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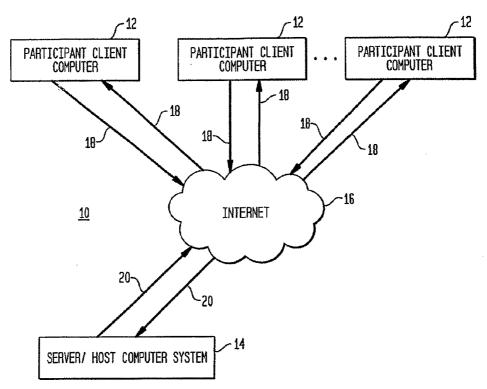
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(54) Title: NETWORK MARKETING METHOD



(57) Abstract: A system and method for an online game that provides directed marketing and advertising to users playing the game. The game is designed to attract visitors to an Internet website and to retain their attention while a variety of advertisements are displayed, products are promoted, and prizes are awarded.

NETWORK MARKETING METHOD

RELATED APPLICATION

This application claims priority to provisional patent application serial no. 60/633,787, which was filed on December 7, 2004.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to a network marketing method and game, and which provides advertising and marketing information to players of the game and which is designed to attract visitors to an Internet website, to retain their attention while a variety of advertisements are displayed and products are promoted, and to send the players to the websites of the companies/organizations who are marketing/promoting their goods and services within the course of the game.

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BACKGROUND

For major brand product companies, and any other company or organization seeking to enhance brand exposure, reach and appeal, and seeking to promote the value of their offering, the Internet provides a vast environment to expose the population to various products, goods and services.

The global information network known as the Internet provides a world-wide medium for advertising. To demonstrate how vast and far-reaching the Internet is, research from Pew Internet & American Life indicates that 77 percent of online Americans have used the Internet in connection with the war in Iraq.

- (http://www.nua.ie/surveys/?f=VS&art id=905358755&rel=true). Online job hunting 25 sites outstripped their newspaper classified counterparts by 3 to 1 in the third quarter of 2004. Overall growth for the three biggest job searching sites averaged 47.4 percent higher in the third quarter than in the same time period in 2003. That growth compares to the 15.9 percent year-over-year growth measured by newspaper classifieds in the Newspaper Association of America. In the U.S. alone this is a tremendous number of 30
 - people to who can be exposed to online advertising and marketing. Heavy Internet use is

not limited to the U.S. In1998, the number of Internet users in China was estimated at 1,750,000. (http://www.why-not.com/company/stats.htm).

According to the CNN MONEY website, the Internet is now the nation's fastest-growing advertising medium, with sales expected to reach \$9.4 billion for 2004 - up 16 percent from the Internet bubble days. Furthermore, Internet research firm eMarketer expects companies will nearly double their annual Web ad spending by 2008. (http://money.cnn.com/2004/11/15/technology/Internet_ads/index.htm).

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Furthermore, the number of computer users playing Internet-based games has escalated immensely. Early in 2004, survey firm Nielsen Entertainment shocked the broadcasting and advertising industries when it announced that TV viewing by young males in 2003 was 6 percent less than it had been only a year previously. The reason for this unprecedented decline is that console and PC gaming were stealing market share at rather mind-boggling rates. According to Nielsen, American men between 18 and 34 spent 30 billion hours in 2003 playing computer games. That's the same amount of time they spent watching TV, and it's the first time gaming tied with TV as a leisure activity. As a result of this trend, fewer and fewer people are tuning into TV programs on which advertisements are broadcasted.

To counteract these trends, many, if not most, of major consumer goods corporations are following the viewers to where they're going now – online to play games. Jupiter Research reports the number of U.S. console and PC gamers will balloon to 40 million in 2004 alone, and by 2009 that number will reach 62 million. Knowledge Networks/SRI found that games now account for 15 percent of teen males' media intake; and an AOL Games study found a huge contingent (43 percent) of dedicated female gamers.

Internet gaming is one of, if not the single, fastest growing online activity. Whereas 63.6 million people played online games over the Internet in 2001, this number is expected to grow to 73 million by end of year 2004. Advertising revenue for such games is expected to reach more than \$1 billion in 2005. In the last five years dating back to 1999, interactive games have grown more rapidly than any other form of entertainment. Interactive Internet Gaming's \$6.5 billion in sales in 2000 put it on par with movie box office receipts. Gamers span the spectrum of age, gender, race, and

socio-economic demographics. The gamer segment is growing 25% per year and surpassing total movie box office revenues. Online gamers play an average of 13 hours per week, about the same amount as the average person watches television. Websites promoting games are 8 of the top 10 entertainment sites on the Internet. The session length in gaming areas of portals average 4 times the general site average, or 28 minutes.

To date, however, there is no medium that brings everything together in one tight, affordable, implementable format and which takes advantage of the web's enormous consumer marketing potential.

10 SUMMARY

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The present invention contemplates a game that is played on the Internet or other networked system. The game combines features of the famous trivia game show "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" and the long-lived shopping television game show "The Price Is Right". Contestants are individuals (generally of majority age) who are connected to the Internet and who "surf" to websites when connected to the Internet. For "contestants", the game delivers the opportunity to participate in a big money game show without having to jump through hoops, eat live cockroaches, or survive on a deserted island to qualify and win. It requires no special knowledge — only the ability to surf the web. The invention comprises an online game offering a cash pay out or other type of award.

The game's methodology offers a unique opportunity for both gamers surfing the Internet and retailers/marketers advertising on the Internet. Contestants are tasked with surfing the web, looking for answers to questions about the marketer's products and services. Together the questions and their answers unite to deliver impactful marketing messages that drive home product value and benefits.

The above and other features of the invention, including various novel details of construction and combinations of parts, will now be more particularly described with reference to the accompanying drawings and pointed out in the claims. It will be understood that the particular device embodying the invention is shown by way of illustration only and not as a limitation of the invention. The principles and features of

this invention may be employed in various and numerous embodiments without departing from the scope of the invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

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These and other features, aspects, and advantages of the apparatus and methods of the present invention will become better understood with regard to the following description, appended claims, and accompanying drawings where:

- FIG. 1 is a block diagram showing an Internet-based hardware implementation of the network marketing method of the present invention;
- FIGS. 2A and 2B illustrate flowchart describing the steps in accordance with the present invention.
 - FIG. 3 is an illustration of one view of an exemplary Internet website visited in accordance with the methodology of the present invention; and
 - FIG. 4 is an illustration of a second view of an exemplary Internet website visited in accordance with the methodology of the present invention;

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The present invention is directed to an interactive online system and methodology that enables numerous users to be subjected to directed marketing and advertising while engaged in a game. Throughout this specification, the terms "user(s)", "contestant(s)", and "participant(s)" are used interchangeably and are intended to refer to the players of the game.

The game is stored on a computer server accessible via multiple users from remote computers connected to the Internet or other private or public network. An example of an Internet-based hardware implementation 10 of the present invention is shown in FIG. 1. As shown in the figure, a web server/host computer 14 and a plurality of remotely located client computers 12, all connected over a computer network, such as via the Internet 16. Participants operating client computers 12 communicate with the web server/host computer 14 of the game administrator, preferably by visiting and interacting with the web site or designated network location located on the server. This process is typically initiated by the participant typing, into his or her Internet web browser or other

graphical user interface (GUI), the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) of the server Web site. In response to receipt of this communication from a participant's browser, software operating in the server/host computer 14 controls the server to send the browser the game's home page form, which may be a Hypertext Mark-up Language (HTML) document or a Flash® application (Macromedia, Inc., San Francisco, CA), having a menu of options to be discussed below. An interactive session ensues, which will be described in detail below with reference to a preferred embodiment.

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The server/host computer 14 is programmed to format data, accessed from local or remote databases or other sources of data, for presentation to the participant, preferably in the format discussed in detail below. The server/host computer 14, although described herein in the singular, may actually comprise plural computers cooperating to perform the functions described herein.

The server/host computer programming can utilize any conventional Web data interface technique or techniques, such as Common Gateway Interface (CGI) protocol and associated applications (or "scripts"), or Java "servlets", i.e., Java applications running on the Web server of Flash® application. It will be appreciated that the interactive forms to be discussed below, which present forms for entry of information by the participants, and which save the entered information to a database, may be implemented in any of several conventional ways, using known server applications. For example, in response to entry of the participant's name and password, the server can redirect the information to a CGI application that is called when the participant clicks, for example, a "submit" icon. Access to databases, both local and remote, containing for example game information or information as to current game results, also may be implemented, for example, by other CGI or similar applications.

As will be understood, the game participant client computer connections 18 to the Internet 16 can be facilitated by any one of a number of different connection types including, but not limited to, wireless, dial-up modem, DSL, ADSL, cable, T1, T3, etc. As will be understood, the connection speeds vary greatly between, say, dial-up modems connected at a typical speed of 56 kbps, and a T1 connection with a speed of 1 Mbps. Furthermore, depending on the geographic location of the game client computers 12 and the reliability of their local Internet service provider ("ISP"), access to the Internet 16 and

to the server/host computer 14 can be interrupted, or very slow. While the server/host computer 14 can be connected to the Internet 16 by a high speed network connection 20 to provide good server performance, the variability in connection speed and reliability of the connections 18 between the remote game client computers 12 and the Internet 18 can make a game of chance and speed such as bingo fundamentally unfair when played on the Internet.

It should be understood that participants at client computers 12 generally input data and responses via a keyboard (not shown) or other computer input device.

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FIGS. 2A and 2B graphically illustrate the steps in an exemplary process in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. The game in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention is played in two rounds: a first or qualifying round and the second or prize round. Although single or multiple rounds are contemplated by the invention. Preferably, anyone 18 years or older can register to compete in the qualifying round simply by visiting the game network location or website and signing up. It is contemplated that the age ranges for qualification can vary across the entire spectrum possible depending on various factors such as parental guidance, content of the contemplated websites to be visited, desired marketing segmentation and others.

Generally, a participant will first visit the game website (step 100). At the website, the participant decides whether to commence play (step 102). If the participant decides not to play, they generally exit the website (step 104). Preferably, if a participant decides to play (step 104) they are sent to a registration page which requires contestants to provide statistically valuable demographic and/or personal information that will be used to further the value of the game to the sponsors (step 108). This information can include, but is not limited to, personal identifiers such as age and gender, geographic identifiers such as zip code and other types of identifying information (step 110). After inputting the requested demographic information, the system may provide the participant with an ID and/or password (step 112) to be used at one or more locations during the game and/or to gain access certain areas of the game website. A privacy policy may be provided at the website that will detail what uses the information may be put to, e.g., delivery of segment-specific content, statistical aggregations of data for market research,

and/or possible sale, and contestants must indicate their acceptance of this policy in order to proceed with registration..

In the invention's preferred embodiment, a first or qualifying round is played over a pre-determined period of time during which time each contestant may play only once. In the preferred embodiment, contestants play the round in one single, uninterrupted web browser session. The fastest contestants to complete the qualifying round will then compete in the final round for the prize, which may be cash, products or other awards. Cash and other prizes will also be available during the qualifying round. In the final round, all contestants race the clock and each other to be the first to correctly answer all the questions and be proclaimed the winner.

The qualifying round is broadly depicted as steps 114-120 in FIG. 2A. The qualifying round is preferably made of 30 sets of clues and questions, although the number may vary greatly depending on desired complexity, time limitations, targeted contestants and other reasons. To start, contestants are given a clue to the identity of one of the participating brand sponsors. Answers are selected from a multiple choice list. Contestants can try as many times as needed to identify the correct sponsor, but each incorrect answer will add time to their total game time.

For example, a sample clue would be the following:

"This toasted whole grain cereal can help reduce your cholesterol:".

Following the clue would be a list of possible answers such as:

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- Raisin Bran
- Lucky Charms
- Frosted Flakes
- Cheerios
- Grape Nuts

Once a contestant correctly selects "Cheerios" as the answer, he/she can receive a Cheerios-related fill-in-the- blank question or other type of question and a link to the Cheerios website. To answer the Cheerio-related question, the contestant must go through the Cheerios website (http://www.cheerios.com/) to find out some specific, brand reinforcing piece of information contained there. For example, a sample question might be something like:

"Cheerios is also an excellent source of _____ and a good source of fiber."

After reading the question, the contestant clicks on the link or URL ("uniform resource locator) (step 116). A new browser window then opens to a network location such as the homepage of the Cheerios website as illustrated in FIG. 3.

From this point, the contestant must navigate the Cheerios website until he/she locates the sentence that contains the answer to the posed question, such as illustrated in FIG. 4.

When the contestant finds the right answer, the contestant enters it into the question form field on the game site (step 118) as follows:

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"Cheerios is also an excellent source of <u>folic acid</u> and a good source of f fiber."

The computer system will then determine if the answer is correct by matching it with the correct answers in its database (step 120). If the answer is wrong, the contestant will be notified immediately and will need to go back (step 122) and find the right answer.

Once the contestant has answered the question correctly, he/she will receive the next clue. Clues and questions are then continuously provided until the contestant has correctly answered all questions (step 124)

At the end of the first round time period, the times of all contestants are tallied. In one embodiment, the fastest times in a 24 hour period advance to the second or prize round (step 126). The invention is not limited in this respect however, and other time periods can be utilized. Participants who do not meet the fastest time criteria do not advance to the second or prize round (step 128). A consolation prize may be provided to participants who do not advance to the second round.

The second or prize round is broadly depicted as steps 128-134 in FIG. 2B. The prize round typically contains less questions than the first round and by way of example herein contain eight questions, four from each of two websites. The participant with the fastest time in completing the eight questions in the prize round wins the prize (steps 136-140). The losers in the second round exit the game at step 142, and may be awarded a consolation prize.

Preferably, the final round will not have clues. In one embodiment the final round will generally comprise questions only, and the questions will be directed to charitable and non-profit organizations instead of sponsoring brands. This will give the game added credibility and social relevance while allowing the game to help worthy causes spread their message to the contestant base.

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The game in accordance with the invention will bring unique users to each sponsor's web site. Preferably, the sponsors pay the game coordinators for their presence in the game. Contestants will indulge in brand reinforcement exercises through the clue part of the game and will delve deeply into each sponsors' unique selling proposition on their search for answers to the questions. As contestants search sponsor websites for answers, they also will encounter many additional promotions, topics, offerings, or messaging throughout the sponsor sites.

Ultimately, brands can use the question portion of the game in any way they deem most valuable. Questions could be used, amongst other things, to enhance public relations campaigns intended to heighten perception of the brand's community involvement; promote the launch of a new product line; help distinguish the value proposition of an existing line; develop familiarity with web-based business processes used to initiate a transaction; and heighten contestant's awareness of current special offers, rebates, sales, etc.

Preferably, the final prize starts out at a predetermined set amount. This is the minimum the winner will be awarded. However, as more and more contestants play the game and complete the full set of clues and questions the prize will grow. Preferably, the actual prize amount will be a designated percentage of the total per-click revenue or the initial set amount, whichever is greater. Although other known methods for awarding can be used such as product giveaways, coupons or gift certificates and others. Also, other awarding schemes are contemplated by the invention including a single grand prize, or other prize finishes, or pay-to-play schemes to build the prize, or others.

The game website may also provide for online messaging. Messaging on the game website will encourage registered contestants to bring their friends in to help drive up the prize. A counter will show what the potential prize is if all contestants finish the whole game. The actual final prize amount will be announced at the completion of the

first round game period when the final round qualifiers are notified so all contestants in the final round will know how much they are playing for. The number will also be posted on the website and included in press releases and promotions to encourage future game participation.

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At the completion of each game, reports can be provided to sponsors relative to how quickly various demographic groups of participants identified them in the clue round and found the answers to the questions. This valuable market research can provide keen insight into brand penetration and site usability.

To help prevent cheating and to provide greater opportunity for sponsors to assess the effectiveness of their websites and messaging, it is preferred that each participating brand will have a minimum number of different questions in play during the qualifying round; these different questions will be delivered proportionately but randomly to contestants. In this manner, two participants sitting side-by-side and playing at the same time will receive different questions and will be directed to sponsors sites in different orders. 1

Throughout the course of the game there can be additional opportunities for participants to win cash prizes and sponsor-supplied merchandise. This will help keep more contestants competing longer, visiting more websites and producing more value for sponsors. For example, the game servers can be programmed to assign the nth number person to hit a certain website as an "Instant Winner" of a prize. Every time someone hits an "Instant Win", it can be announced on the Game website to maintain excitement.

It is also contemplated that there will be opportunities for participants to answer "bonus questions"; answering a bonus question correctly will earn the contestant some measure of time off his final time. This is intended as a preferred means of making the game more fun and helping contestants feel they have a chance of making it to the final round, which will keep them in the game visiting more sponsor websites.

At the end of each game, the game servers can email to all contestants a list of coupons available from the sponsors. In one embodiment each sponsor will be able to offer several coupons and contestants can choose the one they prefer. In this way, sponsors generate immediate revenue potentials and garner more valuable, free market research into which demographic groups preferred which coupon.

At times, sponsors can be offered the ability to deliver segment-specific questions based on demographics mined at registration. For example, Nike[®] might desire to have women find out something about their women's sport shoes, and have men find out something about men's sport shoes.

Not all questions must be of the fill-in-the-blank type. To add variety, interest and value to marketers some could be task based. So, for example, a question might require a contestant to use a sponsors virtual calculator for a mortgage calculation.

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To give the game a more authentic feel and to create an additional revenue stream, the preliminary round of questions can be broken into smaller groups of questions. In the breaks between Rounds 1 & 2, and between Rounds 2 & 3, "intermercials" (Internet commercials) can be broadcast, which can also be targeted based on segmented demographics.

To help keep contestants returning for future rounds, in one embodiment of the game, an increase in prize money (such as \$5,000) could be offered to returning contestants for each previous game round they have completed.

At numerous points before, during and after the game play, contestants can have opportunities to earn "chances" for a sweepstakes drawing that can occur periodically. Each sponsor site that a contestant visits may earn him/her one chance at the sweepstakes drawing. Other exemplary ways to earn additional changes at the sweepstakes drawing might include recruiting new participants to the game, guessing the winner, and replying to coupon offers.

As an additional value-add to both marketers and non-profits, past versions of the game can be archived. Contestants can use these archived rounds to practice which will deliver additional users to the sponsor and organization sites at no charge.

While there has been shown and described what is considered to be preferred embodiments of the invention, it will, of course, be understood that various modifications and changes in form or detail could readily be made without departing from the spirit of the invention. It is therefore intended that the invention be not limited to the exact forms described and illustrated, but should be constructed to cover all modifications that may fall within the scope of the appended claims. The present invention was particularly conceived to utilize a computer system to provide directed marketing and advertising to a

particular population having specific demographics. Using the system claimed herein provides a unique manner for doing so.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

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1. A method of marketing to a plurality of users connected to a network, comprising the steps of:

a. providing a designated network location to be visited by a plurality
 of users intending to participate in the method;

- providing queries to the users that that subject the user to a variety
 of directed marketing and advertising and encourages the users to
 locate responses to the queries by searching network locations for
 answers to the queries;
- c. allowing the users to input responses to the queries; and
- d. awarding a prize to the user who correctly answers the provided queries in the fastest time.
- 2. The method in accordance with claim 1, further comprising the steps of:
 - g. after the users visit the designated website in step a., requesting demographic information from the users intending to participate in the method; and
 - h. providing queries to the users that submitted demographic information, and that subjects the user to a variety of directed marketing.
- 3. The method in accordance with claim 1, wherein the proffered queries are provided to the users in two rounds.
- 4. The method in accordance with claim 3, wherein a first round consists of 30 sets of clues and questions.
- 5. The method in accordance with claim 3, wherein the clues are provided with multiple choice answers.
- 6. The method in accordance with claim 4, wherein the questions are provided with a blank in which the user must fill in the correct answer.
- 7. The method in accordance with claim 4, wherein a predetermined number of users answering the 30 questions in the fastest time within a predetermined time period proceed to the second of the two rounds.

8. The method in accordance with claim 7, wherein the second round consists of eight questions.

- 9. The method in accordance with claim 8, wherein the user answering the eight questions in the fastest time wins a prize.
- 10. The method in accordance with claim 9, wherein the prize is cash and/or merchandise.
- 11. The method in accordance with claim 4, wherein the network locations visited by the user in the first round are network locations of brand sponsors and/or product manufacturers.
- 10 12. The method in accordance with claim 8, wherein the network locations visited by the user in the second round are network locations of charitable and not-for-profit organizations.
 - 13. The method in accordance with claim 1, wherein Internet commercials are intermittently provided during the course of visiting the websites.
 - 14. The method in accordance with claim 1, wherein the queries provided to the users are selected from a pool of varied questions and are randomly delivered to the users so as to prevent cheating.
 - 15. The method in accordance with claim 1, further comprising the step of providing to the users an ID and/or password to allow the users to gain access to certain areas of the designated network location.
 - 16. A computer network marketing system, comprising:
 - a. providing a computer network;
 - b. providing a screen display accessible via the computer network;
 - providing directed marketing or advertising viewable on the screen display;
 - d. providing a set of clues and questions on the screen display via the computer network;
 - e. encouraging a user of the network to search other websites in order to find the answers to the clues and questions;
 - f. allowing the user to input via a keyboard the answer to the provided questions and clues;

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g. comparing the user's inputted answers with the correct answers stored on the computer network determine if they match;

- h. if the answers match, allowing the user to proceed through additional questions and clues until all questions and clues have been correctly answered;
- i. rewarding the user who correctly answers all the clues and questions in the fastest time.
- 17. The system in accordance with claim 16, wherein the clues and questions provided to the users are selected from a pool of varied questions and are randomly delivered to the users so as to prevent cheating.
- 18. The system in accordance with claim 16, wherein the clues and questions are provided to the users in two rounds.
- 19. The system in accordance with claim 18, wherein a first round consists of 30 sets of clues and questions.
- 20. The method in accordance with claim 19, wherein the clues are provided with multiple choice answers.
- 21. The method in accordance with claim 19, wherein the questions are provided with a blank in which the user must fill in the correct answer.
- 22. The method in accordance with claim 19, wherein the user answering the 30 questions in the fastest time proceeds to the second of the two rounds.
- 23. The method in accordance with claim 18, wherein the second round consists of eight questions.
- 24. The method in accordance with claim 23, wherein the user answering the eight questions in the fastest time wins a prize.
- 25. The method in accordance with claim 24, wherein the prize is cash and/or merchandise.
- 26. The method in accordance with claim 19, wherein the websites visited by the user in the first round are websites of brand sponsors and/or product manufacturers.

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27. The method in accordance with claim 23, wherein the websites visited by the user in the second round are websites of charitable and not-for-profit organizations.

28. The method in accordance with claim 16, wherein Internet commercials are intermittently provided during the course of visiting the websites.

29. A system for providing a directed marketing and advertising game to a plurality of participants, and each operating a participant terminal operable to act as a client on a network, the system comprising:

a host controller, the host controller comprising a computer operable to act as a server on the network at one or more designated network locations, and to communicate with the participant terminals over the network; and

data storage accessible to the host controller, the data storage storing information relating to performance of the participants in game, as well as a plurality of questions and clues that are provided to the participants during the game,

the host controller being operable:

- (a) to solicit and accept from each participant demographic information used to subject the user to specific questions and clues relating to particular products; and
- (b) to provide to participants a directed group of clues and questions based on the users inputted demographic information;
- (c) to receive answers to the questions and clues input by the participants and compare them to the correct answer in a database stored on the host controller;
- (d) to allow the participants to proceed with the game if their answers match those stored in the database, or to inform the users that their answers are incorrect and to try again for the correct answers; and
- (e) awarding prizes to the users based on preset wining criteria.

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30. The system in accordance with claim 29, wherein the clues and questions provided to the participants are selected from a pool of varied questions and are randomly delivered to the participants so as to prevent cheating.

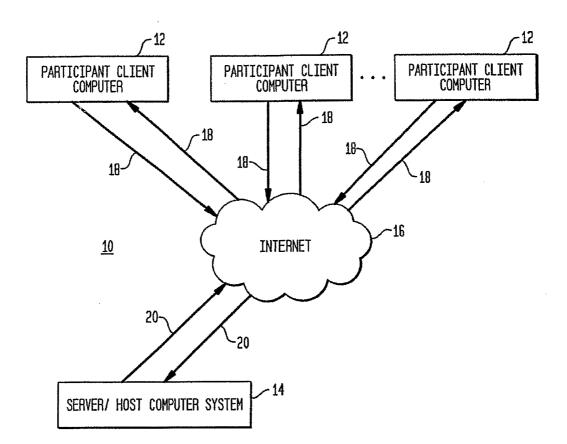
- 31. The system in accordance with claim 29, wherein the clues and questions are provided to the participants in two rounds.
- 32. The system in accordance with claim 31, wherein a first round consists of 30 sets of clues and questions.
- 33. The system in accordance with claim 32, wherein the clues are provided with multiple choice answers.
- The system in accordance with claim 32, wherein the questions are provided with a blank in which the user must fill in the correct answer.

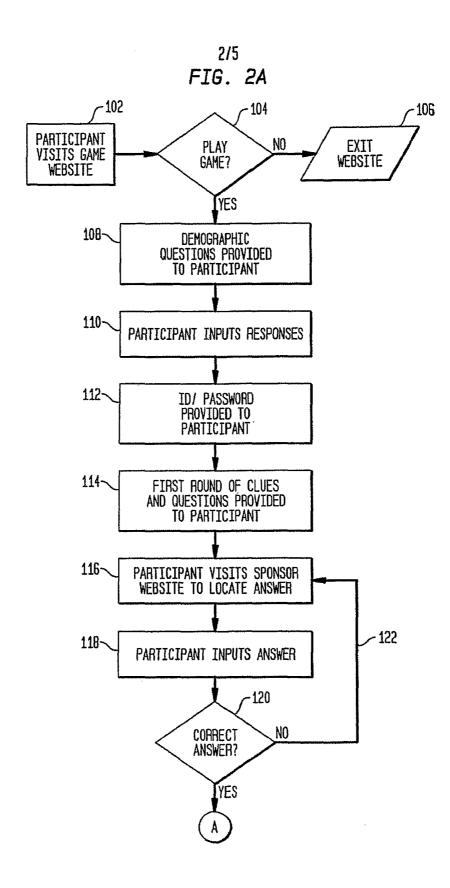
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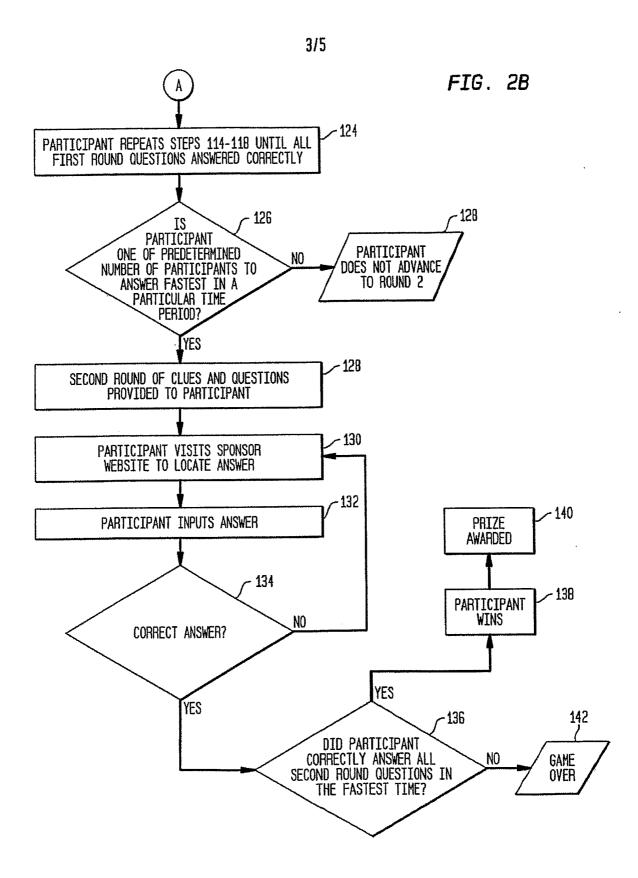
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- 35. The system in accordance with claim 32, wherein the participant answering the 30 questions in the fastest time proceeds to the second of the two rounds.
- The system in accordance with claim 35, wherein the second round consists of eight questions.
 - 37. The system in accordance with claim 36, wherein the user answering the eight questions in the fastest time wins a prize.
 - 38. The system in accordance with claim 37, wherein the prize is cash and/or merchandise.
 - 39. The system in accordance with claim 32, wherein the designated network locations visited by the participants in the first round are network locations of brand sponsors and/or product manufacturers.
 - 40. The system in accordance with claim 36, wherein the designated network locations visited by the participants in the second round are network locations of charitable and not-for-profit organizations.

FIG. 1







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FIG. 3

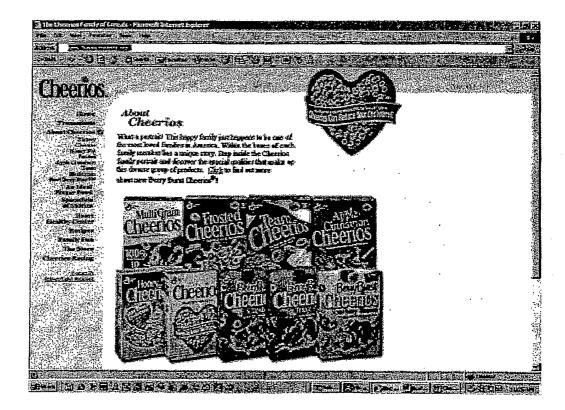


FIG. 4

