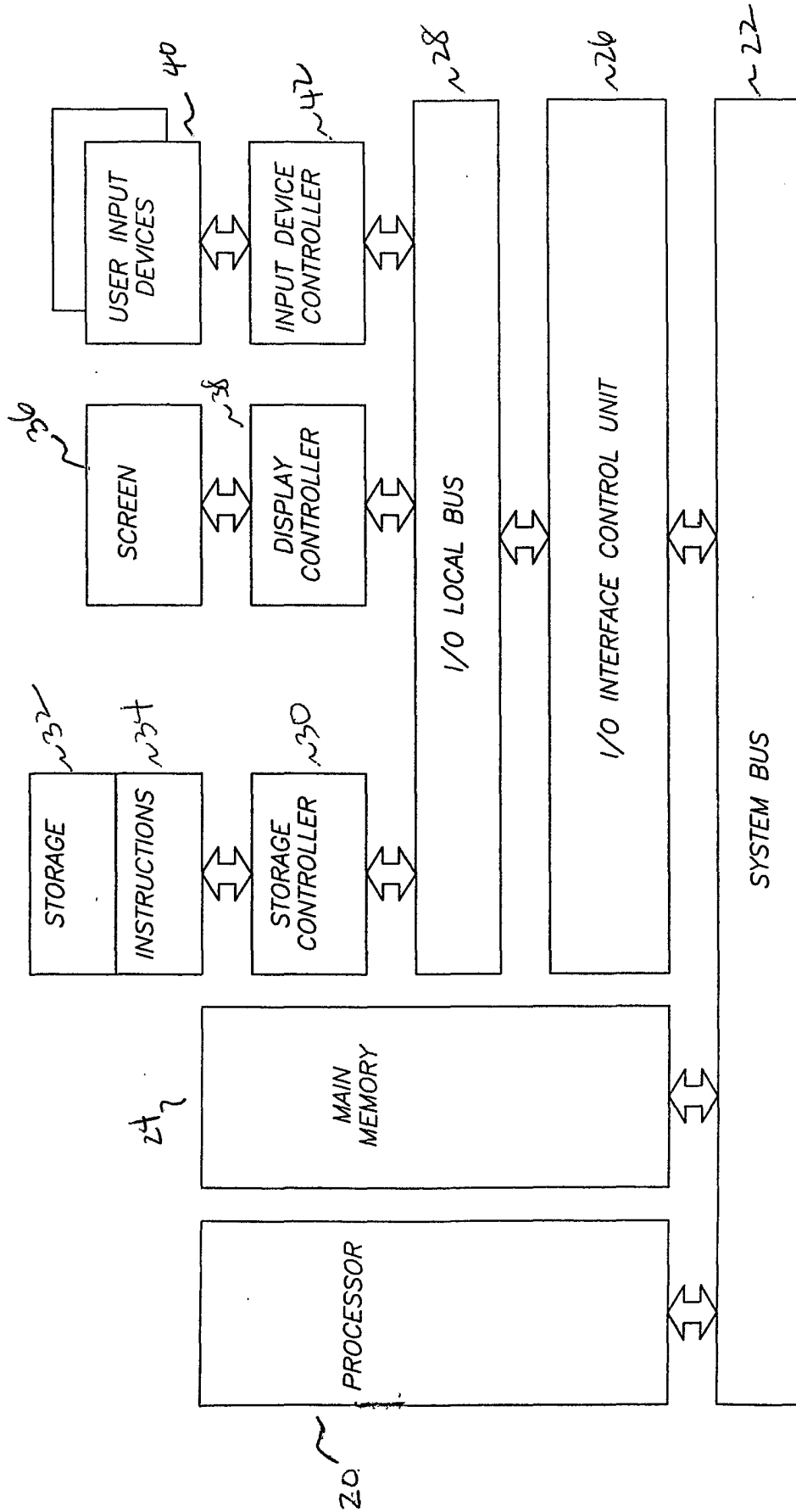


FIG. 2

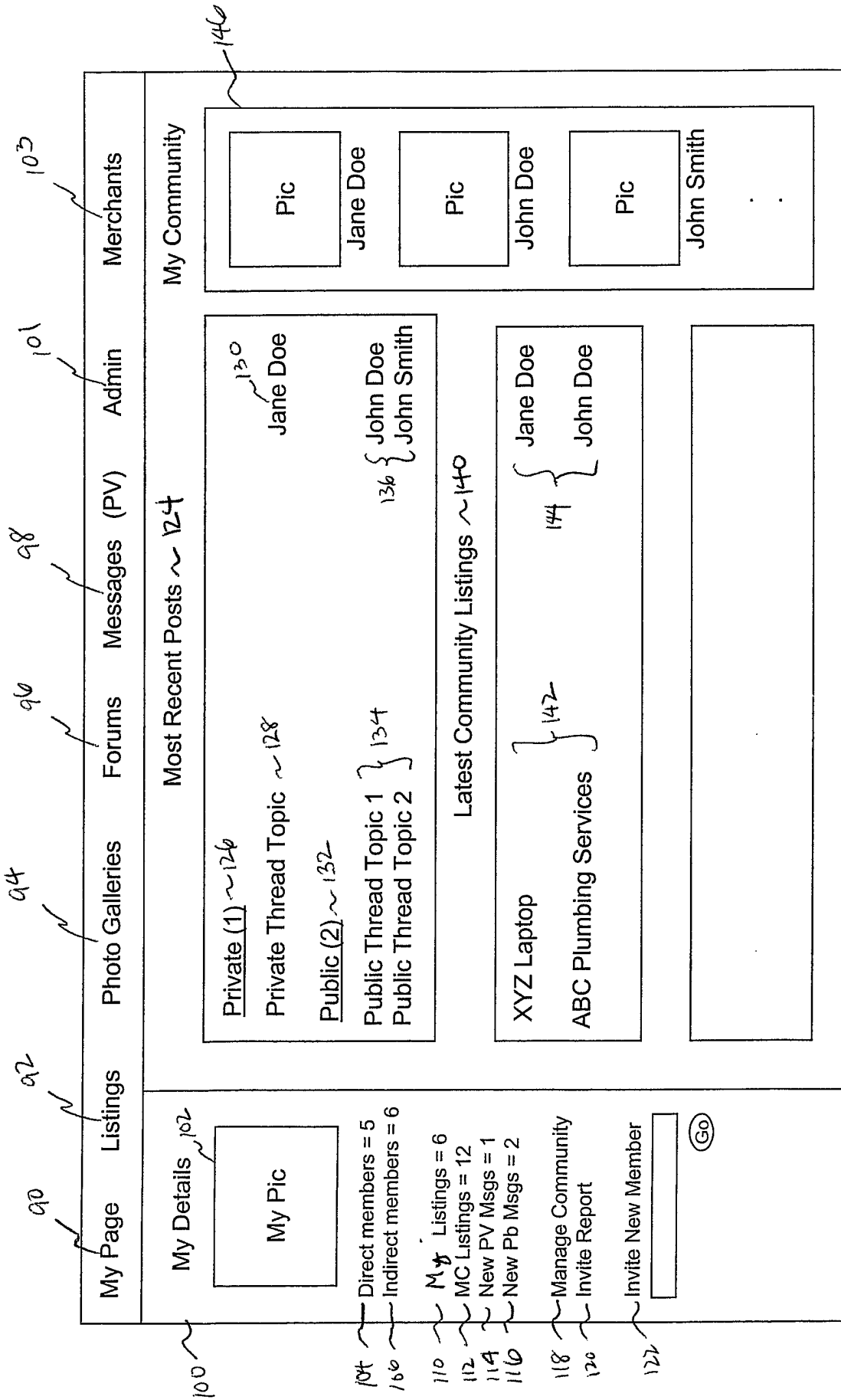


FIG. 3

http://www.program-ace.net/section=transaction&subsection=list_mycommunity&my_community=1 - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Search Favorites Media

Go URL: <

http://www.program-ace.net/section=transaction&subsection=list_mycommunity&my_community=1

RedToucan

Available with health care

My Community | All | Add Listing | Archive

My Community Listings

Messages Admin Merchants

All Members

Hard Plumbing Services	Specialist in drainage plumbing.	willxaeulle	208
Sybase PowerDesigner...		willxaeulle	210
Microsoft Office XP 2002...	Over 4,000 problems help develop the Pre-Algebra skills needed to tackle word problems, create math equations and compute with fractions, decimals...	willykeys	220
Havas Math Blaster...		willykeys	220
Dell Inspiron 1150 2.6...		willykeys	220
Broderbund Family Tree...	Family tree builder	willykeys	220
Test Image URL capture		willyxaeulle	220

Wonderous Toys Time Magazine "Favorite Toy Sites" Yahoo! Top Service Award Store. www.quick-shop.com

Sports Toys at Amazon.com Find toys and games for every age. Free shipping on select items. Amazon.com/toys

Target.com Official Site Find great savings online! Shop Target.com. www.target.com

Internet

FIG. 4

http://www.ebay.com/... Microsoft Internet Explorer

My Community | All | Add Listing | Archive | **My Page** | Listings | Photo Galleries | Forums | Messages | Admin | Merchants

Add Listing

Listing Details

Listing type* ~ 120
 Item type* ~ 232
 Purchase date* ~ 234
 Price / Product* ~ 236
 Activate ~ 238
 Adult content ~ 240

Online listing
 Product 09 v .06 v
 2005 v
 USD

Product name* ~ 247 Select
 Product description* ~ 244

Rate the Product ~ 246 ~ 1 grumpy = Hated it
 Product commentary ~ 248

Merchant Name* ~ 220 Select
 Rate the Merchant ~ 221 ~ 1 grumpy = Hated it
 Store comment ~ 224

Item links: ~ 226
 http://
 Add picture: ~ 228
 Picture title: Image:
 Browse
 Browse
 Browse
 Browse

Learnit Toys for Child
 Children's learning
 toys, books & crafts on
 nature, art and culture
 www.learnit-toys.com

Rated #1 Educational
 Toy
 Over 50 National
 Awards.
 Teache thinking,
 motor, and social
 skills.
 www.learnit-toys.com

Educational Toys
 Teacher approved
 educational toys. Every
 order \$4.95 shipping.
 www.learninggreats.com

Learnit Toys
 Give A Child
 Knowledge.
 Educational Toys and
 Tools Make Learning
 Fun
 www.LearnitToys.com

Done

FIG. 5

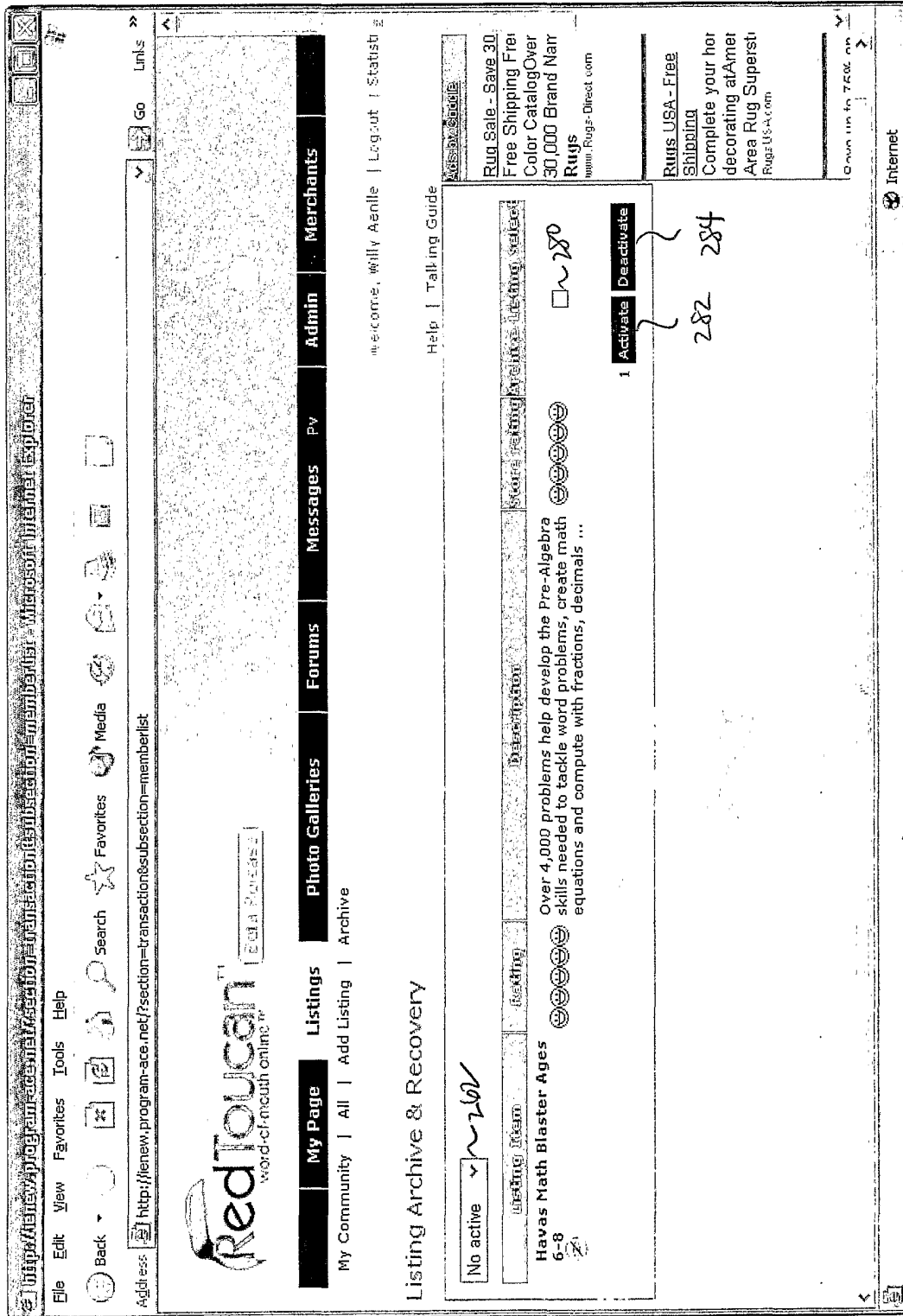


FIG. 6

Microsoft Internet Explorer
 File Edit View Favorites Tools Help
 Back Search Favorites Media
 Address http://66.77.94.138/messages/index.php?c=private&private_node_select=view_all

RedToucan
 word-of-mouth online

My Page Listings Photo Galleries Forums Messages Admin Merchants
 Private Listings Interest Group General

251 253
 Private Forums

250
 View All

Forum

Forum	Topics	Search
General Category ~252	35	62
My Community ~256		
Transactions Category ~254	11	12
Microsoft Office XP 2002 Small Business For PC (588-02430OEM)		
Axis Camera Explorer 1 For PC (0136-004-01)	9	8
Havas Math Blaster Pre-Algebra	4	4
Best of EA Sports For PC	3	4

258 }
 Microsoft Office XP 2002 Small Business For PC (588-02430OEM)
 Axis Camera Explorer 1 For PC (0136-004-01)

Hot Rod Great deals on Hot RodShop on eBay and Save! www.ebay.com
 Classic Cars and Hot Rods
 Streetrods Classics Customs
 Muscle/Vintage Vehicles List With Us Today www.hotrodtrader.com
 Hot Rods and Street Rods
 Hot Rods and Street Rods For Sale/Muscle

Hot Rod
 Great deals on Hot RodShop on eBay and Save!
 Classic Cars and Hot Rods
 Streetrods Classics Customs
 Muscle/Vintage Vehicles List With Us Today
 Hot Rods and Street Rods
 Hot Rods and Street Rods For Sale/Muscle

FIG. 7A

Microsoft Internet Explorer
 File Edit View Favorites Tools Help
 Back Search Favorites Media
 Address: http://66.77.94.138/messages/index.php?c=transactions
 Go Links

RedToucan
 www.red-toucan.com

My Page Listings Photo Galleries Forums Messages Admin Merchants

Welcome, Bill, Admin | Logout | Statistics

Help | Audio Guide

Listing Forums

Forum	Topics	Posts	Last Post
Microsoft Office XP 2002 Small Business For PC (588-024300EM)	11	12	Mon Jun 13, 2005 6:33 pm willyaenlla →
Axis Camera Explorer 1 For PC (0136-004-01)	8	8	Fri Jun 10, 2005 7:57 pm Francisco →
BMW5	6	11	Mon Mar 28, 2005 1:41 pm arwax_test2 →
Havas Math Blaster Pre-Algebra	4	4	Tue Jun 14, 2005 7:20 pm FranzFerdinand →

Page : 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

New posts No new posts

800 Paintball Superstore
 Great selection, low prices, Fast and Free shipping!
 www.800paintball.com

Xtreme Paintball
 Free Shipping, 40% below retail Paintballs guns & all accessories
 xpaintball.com

Paintball-Free Shipping
 Action Village has 30,000 items, real-time inventory, and low

Internet

FIG. 7B

Microsoft Internet Explorer
 File Edit View Favorites Tools Help
 Back Search Favorites Media
 Address http://lensaw.program-acc.net/messages/

RedToucan
 word-of-mouth online

Private | Listings | Interest Group | General
 My Page Listings Photo Galleries Forums Messages PV Admin Merchants
 welcome, Willy Aehlle | Logout | Statistics

Help Talking Guide

General Forums

Forum Search

Forum	Topics	Pages	Text Posts
General category ~ 302	9	20	Fri Jun 05, 2005 10:03 am karenona →
General Discussions	4	8	Thu Mar 17, 2005 2:03 pm arvex_test1 →
Test Forum	1	2	Mon Apr 04, 2005 9:36 am arvex_test11 →
Test Description			
Test Category			
Current Events			
Music			
Books			
Test forum	1	1	Wed Mar 30, 2005 7:41 am arvex_test1 →
Test			

Done

Rugs USA - Free Shipping
 Complete your home decorating at Americas Area Rug Superstore.
 RugsUSA.com

Rug Sale - Save 30-70%
 Free Shipping Free Color Catalog Over 30,000 Brand Name Rugs
 www.Rugs-Direct.com

Beautiful Area Rugs
 Browse our website for the perfect Area Rug to accent your home

Internet

FIG. 8

My Community | All | Edit Galleries

My Page | Listings | Photo Galleries | Forums | Messages | PV | Admin | Merchants

RedToucan™
World of Rugs Online

My Community | All | Edit Galleries

My Community Details

My Community *350*

<input type="checkbox"/> willy	<i>351</i>	keys	<i>350</i>	Cousin	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Billy		Aenlle		Cousin	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Francis		Balle		Co-worker	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Francisco		Balle		Employee	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Fritz		Balle		Nephew	<input type="checkbox"/>

My Community Friends *350*

My Community Interest Groups *350*

- My Interest Groups
- Ashton Martin Inthusiasts
- Classic Wooden Yawls
- FB 3 Public
- Franks Interest Group 1
- ig by alf
- Private IG
- The gas guzzling crowd**
- Search Interest Groups
- Create Interest Group

Subject: Willy Aenlle invites you to his community
 Message (Feel free to change): Hello,
 I'd like you to join my RedToucan community.

Invite Friends - enter email addresses (separate multiple addresses with a comma) *350* Invite Report

Search Existing Members | List all members in one view

Update Community

Beautiful Area Rugs
Browse our website for the perfect Area Rug to accent your home decor
www.HomeDecorClassCatalog.com

Unique Area Rugs
30-Day Satisfaction Guarantee. Free Shipping. Huge Selection.
www.RugStudio.com

Rugs USA - Free Shipping
Great Collection of Rugs starting at \$59 - Buy Now & Save Big!
RugsUSA.com

Rug Sale - Save 30-70%
Free Shipping Free Color Catalog Over 30,000 Brand Name Rugs
www.RugsDirect.com

Help | Talking Guide

WebSite: willy Aenlle | Logout | Statistics

Internet

FIG. 9

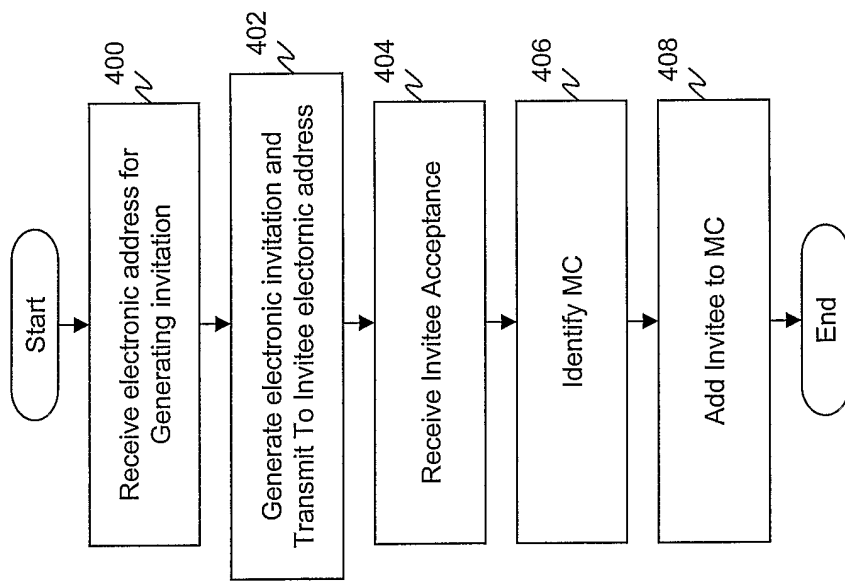


FIG. 10

Order Form Previewer - Microsoft Internet Explorer, provided by SBC Yahoo! DSL

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Search Favorites Media

Address <http://edit.store.yahoo.com/RT/MGR.yhst-6638087166518/675e35f762bd/CqPdCAA0> Go

Links Yahoo! Briefcase Yahoo! Mail WebHost Manager


The Pink Pashmina

Thank you for your order. Please print this page for your records.


Ship to John Exemplar
123 Example St
Exampleville CA 99999
555 555 5555

Bill to John Exemplar
123 Example St
Exampleville CA 99999
555 555 5555
user@yahoo.com

Via Next Day Air

Item	Options	Unit Price	Quantity	Subtotal
 Example Item	Color: Black	79.95	2	159.90
(Will ship in 2-3 days)				
Total Purchases				159.90
Shipping				3.20
Tax				6.00
Total for The Pink Pashmina				171.10

Thank you for your order from The Pink Pashmina. If you have any questions about your order, please [contact us](#).



Become a RedToucan member today.

The Pink Pashmina is a participating merchant on the RedToucan network. If you are also a member of RedToucan, you can have this purchase added to your listings on RedToucan. If yes, you allow this merchant to pass your purchase information to RedToucan.

By submitting your listing you are accepting the Terms and Conditions.

I want to add this purchase to my RedToucan listings

~500

FIG. 11A

Order Form Preview - Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by SBC AdWorldSL

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Search Favorites Media

Address: http://edit.store.yahoo.com/RT/MGR.yhst-6638087166518/675e35f762bd/CqPdCAAO

Links: Yahoo! Briefcase Yahoo! Mail WebHost Manager

The Pink Pashmina

Thank you for your order. Please print this page for your records.

Ship to John Exemplar
123 Example St
Exampleville CA 99999
555 555 555

Bill to John Exemplar
123 Example St
Exampleville CA 99999

Via Next Day Air

Microsoft Internet Explorer

Please confirm that you would like this purchase added to your RedToucan Listings.


Yes I want to add this purchase to my RedToucan Listings.

Cancel Confirm

Example Item	Color: Black	79.95	2	159.90
				Subtotal
				Total Purchases
				159.90
				Shipping
				3.20
				Tax
				8.00
				Total for The Pink Pashmina
				171.10

(Will ship in 2-3 days)

Thank you for your order from The Pink Pashmina. If you have any questions about your order, please [contact us](#).



Become a RedToucan member today.

The Pink Pashmina is a participating merchant on the RedToucan network. If you are also a member of RedToucan, you can have this purchase added to your listings on RedToucan. If yes, you allow this merchant to pass your purchase information to RedToucan.

By submitting your listing you are accepting the Terms and Conditions.

I want to add this purchase to my RedToucan listings **Submit**

FIG. 11B

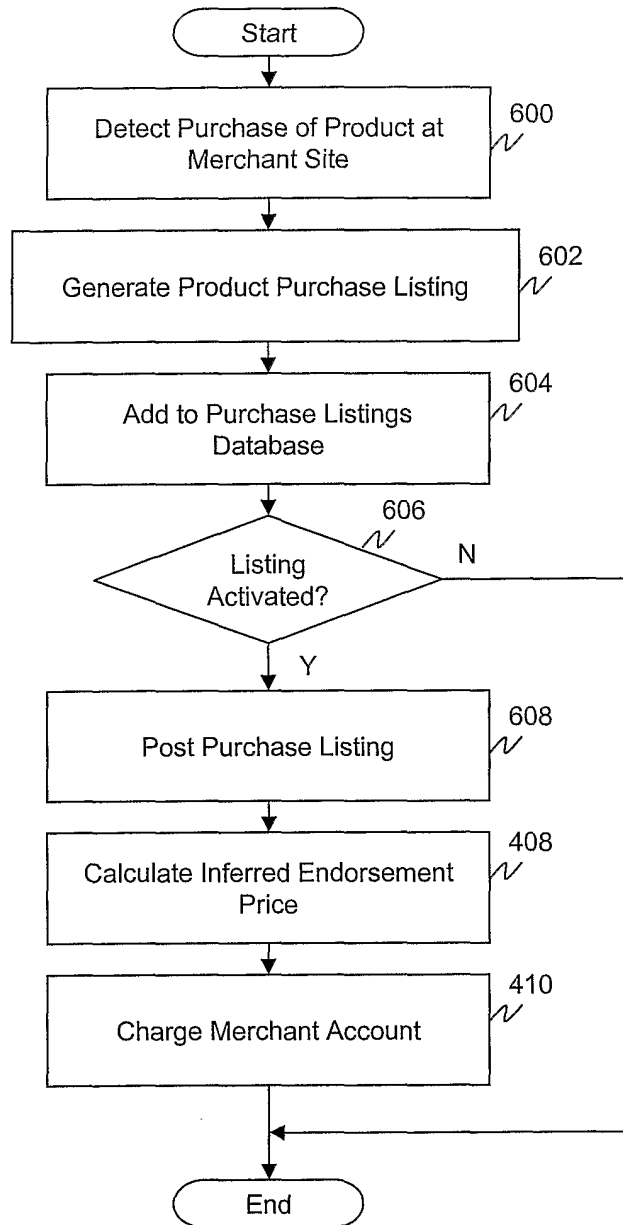


FIG. 12