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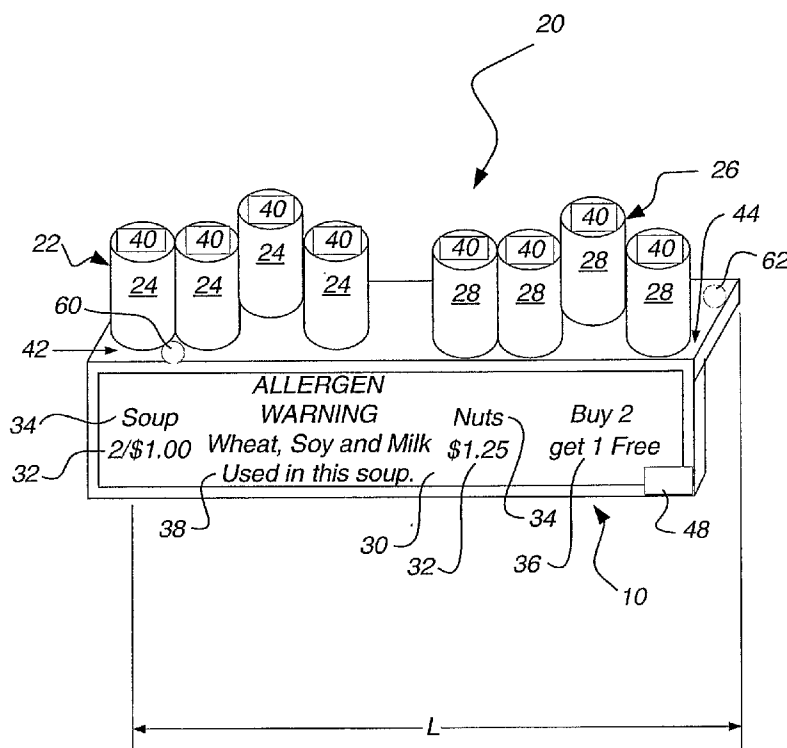
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(54) Title: ELECTRONIC PRODUCT IDENTIFIER SYSTEM



(57) Abstract: An electronic product identifier system is provided for use with a product storage area adapted to store more than one type of product. The electronic product identifier system has a display adapted to present product information for more than one product along a length of the storage area. Each product has an electronic product identifier. An electromagnetic sensing circuit is provided having at least one transmitter for transmitting polling electromagnetic fields so that the electronic product identifier associated with each product can generate a response. The electromagnetic sensing circuit further has at least one receiver for receiving each responsive electromagnetic signal at two separated sensing locations. A location circuit determines a location of each responsive electronic product identifier using the electromagnetic signals received; a data interface determines product information for each product type; and a display controller causes product information to be presented proximate to products of that type.



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ELECTRONIC PRODUCT IDENTIFIER SYSTEM

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates to the field of electronic displays of the type for use in on storage shelves and other storage areas.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Electronic shelf labels in retail store environments are well known in the art. One major disadvantage of prior systems is that they need some form of manual intervention to ensure that the electronic shelf labels are positioned at the appropriate places on the shelves. Thus, when the items on the shelf are
10 moved for one of several reasons, e.g. store resets, promotional placement, the addition or removal of items, or seasonal changes, then there becomes a need to reconfigure the arrangement of electronic shelf labels on the shelf to exchange the electronic shelf labels to represent the required information. Furthermore, most systems that use electronic shelf labels need to affix some form of printed
15 information over the electronic label to display the non changeable information relating to the item, such as bar code, UPC, stock location, dept, size and description.

Another limitation of existing electronic shelf labels systems is that the display systems used in electronic shelf labels have very limited functionality.
20 In general, they are usually only capable of displaying rudimentary information, such as price and stock quantity and sometimes they are capable of presenting a limited number of specific alphabetic characters to denote words such as "sale". Further, most display systems used in electronic shelf labels are based on glass cells, which means that they are fragile and have severe limitations for size and
25 ability to withstand the environment of a retail store.

In some retail operations that employ a retail accounting system, there is a requirement to manually count the inventory whenever a price change is executed. Thus, it is a relatively simple matter to adjust labels as a part of this manual counting process. Accordingly, the value of an automatic price update
30 capability is severely limited. What is needed in the art therefore, is a shelf

labeling system that is easily adapted to reflect changes in product configuration or in prices and that can also assist in the process of counting products when a price change is executed.

U.S. Patent Application Publication 2002/0109593 A1 (Swartzel et al) describes a product information display system that includes an electronic display tag mounted on a product shelf. The display tag includes a display screen having a display width of at least two feet. The display tag is operable to simultaneously display via the display screen at least both a first product and price message for a first product and a second product and price message for a second product which is different than the first product, the first and second product and price messages being displayed in a spaced apart manner. The product information display system can have a controller operable for communication with the tag. A database of stored plan-o-gram information including product facing set up information is provided. The tag and controller are operable in a facing set up mode in which the controller retrieves from the plan-o-gram database product facing set up information, communicates the retrieved information to the tag, and the tag displays facing set up margins on the display screen and product information between the set up margins for communicating shelf facing set up information to a user configuring or checking the product shelf. Thus, the '593 patent allows remote programming of display tags in accordance with assigned products.

The display tag of the '593 application includes an electronic display tag mounted on a product shelf, the display tag including a radio frequency (RF) transceiver means, and a controller operable for communication with the transceiver means. The controller and transceiver means are operable in a product stock check mode in which the transceiver means transmits a localized RF signal for detecting a radio frequency signal generated by a radio frequency transponder associated with a given product. The radio frequency transponder is adapted to generate an identifying signal upon receipt of the localized RF signal. Transponders of this type are well known and commonly referred to as RFID tags. The transceiver means is further operable to communicate to the controller whether or not at least one RFID tag associated with the given product was

identified, the controller operable to initiate a restock check signal in the event that no RFID tag associated with the given product is identified by the tag. In certain applications, this restock check signal could be a system-generated message to an on-site or off-site person or persons via a personal pager, wireless
5 telephone text message or email. The controller can be operable to initiate a restock check signal in the event that the number of detected RFID tags associated with the given product falls below a set threshold.

The '593 patent also describes a product information display system that includes an electronic display tag mounted on a product shelf, the
10 display tag having an RF transceiver means. A controller is operable for communication with the RF transceiver means. The controller and RF transceiver means are operable in a targeted merchandising mode in which the controller causes the RF transceiver to transmit a localized RF signal for detecting a consumer RFID tag in an area proximate to the display tag, the tag operable to
15 communicate detected consumer RFID tag information to the controller. The controller is operable to retrieve a targeted consumer message from a database based upon the received consumer RFID tag information and to communicate the targeted consumer message to the tag, the tag operable to display the targeted consumer message received from the controller.

20 The major deficiency of the '593 patent is that it relies upon the store operations personnel being familiar with the desired stock locations and stocking the shelves appropriately. Using the plan-o-gram feature described in the '593 patent, the system only has the ability to download price information to a predetermined location. However in reality, the operation of the store is such that
25 it is not always possible or desirable to dictate the location of items from a central office. In cases where items are out of stock, it becomes difficult to place substitute items because price information would be incorrect. Also, as frequently happens, items can be moved to alternative locations for cross merchandising purposes, and it may be necessary to deviate from the plan-o-gram so that an
30 appropriate price and other additional information is available.

There is a need for a new display and method for automatically updating product information presented by a shelf display so that the display accurately reflects the actual product that is placed on a shelf.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 An electronic product identifier system is provided for use with a product storage area adapted to store more than one type of product. The electronic product identifier system has a display adapted to present product information for more than one product along a length of the storage area. A plurality of electronic product identifiers, with one such electronic product
10 identifier associated with each one of a supply of products of each product type stored in the storage area and each electronic product identifier being adapted to receive a polling signal and to generate a responsive electromagnetic signal containing information that identifies at least the product type of the product. An electromagnetic sensing circuit is provided having at least one transmitter for
15 transmitting polling electromagnetic fields into the storage area proximate to the products in the storage area so that the electronic product identifier associated with each product can generate a response, with the electromagnetic sensing circuit further comprising at least one receiver for receiving each responsive electromagnetic signal at two separated sensing locations. A location circuit is
20 provided for determining a location in the storage area of each responsive electronic product identifier using the electromagnetic signals received; a data interface is adapted to determine product information for each product type detected based upon signals received from the product identifiers; and a display controller is adapted to cause product information for each product to be presented
25 in an area of the display that is proximate to locations of the storage area at which products of that type have been located.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 depicts the system at the storage area;
FIG. 2A shows a schematic view of one embodiment of a display;
30 FIG. 2B shows a schematic view of another embodiment of a display;

FIG. 3 shows one embodiment of an electronic product identifier system;

FIG. 4 shows another embodiment of an electronic product identifier system;

5 FIG. 5 shows still another embodiment of an electronic product identifier system;

FIG. 6 shows one embodiment of the electronic product identifier system used for forming a plan-o-gram;

10 FIG. 7 shows one embodiment of the electronic plan-o-gram in combination with the electronic product identifier system;

FIG. 8 shows a flow diagram of a method for updating the display;

FIG. 9 shows a flow diagram of a method for generating a plan-o-gram; and

15 FIG. 10 shows one example of a storage facility having a plurality of storage areas.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

FIG. 1 shows a first embodiment of an electronic product identifier system 10 of the invention that is adapted for use with a product storage area 20 adapted to store a supply of more than one type of product arranged along a length L of storage area 20 of a type used in a storage facility 21, such as a retail store, a warehouse, a pharmacy or any other storage structure. As shown, storage area 20 stores a supply 22 of a first product 24 and a supply 26 of a second product 28. In the embodiment of FIG. 1, electronic product identifier system 10 has a display 30 that has a length that extends along length L of storage area 20 and that is adapted to present product information for more than one product along the length L of storage area 20. Storage area 20 can be a horizontal shelf 29 as illustrated in FIG. 1, an end-cap kiosk, a pegboard, a clothing rack or any other device configured to store products. In the embodiment shown in FIG. 1, which illustrates storage area 20 as having a horizontal surface 29 for storing products, display 30 can be configured to extend along the full length L or a substantial portion thereof. Multiple displays 30 can be used to cover the length of a storage area 20.

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Display 30 can be monochrome, bichromal, or full color. Display 30 can be segmented, or it can be pixilated, or fully addressable, to allow for greater flexibility in the types of information to be displayed. Display 30 is preferably at least 2 feet in length, preferably 4 feet and can be configured to cover the full length of an edge of shelf edge. Display 30 is configured to present product information, which can include, but is not limited to, price 32, unit price (not shown), item description 34, size (not shown), a barcode relating to the UPC (not shown), a UPC number (not shown), stocking information (not shown), product images (not shown) and marketing/promotional information 36 and product warnings 38.

FIG. 2 shows a more detailed sectional view of one embodiment of a display 30. In this embodiment, display 30 is of an appropriate size and shape to be placed upon an edge of storage area 20. Display 30 comprises in this embodiment a frontplane 31, an imageable layer 33, a backplane 35 and a support 39. Imageable layer 33 is made up of individual picture elements (pixels, not shown). Pixels can be grouped as desired into a plurality of facing areas 41 which are of an appropriate size to fit with a standard portion of storage area 20 used with a particular product, or pixels can be provided in a generally continuous array allowing dynamic assignment of portions of the available pixels.

Imageable layer 33 can contain an electrically imageable material. The electrically imageable material can be light emitting or light modulating. Light emitting materials can be inorganic or organic in nature. Organic light emitting diodes (OLED) or polymeric light emitting diodes (PLED) can be used. organic or polymer light emitting devices (OLEDs) or (PLEDs) can be used. OLEDs and PLEDs can comprise several layers in which one of the layers has an organic material that can be made to electroluminesce by applying a voltage across the organic material. An OLED device is typically a laminate formed on a substrate such as glass or a plastic polymer. In an OLED, a light emitting layer of a luminescent organic solid, as well as adjacent semiconductor layers, are sandwiched between an anode and a cathode. The semiconductor layers can be hole injecting and electron injecting layers. PLEDs can be considered a subspecies of OLEDs in which the luminescent organic material is a polymer.

The light emitting layers may be selected from any of a multitude of light emitting organic solids, e.g., polymers that are suitably fluorescent or chemiluminescent organic compounds.

Imageable layer 33 can alternatively comprise a light modulating material that can be reflective or transmissive. Light modulating materials can be electrochemical, electrophoretic, such as Gyricon particles, electrochromic, or liquid crystals. The liquid crystalline material can be twisted nematic (TN), super-twisted nematic (STN), ferroelectric, magnetic, or chiral nematic liquid crystals. Such chiral nematic liquid crystals can be polymer dispersed liquid crystals (PDLC).

In one embodiment, the electrically imageable material used in imageable layer 33 can be addressed with an electric field and then retain its image after the electric field is removed, a property typically referred to as "bistable". Particularly suitable electrically imageable materials that exhibit "bistability" are electrochemical, electrophoretic, such as Gyricon particles, electrochromic, magnetic, or chiral nematic liquid crystals. Especially preferred are chiral nematic liquid crystals. The chiral nematic liquid crystals can be polymer dispersed liquid crystals (PDLC).

Imageable layer 33 can also be a printable, conductive ink having an arrangement of particles or microscopic containers or microcapsules. Each microcapsule contains an electrophoretic composition of a fluid, such as a dielectric or emulsion fluid, and a suspension of colored or charged particles or colloidal material. The diameter of the microcapsules typically ranges from about 30 to about 300 microns. According to one practice, the particles visually contrast with the dielectric fluid. According to another example, the electrically modulated material may include rotatable balls that can rotate to expose a different colored surface area, and which can migrate between a forward viewing position and/or a rear non-viewing position, such as gyricon. Specifically, gyricon is a material comprised of twisting rotating elements contained in liquid filled spherical cavities and embedded in an elastomer medium. The rotating elements may be made to exhibit changes in optical properties by the imposition of an external electric field. Upon application of an electric field of a given polarity,

one segment of a rotating element rotates toward, and is visible by an observer of the display. Application of an electric field of opposite polarity, causes the element to rotate and expose a second, different segment to the observer. A gyricon display maintains a given configuration until an electric field is actively applied to the display assembly. Gyricon materials are disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 6,147,791, U.S. Patent No. 4,126, 854 and U.S. Patent No. 6,055,091, the contents of which are herein incorporated by reference.

According to one practice, the microcapsules can be filled with electrically charged white particles in a black or colored dye. Examples of electrically modulated material and methods of fabricating assemblies capable of controlling or effecting the orientation of the ink suitable for use with the present invention are set forth in International Patent Application Publication Number WO 98/41899, International Patent Application Publication Number WO 98/19208, International Patent Application Publication Number WO 98/03896, and International Patent Application Publication Number WO 98/41898, the contents of which are herein incorporated by reference.

Imageable layer 33 can also take the form of charged particles in a liquid dispersion medium encapsulated in a large number of microcapsules as disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 6,025,896, the contents of which are incorporated herein by reference. The charged particles can have different types of color and charge polarity. For example white positively charged particles can be employed along with black negatively charged particles. The described microcapsules are disposed between a pair of electrodes, such that a desired image is formed and displayed by the material by varying the dispersion state of the charged particles. The dispersion state of the charged particles is varied through a controlled electric field applied to the electrically modulated material.

Display 30 can have a single imageable layer 33 or multiple stacked imaging layers (not shown) as desired to provide, for example, full color images. In one example, a liquid crystal material can be provided along a line perpendicular to a face of display 30, in a single layer coated on a flexible support 39. Such a structure is especially advantageous for monochrome shelf labels and the like.

In one embodiment of the invention, support 39 can take the form of a flexible plastic substrate. The flexible plastic support 39 can be any flexible self-supporting plastic film that supports the thin conductive film. "Plastic" means a high polymer, usually made from polymeric synthetic resins, which may be combined with other ingredients, such as curatives, fillers, reinforcing agents, colorants, and plasticizers. Plastic includes thermoplastic materials and thermosetting materials. The flexible plastic film must have sufficient thickness and mechanical integrity so as to be self-supporting, yet should not be so thick as to be rigid. Typically, flexible plastic type substrate is the thickest layer of the composite film in thickness. Consequently, support 39 determines to a large extent the mechanical and thermal stability of the fully structured composite film. Alternatively, in other embodiments, display 30 can be made using generally rigid support 39 structures such as glass, metal or ceramic substrates. As illustrated in FIG. 2B in certain embodiments, imageable layer 33 can be viewed through support 39, such as where frontplane 31 is used as support 39.

FIG. 3 shows display 30 connected to one embodiment of a control system 48 to form one embodiment of the electronic product identifier 10. Control system 48 is adapted to detect the type and location of products in storage area 20, to determine product information for presentation on display 30 and to cause display 30 to present the product information. In the embodiment of FIG. 3, control system 48 has an electromagnetic sensing circuit 50 that is used to exchange data with electronic product identifiers 40. Electromagnetic sensing circuit 50 has at least one transmitter 52 for transmitting polling electromagnetic fields into storage area 20 proximate to portions 42 and 44 of storage area 20 in which are products 24 or 26 are stored so that at least one electronic product identifier 40 associated with products 24 and 28 in storage area 20 can generate a response.

Each electronic product identifier 40 is adapted to receive the polling signal and to generate a responsive electromagnetic signal containing information from which at least the product type of the product can be determined.

Product identifier 40 can be formed integrally with an associated product, applied as a label to the product, or attached to a surface of the product. In the embodiment of FIG. 1 each product identifier 40 comprises a Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) transponder. Such an RFID transponder
5 conventionally comprises three components, a memory, a transceiver and an antenna (not shown). Often these components are combined on a single substrate such as is done with RFID transponders of an inlay type. Such RFID transponders are typically adapted to receive the polling electromagnetic fields and to generate a responsive signal. Such RFID transponders are typically associated with an
10 identification code that identifies each transponder within a system or that identifies a specific transponder as being one of a type common to a product, process, or purpose. For example, when an RFID transponder is used to identify products in a retail environment, it is often the case that the central purpose of such a transponder is to identify each product type to a retailer, however, it is not
15 inherently necessary in such an embodiment to uniquely identify each transponder, instead, it is only necessary that the RFID transponder provide a response that enables a reader to discriminate between individual product types, known generally in the industry as SKUs.

When RFID transponders of this type are used as product
20 identifiers 40 in a retail environment, this identification code is transmitted automatically in each responsive signal. Examples of transponders that can be used for such a purpose include, but are not limited to, Carroll, U.S. Patent No. 4,724,427 and Moskowitz et al., U.S. Patent No. 5,528,272.

Such RFID transponders are becoming increasingly popular with
25 retailers as they enable automatic, non-contact, non-line of sight control over retail inventory resulting in the elimination of the labor associated with inventory counting and price updating. This allows labor at the retailer to be deployed to more valuable customer service functions. Further, such RFID transponders can be used to facilitate purchase transactions and to resolve warranty problems.

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The electromagnetic sensing circuit 50 further comprises at least one receiver 54 for receiving each responsive electromagnetic signal at two separated sensing locations shown in FIG. 1 as locations 60 and 62. In certain embodiments, transmitter 52 and receiver 54 can share components in a transceiver type arrangement.

The ability to sense responsive signals at two or more separated sensing locations can be provided in a variety of ways. In the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 3, receiver 54 is associated with two separated antennas 55 and 57 that are positioned at separate locations 60 and 62 so that they can separately receive each responsive signal. In such an embodiment, receiver 54 provides an output signal that is characteristic of the identifying information contained in the responsive signal and that also is characteristic of differences between the responsive signals. Alternatively, sensing circuit 50 can employ a receiver 54 that can generate two output signals, each signal being characteristic of the responsive signals received at locations 60 and 62 respectively. In still another embodiment (not shown), sensing circuit 50 can incorporate separate receiver circuits associated with separate antennas for receiving responsive signals at separate locations 60 and 62 and, for providing separate output signals that are characteristic of the identification code in the responsive signal and from which differences in the responsive signals can be determined. The number of sensing locations should be great enough to enable the determination of product placement at a spatial resolution that is appropriate to the number of items stored per unit area and the relative location of each. Some items such as spices or lipstick typically have very small facings in a store and therefore many different product types can be stored per unit of area in storage area 20. In such circumstances, more sensing locations can be necessary. However larger items, such as for example, laundry detergent, or bulk items, each occupy such a substantial amount of the available space in storage area 20 so as to make discrimination of the location of such items within the storage area 20 possible using as few as two separated sensing locations.

A location circuit 56 is provided for determining a location in storage area 20 of each responsive electronic product identifier 40 using the signals received from receiver 54. Location circuit 56 can take the form of a programmable processor such as a micro-processor, a micro-controller, an application specific integrated circuit or an arrangement of discrete components. In any form, location circuit 56 is adapted to use differences in the responsive signals received at different points and to determine a location for each product identifier 40 in storage area 20 based upon differences in the signals. For example, location circuit 56 can correlate the signal strength received at each of sensing locations 60 and 62. Location circuit 56 can be provided with algorithms to determine if the quantity of product detected is sufficient to require a product label be displayed. Additionally, location circuit 56 or other circuits and systems in control system 48 can be adapted to determine if a located product is to be identified as misplaced, flagged for restocking, or flagged with other user defined alert(s). The user of the system, in accordance with local laws governing product identification, can predetermine the system requirements.

A data interface 64 is adapted to determine product information for each product type detected. In the embodiment illustrated, data interface 64 is adapted to determine the product information by compiling the identifying information contained in the responsive signals from receiver 54 and generating a request for product information from a data source 66. Data source 66 can be located proximate to storage area 20 or it can be remote.

Data source 66 is adapted to receive a signal from data interface 64 containing the identification code read from each product type and to generate a responsive signal containing one or more of the following types of product information for each product type: Price, Unit Price, Item description, size, the barcode relating to the UPC, UPC number, stocking information and product images and marketing/promotional information and warnings and any other information that the user of the system desires. Data interface 64 receives a responsive signal and provides the product information and location information, in this embodiment, to a display controller 70.

In the embodiment of FIG. 1, electronic product identifier system 10 is shown with a data source 66 that is separate from control system 48. In such an embodiment, data source 66 can comprise a memory that stores product information such as a data storage device including, but not limited to, a disk drive, semiconductor memory, server, personal computer, or the like. Communication with such a remote data source 66 can be made by way of transmitter 52 and receiver 54, or by way of a communication device (not shown) such as a modem or other conventional communication circuit or system that is adapted to exchange data between data interface 64 and data source 66 by way of a wired network, wireless network, or via an intermediate computer system.

Display controller 70 is adapted to cause product information for each product type to be presented in an area of display 30 that is proximate to locations at which the supply of products of that type have been located. As noted above the product information that is displayed can contain Price, Unit Price, Item description, size, the barcode relating to the UPC, UPC number, stocking information, product images or marketing/promotional information or other multimedia content as obtained from the data interface.

Display controller 70 is adapted to determine a location for presenting product information relevant to each product type by using location information from location circuit 66 to segregate display 30 into portions with one portion being associated with each product type. In one embodiment, the display portions can be differently sized with portions arranged in proportion to the portion of storage area 20 actually occupied by each product type. Such proportions can be dynamically adjusted based upon patterns of placement or removal of products in storage area 20.

In another embodiment, display controller 70 is adapted to segregate display 30 into facing areas each facing area being associated with a predetermined portion of storage area 20 that is capable of storing at least one supply of one of a plurality of products in a manner that allows product and the display to be viewed simultaneously from outside the storage area. This can be done in a manner that is consistent with non-active shelf displays so that, for example, a supply of cans of soup can be arranged in a portion of a shelf and the

display 30 can present product information regarding the soup in an area of the display that is visually aligned with the portion of the shelf that contains the supply of soup.

In this embodiment, the display controller 70 can be adapted to proportionately attribute a plurality of facing areas to each product in proportion to the portion of the storage area actually occupied by each product type. In one embodiment, display controller 70 can be further adapted to detect when product information for at least one product type is organized into more than one facing area. When display controller 70 detects such a situation, display controller 70 can cause a minimum set of product information to be presented in one facing area proximate to the location of the products stored in that portion of the storage area and can cause supplemental product information to be presented in another one of the facing areas. Such a minimum set of product information can comprise, for example, a product description and price while such supplemental information can include any other type of product information. The number of facing areas can be adjusted to reflect the removal of or placement of products in storage area 20.

Display controller 70 can be preprogrammed to expect that a predetermined set of product types will be stored in storage area 20 and, where this is done, display controller 70 can segregate display 30 into facing areas for each of the predetermined product types and can present product information for each product type. Where there is no supply of products of one of the predetermined product types, display controller 70 can provide an indication that such a product is out of stock. Similarly where products that are not among the predetermined set of product types are located in the storage area, display controller 70 can present product information for such products or can provide a warning indicating that such products have been mis-stocked.

As illustrated in FIGS. 1 and 3, display controller 70 generates signals that are received by display driver 72 and converted by display driver 72 into signals that are provided to imageable layer 33 to alter the appearance of display 30. There are a variety of well-known circuits and systems that can be used for this purpose.

It will be appreciated that using a system of this type, it is possible to ensure that each storage area 20 has product information presented in association therewith that provides a reliable indication of what is stored in the storage area and where the item is stored. It will also be appreciated that product
5 information can be rapidly and automatically updated with new information simply by altering the product information stored in data source 66.

Using an electronic product identifier system 10 of the invention also enables real time adjustment of the information presented on display 30 so that storage area 20 can be effectively maintained allowing greater utilization of
10 resources. The advantages of this system over those previously described are that it allows for a more complete automation of the price update function. For traditional horizontal shelves the display, which now comprises the full length of the shelf and height of the shelf edge, allows for the required information to be present directly underneath the desired items. Where display 30 is of fully
15 addressable nature, display 30 can fulfill the needs of both the store operations for the display of correctly updated legally required information such as price and unit price and product description, in addition to fulfilling, more completely, the needs of the marketing functions of the store such as to identify promotions and items of special interest. In this embodiment, the image forming resolution of the display
20 30 can be such that it could display barcodes, images and the like. Display 30 is comprised of a polymeric based support 39 rather than glass so that it is more able to withstand the harsh environments of the store operations, and be an integral part of the store design rather than being mounted to the shelves with awkward, unsightly and potentially dangerous or damageable brackets.

25 FIG. 4 shows an alternative embodiment of electronic product identifier 10 having a different control system 48. In this embodiment, a local processor 80 is associated with control system 48 that can be physically located at storage area 20 or separate. Local processor 80 is adapted to perform the functions of location circuit 56, data interface 64 and display controller 70. Each
30 local processor 80 can perform these functions for one combination of a display 30 and control system 48 or for a number of additional combinations of a display 30 and control system 48 (not shown) with each additional combination being

associated with storage areas (not shown) that are proximate to storage area 20 such as may be found in a storage facility, such as a retail environment where stacked shelves provide a plurality of proximate storage areas. In such an application, the overall cost of an electronic product identifier system 10 can be
5 reduced by the use of a local processor 80 as it is no longer necessary to provide components for performing such functions separately at each storage area 20.

Local processor 80, control circuit 48 and display 30 can be powered by being electrically connected to a local electrical circuit or can be powered by an appropriately sized battery, fuel cell or other source of energy.
10 Local processor 80 can connect to control circuit 48 using a wired or wireless communication regime. Processor 80 can connect to data source 66 using a wired or wireless strategy as well.

FIG. 5 shows still another embodiment of a control system 48 of the invention, in this embodiment, control system 48 is adapted to communicate
15 with an embodiment of data source 66 that is also adapted to provide the functions of location circuit 56 and display controller 70. This has the advantage of reducing the overall complexity and cost of the system.

Turning now to FIG. 6, what is shown is one embodiment of one electronic plan-o-gram system 12. The electronic product plan-o-gram 12 of the
20 present invention allows for automatic plan-o-gram generation giving the user an accurate representation of the actual location of products in a storage facility at any given time based upon signals received from electronic product identifiers 40 associated with the products.

As shown in FIG. 6, electronic plan-o-gram system 12 uses the
25 embodiment of the electronic product identifier system 10 described above with reference to FIG. 4 as a part of a comprehensive system for generating plan-o-grams and otherwise managing inventory and product information display. However, other embodiments of product identifier system 10 can be used with equal facility and it will be appreciated that in this embodiment the structure,
30 functions and operative relationships of display 30, transmitter 52, receiver 42,

antennas 55 and 57, sensing circuit 50, data interface 64, location circuit 56, display controller 70, and display driver 72 can be well understood from the above descriptions.

In this embodiment, the overall cost of the system can be reduced by the use of elements such as a processor 80 for multiple tasks. Local processor 80 can connect to sensing circuit 50 using a wired or wireless communication regime. Local processor 80 can connect to data source 66 using a wired or wireless strategy as well. In the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 6, data source 66 is in two-way communications with processor 80. In this embodiment, data source 66 has data stored therein comprising a storage area ID for each storage area in a storage facility and also has data stored therein indicating the product type and location of each product in each storage area. In addition, data source 66 contains one or more of the following types of product information for each product: Price, Unit Price, Item description, size, the barcode relating to the UPC, UPC number, stocking information and product images and marketing/promotional information and warnings and any other information that the user of the system desires. In this embodiment, the associated product storage area ID, product type and location information are uploaded to data source 66 by, for example, a local processor 80 via a wireless communication link. The information can be transferred to data source 66 automatically based on a timing mechanism, or may be initiated upon request from the processor 80 or central processor 82.

A plan-o-gram data source 90 provides a configuration of each storage area 20 that links each storage area 20 with particular locations within a storage facility 21. Plan-o-gram data source 90 can be a single data file or a database for a single retail or warehouse establishment. Alternatively, plan-o-gram data source 90 can be in the form of multiple files, or one or more databases containing information for multiple physical locations; for example multiple stores within a larger chain. FIG. 6 shows plan-o-gram data source 90 to be separate from central processor 82. In an alternative embodiment, plan-o-gram data source 90 may be stored within the central processor 82. Plan-o-gram data source 90 can comprise data stored on a electronic media such as CD, DVD, or

flash drive or may be stored on a dedicated server, website, or other remote data storage location coupled with circuits and systems for reading such data and providing it as required.

Plan-o-gram data source 90 can also have data stored therein that
5 assigns particular product types for storage at particular storage areas 20 within a storage facility 21 or that further assigns particular product types for storage at particular locations within a storage area 20. This is done to ensure that the storage areas 20 provide desired mixes or product types and desired quantities of product types within storage facility 21.

10 In the embodiment shown in FIG. 6, a communication device 86 is adapted to transfer information between data source 66 and central processor 82. Communication device 86 shown in FIG. 6 is the central processor 82, can use any known method of communication including, but not limited to, Internet, bluetooth, wired or wireless connections.

15 A plan-o-gram 96 is typically stored in the form of electronic data indicates the location of products in the storage area of a storage facility 21. Often this takes the form of a map that illustrates product positioning within a portion of an arrangement of storage areas 20 within a shelving unit or other facility within a warehouse or retail establishment. The specification of the information and
20 format of the plan-o-gram may be fixed, pre-user defined, or interactive. Plan-o-grams can be generated for multiple sections, a complete store, or multiple stores. Typically, plan-o-grams provide some indication of the configuration of storage areas for a desired storage facility 21 and product information indicating which portions of the illustrated storage areas are assigned for particular products.
25 However, using the system described herein, plan-o-gram 96 can also be made to illustrate the actual location of products and their associated information for a given store, or portion thereof.

A user interface 92 is adapted to allow a user to obtain a plan-o-gram 96 for all or a portion of the retail or warehouse space. User interface 92
30 may allow the user to define all or some of the specifics of the plan-o-gram. User interface 92 may also contain a predefined selection or give a user total freedom to

define product assignments within the storage spaces 20 associated with a plan-o-gram. User interface 92 is in communication with central processor 82 through any means known in the art including Internet, bluetooth, wired or wireless connections.

5 Central processor 82 is provided with algorithms to use configuration data and product information and product location information received from data source 66 to automatically create a plan-o-gram. Central processor 82 further associates the information from data source 80 and plan-o-gram data source 90, formats the information, and supplies the plan-o-gram to
10 user interface 92. The central processor 82 can be a desktop computer, mainframe, server, laptop, handheld processor or any other processing system.

 User interface 92 can be a software program useable on a personal computer or laptop 110 as illustrated in FIG. 6. In another embodiment, user interface 92 can be a kiosk or other stand-alone type equipment. Plan-o-gram 96
15 can be electronically displayed to a user through the user interface, selectively printed, or automatically printed and can, optionally, be stored in a memory of such computer 110.

 FIG. 7 shows an embodiment of the electronic plan-o-gram system using various components of the electronic product identifier system 10 shown
20 above but without a display 30, display controller 70 and display driver 72. In this configuration, local processor 80 is adapted to perform the functions of location circuit 56 and data interface 64 only. As noted above, each local processor 80 can perform these functions for one or more storage areas, such as may be found in a retail environment where stacked shelves provide a plurality of storage areas.

25 The advantage of this system over those previously described is that it, returns an accurate representation of the actual product placement within storage areas 20 of a storage facility 21 at less cost than embodiments that also include display related components of electronic product identifiers 10.

 The capabilities of the system 12 of FIG. 7 would allow central
30 processor 82 to identify the location of stock, in addition to providing a real time count of the inventory present at each location. The central processor 82 could compile the product layout by sector or for an entire retail establishment in real

time. The ability of the system to identify the location of misplaced or low-quantity stock would allow a user to setup automated instructions for product reshelving and restocking to be transmitted to staff on the floor. Additionally, it can be envisioned that the system of this invention could be used for wholesale or warehouse applications. This could allow the user to compare the intended plan with the actual layout and for verification of sales versus plan-o-gram.

FIG. 8 shows a flow diagram depicting a method for using the system of FIG. 6 to ensure that an electronic product identifier provides up to date product information for products that are stored in a storage area 20 associated therewith.

As shown in FIG. 8, product identifiers in storage area 20 are sensed (step 120). This can be done in a variety of ways as generally described above. In the embodiment of FIG. 6, control system 48 performs the sensing step by causing transmitter 52 to send out polling signals and receiver 54 to receive responsive signals from each product identifier 40 in storage area 20. Product information and location information are derived by receiver 54 and location circuit 56 from the responsive signals and provided to data interface 64. Data interface 64 then provides this information to data source 66. In the embodiment of FIG. 6, data source 66 is shown in communication with a central processor 82. In an alternative embodiment (not shown), data source 66 and central processor 82 can be combined in the same device some illustrative examples of which include but are not limited to a personal computer, server, or mainframe computing system.

Sensing step (step 120) can performed at the request of a local processor 80 or at the request of a central processor 82 that is setup to periodically request information from the sensing circuit 50. In an alternate embodiment, control circuit 48, can be setup so that sensing circuit 50 periodically performs the sensing step (step 120).

Product type information and location information are then determined based upon the signals received (step 122). The product type information can be determined by local processor 80 as described above.

Similarly, the product location information can be determined using location circuit 56 as described above. In another embodiment, (not shown) the received signals are first transmitted to central processor 82 by way of data interface 64 with central processor 82 being adapted to determine the product type information and location information based upon the signals so received.

Product information is then obtained based upon the product type information (step 124). The product information can be obtained from data source 66 as described above.

A location for presenting the product information is then determined (step 125). This can be one in at least two ways, in one embodiment, local processor 80 is also provided with an location circuit 56 that has an algorithm that uses the relative signal strengths obtained from the sensing circuit 50 associated with storage area 20 to determine location information for locating product identifiers within storage area 20. The determined location information can be used by display controller 70 to determine which portions of display 30 are to be used for presenting product information. In another embodiment, the location for presenting particular product information can be to portions of a display 30 that are proximate to the predefined portion of a corresponding storage area 20 assigned to the storage of the products as defined by a plan-o-gram 96. In this latter embodiment, the product type information and product location information can be used for other purposes such as determining a quantity of stock of a supply of the product in storage area 20. In still another embodiment, central processor 82 can be used to determine locations for presenting product information. Where applicable, local processor 80 or central processor 82 further can be provided with algorithms to determine which display controller 70 from among many possible display controllers is associated with a location for presenting the product information location and to that send information to be displayed on a display 30.

The product information and location information are associated such as in a data file or data field (step 126) and sent for presentation (step 128).

In the embodiment of FIG. 6, these steps are performed by local processor 80 and/or central processor 82 which assembles the data and to transmit it to data interface 64 which can be done directly or by way of data source 66.

5 The product information is then presented on the portion of the display indicated by the associated location information (step 130). In the embodiment of FIG. 6, the product information and location information are received by data interface 64 and provided to display controller 70. Display controller 70 in turn, processes these signals and provides signals to display driver 72 that display driver 72 uses to write product information to the portion of a
10 display 30 indicated by the location information. In addition to these functions, local processor 80 and/or display driver 82 can transmit location data determined for a given product identifier 40 for storage in data source 66 (step 132).

FIG. 9 shows a flow diagram for generating a plan-o-gram of a storage facility 21 illustrated in FIG. 10 using the product identifier system 10 of
15 FIG. 6.

As is shown in FIGS. 9 and 10, in accordance with a method of Fig. 9, identifiers 40 on products in storage areas 20a-20n are sensed. This is done as described above by transmitting polling signals into storage area 20 and receiving responsive signals from identifiers 40 on products within a storage
20 facility 21 (step 140). Product type and product location information are determined for each product based upon the received signals (step 142). This step can be performed as described above. A configuration of storage areas and sensing locations in the storage facility is then determined (step 144). The configuration can, for example, comprise data stored previously in a plan-o-gram
25 data source 90 as described above or in data source 66. Alternatively, the configuration data can be determined automatically by providing sensors (not shown) in storage facility 21 that are adapted to sense the location of product identifier systems 10 such as by radio-location of the sensors and interpretation of data transmitted thereby.

30

The location of products within the storage facility 21 is then determined (step 146). Using location information that indicates where particular products are located in a particular storage area, e.g. storage area 20A with information from the configuration data locating storage area 20A within storage facility 21. This determination can be made by local processor 80 and/or central processor 82.

The data that indicates the actual location of products in the storage areas 20A - 20N of storage facility 21 is then stored (step 148). The actual location data can be stored in the form of a data file or any other data structure known in the art. The actual location data can be stored in plan-o-gram data source 90 or in data source 66.

The actual location data can be used for variety of purposes. In the embodiment of FIG. 9, a comparison step (step 150) is performed after storage to determine whether the products that are actually located in storage areas within storage facility 21 correspond to products that are assigned for storage at those locations in a plan-o-gram data file stored in plan-o-gram data source 90. As is illustrated in FIG. 9, where no differences are detected, the process can return to the step of receiving signals from identifiers on products in storage areas within storage facility 21 (step 140).

As is also illustrated in FIG. 9, where differences are detected a step of detecting whether a reset requested has been made can be performed (step 152). When a reset is requested actual location data is stored in the form of plan-o-gram data so that the plan-o-gram data reflects actual conditions at the time of the reset (step 154). Using the system, therefore, reset can be performed simply by manually adjusting shelf the arrangement of products on storage areas of a storage facility and transmitting a reset request. This greatly facilitates the speed at which reset can be performed and provides central processor 82 and/or any other user of plan-o-gram data source 90 with an indication of an actual arrangement products made at the retail level.

Where differences are detected and where no reset has been requested, an alert, warning, or other signal can be provided to indicate when circumstances exist such that products that are actually located in a particular

location in a storage area 20a-20n does not correspond to a product type that is expected to be found at that location (step 156). Such a signal can cause a warning to be presented on a display 30 of a product information system.

As is also shown in FIG. 10, where a plurality of storage areas are arranged in a storage facility a group display 160 can be provided at a location proximate to but separated from a group of the storage areas. The group display 160 has a group display receiver 162 for receiving signals from central processor 82 and a group display driver 164 for causing a display surface 166 to present group display information provided by central processor 82. Central processor 82 can provide the group display information based upon the product information and location information received from each electromagnetic sensing circuit. Further, central processor 82 can be adapted to determine product groupings based upon the product information associated with storage areas proximate to, but separate from, the group display and to provide group display information indicating each determined product grouping. For example where a group of products types include various types of soup, presented group display information can include "soup" without identifying each type of soup with specificity.

In another embodiment of this type, group display 160 can have a group display receiver 162 for receiving transmitted signals having product information and location information and a group display processor 168 for determining group display information based upon the product information and location information. In this embodiment, a group display processor 168 generates signals causing the group display driver 164 to present the determined of group display information on a display surface 166 without the aid of central processor 82, by determining group display information locally.

PARTS LIST

	10	electronic product identifier system
	12	electronic plan-o-gram system
5	20	product storage area
	21	storage facility
	22	supply of first product
	24	first product
	26	supply of second product
10	28	second product
	29	horizontal shelf
	30	display
	31	front plane of display
	32	price
15	33	imageable layer
	34	item description
	35	backplane
	36	marketing/promotional information
	38	product warnings
20	39	support
	40	product identifier
	41	facing area
	42	portion of storage area
	44	portion of storage area
25	48	control system
	50	electromagnetic sensing circuit
	52	transmitter
	54	receiver
	55	antenna
30	56	location circuit
	57	antenna
	60	sensing location

	62	sensing location
	64	data interface
	66	data source
	70	display controller
5	72	display driver
	80	local processor
	82	central processor
	84	antenna system
	86	communications device
10	90	plan-o-gram data source
	92	user interface
	96	plan-o-gram
	100	point of sale system (POS)
	110	computer
15	120	sense product identifiers in storage area step
	122	determine a product type and location for products in storage area step
	124	obtain product information step
	125	determine location for presenting product information step
	126	associate product information and location for presenting product
20		information step
	128	transmit product information and associated location for presenting
		product information step
	130	present product information at location step
	132	store information indicating products stored at particular locations in
25		storage area step
	140	sense identifiers on products in storage area step
	142	determine a product type and location for products in storage area step
	144	determine a configuration of the storage area in the storage facility step
	146	determining the location of products in the storage facility based upon
30		the configuration and the product locations step
	148	storing data indicating the location of products in the storage areas of
		the storage facility step

- 150 different from products assigned to location step
- 152 reset step
- 154 storing new product assignments based upon the location of
products in the storage areas of the storage facility step
- 5 156 alert step
- 160 group display
- 162 group display receiver
- 164 group display driver
- 166 group display surface
- 10 168 group display processor

CLAIMS:

1. An electronic product identifier system for use with a product storage area adapted to store more than one type of product; the electronic product identifier system comprising:

5 a display adapted to present product information for more than one product along a length of the storage area;

 a plurality of electronic product identifiers, with one such electronic product identifier associated with each one of a supply of products of each product type stored in the storage area and each electronic product identifier
10 being adapted to receive a polling signal and to generate a responsive electromagnetic signal containing information that identifies at least the product type of the product;

 an electromagnetic sensing circuit having at least one transmitter for transmitting polling electromagnetic fields into the storage area proximate to
15 the products in the storage area so that the electronic product identifier associated with each product can generate a response, with the electromagnetic sensing circuit further comprising at least one receiver for receiving each responsive electromagnetic signal at two separated sensing locations;

 a location circuit for determining a location in the storage area of
20 each responsive electronic product identifier using the electromagnetic signals received;

 a data interface adapted to determine product information for each product type detected based upon signals received from the product identifiers;
and

25 a display controller adapted to cause product information for each product to be presented in an area of the display that is proximate to locations of the storage area at which products of that type have been located.

2. The electronic product identifier system of claim 1, wherein
30 said display controller is adapted to segregate the display into portions with one portion being associated with each product type.

3. The electronic product identifier system of claim 2, wherein said portions have different sizes and are arranged in proportion to the portion of the storage area actually occupied by each product type for which information is presented.

5

4. The electronic product identifier system of claim 2, wherein said display controller is adapted to segregate the display into facing areas each facing area being capable of storing at least one supply of one of a plurality of products in a manner that allows product and the display to be viewed simultaneously from outside the storage area, said display controller further being adapted to proportionately attribute facing areas to each product in proportion to the portion of the storage area actually occupied by each product type.

5. The electronic product identifier system of claim 4, wherein said display controller is associated with a predetermined set of product types and wherein said display controller segregates the display into facing areas for each of the predetermined product types, and presents display information for any of the set product types for which no electronic product identifier is located in the facing area for that product type.

20

6. The electronic product identifier system of claim 1, wherein said display controller is associated with a predetermined set of product types

7. The electronic product identifier system of claim 1, wherein said product information includes at least one of product advertising information, product bar code information, product SKU information, product lot number information, product expiration date information; product price information, product unit price information, nutritional information, product interaction information, combination product information; allergen information and product safety information.

30

8. The electronic product identifier system of claim 1, wherein the data interface is adapted to determine product information using said product type identification information to access product information stored in a memory on the electronic product identifier including alpha-numeric or characters or images.

5

9. The electronic product identifier system of claim 1, wherein the data interface is adapted to determine product information by transmitting the product type identification information to remote data source and by receiving the product information from the remote data source.

10

10. The electronic product identifier system of claim 9, wherein the data interface further transmits information to the remote data source identifying at least one of the number of and location of each product of each type of product in the storage area.

15

11. The electronic product identifier system of claim 10, wherein the remote data source comprises a processor that determines a portion of the display for presenting product information for each type of product in the display area and wherein said display controller is adapted to proportionately attribute facing areas to each product in proportion to the portion of the storage area actually occupied by each product type based upon the portion determined by the processor.

20

12. The electronic product identifier system of claim 1, wherein the display controller is adapted to cause the display to present a minimum set of product information for each product in a portion of the display used for presenting product information for that product including at least two of product price information, product description, product unit price information and a product bar code for each product.

30

13. The electronic product identifier system of claim 12, wherein the product information for at least one product type is organized into more than one facing area for at least one of the products and with the display controller causing the minimum set of product information to be presented in one facing area
5 proximate to the location of the products stored on the display and with supplemental product information being presented in another one of the facing areas.

14. The electronic product identifier system of claim 1, wherein
10 the display provides a length of image forming pixel areas that corresponds to the length of the storage area.

15. An electronic product identifier system for use with a product storage area adapted to store more than one type of product arranged along a
15 length of the storage area; the electronic product identifier system comprising:
a display adapted to present product information for more than one product along the length of the storage area;
a plurality of electronic product identifiers, each associated with one of a supply of each product type to be stored in the storage area with each
20 electronic product identifier being adapted to receive a polling signal and to generate a responsive electromagnetic signal containing information that identifies at least the product type of the product;
an electromagnetic sensing circuit having at least one transceiver for transmitting polling electromagnetic fields into the storage area proximate to
25 the products arranged along the length so that at least one electronic product identifier in each product can generate a response, with the electromagnetic sensing circuit further comprising at least one receiver for receiving each responsive electromagnetic signal at two separated sensing locations;
a location circuit for determining a location in the storage area of
30 each responsive electronic product identifier using the electromagnetic signals received;

a memory having data identifying a set of product types stored therein representing each product type that is to be stored using the storage area and identifying a portion of the display to be used for presenting product information for that type;

5 a comparator for determining whether each portion of the storage area is actually used for storing a supply of each product type proximate to the portion of the display to be used for presenting product information for that type of product; and

10 a display controller adapted to cause product information for each product to be presented in the portion of the display identified for presenting product information of that type and to adapt the presentation of such information so that an observer of the display is capable of determining whether a product of that type is stored therein.

15 16. The electronic product identifier system of claim 15, wherein said memory is remote from the storage area and further comprising a data interface for exchanging data with the memory using a communication medium.

20 17. The electronic product identifier system of claim 16, wherein said comparator is remote from the storage area and wherein said data interface is further adapted to exchange data with the comparator.

25 18. The electronic product identifier system of claim 17, wherein said comparator is adapted to generate an alert signal when it is determined that what is stored in a portion of the storage area does not correspond to product information presented proximate to that portion of the storage area.

30 19. The electronic product identifier system of claim 15, wherein said comparator is adapted so that when there is no supply of a product type located in a portion of the storage area proximate to the portion of the display to

be used to present product information and wherein the comparator provides signals that cause the display controller to have display present information indicating that there is no supply of this product in the storage area.

5 20. The electronic product identifier system of claim 15, wherein the display is located on a floor adjacent to the storage area.

 21. The electronic product identifier system of claim 15, wherein
said comparator is further adapted to determine when a product type is stored in a
10 portion of the storage area associated with another product type and to provide a
signal indicating this.

1/10

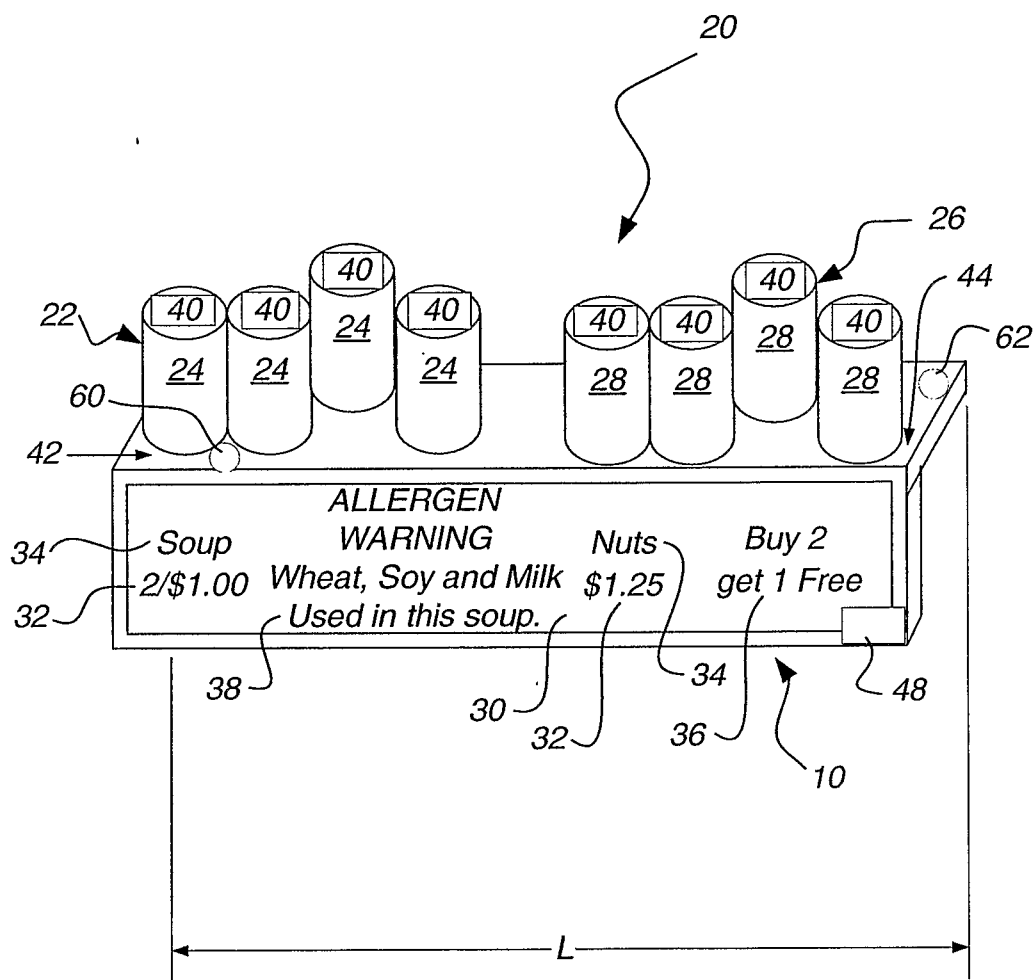


FIG. 1

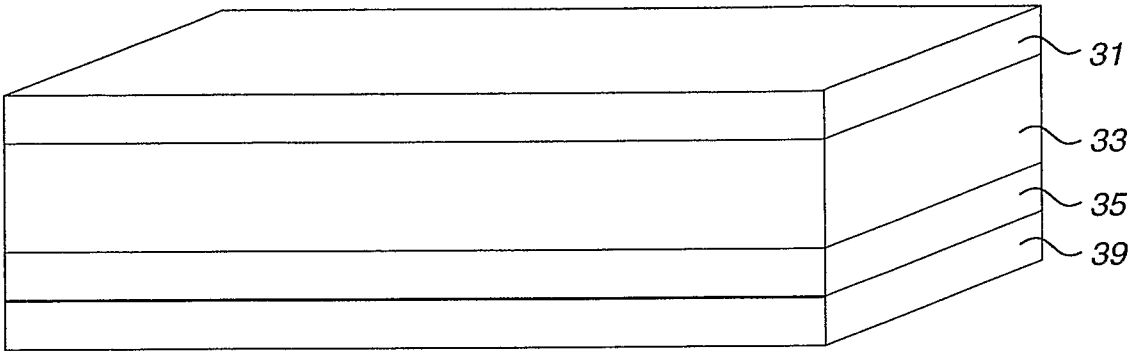


FIG. 2A

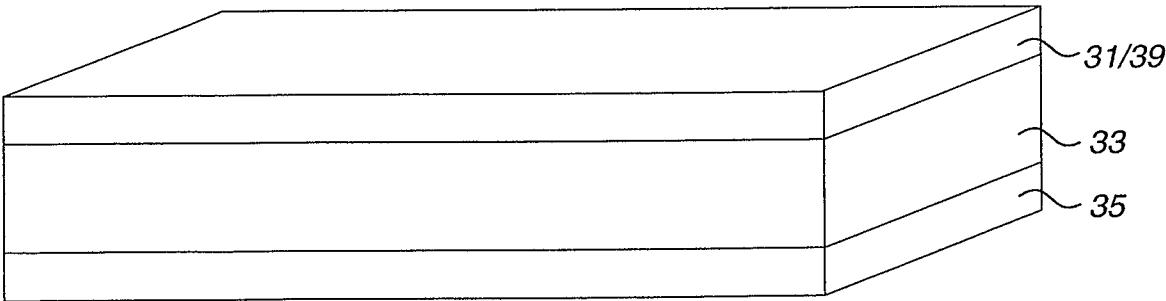
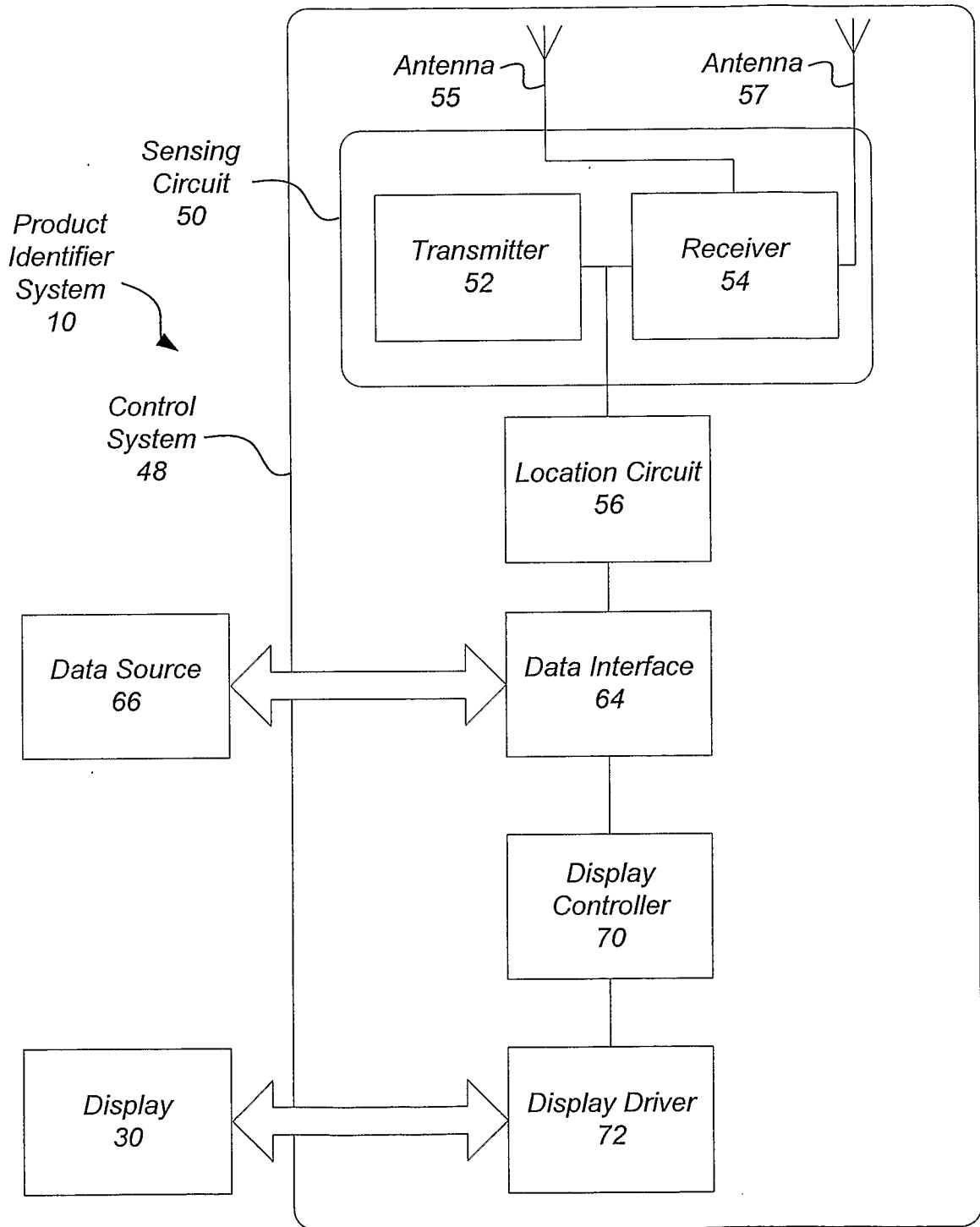
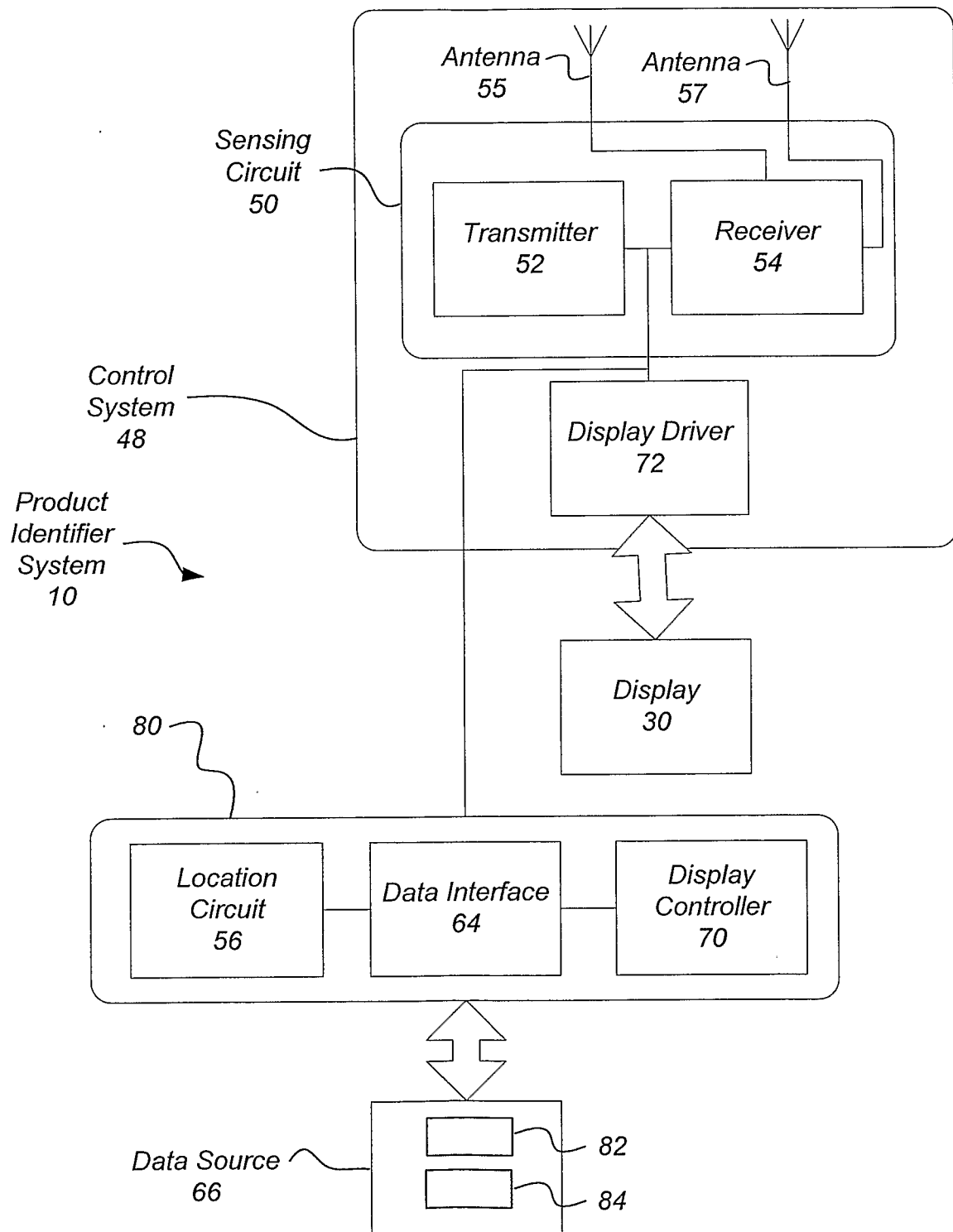


FIG. 2B

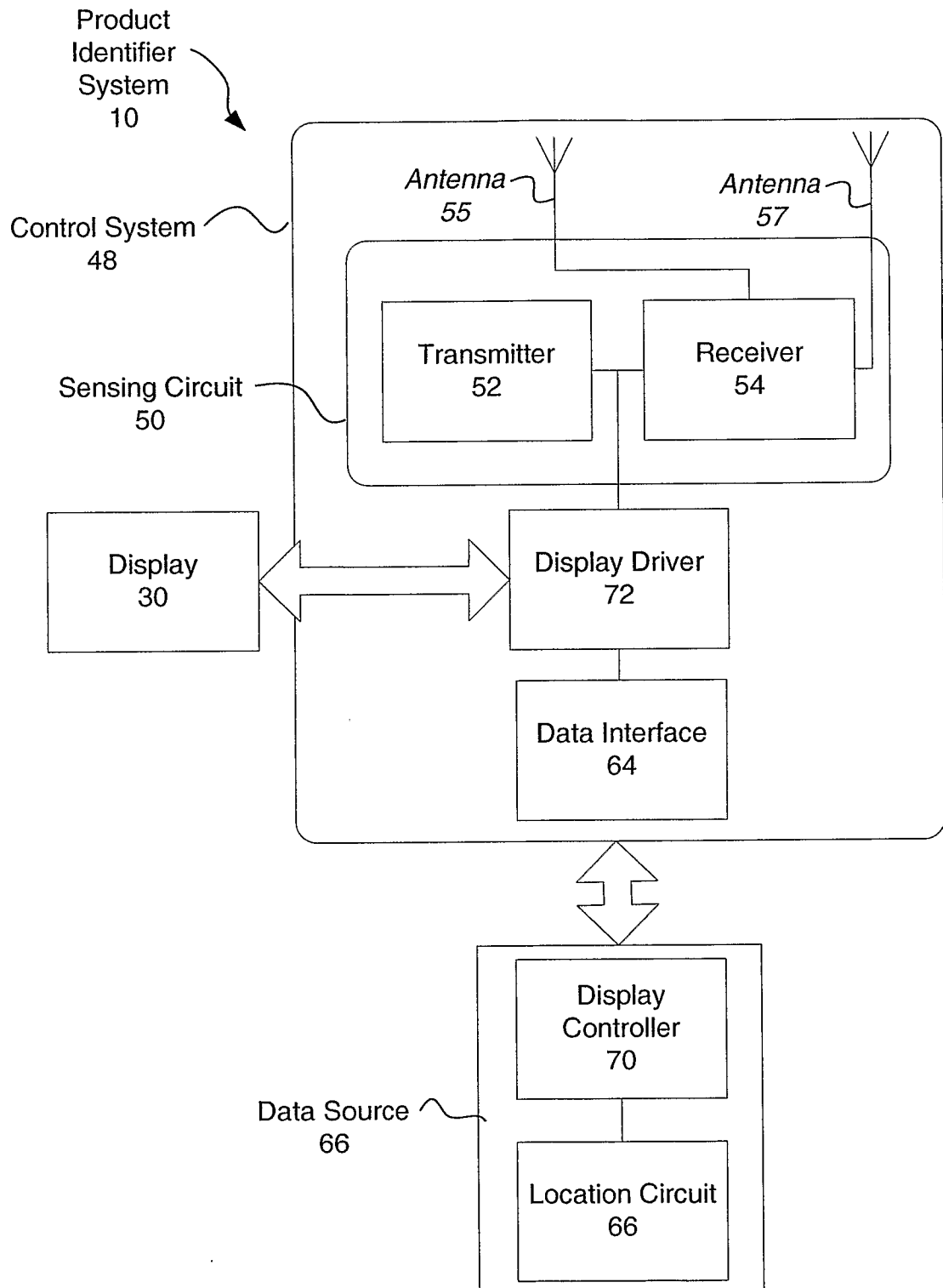
3/10

**FIG. 3**

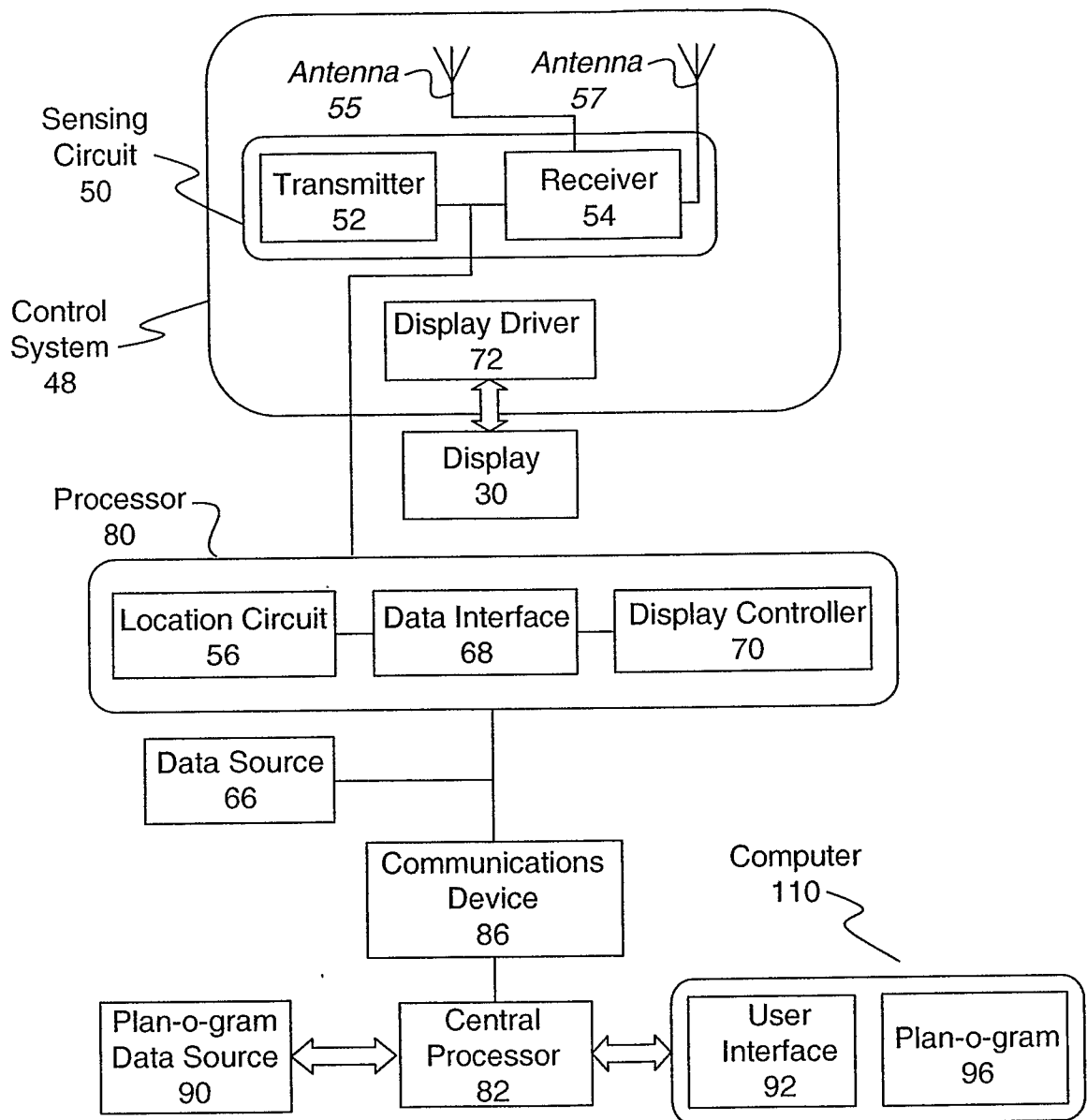
4/10

**FIG. 4**

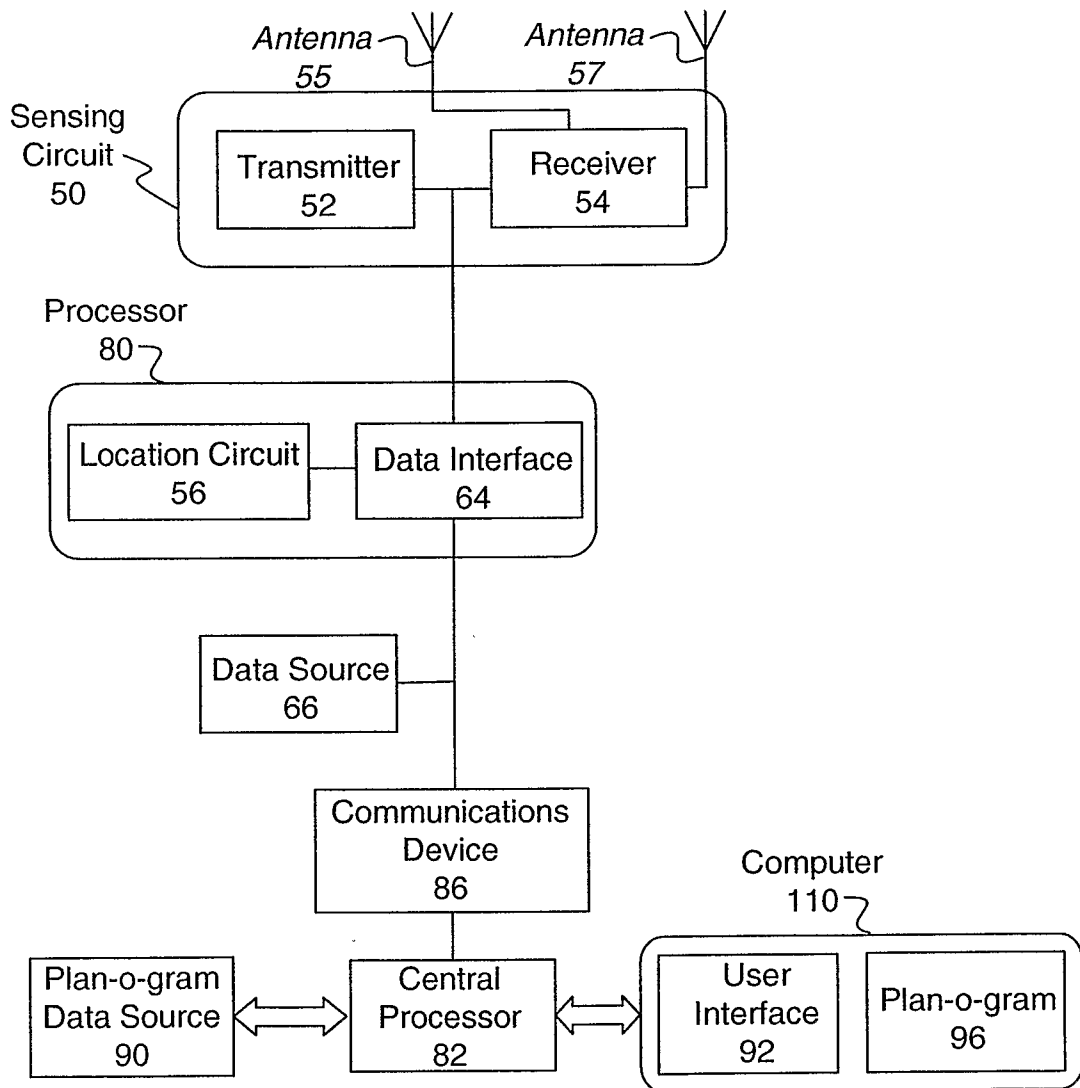
5/10

**FIG. 5**

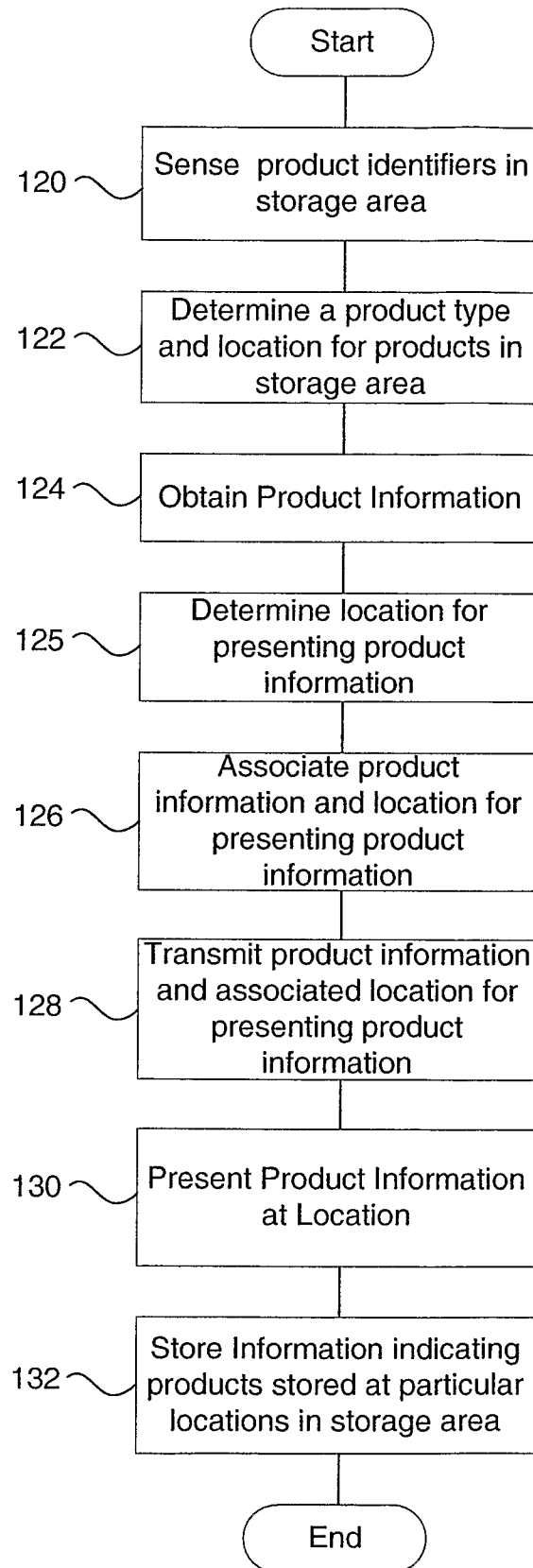
6/10

**FIG. 6**

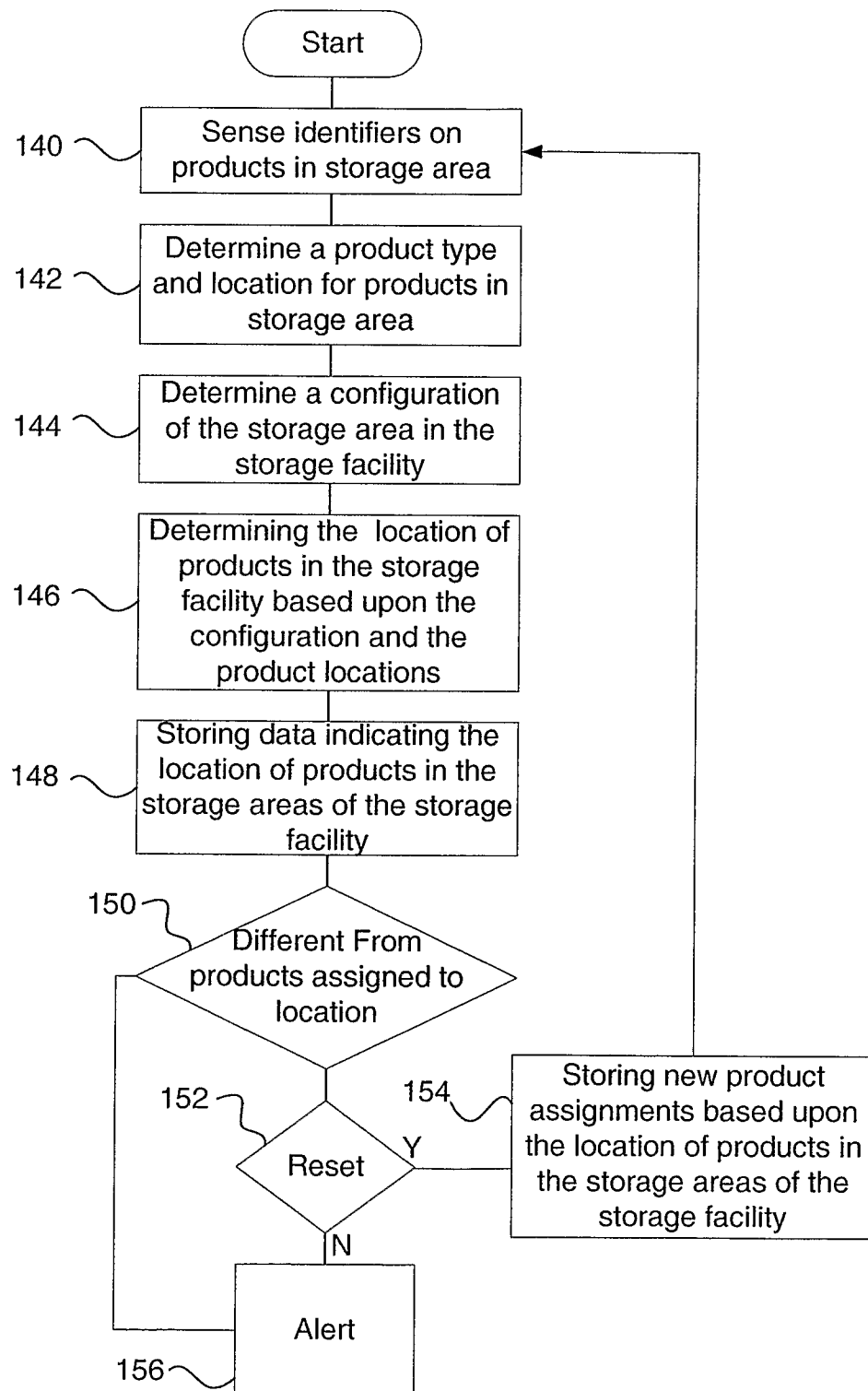
7/10

**FIG. 7**

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**FIG. 8**

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**FIG. 9**

10/10

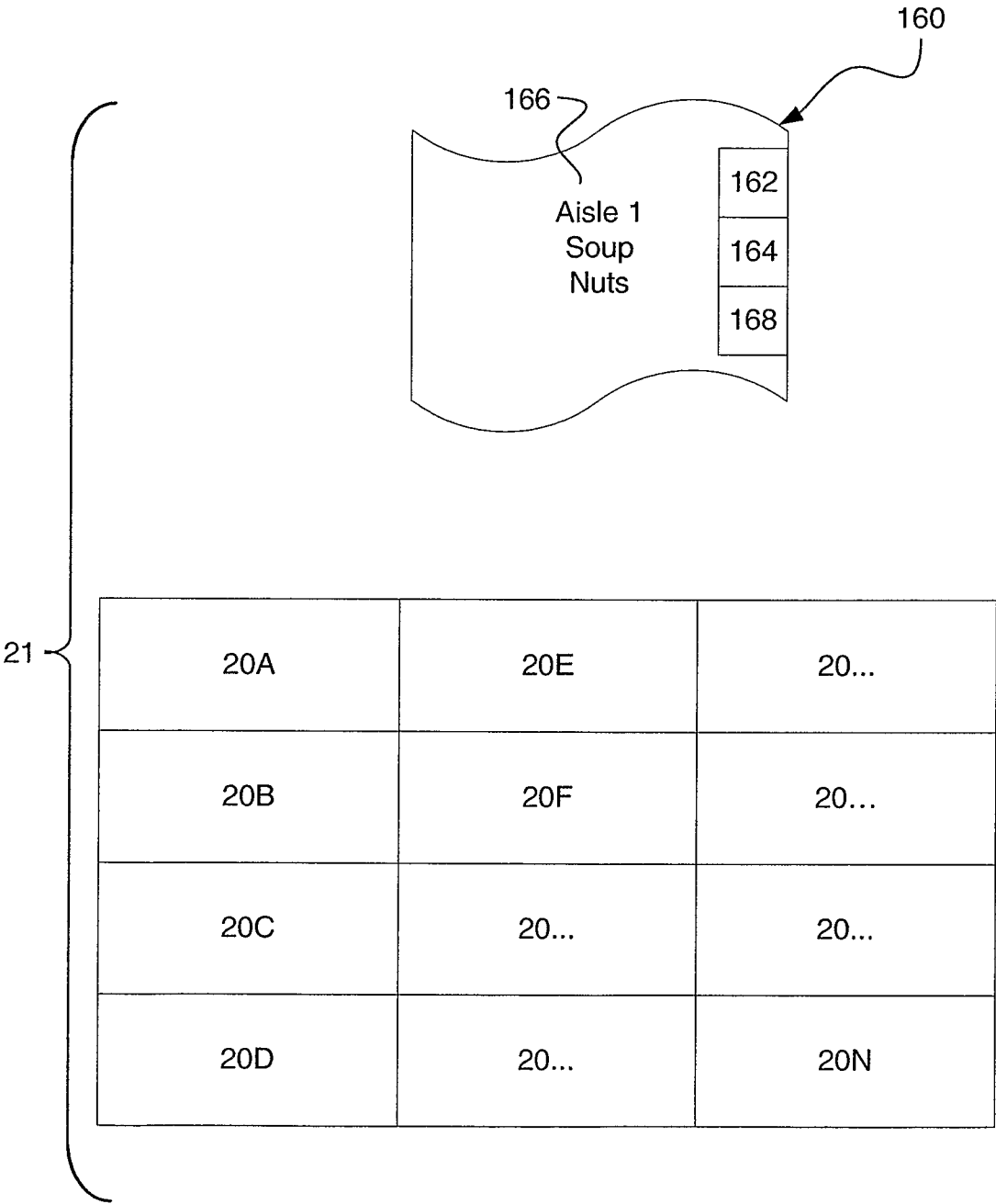


FIG. 10