SELF-CONTAINED MERCHANDISE DISPLAY AND SERVICE SYSTEM

Inventors: Anthony C. Squitieri, Monroe, CT (US); Simon Hopkins, Mt. Kisco, NY (US); Kurt Haldin, New Milford, CT (US); Jay A. Matusow, Chestnut Ridge, NY (US); Christopher S. Anderson, Westport, CT (US)

Correspondence Address:
WIGGIN AND DANIEL LLP
ATTENTION: PATENT DOCKETING
ONE CENTURY TOWER, P.O. BOX 1832
NEW HAVEN, CT 06508-1832 (US)

Publication Classification

Int. Cl. ........................................... A47F 1/04
U.S. Cl. ........................................... 211/187

ABSTRACT

A merchandise display and service system is provided for a retail environment. The system includes a base and an upright support structure coupled to the base that are selectively arranged to define a variety of merchandise display and service areas. The upright support structure may include vertically oriented tubular posts, horizontal cross-bars and panel members, a pair of the cross-bars are coupled to a pair of posts and at least one panel member extends between the pair of posts and cross-bars to separate each merchandise display and service area. The merchandise display and service areas may include a first area having merchandise support hardware coupled to a tubular post or a panel member for supplying an inventory of merchandise offered for sale to prospective purchasers and a second area containing components operable by prospective purchasers of services provided by the components.
SELF-CONTAINED MERCHANDISE DISPLAY AND SERVICE SYSTEM

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS


COPYRIGHT NOTICE

[0002] A portion of the disclosure of this patent document contains material which is subject to copyright protection. The copyright owner has no objection to the facsimile reproduction by anyone of the patent document or the patent disclosure, as it appears in the United States Patent and Trademark Office files or records, but otherwise reserves all copyright rights whatsoever.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0003] This invention relates generally to a merchandising display system, support structure and accessories for use in, for example, a retail environment and, more particularly, to a self-contained, modular merchandising display and service system, support structure and various product support hardware.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0004] Many types of merchandise is marketed by placing the merchandise in a position that is clearly visible to potential consumers. Conventional merchandise display units provide an array of vertically spaced, horizontally extending display bins, trays, shelves and the like that are both aesthetically pleasing and provide convenient access to merchandise by consumers. Typically, merchandise display units combine numerous standardized hardware and accessories such as, for example, slat wall and peg board panels, dividers, posts and similar structures for receiving product support hardware such as brackets, hangers, shelf supports, and the like for supporting bins, trays, shelving and other specialized merchandise display units. Conventional display systems of this general type include a series of vertical support members or posts connected to panels or walls. Mounting brackets secure the panels to the vertical support members. Merchandise display hardware and accessories (e.g., the aforementioned bins, trays, shelves and the like) may be mounted to the panels and/or directly to the vertical support members. For example, U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,698,597 and 5,271,204, describe two such conventional merchandise display systems. Connecting structures and post arrangements for conventional merchandise display systems are described in, for example, U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,682,255, 6,185,887, 5,150,854 and 4,807,200. The disclosures of the aforementioned U.S. patents are incorporated by reference herein in their entirities.

[0005] In most retail environments, display systems focus on supplying consumers with product and/or services. Such supply-type display units are configured to allow the bulk storage, organization and display of merchandise. Additionally, the space that is available in a retail environment for merchandise display must be utilized effectively in order to maximize the revenue generated from merchandise displayed within a certain retail floor space. Therefore, conventional supply-type display systems are often customized to fit available floor space and/or to display certain merchandise.

[0006] Generally speaking, the retail environment is ever-changing as consumers' styles, trends and needs change. For example, user-friendly and interactive shopping environments are often employed to attract consumers of certain electronic products such as computers, traditional and digital photographic equipment (e.g., traditional and digital cameras, camcorders). Interactive shopping environments include environments where products offered for sale are integrated with supporting services and components for delivering such services. The inventors of the present invention have realized that a preferred shopping environment for such merchandise would have displays providing stations for the use and/or demonstration of products and services offered, feature technological innovations and direct consumers to complementary product offerings. Such interactive and collaborative retail environments not only capture the attention of consumers but also encourage repeat visits to a store.

[0007] In an effort to achieve the preferred interactive and collaborative retail environment, vertical support members, panels, display hardware and accessories of conventional supply-type display units are custom assembled in a number of configurations. However, once assembled, conventional display units are not adaptable to change. The inventors of the present invention have realized that the primary role of conventional supply-type display units cannot be altered to achieve the preferred collaborative retail environments without time consuming and costly modification and, more often, by replacement of an existing structure with another customized, fixed structure. As such, conventional display systems are not seen to offer flexibility in providing configurations that adapt to use in various retail locations, positioning and quantities of components and systems providing services to consumers, or replacement of components and systems when it is desired to offer new technological innovations to customers.

[0008] Accordingly, the inventors have discovered that a need exists for a self-contained, modular merchandise display and service system, support structure and accessories that can be changed to implement a collaborative retail environment now and in the future.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0009] The present invention is directed to a self-contained modular merchandise display and service system for a retail environment. The merchandise display and service system includes a base and an upright support structure coupled to the base. The base and upright support structure may be selectively arranged to define a variety of merchandise display and service areas. In one embodiment, the upright support structure includes a number of vertically oriented tubular posts, a number of horizontal cross-bars and a number of panel members, where a pair of the horizontal cross-bars are coupled to a pair of the tubular posts and at least one of the panel members extends between the pair of posts and the pair of cross-bars to separate each of the plurality of merchandise display and service areas. In one
embodiment, the merchandise display and service areas include a first area having merchandise support hardware coupled to at least one of the tubular posts and the panel member for supplying an inventory of merchandise offered for sale to prospective purchasers of the merchandise. The merchandise display and service areas also include a second area containing components operable by prospective purchasers of services provided by the components.

[0010] In one embodiment of the self-contained modular merchandise display and service system, the components of the second area include a device for inputting electronic image data provided by a prospective purchaser, a processing unit and a monitor coupled to the input device such that the prospective purchaser may preview and edit the inputted electronic image data, and an output device coupled to the processing unit such that the prospective purchaser may purchase the edited image data. Preferably, the input device includes at least one of a scanner for scanning a previously processed print photograph, a reader for reading image data from a memory card of digital photographic equipment and a communication link for retrieving image data from a portable computing device.

[0011] In one embodiment of the self-contained modular merchandise display and service system, the input devices also include a communication device for enabling the processing unit to communicate with a network and the inputted electronic image data is accessed and retrieved from a remote computing device coupled to the network.

[0012] In another embodiment of the self-contained modular merchandise display and service system, the output device includes at least one of a high quality photo printer, a high-speed printer, and an optical or digital storage device.

[0013] The present invention is also directed to a method for converting a conventional merchandise display system to a merchandise display and service system. The method includes steps of; providing the merchandise display system having a base and an upright support structure coupled to the base, the upright support structure having vertically oriented posts, horizontal cross-bars and panel members that define a plurality of areas for displaying an inventory of merchandise to prospective purchasers; placing at least one additional post in proximity to the merchandise display system; coupling the at least one additional post to the merchandise display system with an additional pair of the horizontal cross-bars; placing a component rack system in a position between the merchandise display system and the at least one additional post; and placing components on the component rack system, the components operable by prospective purchasers of services provided by the components.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0014] The features and advantages of the present invention will be better understood when the Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiments given below is considered in conjunction with the figures provided, wherein:

[0015] FIGS. 1A and 1B illustrate a self-contained, modular merchandise display and service system configured, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, as a standalone island system;

[0016] FIGS. 2 and 3 illustrate self-contained, modular merchandise display and service systems configured, in accordance with two embodiments of the present invention, as horizontal interior wall systems;

[0017] FIG. 4 illustrates a self-contained, modular merchandise display and service system configured, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, as an end cap;

[0018] FIG. 5 illustrates a self-contained, modular merchandise display and service system configured, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, as an elongated end cap;

[0019] FIG. 6 illustrates a self-contained, modular merchandise display and service system configured, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, as an interior corner wall;

[0020] FIG. 7 is a prospective view of a tubular post and merchandise support hardware in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

[0021] FIG. 8 is a cross-sectional view of the tubular post of FIG. 7;

[0022] FIG. 9 is a prospective view of a tubular post and merchandise support hardware in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention;

[0023] FIG. 10 is a cross-sectional view of the tubular post of FIG. 9;

[0024] FIGS. 11A-11C are prospective views of a tubular post and merchandise support hardware in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

[0025] FIG. 11D is a plan view of the tubular post and merchandise support hardware of FIG. 11C;

[0026] FIGS. 12A-12C illustrate expansion of the functionality of the self-contained, modular merchandise display and service system in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

[0027] FIGS. 12D and 12E illustrate a modular component rack of the merchandise display and service system in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention; and

[0028] FIGS. 13A-13C illustrate a component rack assembly configured as a cabinet, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

[0029] In these figures like structures are assigned like reference numerals, but may not be referenced in the description of all figures.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0030] It should be appreciated that while described and illustrated as a self-contained, modular merchandise display and service system for electronic merchandise such as, for example, traditional film and digital photographic equipment, the scope of the present invention may be varied by those skilled in the art and used as a display and service system in other retail environments.

[0031] FIGS. 1A and 1B illustrate one embodiment of a self-contained, modular merchandise display and service system 10 of the present invention. The display and service system 10 includes a base 20 and an upright support struc-
In one embodiment, the base 20 includes at least a top display and/or work surface 23 and, preferably, a wall 25, e.g., a front wall and/or a left and a right side wall, and the upright support structure 40 includes a plurality of vertically oriented tubular posts 42, a plurality of horizontal cross-bars or struts 44 and a panel member 46. In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, the base 20 and the upright support structure 40 cooperate to provide a plurality of merchandise display and service areas A-D (FIG. 1B) having components (as described below) integrated in one assembly.

For example, at area A, a consumer may deposit certain merchandise for processing at a later time such as depositing a print film canister (e.g., 35 mm print film canister) in a drop box 22 for development in a photo lab (not shown). At area B, a consumer may operate components on the display and service system 10 to preview, select and print a photograph. In one embodiment, the components include a scanner 24 for scanning a previously processed photograph, input devices 26 for reading image data from a memory card of a digital camera or the like, or by using a compatible communication link 31 (e.g., wireless or wired communication channel) reading image data from a mobile phone 33, laptop, or like computing device having image and/or graphic processing capabilities. In one embodiment, the components include a film processing system (FPS) 27 (FIG. 2) that accepts a print film canister and automatically retrieves image data from the canister for processing. The scanner 24, input devices 26 and FPS 27 are coupled to a central processing unit (CPU) 28 and monitor 30 and provide electronic image data to the CPU 28 so that the consumer may preview and edit the electronic image, for example, by enlarging or cropping unwanted portions of the image, enhancing or diminishing color, contrast or the like, adding, changing and deleting text or borders, or otherwise tailoring the image. The CPU 28 is coupled to an output device 32 such as, for example, a printer or disk drive (CD ROM burner or floppy drive) so that consumers may purchase the edited image data in the form of print photo or image data downloaded onto storage media (e.g., a CD ROM or diskette).

In one embodiment, area C includes innovative merchandise support hardware 34 (e.g., brackets, hangers, shelf supports, and the like) adapted to fit the merchandise display and service system 10 and for supporting bins, trays and shelving and the other product display units. At area D, a consumer may sit in an imaging processing service station 36 adjacent to the processing digital image data. In one embodiment, the imaging processing service station 36 includes input devices 26 and a monitor 30 that are substantially similar to input devices 26 and monitor 30. The input devices 26 and monitor 30 may be coupled to the CPU 28 or to another, substantially similar processing unit (not shown). The consumer may utilize the image processing service station 36 to preview, edit, store or output image data. In one embodiment, the image processing service station 36 includes a communications card or device (COMMS) 37 such as, for example, a modem or network adapter, coupled to the CPU 28 for exchanging data with a network 38 such as, for example, the Internet, an intranet or an extranet, via a communications link 39 such as, for example, a telephone line, as is generally known in the art. As such, a consumer operating the image processing service station 36 may access, retrieve, store and transmit electronic image data stored locally at the image processing service station 36, a device coupled thereto (e.g., mobile phone or laptop), or remotely at one or more computing devices 29 coupled to the network 38. In one embodiment, the network 38 is a local area network such that image data processed at the image processing service station 36 may be sent to an array of components providing on-site services such as, for example, high quality photo printers, high-speed printers, optical or digital storage devices, located in close proximity to the image processing service station 36. Preferably, the components are integrated within the same display and service assembly (FIGS. 12A-12C).

In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, each of the plurality of display and service areas A-D are integrated within the system 10 and separated by a pair of vertically oriented tubular posts 42, a pair of horizontal cross-bars or struts 44 and a panel member 46. It should be appreciated that the panel member 46 may be comprised of, for example, a slat wall or peg board for displaying merchandise, or a screen or sheet absent of such merchandise display features. In one embodiment, the panel member 46 has decorative, informational, or advertising indicia thereon. For example, the merchandise display and service station 10 may include a corporate logo 21 or other features to visually identify the source of goods and/or services provided at the display and service system 10 with a specific company.

It should also be appreciated that while shown in a standalone, display and service station island embodiment, the modular design of the base assembly 20 and upright support structure 40 permit a plurality of base assemblies and upright support structures to be configured and combined to form various merchandise display and service arrangements adapted to needs within a particular retail environment. For example, it is within the scope of the present invention for the inventive merchandise display and service system to combine a plurality of display and services areas A-D to form a horizontal interior wall (FIGS. 2 and 3) where merchandise display and service areas A-D are positioned in a side-by-side arrangement at a substantially 90° angle or another, and an end cap (FIG. 4), an elongated end cap (FIG. 5) and a corner wall (FIG. 6) within a retail environment where merchandise display and service areas A-D are positioned in the side-by-side arrangement at angles other than 180° relative to one another.

In one embodiment, the tubular post 42 is formed by, for example, extrusion of a rigid material such as aluminum, styrene, polyethylene, fiberglass, or the like. As illustrated in FIGS. 7 and 8, the tubular post 42 includes an inner tubular post 44 with an octagonal cross section and an outer tubular part 46 having a plurality of radially-extending hammer-shaped members 48, for example, hammer-shaped members 48A-48H. As shown in FIG. 8, each of the radially-extending hammer-shaped members 48A-48H has a generally planar wall 51 which connects to the inner tubular part 44 and a hammer-shaped head 53. The inner tubular part 44 and the hammer-shaped members 48A-48H cooperate to define a plurality of channels 50, for example, channels 50A-50H. The channels 50A-50H are of a concave relation to and extend over the length of an outside diameter 60 of the tubular post 42. In one embodiment, the channels 50A-50H may be typically of about 0.35 inch wide between adjacent heads 53 of the hammer-shaped members 48A-48H and may be typically of about 0.71 inch wide between adjacent heads 53 of the hammer-shaped members 48A-48H and may be typically of about 0.71 inch wide between adjacent heads 53 of the hammer-shaped members 48A-48H.
adjacent planar walls 51, and the tubular post 42 may have an outside diameter 60 of about 2.25 inches. As shown in FIGS. 7 and 8, the octagonal cross section of the inner part 44 provides the channels 50 at typically about forty-five degree angles, respectively. Each channel 50 has a flat bottom 52 defined by an outside surface of the inner tubular part 44 and a pair of planar side walls 54A and 54B defined by adjacent ones of the hammer-shaped members 48A-48H. As described below, a number of innovative merchandise display hardware and accessories are configured to be received and retained within the bottom 52 and side walls 54A-54B of the channels 50. It should be appreciated that the configuration of the channels 50 enable attachment of merchandise display hardware and accessories and components of service area A-D at a variety of heights along the outside diameter 60 of the tubular post 42 and at a variety of angles.

[0037] In another embodiment, an inside surface of the inner tubular part 44 includes a plurality of L-shaped inward projections 56, for example, projections 56A-56D. The projections 56 are adapted to receive components for terminating ends of the tubular post 42, e.g., adjustable legs and a top cap, as are generally known in the art.

[0038] In another embodiment, illustrated in FIGS. 9 and 10, a tubular post 82 includes a plurality of first channels 84, for example, first channels 84A-84D, and a plurality of second channels 86, for example, second channels 86A-86D. In one embodiment, the first channels 84A-84D are of a concave relation to an outside diameter 90 of the tubular post 82, while the second channels 86A-86D are of a convex relation to the outside diameter 90. In another embodiment, the first channels 84A-84D are of a wider diameter than that of the second channels 86A-86D. For example, each of the first channels 84A-84D may be typically of about 0.90 inch wide (and about 0.75 inch radius), and each of the second channels 86A-86D may be typically of about 0.26 inch wide; and the outside diameter 90 of the tubular post 82 is about 2.75 inches.

[0039] In one aspect of the invention, the plurality of channels 50 of the tubular post 42 and the first 84 and second channels 86 of the tubular post 82 receive removable inserts such as, for example, adapters, product support hardware and inserts having decorative, informational or advertising indicia. In FIGS. 7 and 9, the channels 50 of the tubular post 42 and the second channels 86A-86D of the tubular post 82 receive various product support hardware. For example, a slotted insert 130 may be inserted into one of the channels 50 of post 42 or one of the second channels 86A-86D of post 82. The slotted insert 130 includes a plurality of vertically arranged slots 132 dimensioned to receive and provide cantilevered support to the product support hardware such as, for example, a shelf support 134 or a merchandise hook (not shown). An extension insert 140 may be inserted into one of the second channels 86A-86D. In one embodiment, the extension insert 140 is of a generally U-shape cross-section and includes a plurality of fingers 142 disposed within the U-shape cross-section for receiving and holding, for example, a panel or sheet of appropriate material such as, for example, polyethylene, styrene or the like. In one embodiment, the extension insert 140 includes an intermediate arm 144 extending from the U-shape cross-section portion to a portion of the insert 140 received and retained by one of the second channels 86A-86D. The intermediate arm portion 144 provides flexibility to the extension insert 140 such that the insert 140 and a panel or sheet attached thereto is horizontally displaced (e.g., bends) when a force is applied to the panel, sheet or extension insert 140.

[0040] The channels 50A-50H of post 42 and the second channels 86A-86D of post 82 may also receive a holding insert 150 for holding a panel or sheet 160. In one embodiment, the holding insert 150 includes a pack 152 fastened about an edge of the panel 160 to retain the panel 160 in a predetermined vertical arrangement. An extension insert 170 may also be inserted into the channels 50A-50H and the second channels 86A-86D. As can be appreciated by those skilled in the art, the extension insert 170 may support shelves, trays, bins or other merchandise displays.

[0041] FIG. 11A illustrates an insert 100 dimensioned to substantially fill one of the first channels 84 and complete the outside diameter 90 of the tubular post 82. For example, when inserts 100 are disposed within each of the first channels 84A-84D, the outside diameter 90 of the tubular post 82 is provided a substantially solid appearance. In one embodiment, the inserts 100 are provided a distinctive color to improve aesthetic features of the merchandise display and service system 10 or to color code (e.g., brand) the merchandise display and service system 10. In one embodiment, the inserts 100 include informational or advertising indicia, or a graphic display. While described as dimensioned to substantially fill one of the first channels 84 of post 82, it should be appreciated that inserts, substantially similar to insert 100 may be selectively employed to fill channels 86 of post 82 and channels 50 of post 42.

[0042] FIG. 11B illustrates a supplemental channel adapter 110 that is inserted in one of the first channels 84A-84D to provide a third channel 112 for tubular post 82 that is substantially similar to one of the second channels 86A-86D. The supplemental channel adapter 110 permits a selective deployment of additional product support hardware (described below) at an even greater variety of angles. For example, in one embodiment, four supplemental channel adapters 110 are disposed in each of the first channels 84A-84D such that the tubular post 82 includes eight second channels (e.g., channels 86A-86D, and four channels 112) for receiving product support hardware rather than the four product support channels (e.g., only channels 86A-86D) depicted in FIG. 9.

[0043] While the aforementioned inserts 130, 140, 150 and 170 are described as fitting within one of the channels 50A-50H of post 42 and the second channels 86A-86D of post 82, it should be appreciated that such inserts may equally be deployed within one of the third channels 112 provided by the supplemental channel adapter 110.

[0044] FIG. 11C illustrates a multiple depth panel extension insert 120 that is inserted into one of the first channels 84A-84D for supporting a panel or connecting the tubular post 82 to one of the base assemblies 20. For example, the extension insert 120 may include an aperture 122 for receiving a fastener (e.g., bolt, screw, etc.) such that the tubular post 82 is affixed to a desired component. It should be appreciated that the inserts 100, 110 and 120 illustrated in FIGS. 11A, 11B and 11C may extend the full vertical length of one of the channels 50 of post 42 or the first channels 84A-84D of the post 82 (e.g., from a full height of the tubular posts 42 and 82 to the floor, counter or platform.
supporting the tubular posts 42 and 82), the inserts 100, 110 and 120 may also fill a predetermined portion of the channels 50 and 84A-84D and, as such, be fixedly secured in a desired vertical displacement within the channels 50 and 84A-84D.

[0045] In one embodiment, illustrated in FIGS. 12A-12E, the merchandise display and service system 10 includes a modular component rack 200. The component rack 200 includes at least one shelf and, in one embodiment, a plurality of shelves 210 extending horizontally between four of the vertically extending tubular posts 42 or 82. As shown in FIGS. 12D and 12E, the plurality of shelves 210 may be fixedly attached, via support 220 and fasteners 222, to each tubular post 42 or 82, or may be attached to the support 220 via a slide assembly 230 such that each shelf 210 may extend horizontally forward of the four tubular posts 42 or 82 so that components 250 (e.g., high quality photo printers, high-speed printers, optical or digital storage devices, and the like) disposed on the shelves 210 may be serviced, updated and/or replaced with new components.

[0046] In one embodiment, illustrated in FIGS. 13A-13C, the component rack assembly 200 may be configured as a cabinet 200’ having a front wall 202, a right and a left side-walls 204 and 206, respectively, and a top 208. Shelves 210 of the cabinet 200’ supports components 250. The cabinet 200’ may be utilized in a standalone configuration or may be integrated as a service area in a merchandise display and service system as shown in FIG. 13B. Preferably, the cabinet 200’ includes a plurality of roller assemblies 235 for selective installation of the cabinet 200’ within the merchandise display and service system 10 as depicted in FIG. 13C.

[0047] As described herein and as illustrated in FIGS. 12A-12C, functionality of the merchandise display and service system 10 may be expanded by the addition of yet another display and service area. For example, in FIG. 12B, functional of a merchandise display and service system 10 having two image processing service stations 36 at area D and a component rack 200 at area E, is expanded by the addition of a second component rack 200’ at area E’. Similarly, in FIG. 12C, the functionality of the merchandise display and service system 10 is further supplemented by the addition of another image processing service station 36 at area D’.

[0048] As can be appreciated, a perceived advantage of the merchandise display and service system of the present invention is its ability to change and adapted to a variety of retail environments. For example, the modular character of the merchandise display and service system 10 illustrated, for example, in FIGS. 12A-12C, allows the system 10 to maintain existing retail space and/or expand into new space, by adding new components and services as they are developed. Moreover, the integrating of systems for displaying merchandise with systems that provide supporting services for such merchandise is seen to enhance the appeal of the retail environment for consumers. As can be appreciated, attractive, user-friendly retail environments lead to more sales and thus, more successful merchandising solution for retailers.

[0049] It should also be appreciated that, in accordance with one aspect of the present invention, a conventional merchandise display system may be adapted and converted to an integrated merchandise display and service system such as system 10. That is, components of the present invention may be added to a merchandise display system that currently includes only merchandise display areas to provide new functionality to the display system. For example, a merchandise display system having a base and an upright support structure may be improved by the addition of a merchandise service area comprised of an additional tubular post 42 and 82, cross-bars 44 coupling the tubular post 42 and 82 to the existing merchandise display, and a modular component rack 200. The component rack 200 includes components such as, for example, high quality photo printers, high-speed printers, optical or digital storage devices that can be operated by prospective purchasers. As such, existing merchandise display systems in a current retail environment may be updated to merchandise display and service systems (as described herein) by field technicians providing a substantial cost savings to the retailer who heretofore was required to replace display systems with new, fixed structure systems to adapt to changes.

[0050] Although described in the context of preferred embodiments, it should be realized that a number of modifications to these teachings may occur to one skilled in the art. Accordingly, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that changes in form and details may be made therein without departing from the scope and spirit of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A self-contained modular merchandise display and service system for a retail environment, comprising:

   a base having at least a display and work surface; and

   an upright support structure coupled to the base, the base and upright support structure selectively arranged to define a plurality of merchandise display and service areas;

   wherein the upright support structure includes a plurality of vertically oriented tubular posts, a plurality of horizontal cross-bars and a plurality of panel members, wherein a pair of the horizontal cross-bars are coupled to a pair of the tubular posts and at least one of the panel members extends between the pair of posts and the pair of cross-bars to separate each of the plurality of merchandise display and service areas;

   wherein the plurality of merchandise display and service areas include:

   a first area having merchandise support hardware coupled to at least one of the tubular posts and the panel member for supplying an inventory of merchandise offered for sale to prospective purchasers of the merchandise; and

   a second area containing components operable by prospective purchasers of services provided by the components.

2. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 1, wherein the components of the second area include a device for inputting electronic image data provided by a prospective purchaser, a processing unit and a monitor coupled to the input device such that the prospective purchaser may preview and edit the inputted electronic image data, and an output device coupled to the processing unit such that the prospective purchaser may purchase the edited image data.
3. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 2, wherein the input device includes at least one of a scanner for scanning a previously processed print photograph, a reader for reading image data from a memory card of digital photographic equipment and a communication link for retrieving image data from a portable computing device.

4. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 2, wherein the input device includes a communication device for enabling the processing unit to communicate with a network and wherein the inputted electronic image data is accessed and retrieved from a remote computing device coupled to the network.

5. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 2, wherein the output device includes at least one of a high quality photo printer, a high-speed printer, and an optical or digital storage device.

6. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 2, wherein the base of the second area includes a modular component rack having a plurality of shelves, the plurality of shelves for storing the components providing services to the prospective purchasers.

7. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 6, wherein each of the plurality of shelves extends horizontally forward of the display and service system such that the components stored on the shelves may be at least one of serviced, updated and replaced with a new component.

8. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 7, wherein the modular component rack further includes a slide assembly coupling each of the plurality of shelves to the modular component rack.

9. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 6, wherein the modular component rack includes a plurality of roller assemblies such that the modular component rack may be selectively installed as a unitary element within the base of the merchandise display and service system.

10. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 1, wherein the plurality of vertically oriented tubular posts are each comprised of an inner tubular part having an octagonal cross-section and an outer tubular part having a plurality of radially-extending hammer-shaped members, the inner tubular part and the hammer-shaped members cooperating to provide a plurality of channels, the channels configured to receive and retain merchandise display hardware and accessories.

11. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 10, wherein a cross-section of each of the vertically-oriented tubular posts defines a plurality of first channels and a plurality of second channels, the first channels having a concave relation to an outside diameter of the tubular post and the second channels having a convex relation to the outside diameter, and wherein the first and the second channels receive and retain merchandise display hardware and accessories.

12. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 11, wherein the removable inserts include adapters, product support hardware and inserts having decorative, informational, or advertising indicia thereon.

13. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 12, wherein the adapters include a supplemental channel adapter disposable in one of the first channels for providing a third channel that is substantially similar to one of the second channels.

14. A self-contained modular merchandise display and service system for a retail environment, comprising:

- a base; and
- an upright support structure coupled to the base, the base and upright support structure selectively arranged to define a plurality of merchandise display and service areas;

wherein the plurality of merchandise display and service areas include:

- a first area having merchandise support hardware coupled to the upright support structure for supplying an inventory of merchandise offered for sale to prospective purchasers of the merchandise;
- a second area containing a plurality of devices, operable by a prospective purchaser, for inputting electronic image data and for editing the electronic image data to the prospective purchaser's needs; and
- a third area containing an output device, operable by the prospective purchaser, such that the prospective purchaser can purchase the edited electronic image.

15. The self-contained modular merchandise display and service system of claim 14, wherein at least one of the bases of the second and third areas include a modular component rack for storing the devices operable by the prospective purchaser, the modular component rack having at least one shelf such that the devices may be at least one of serviced, updated and replaced with a new device without disassembly of the merchandise display and service system.

16. A method for converting a merchandise display system to a merchandise display and service system, the method comprising steps of:

- providing the merchandise display system having:
- a base; and
- an upright support structure coupled to the base, the upright support structure having a plurality of vertically oriented posts, a plurality of horizontal cross-bars and a plurality of panel members defining a plurality of areas for displaying an inventory of merchandise to prospective purchasers;

placing at least one additional post in proximity to the merchandise display system;

- coupling the at least one additional post to the merchandise display system with an additional pair of the horizontal cross-bars;

- placing a component rack system in a position between the merchandise display system and the at least one additional post; and

- placing components on the component rack system, the components operable by prospective purchasers of services provided by the components.

17. The method for converting of claim 16, further comprising a step of:

- coupling an additional panel member between the at least one additional post, the merchandise display system and the additional pair of the horizontal cross-bars.
18. The method of converting of claim 16, wherein the merchandise display system extends along a first angular position in a retail environment and the at least one additional post and the component rack system are placed in a second angular position that is different from the first angular position.