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(19) **United States**(12) **Patent Application Publication**
NARGIZIAN(10) **Pub. No.: US 2013/0024327 A1**(43) **Pub. Date: Jan. 24, 2013**(54) **STORE CREDIT AND SYSTEMS AND METHODS RELATING THERETO****Publication Classification**(76) Inventor: **Steven NARGIZIAN**, Franklin Lakes, NJ (US)(51) **Int. Cl.**
G06Q 30/00 (2012.01)(52) **U.S. Cl.** **705/27.1**(21) Appl. No.: **13/399,804**(22) Filed: **Feb. 17, 2012**(57) **ABSTRACT**

The present invention provides systems and methods relating to store credit. A person or entity (a party) could use the system as a buyer, seller, supplier, facilitator, or other party. The invention provides an electronic platform (a website and its associated hardware and/or software, etc.) where buyers and/or alternative parties could customize and/or negotiate provisions on offers to buy and/or sell store credit, and/or where buyers and/or alternative parties could customize and/or negotiate terms and/or conditions associated with store credit.

Related U.S. Application Data

(60) Provisional application No. 61/443,945, filed on Feb. 17, 2011, provisional application No. 61/513,482, filed on Jul. 29, 2011.

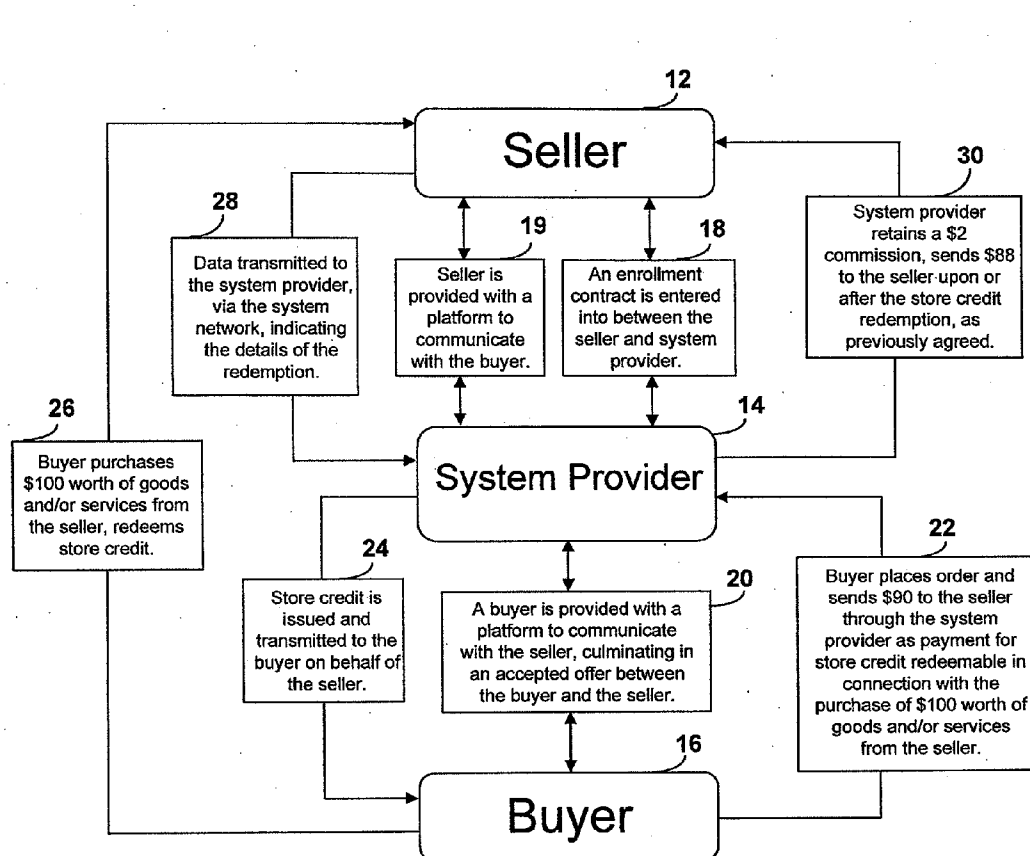
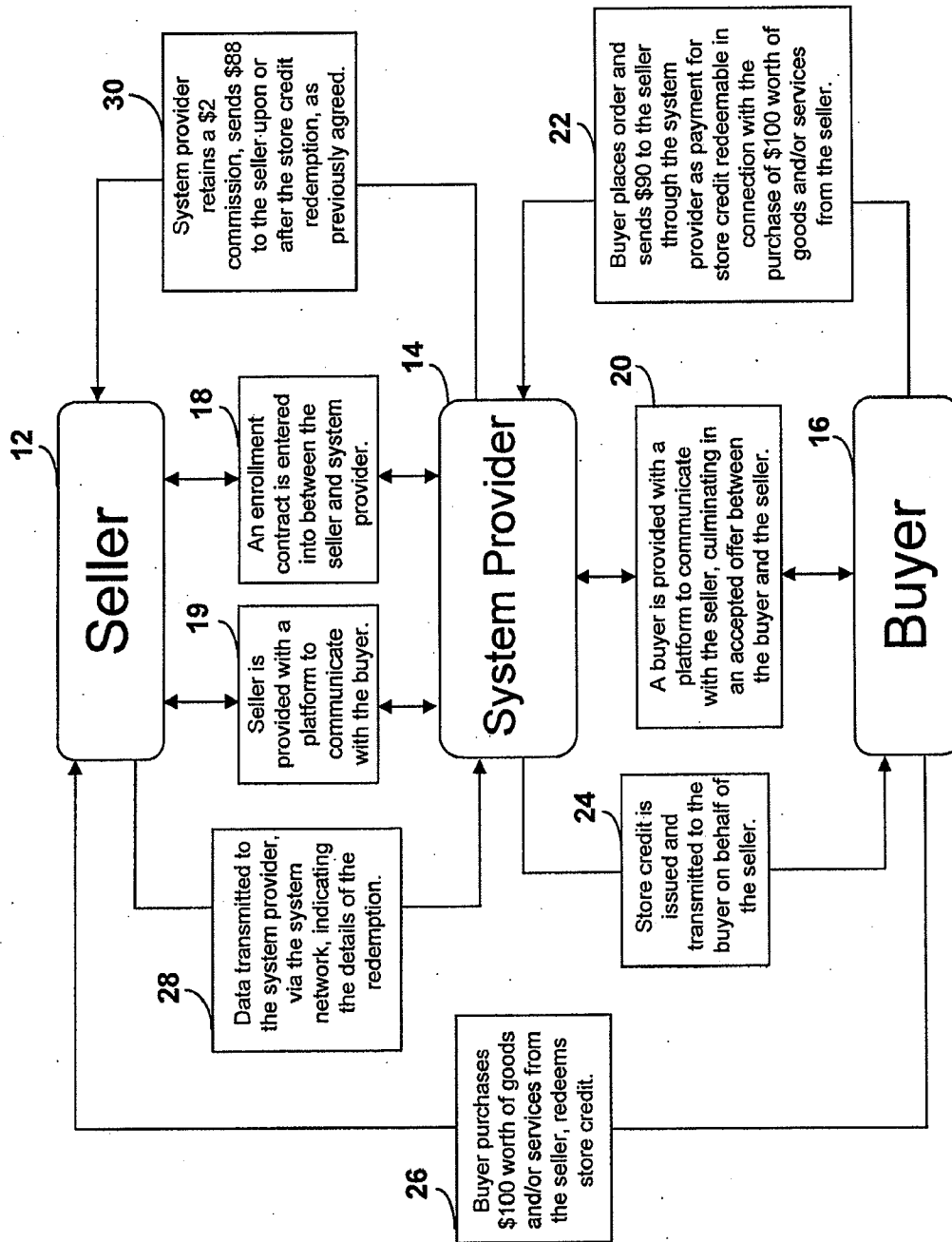
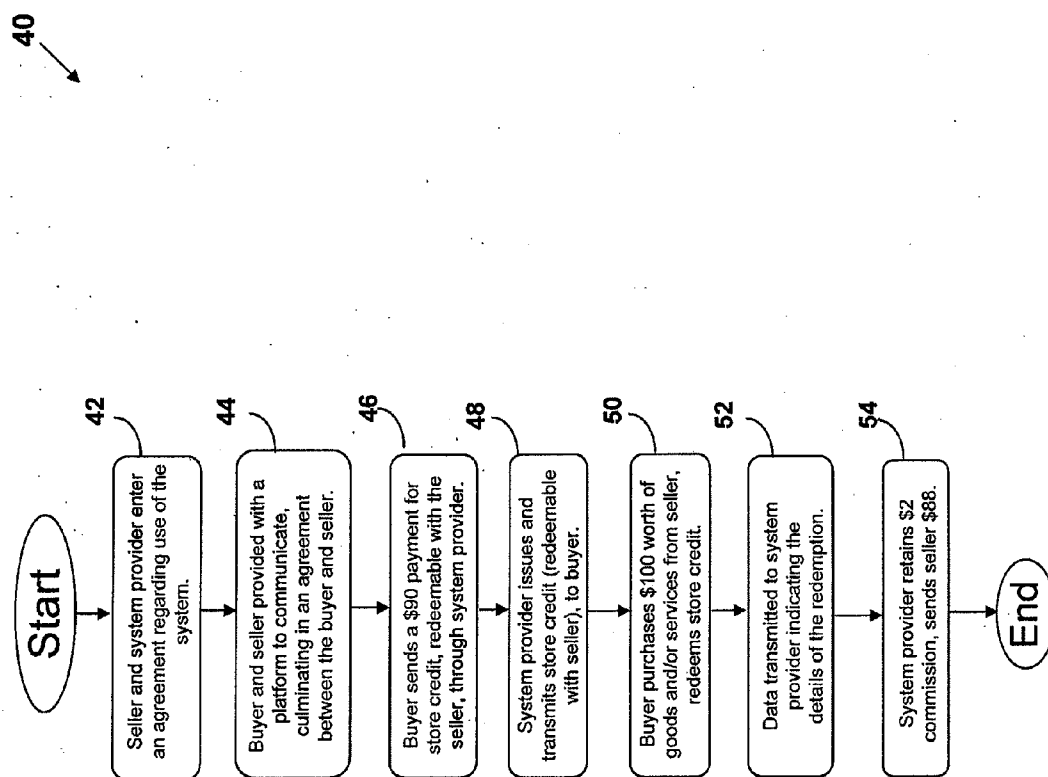


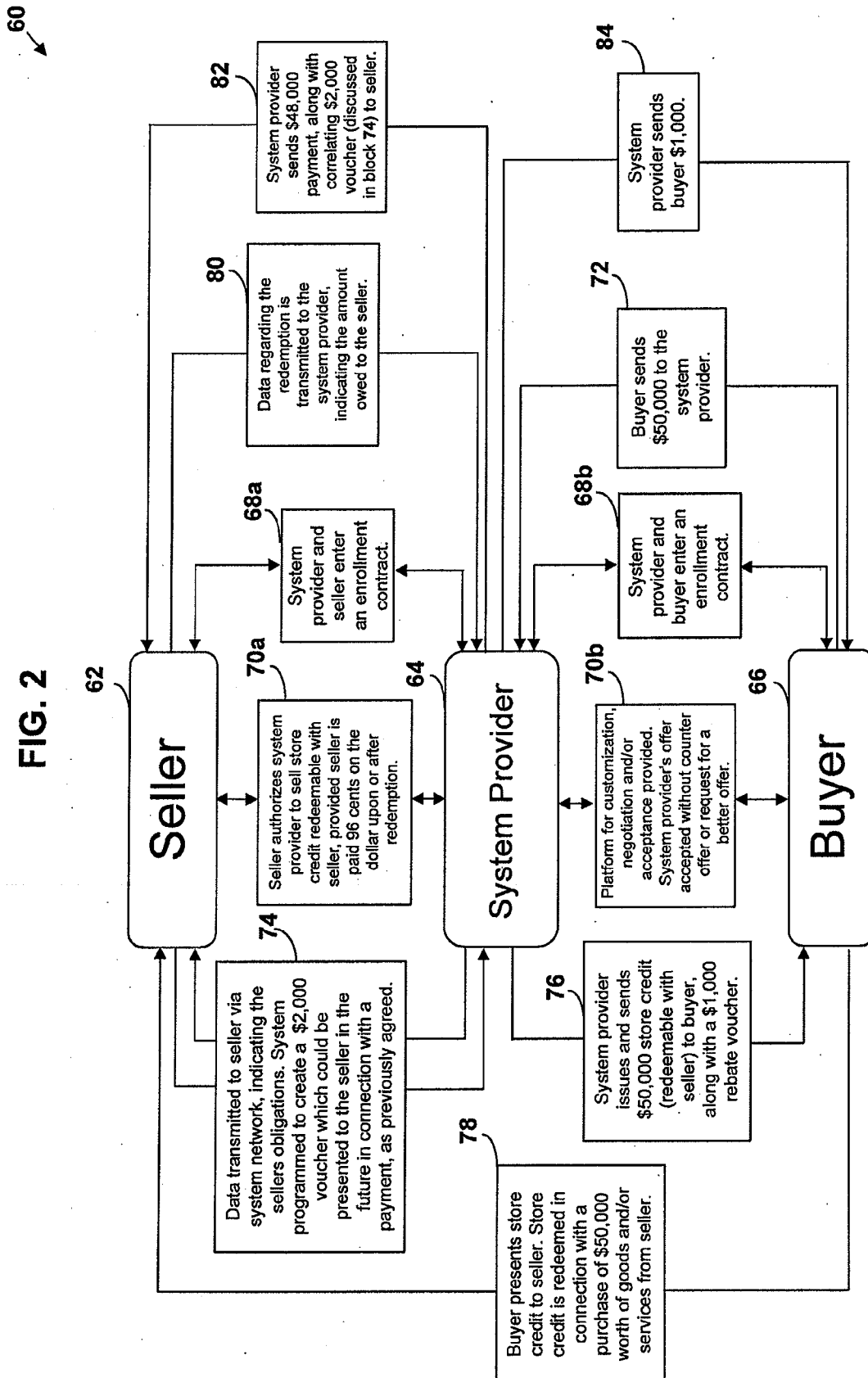
FIG. 1A



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FIG. 1B





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FIG. 3A

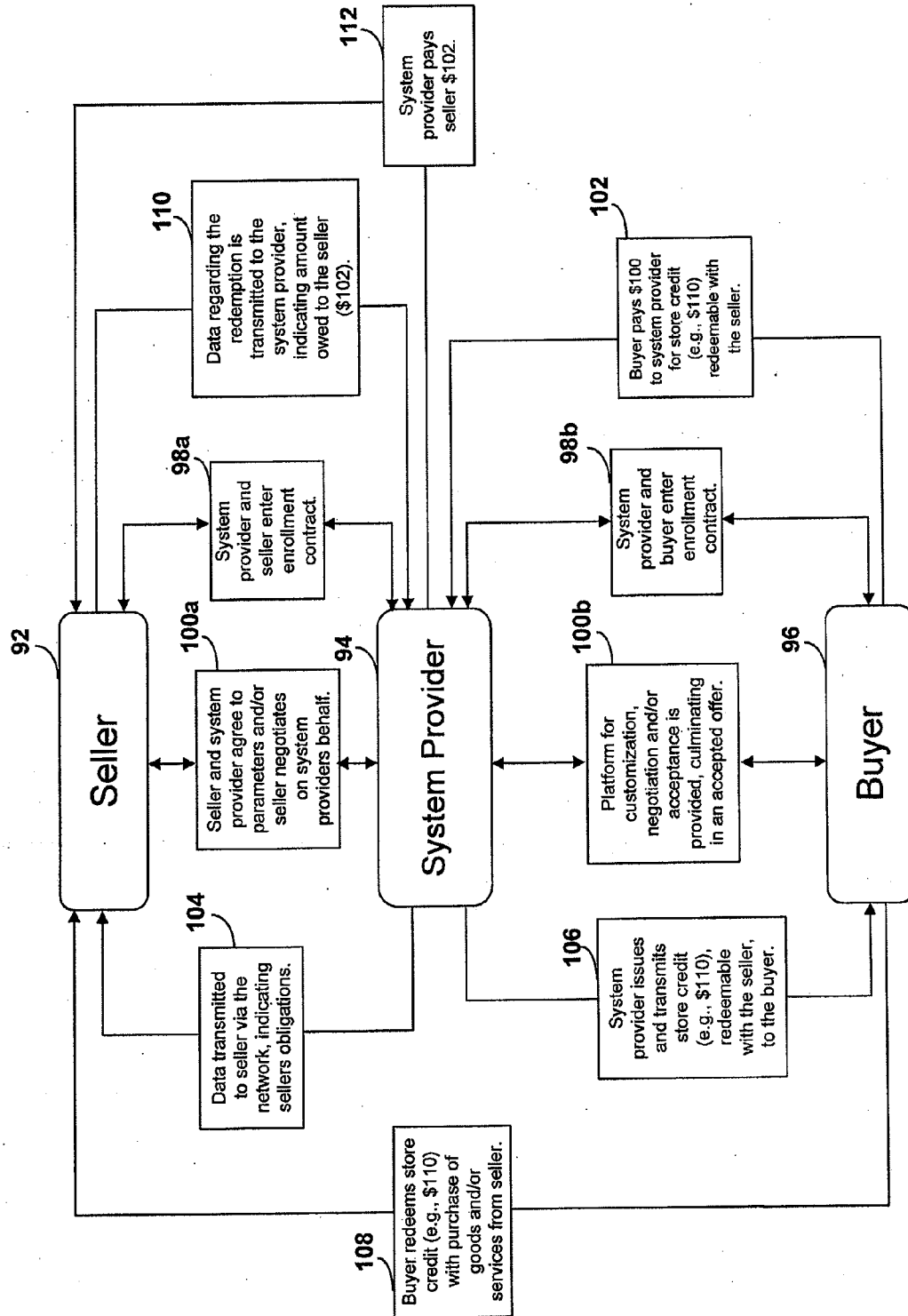
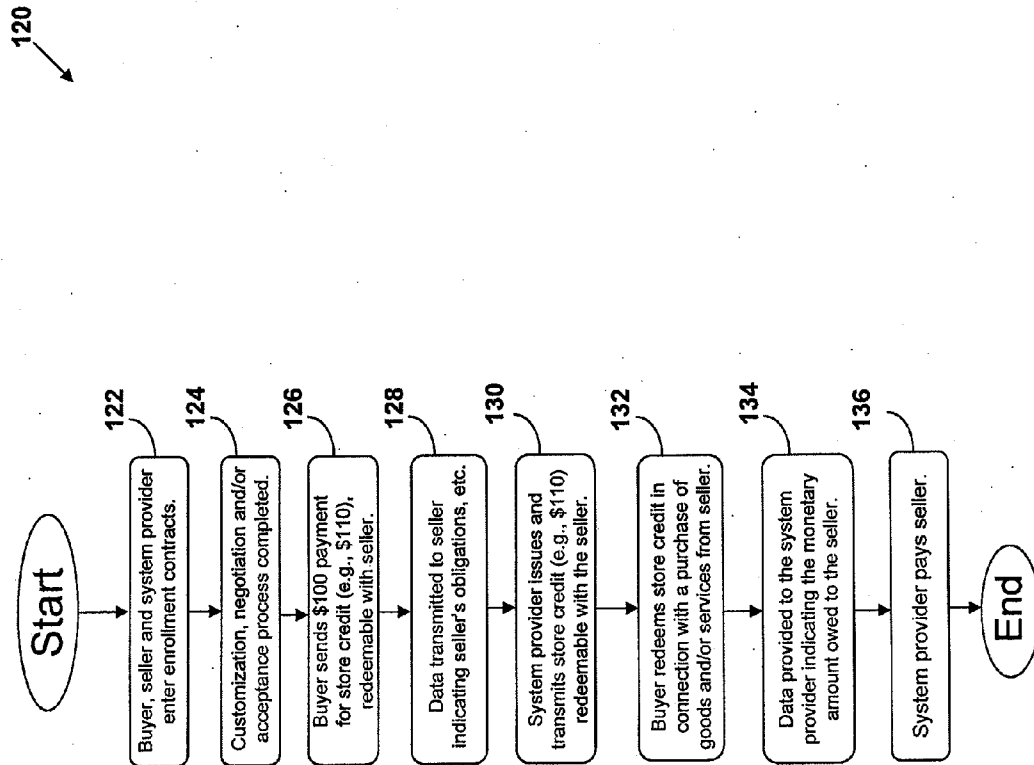
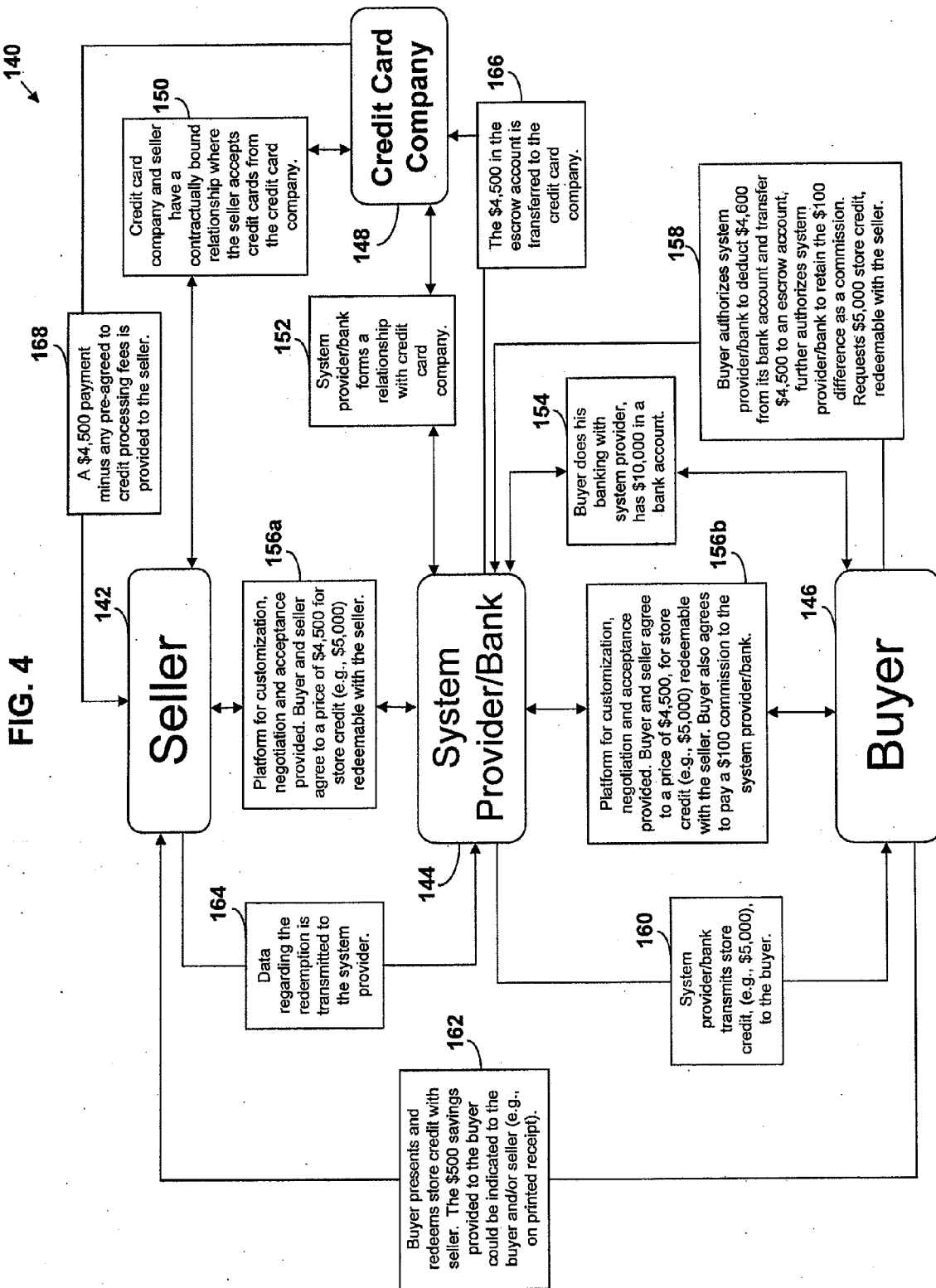


FIG. 3B





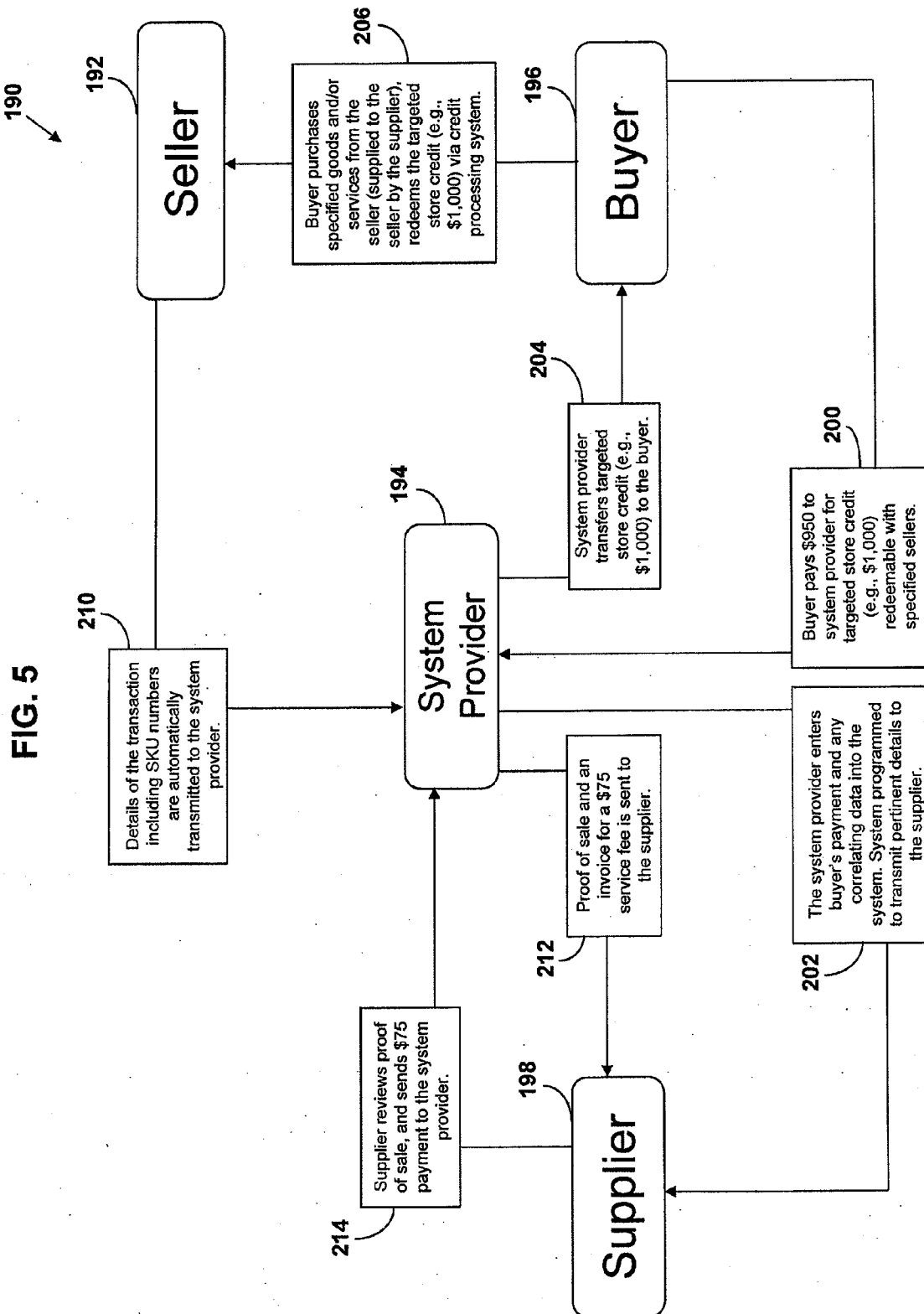


FIG. 6A

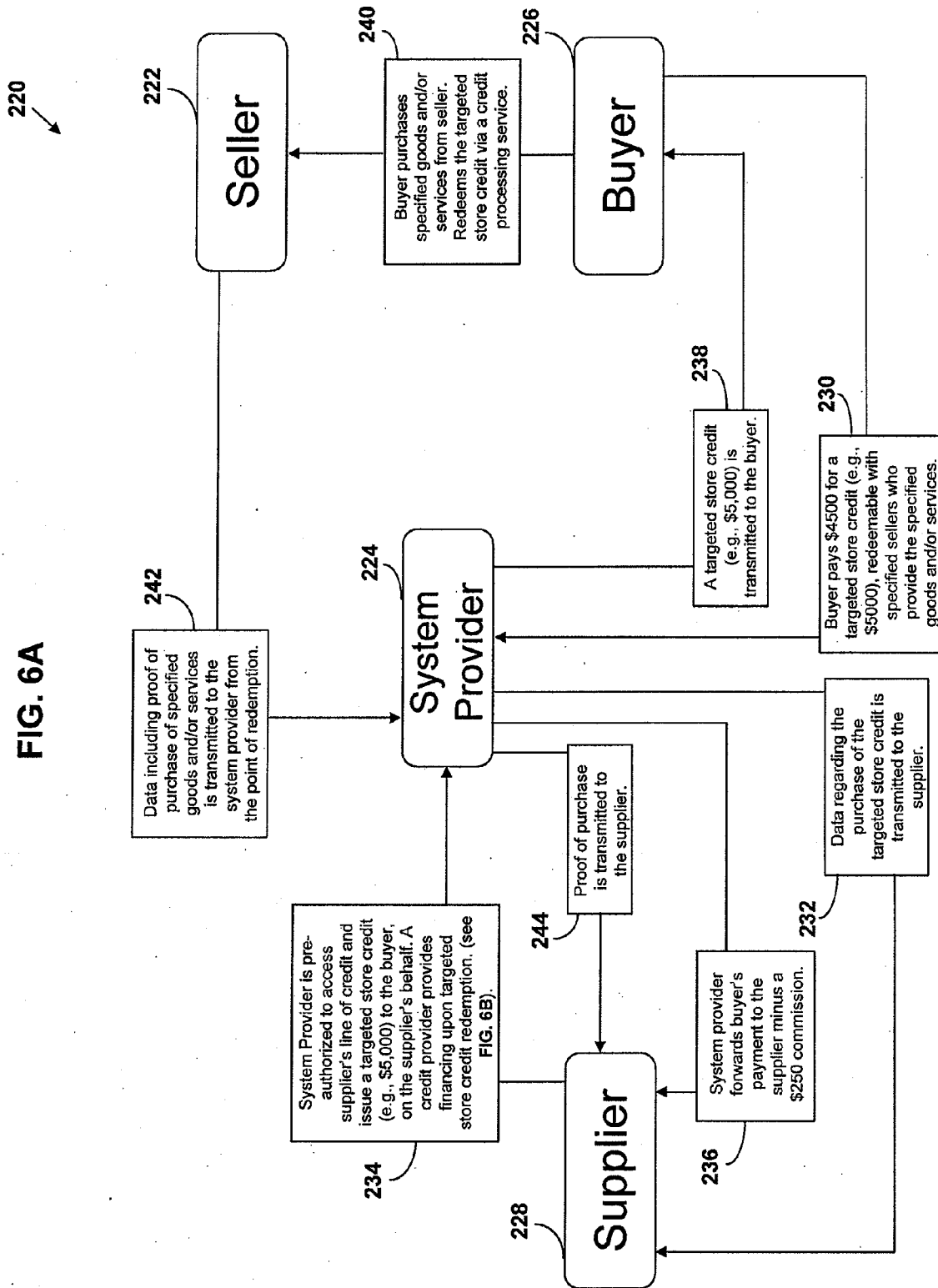
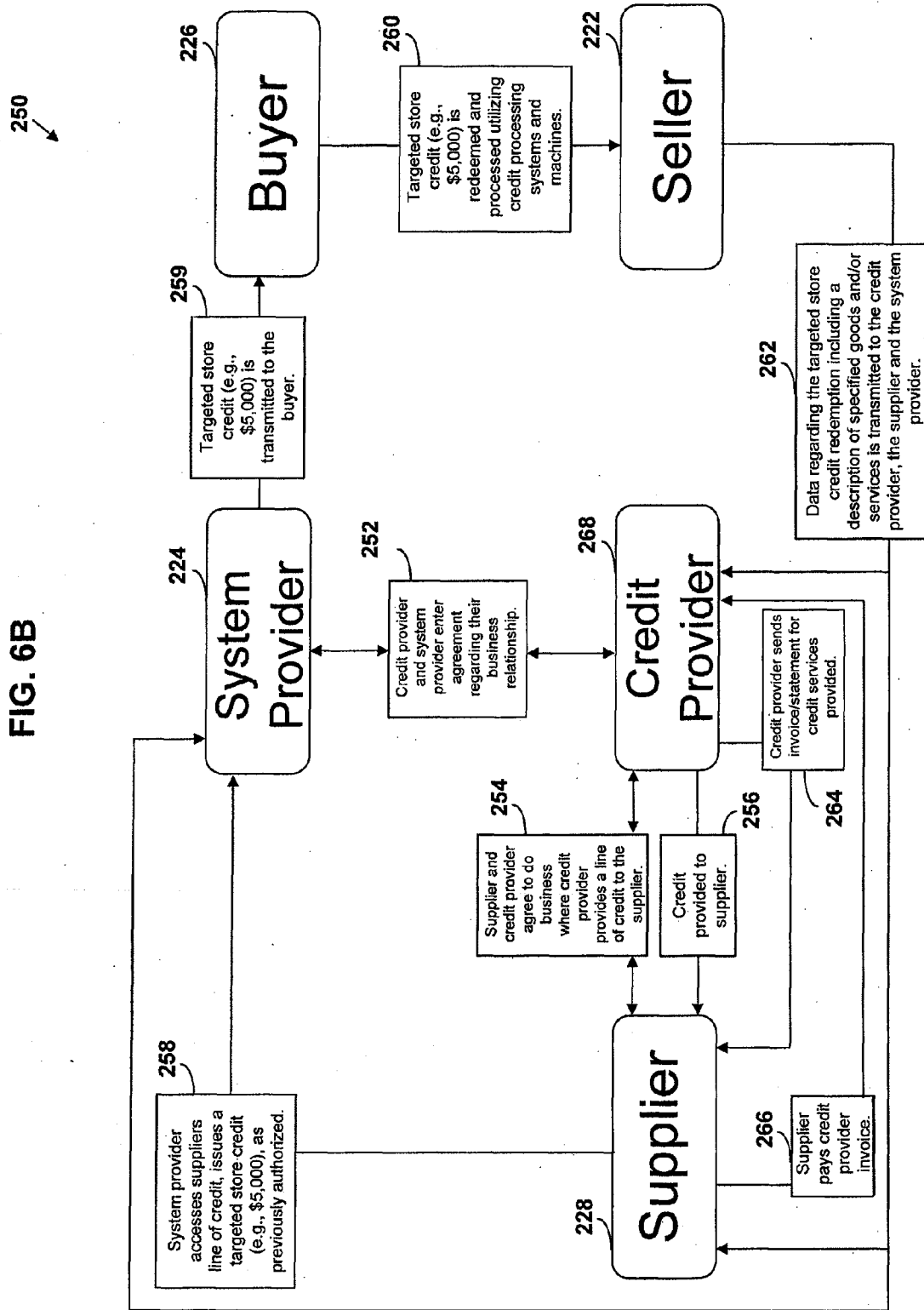
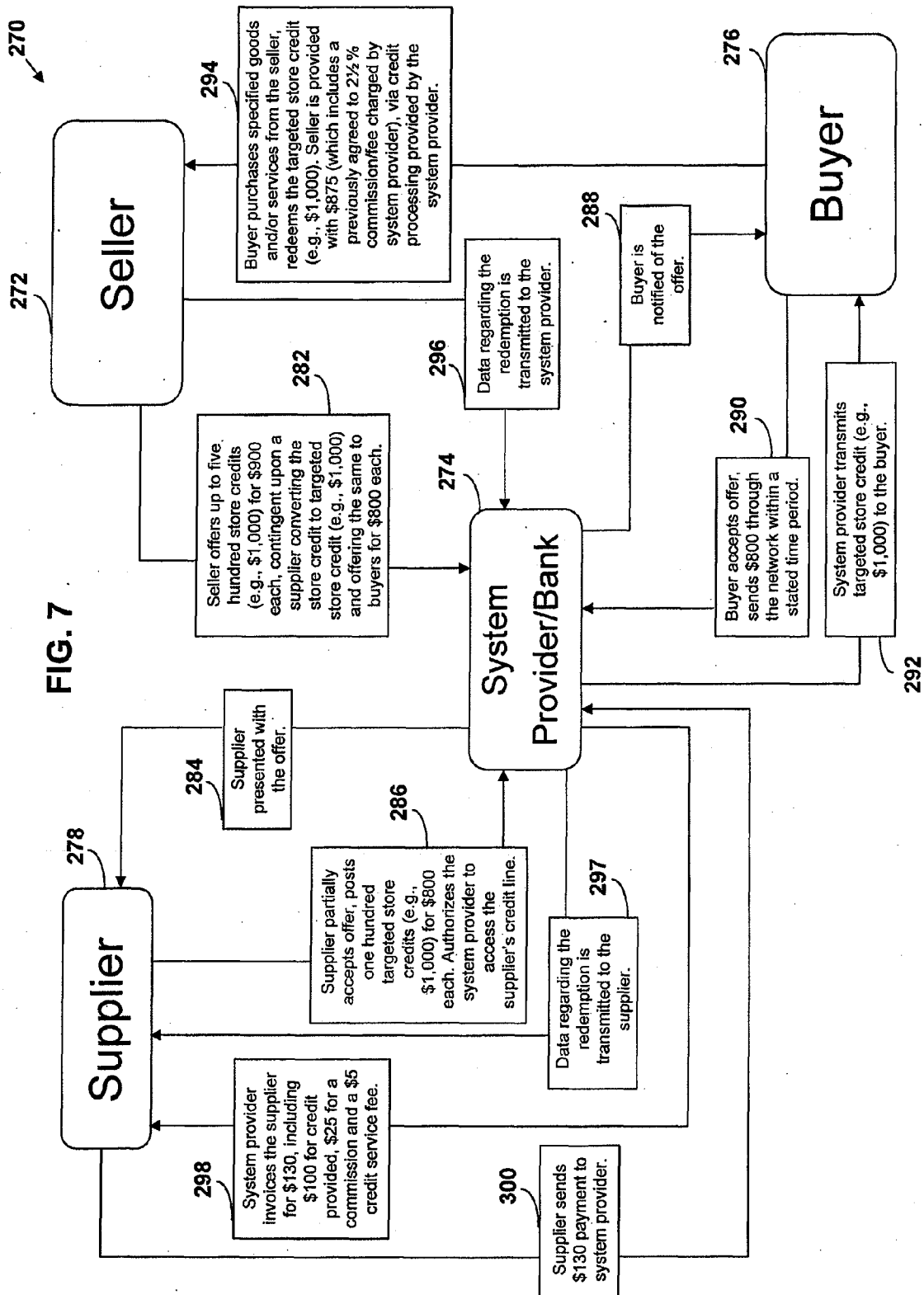
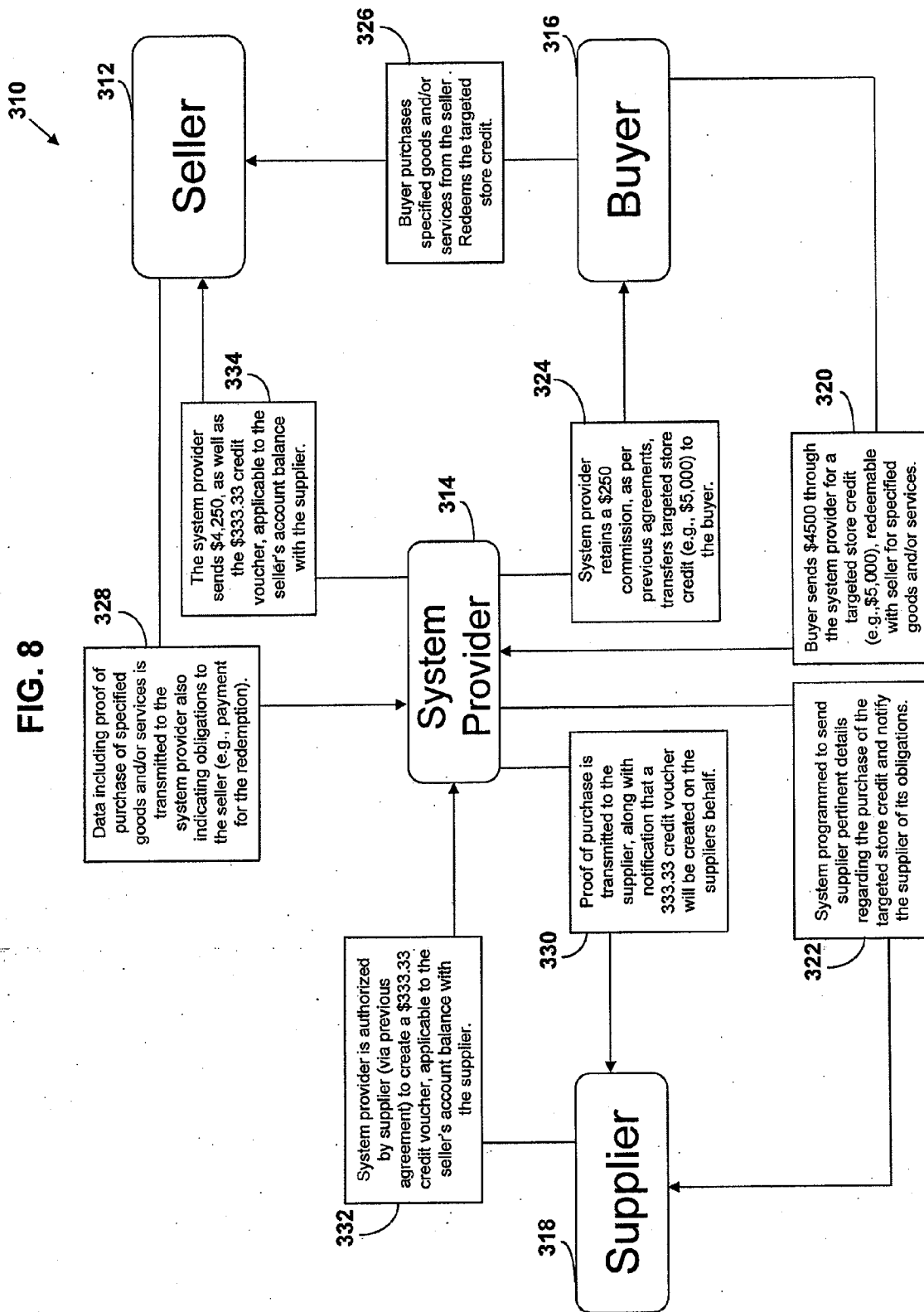
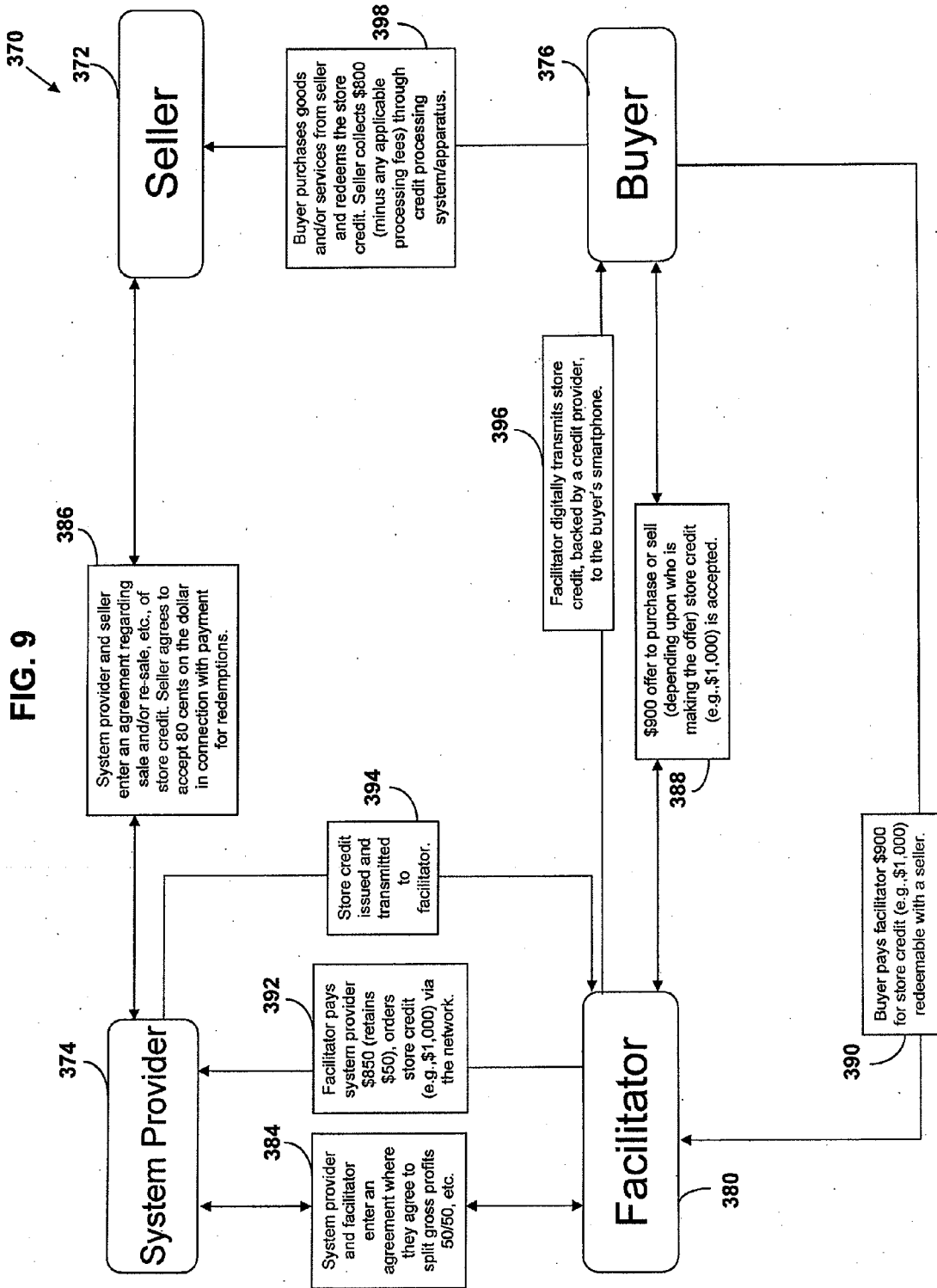


FIG. 6B









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FIG. 10

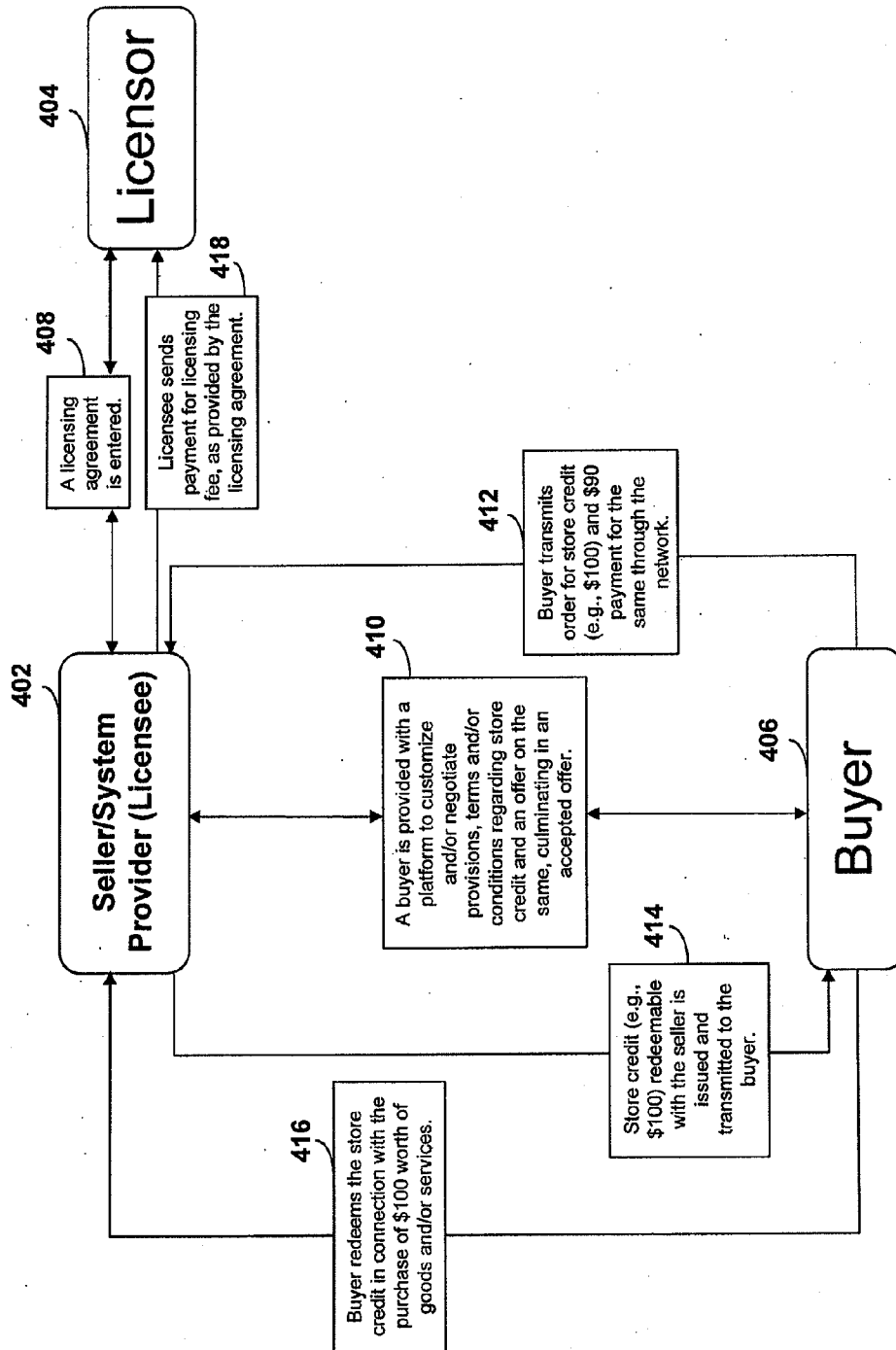
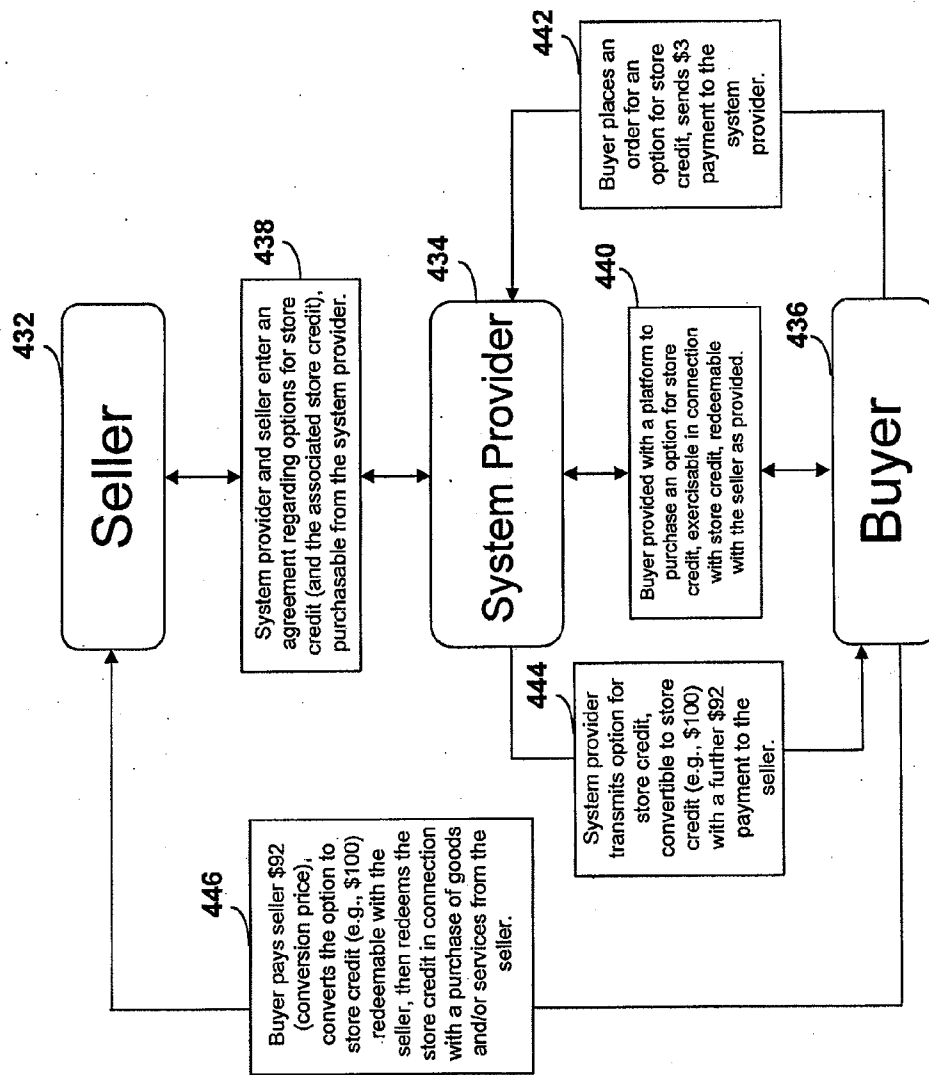


FIG. 11



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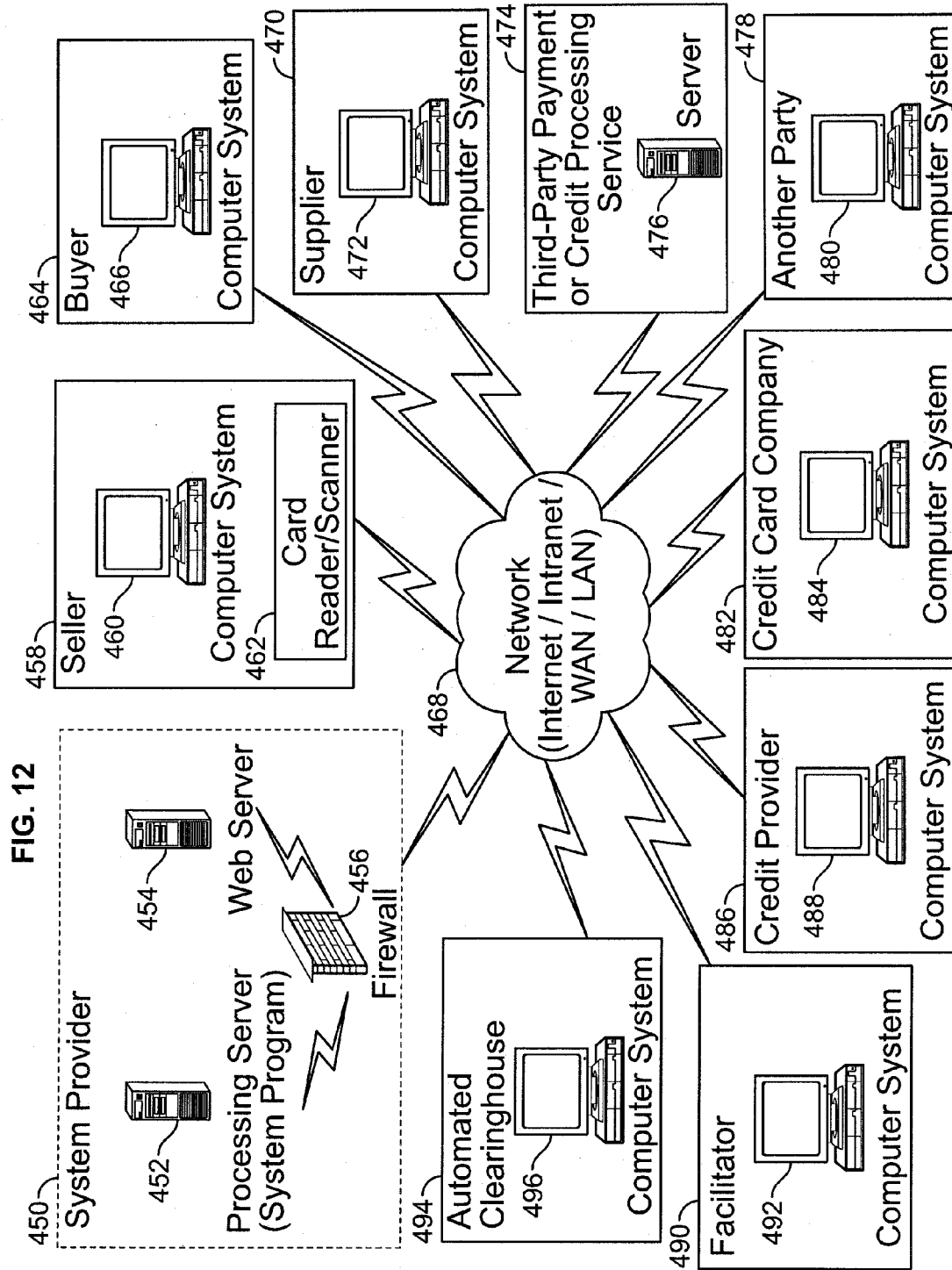
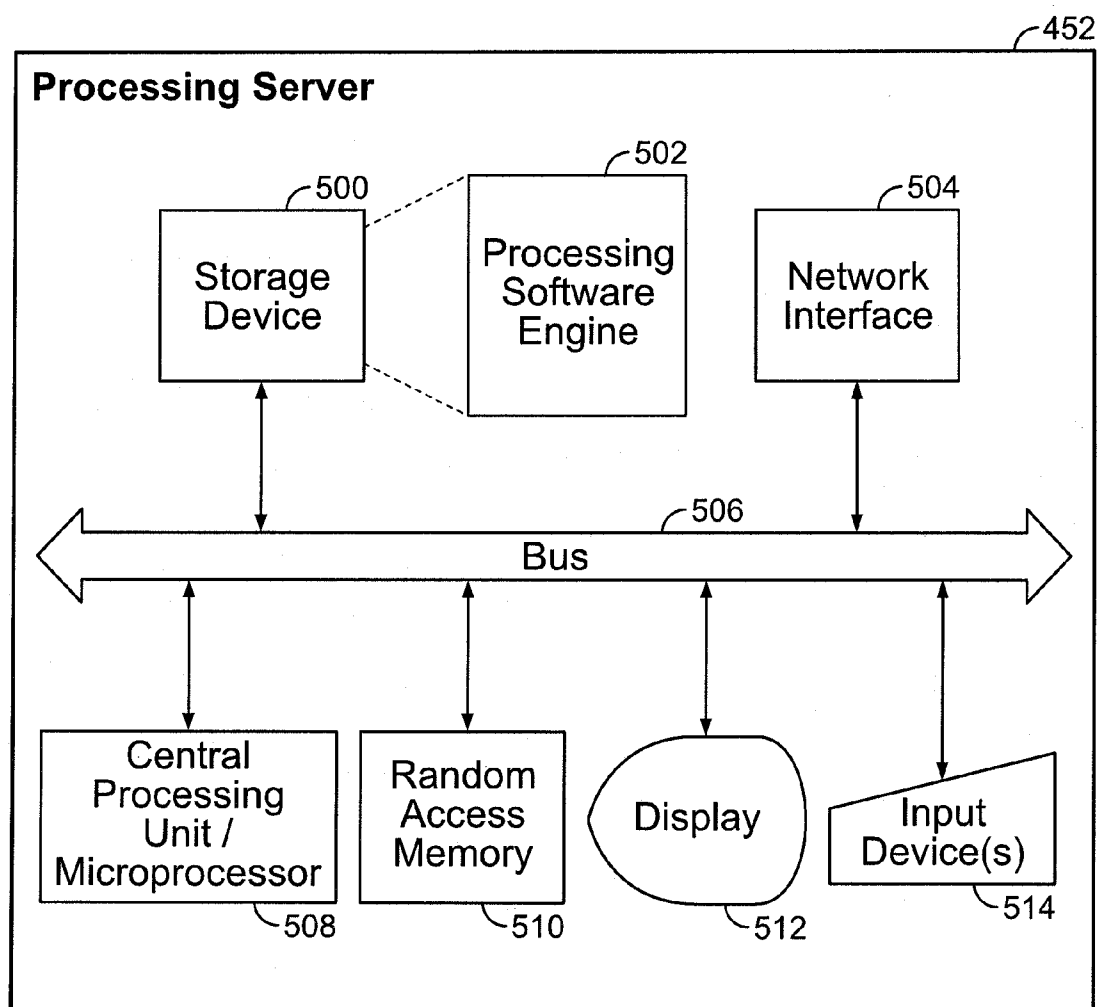


FIG. 13



STORE CREDIT AND SYSTEMS AND METHODS RELATING THERETO

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] The present application claims the benefit of priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 61/443,945, filed Feb. 17, 2011, and U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 61/513,482, filed Jul. 29, 2011, the entire contents of both of which are incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] 1. Field of the Invention

[0003] The present invention relates generally to the field of commerce. More specifically, the present invention relates to store credit and systems and methods therefor.

[0004] 2. Related Art

[0005] Store credit has been provided to customers for generations. Historically, businesses provided store credit to customers using a paper voucher; these were given to customers who returned product, in lieu of a cash refund. Gift certificates were brought to the mass market by big department stores in the mid-1930s. The gift card is a descendant of the paper gift certificate, and gained popularity in the mid 1990's. Credit card companies offer "gift cards" redeemable with their merchants. Gift cards are sometimes resold for less than the monetary amount they are connected with upon full redemption. Traditionally, store credit is paid for on a dollar for dollar basis (the purchase price of the store credit equals the monetary amount connected with the full redemption of the store credit), upon its initial issuance.

REFERENCE GUIDE

[0006] The following terms, as used with respect to embodiments of the present invention, encompass the following descriptions. Parties referenced by name herein, are referenced as per their role within a particular transaction.

[0007] Store Credit:

[0008] The term "store credit" as used herein and with respect to embodiments of the present invention encompasses store credit as is commonly known, and as set forth throughout this specification. The term "store credit" when used in a general sense could also encompass targeted store credit. The term "store credit" as used with respect to embodiments of the present invention does not necessarily require that the seller (redeemer) have an actual store. For example, a magician for hire, who only works on location (e.g., does house calls), could redeem store credit in connection with a payment for his or her services.

[0009] Seller:

[0010] The term "seller" as used herein and with respect to embodiments of the present invention, encompasses any person or entity that sells, has sold and/or could sell goods and/or services in direct connection with the redemption of store credit. As used herein, the term "seller" could encompass a seller computer system.

[0011] Buyer:

[0012] The term "buyer" as used herein and with respect to embodiments of the present invention, encompasses any persons or entities that purchase, have purchased and/or could purchase goods and/or services in direct connection with a redemption of store credit. As used herein the term "buyer" could encompass a buyer computer system.

[0013] Supplier:

[0014] The term "supplier" as used herein and with respect to embodiments of the present invention encompasses any persons or entities who provide a seller with goods and/or services, possibly, but not necessarily for resale. As used herein the term "supplier" could encompass a supplier computer system.

[0015] Alternative Party:

[0016] The term "alternative party" as used herein and with respect to embodiments of the present invention, encompasses any persons or entities other than a buyer. As used herein the term "alternative party" could encompass an alternative party computer system.

[0017] Targeted Store Credit:

[0018] The term "targeted store credit" as used herein and with respect to embodiments of the present invention refers to store credit created, issued and/or redeemable only in connection with specified goods and/or services. The term "targeted store credit" does not necessarily require that the seller (redeemer) has an actual store.

[0019] Provisions:

[0020] The term "provisions" as used herein and with respect to embodiments of the present invention is used in association with offers to purchase and/or sell store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit. For example, provisions could include: the number of store credits being offered by a seller, or the price of a store credit offered to a buyer.

[0021] Terms and/or Conditions:

[0022] The term "terms and/or conditions" as used herein and with respect to embodiments of the present invention, is used in association with store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, created and/or issued. For example, terms and/or conditions could include: the monetary amount provided in connection with the full redemption of the store credit, or the price that was paid for a store credit by a buyer.

[0023] And/or:

[0024] The term "and/or" as used herein and with respect to embodiments of the present invention is used to indicate that one or more of the stated cases may occur. For example, the sentence "He will eat cake, pie, and/or brownies" indicates that although the person may eat any of the three listed desserts, the choices are not exclusive; the person may eat one, two, or all three of the choices.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0025] The present invention provides systems and methods relating to store credit. A person or entity (a party) could use the system as a buyer, seller, supplier, facilitator, or other party. The invention provides an electronic platform (a website and its associated hardware and/or software, etc.) where buyers and/or alternative parties could customize and/or negotiate provisions on offers to buy and/or sell store credit, and/or where buyers and/or alternative parties could customize and/or negotiate terms and/or conditions associated with store credit. The invention also provides an electronic marketplace where buyers could order and/or purchase store credit, generally but not necessarily, for a lower monetary amount (or price) than the monetary amount associated with the full redemption of the store credit. The invention provides various implementations of the system or method where store credit could be provided to a buyer by a seller, a supplier, a system provider, another party, or combinations of the same.

An agreement or contract could require a seller to redeem store credit provided via the system upon presentation, even if the store credit is created and/or initially issued by a party other than the seller. Store credit could be provided in many forms.

[0026] Some embodiments of the invention also encompass targeted store credit and systems and methods related thereto. Targeted store credit is redeemable in connection with specified goods and/or services. Targeted store credit provides benefits to buyers, sellers, suppliers, and/or other parties. The system could provide access to a platform where provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with targeted store credit, redeemable with a seller, could be customized and/or negotiated by a buyer and/or an alternative party, as well as a platform where targeted store credit could be bought and/or sold. Coding associated with stock keeping units (SKUs), as well as supplier identification numbers, etc., could be utilized in conjunction with the use of targeted store credit. Targeted store credit could be purchased for a price that is less than the monetary amount associated with its full redemption. Targeted store credit could be provided by a seller, a supplier, a system provider, a facilitator, another party, or combinations of the same, and could be redeemed with seller(s) that are affiliated with the targeted store credit.

[0027] Some embodiments of the present invention encompass options for store credit. These options could provide a buyer with the right and/or opportunity to convert the options to store credit or the right and/or opportunity to purchase store credit with specified provisions, terms and/or conditions.

[0028] References to parties (e.g., a facilitator) herein, could encompass reference to the parties' computer system. Some embodiments of the invention include a system comprising at least one processing server (system provider) in communication with a seller regarding the offering of store credit to buyers, via a first communication link within the network, between at least one processing server and the seller. Some embodiments of the invention include a system comprising at least one processing server in communication with a buyer regarding the purchase of store credit, via a second communication link within the network, between at least one processing server and a buyer.

[0029] Some embodiments of the invention include a system comprising at least one processing server in communication with a seller via a first communication link within the network for establishing provisions on offers regarding store credit to buyers. A second communication link between at least one processing server and a buyer could be provided where, for example, buyers could customize and/or negotiate provisions on offers to purchase store credit, and then possibly purchase the same, or a second communication link between at least one processing server and a buyer could be provided where, for example, buyers could customize and/or negotiate terms and/or conditions associated with store credit, and then possibly purchase the same.

[0030] Some embodiments of the present invention include a system comprising at least one processing server in communication via a network, where, for example, store credit could be purchased for a price that is less than the monetary amount the store credit provides in connection with its full redemption, using communication links within the network between at least one processing server, a buyer and a seller.

[0031] Some embodiments of the present invention include a system comprising at least one processing server in communication via a network, where, for example, store credit

created and/or issued by a party other than the seller, yet still redeemable with the seller, could be provided, using communication links within the network, between at least one processing server, a buyer and a seller.

[0032] Some embodiments of the present invention include a system comprising at least one processing server in communication via a network, where, for example, targeted store credit could be provided using communication links within the network, between at least one processing server, a buyer and a seller.

[0033] Some embodiments of the invention include a system for providing options for store credit comprising at least one processing server in communication via a communication link within the network with a seller, relating to options for store credit, a second communication link between at least one processing server and a buyer for communication concerning the purchase of options for store credit. The system could further provide a means for buyers to exercise options for store credit through a communication link within the network between a buyer and at least one processing server.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0034] The foregoing features of the invention will be apparent from the following Detailed Description of the Invention, taken in connection with the accompanying drawings.

[0035] FIG. 1A is a diagram showing an example of an embodiment of the system, wherein store credit is sold to a buyer by a seller, through a system provider, and money paid by the buyer is transferred to the seller in connection with the redemption of the store credit;

[0036] FIG. 1B is a flowchart showing processing steps carried out by the system depicted in FIG. 1A;

[0037] FIG. 2 is a diagram showing an example of an embodiment of the system, where store credit redeemable with a seller is sold to a buyer by a system provider, and a rebate is provided to the buyer;

[0038] FIG. 3A is a diagram showing an example of an embodiment of the system, where store credit, redeemable with a seller, is sold to a buyer by a system provider;

[0039] FIG. 3B is a flowchart showing processing steps carried out by the system depicted in FIG. 3A;

[0040] FIG. 4 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, wherein store credit is sold to a buyer by a system provider/bank, and a seller is provided with payment via automatic processing in connection with a credit card company;

[0041] FIG. 5 is diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, where a system provider is offering targeted store credit, redeemable with a seller(s), in connection with goods and/or services, supplied to the seller, by a supplier;

[0042] FIGS. 6A and 6B are diagrams showing an example of another embodiment of the system, where a supplier offers targeted store credit, redeemable with a seller(s), in association with credit from a credit provider;

[0043] FIG. 7 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, wherein targeted store credit, redeemable with a seller, is offered to a buyer based on a joint offering;

[0044] FIG. 8 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, wherein a supplier offers targeted

store credit, redeemable with a seller, and the supplier's accounts receivable with the seller is utilized in connection with a payment;

[0045] FIG. 9 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system wherein a facilitator is involved in the selling of store credit;

[0046] FIG. 10 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system wherein systems and methods for providing store credit (and/or targeted store credit) are licensed to a seller;

[0047] FIG. 11 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system wherein options for store credit are bought, sold and utilized;

[0048] FIG. 12 is a diagram showing sample hardware components capable of implementing systems and/or methods of the present invention; and

[0049] FIG. 13 is a diagram showing hardware and software components of FIG. 12 in greater detail.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0050] The present invention provides systems and methods relating to store credit, which could be used by buyers and alternative parties. The systems and methods provided herein could be independently provided by multiple system providers. The term "store credit" when used in a general sense herein, also refers to targeted store credit. Store credit provided via the system is redeemable with an affiliated seller(s), but not necessarily provided by the affiliated seller(s), i.e. store credit could be redeemed and/or used in connection with a seller, who did not necessarily create and/or issue the store credit. Store credit provided via the system encompasses the terms and/or conditions associated with the store credit. Store credit provided via the system could be redeemed with a seller who has received no prior payment in connection with the store credit. Store credit could be purchased through the system at a price equal to, or less than, the monetary amount associated with the full redemption of the said store credit. As provided herein, when the term "store credit" is used in connection with a monetary example in the following manner, for example; "store credit (e.g., \$100)," it should be understood the monetary amount being referenced is the monetary amount the store credit is associated with upon full redemption. The term "store credit" could refer to store credit yet to be created and/or issued, provisions on offers to buy and/or sell the same could be customized and/or negotiated (i.e., the provisions of the deal). The term "store credit" could also refer to store credit that has been created and/or issued, and encompasses the terms and/or conditions attached to it (e.g., the terms and/or conditions associated with its redemption).

[0051] Store credit could provide savings to buyers over and above any other savings. Some discount offerings provided outside the system are not combinable; however, the implicit nature of store credit provides that it is accepted as payment for goods and/or services. A contractual agreement could reinforce that store credit, provided via the system, be honored as such upon valid presentation, regardless of its purchase price.

[0052] It should be understood that a system provider could choose to view, market and/or implement the system, differently than another system provider might choose to view, market and/or implement the system. For example, a system provider could implement the system as a mechanism to provide the market value (or market price) of store credit as accepted by parties, in the context of a marketplace or

exchange for the buying and selling of store credit. A different system provider may choose to implement the system as an apparatus that provides store credit at a "discount," with respect to the baseline monetary amount associated with the full redemption of the store credit. Additionally, a system provider could view, market and/or implement the system as an apparatus to provide store credit to buyers on a dollar for dollar basis (its price is equal to the monetary amount connected with its full redemption) and where additional or bonus store credit could be awarded or earned by buyers, at no additional cost.

[0053] Different parties could also have different perspectives as to what the system provides. For example, it would make sense for a seller using the system to offer store credit "at a discount," yet a buyer who purchases the same, may feel that the purchase was made at nothing more than fair market value.

[0054] Store credit provided in conjunction with or via the system, could be created and/or initially issued by a seller, or a party other than a seller, yet still redeemable with the seller. Store credit could be initially issued by an alternative party (e.g., a seller), and made available for resale, re-issuance and/or further transfer, etc., to another party (e.g., a system provider), via the system. Store credit, as used herein, could initially be issued in one form and then transformed to another form. For example, a seller could issue store credit to a system provider and allow the system provider to re-brand, or co-brand the store credit, or allow the system provider to attach further terms and/or conditions to the store credit (e.g., that fall within parameters previously authorized by the seller). Embodiments of the invention can provide various implementations of the systems and/or methods. For example, in many embodiments store credit could be provided to a buyer by a seller, a supplier, a system provider, another party, or combinations of the same.

[0055] As will be discussed, a system provider could comprise a processing server, web server, software, and hardware, etc. for facilitating the systems and methods provided herein, such as that described in connection with FIGS. 12 and 13, for example.

[0056] Embodiments of the invention could be provided in connection with a website, accessible via the Internet (or another network), where buyers could customize and/or negotiate provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit. Some embodiments of the invention provide an electronic marketplace or exchange where store credit could be bought and sold, generally but not necessarily, for a price less than the monetary amount that the store credit is associated with in connection with its full redemption.

[0057] A system provider could require buyers and alternative parties such as sellers to enter agreements regarding use of the system, store credit and/or options for store credit. However, agreements and/or contracts may not be required or even needed in embodiments of the system. For example, an agreement is not necessary if and/or when a system provider purchases and pays for store credit from a seller, and then re-sells the same to a buyer. Furthermore, for example, a buyer could purchase store credit from an alternative party via the system without an agreement being necessary.

[0058] Agreements could be provided in various ways, including but not limited to, a formal printed contract, an electronically implemented contract, a click through agreement, as a condition of issuance, as part of rules and regulations, etc. Agreements and/or contracts could provide rules

and regulations regarding use of the system in general, or rules and regulations regarding elements within and/or provided via the system. Contracts and/or agreements could bind parties to perform obligations relating to the present invention. Contracts and/or agreements between one party and another party could provide the other party with consent, authorization, rights, etc. For example, a contract between a system provider and a seller could grant the system provider with the right to create issue and/or transfer store credit which is redeemable with the seller. Alternatively, for example, a contract between a system provider and a seller could grant the system provider with the right to resell, transfer, and/or transform, etc., store credit initially provided by the seller. Contracts and/or agreements could obligate parties towards one another, as well as obligate parties with respect to the store credit itself. For example, a contract could obligate a seller to accept store credit provided to a buyer by a system provider, as if it was issued by the seller without use of the system. Contracts and/or agreements could also provide authorization to a party for performance or future performance (possibly contingent upon various factors). For example, a contract between a seller and a system provider could authorize the system provider to negotiate with a buyer, on behalf of the seller, regarding terms and/or conditions associated with store credit, offered to the buyer by the seller. Alternatively, for example, a seller could be authorized by a system provider, to negotiate terms and/or conditions associated with store credit, with a buyer, on behalf of the system provider. Such negotiation by the seller could be automated.

[0059] Contracts and/or agreements could generally provide a basis of understanding between parties, and could serve as a backdrop when decisions are made by buyers and/or alternative parties. The content of the agreements and/or contracts could dictate the way the present invention is implemented. These agreements and/or contracts could be entered into as a party enrolls with or joins the system, and/or could be entered into at a subsequent time. For the purposes of this document, some of these contracts and/or agreements could be referred to as enrollment contracts.

[0060] Furthermore, one contract and/or agreement could differ from another contract and/or agreement. For example, a contract between a system provider and a furniture manufacturer (supplier) may differ from a contract between the system provider and a bolt manufacturer (supplier). Or, a contract between a system provider and an individual, who may use the system in connection with the purchase of groceries, might differ from a contract between the system provider and a bakery, which might use the system in connection with the purchase of sugar. Contracts provided to buyers, for example, could differ from contracts provided to alternative parties. Contracts and/or agreements could differ from industry to industry, sector to sector, business to business, person to person and/or transaction to transaction.

[0061] It is contemplated that various agreements can be provided in connection with any of the parties. For example, regarding agreements with sellers, agreements and/or contracts could be entered into between a seller and a system provider (and/or another party), where the seller gives permission to the system provider (and/or another party), to create, issue, sell, re-sell, distribute, etc., store credit, which can be redeemed with the seller. Agreements and/or contracts between a system provider and a seller, for example, could provide an understanding that store credit provided via the system, is in fact store credit (or something tantamount) as it

relates to the seller, i.e. as if it was created and/or issued by the seller in a conventional manner. Agreements and/or contracts could be entered into between a seller and a system provider (and/or another party) where, for example, the seller could grant permission and/or authorize the system provider (and/or another party) to create store credit and/or issue store credit on behalf of the seller, which is redeemable with the seller. Agreements and/or contracts could be entered into between a seller and a system provider (and/or another party), where, for example, the seller authorizes parties that offer credit within or connected to the system, to transform, rename, etc., such credit, to store credit, redeemable with the seller. Agreements and/or contracts could be entered into between a seller, and a system provider (and/or another party), where the seller authorizes parties within or connected to the system to brand, re-brand, co-brand, etc., store credit redeemable with the seller.

[0062] Some embodiments of the system include the participation of third party credit lenders (e.g., banks), credit card companies, and/or credit processing services. The foregoing parties can be referenced as credit providers, and agreements and/or contracts between credit providers, and other parties (e.g., system providers, sellers, suppliers, etc.) could provide an understanding that credit provided via a credit provider, to another party within the system, could be transformed, renamed, etc., to store credit. Agreements and/or contracts could also provide an understanding that store credit provided in conjunction with credit from a credit provider, could be provided in conjunction with, or on behalf of, other parties (e.g., system providers, suppliers, sellers, etc.), via the system. Agreements and/or contracts could be entered into between credit providers, and other parties (e.g., system providers, sellers, suppliers, etc.), where the credit provider consents to the branding, re-branding, co-branding, etc., of store credit, provided in conjunction with credit from the credit provider. Agreements and/or contracts between credit providers, sellers, system providers and other parties, could provide an understanding that credit initially provided within the system to a party by a credit provider, could in fact be store credit (or something tantamount), upon its initial issuance within the system.

[0063] Agreements and/or contracts could provide that money transferred to a party on behalf of a different party could be held or distributed, used to finance store credit, or as otherwise provided. For example, a contract could stipulate that payment for targeted store credit provided to a buyer by a supplier be sent to the system provider. The supplier could further authorize the system provider to use the aforementioned payment in connection with a separate payment to the seller for the redemption of the targeted store credit.

[0064] Agreements and/or contracts could encompass multiple transactions, or could be entered into for individual transactions. Contracts are not a necessity in order for embodiments of the system to function; however, it is important that store credit provided in conjunction with or via the system is honored by the affiliated sellers upon presentation.

[0065] A system provider could choose to implement the system in a number of ways. A platform could be provided in the form of an exchange where offers to buy and/or sell store credit could be posted on an open forum similarly to how, for example, company stock is traded on a stock exchange, perhaps based upon the last price paid for a similar offering, or based upon an initial offer, etc. Processes associated with this embodiment, could be communicated via a website incorpo-

rating, for example, a user interface screen with a point and click interface, use of a communication link within a network, between at least one processing server and an alternative party, and/or use of a second communication link within the network, between at least one processing server and a buyer.

[0066] A platform could also be provided in the form of an auction, where store credit is sold to the highest bidder. This embodiment could provide a platform where alternative parties offer store credit to buyers (bidders). These auctions could include reserve bids by alternative parties, or a maximum allowable bids (e.g., 90% of the monetary amount associated with the full redemption of the offered store credit). Time or quantity limits could dictate the closing of the bidding process for each store credit offered, and could be digitally displayed on the platform. Processes associated with this embodiment could also be communicated using a communication link within the network between at least one processing server and an alternative party, and a second communication link between at least one processing server and the buyer.

[0067] Alternative parties could provide store credit to buyers through the system. Additionally alternative parties (e.g., a seller) could provide store credit to other parties (e.g., a system provider) for optional conversion, transfer, sale, resale, etc., to a buyer. Such store credit could be bought and/or sold at prices that are less than, or equal to, the monetary amount associated in connection with the full redemption of the store credit. For example, store credit redeemable in connection with the purchase of \$5,000 worth of goods and/or services (including taxes, etc.), could be purchased for \$4,500. Either a buyer or an alternative party could initiate an offer. Store credit could be created, transferred, issued, bought and/or sold, etc., by sellers and/or alternative parties other than sellers.

[0068] The system could provide an electronic platform (e.g., a website and its associated hardware and/or software, etc.) where a buyer and/or an alternative party could customize and/or negotiate provisions associated with offers to buy and/or sell store credit, targeted store credit and options for store credit, as well as a platform to transmit data and/or receive transmissions regarding the same. Offers could be limited to a total quantity, a total quantity per supplier, by time, or as otherwise specified. For example, a seller could offer one thousand store credits to buyers that are limited to one purchase per buyer. Additionally, parameters could be established regarding provisions associated with offers to buy and/or sell store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit via the platform. For example, a seller and a system provider could agree that the monetary amount provided in connection with the full redemption of store credit to be offered by the system provider could be limited to a maximum of \$500 (or particular stated monetary amount).

[0069] As previously mentioned, examples of terms and/or conditions could include, but are not limited to, the price paid for the store credit, the monetary amount connected with the full redemption of the store credit, the expiration date of the store credit, etc. Store credit could be redeemed piecemeal via the system, where the monetary amount provided to the seller upon, or after, a redemption, is provided in the same proportion as the monetary amount provided in connection with a full redemption, versus the monetary amount to be received by the seller upon, or after, a full redemption.

[0070] Using the platform, a buyer could essentially craft, choose and/or propose, etc., provisions, terms and/or conditions. For example, a buyer could customize the monetary

amount provided in connection with the full redemption of a store credit, as well as a price the buyer would be willing to pay for it. A buyer could offer to purchase the affiliated store credit, or request an offer from an alternative party who has the right to sell the affiliated store credit. Obligations associated with the use of the platform could be described and provided within contracts and/or agreements, or conveyed otherwise. A reviewable template of the agreed upon provisions, terms and/or conditions could also be provided to a buyer and/or an alternative party prior to acceptance.

[0071] The platform could include a point and click interface containing choices regarding provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, allowing buyers to choose the same. The platform could also provide alternative parties with a point and click interface containing choices regarding provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit. Contracts and/or other factors could limit the amount of choices buyers and/or alternative parties might be provided with while customizing and/or negotiating such provisions, terms and/or conditions, or contracts and/or other factors could enhance the selection of choices, perhaps due to unique characteristics of a particular industry, or laws governing particular countries and/or states.

[0072] The system provider could provide guidelines, including formulas and/or ratios to help buyers customize offers, for example, the system provider could inform buyers that a particular seller has recently accepted offers on store credit, based on a 10 to 8 store credit/price ratio. Provided with this knowledge, a buyer could offer \$800 to a seller, for store credit redeemable in connection with the purchase of \$1,000 worth of goods and/or services from the seller.

[0073] Alternatively, the platform could provide a mechanism for negotiation where alternative parties could post offers to sell store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, and/or where buyers could provide counter offers, reject offers and/or counter offers, request offers and/or better offers, or accept offers and/or counter offers, regarding the same. Alternatively, buyers could initially customize and/or post offers to buy store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, and alternative parties could provide counter offers, reject offers and/or counter offers, request offers and/or better offers, or accept offers and/or counter offers, regarding the same. In brief, the system could provide a platform for negotiating provisions, terms and/or conditions relating to store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, as well as a platform for providing offers to buy or sell the same.

[0074] The system could provide a buyer and/or an alternative party with choices provided by and/or approved by the system provider. Contracts could state that providing an offer that is accepted also constitutes acceptance by the offering party, and the issuance of store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, could be contingent upon prior acceptance by a party or parties.

[0075] Upon acceptance of an offer, data (including coded data) regarding the accepted offer could be transmitted (e.g., e-mailed) by the system provider, to the buyer and/or alternative parties. A buyer could customize and/or negotiate the provisions of an offer relating to the purchase or sale of store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit. Alternatively, a buyer could customize and/or negotiate the terms and/or conditions associated with store credit, targeted

store credit and/or options for store credit. A buyer could then place an order to purchase the same, or request an offer from an alternative party to sell the same. The buyer could send payment via various methods to the system provider or another party (depending upon how the system is implemented) within what could be a pre-agreed to period of time. Payment could be made by cash, credit card, debit card, check, wire, etc. Alternatively, a buyer could place an order and send payment contemporaneously using an automated clearinghouse or other electronic payment service provided by or in conjunction with the system. For any given transaction, previous agreements between a system provider and another party could allow for monies received by the system provider on behalf of the other party, to be held, for example, until the associated store credit is redeemed, or as otherwise provided by agreement. Disbursement of unredeemed store credit could also be determined by agreement, as the system could provide a means for dispersing unredeemed funds to sellers and/or parties other than sellers.

[0076] Store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, could be provided to a buyer in any descriptive and/or identifiable form, including, but not limited to, a card (e.g., plastic) incorporating a data storing apparatus (e.g., a magnetic strip), a coded electronic transfer, a bar coded paper certificate or voucher, a coded wireless digital transfer and/or digital cash (token), etc. Store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, could be issued in conjunction with credit providers (as previously described). Store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, could be issued and/or backed in conjunction with money, credit and/or services provided by credit providers. Processing systems currently in use could be utilized to process store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, or modified to do so. Upon receipt of store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, provided via the system, a buyer could sell or gift the same to another buyer, as store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, may be transferable.

[0077] Buyers, sellers, suppliers and other parties could include but are not limited to: manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, distributors, agents, refiners, other business entities, individuals, insurance service providers, educational service providers, financial service providers, legal service providers, healthcare service providers, any other service providers, government entities, non-profit entities, etc.

[0078] It is important to note that a person or entity could use the system as a buyer, seller, supplier and/or another party. For example, a baker of bread could use the system as a seller, in connection with the redemption of store credit presented to the baker by an individual (a buyer) who purchases bread directly from the bakery. The same baker could also use the system (as a supplier) to offer targeted store credit (targeted to the baker's brand of bread) to buyers, which is redeemable in connection with a purchase of the baker's brand of bread at a supermarket (a seller). Alternatively, the same baker could use the system as a buyer to purchase store credit for use with a flower mill (a seller), in connection with a purchase of flower. Thus, the same person or entity could be one type of party in one transaction, and another type of party in another transaction. Parties herein referenced by name (e.g., buyer, seller, etc.), are referenced as per their role within a particular transaction.

[0079] In the various embodiments and/or examples of embodiments of the system depicted and described herein,

there are numerous options and features discussed with respect to one or more embodiment and/or examples of embodiments which could be utilized in connection with other embodiments and/or examples of embodiments as would be understood by one having ordinary skill in the art. For example, systems and/or methods used to provide store credit to buyers could also be used to provide options for store credit to buyers. Alternatively, for example, as described in the embodiment depicted in FIG. 8, the supplier 318 is providing the targeted store credit to the buyer 316, however, the targeted store credit could be provided to the buyer 316, by the supplier 318, the seller 312, the system provider 314, or various combinations of these parties.

[0080] It should also be understood that the examples of embodiments of the systems and/or methods depicted and/or described herein may be provided as portions of larger systems and/or methods. Furthermore, while many of the Figures show processing steps which are numbered in order, it should be pointed out that the order in which the steps are performed may not necessarily be relevant.

[0081] Embodiments of the present invention are discussed in detail below in connection with FIGS. 1-13. Examples of the embodiments of the invention depicted within the figures and described herein, including numerical and/or monetary examples, are for illustrative purposes, and do not limit the scope of the invention. It will be understood that the embodiments of the present invention described herein are merely exemplary and that a person skilled in the art may make variations and modifications without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. All such variations and modifications, including those discussed above, are intended to be included within the scope of the invention. Furthermore, various embodiments and/or implementations of the system, could be could be simultaneously provided through a single website and/or through multiple websites, as would be understood by one having ordinary skill in the art.

[0082] FIG. 1A is a diagram showing an example of one embodiment of the system, indicated generally at 10, wherein store credit is sold to a buyer 16 by a seller 12, through a system provider 14. In order to use the system, a party could be required to enter into an enrollment contract. As indicated by block 18, the seller 12 and the system provider 14 have entered such an agreement, with regard to use of the system and obligations associated with such.

[0083] As indicated by blocks 19 and 20, the buyer 16 and the seller 12 are provided with access to a platform to communicate offers and the acceptance of such, relating to store credit. As further indicated by block 20, the platform could be used to customize and/or negotiate provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit. This process could entail the posting of an offer by the buyer 16 to purchase the associated store credit, or the buyer 16 could request an offer from the seller 12 on the same. Furthermore, the system provider 14 could be authorized to negotiate provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit on the seller's 12 behalf. A software program designed for negotiation could be used, where sellers could provide authorization to a system provider, to post or accept offers based on parameters acceptable to the seller, regarding provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit. Alternatively, sellers could utilize negotiation software provided via the system, to negotiate directly with buyers, without the system provider's direct involvement in the negotiation. Offers provided via negotiation could provide more favorable provi-

sions, terms and/or conditions than a standard posted offer and negotiation performed by an automated software program could be less expensive than manual negotiation. As previously mentioned, alternative parties any buyers can post offers, or request offers, on the platform. The platform could also provide parties with a means to counteroffer. The system could also provide parties with a platform to review proposed provisions, terms and/or conditions relating to store credit prior to an offer and/or acceptance of an offer.

[0084] Payment for store credit could be required before the store credit is provided, as is the case depicted in FIG. 1A. The system could also notify buyers and sellers of accepted offers and obligations related to such. As shown in block 22, an electronic order for the associated store credit could be placed, and payment (e.g., \$90) could be sent electronically through the network to the system provider 14, for further transfer to the seller 12, as agreed.

[0085] Upon receipt of payment, as depicted in block 24, the system provider 14, could create the store credit and issue it to the buyer 16, as previously authorized by the seller (e.g., via the enrollment contract 18). Store credit sent to a buyer's hard drive and/or mobile device is less likely to be lost than a gift certificate or gift card. After the store credit has been conveyed to the buyer 16, the store credit could be redeemed upon presentation to the seller 12, in connection with a purchase (e.g., \$100 worth) of goods and/or services, as shown in block 26. Full redemption of store credit could be attained in connection with one or multiple purchases.

[0086] Upon redemption of the store credit, data could be transmitted to the system provider 14 via the network, indicating the details of the redemption, as indicated by block 28. As per block 30, payment (e.g., \$88) could be forwarded to the seller 12, and a commission (e.g., \$2) could be retained by the system provider 14, which the seller 12 has authorized via a previous agreement (e.g., a click through agreement). Alternatively, payment to sellers could occur prior to a store credit redemption.

[0087] It is of note that a commission could be a fixed dollar value, a percentage of the store credit purchase price, a percentage of the monetary amount associated with a full store credit redemption, etc. A commission or fee could be charged to a buyer, a seller, or another party, and/or could be charged to, or divided between, various parties, or as otherwise agreed and/or provided. Other provisions, terms and/or conditions (e.g., which party or parties receive unredeemed funds) could also be agreed to by the associated parties.

[0088] FIG. 1B is a flowchart showing processing steps carried out in the example of the embodiment depicted in FIG. 1A, indicated generally at 40. As indicated in step 42, the seller and system provider can enter an agreement regarding use of the system. Then, in step 44, the buyer is provided with a platform to customize and/or negotiate provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit culminating in an accepted offer on the store credit. Upon acceptance, step 46 occurs, wherein the buyer sends payment (e.g., \$90) for the store credit through the system provider, for further transfer to the seller. As described in step 48, the system provider issues and transmits the store credit to the buyer, on behalf of the seller. The store credit could then be redeemed in connection with a purchase of goods and/or services, as indicated by step 50. In step 52, data regarding the details of the store credit redemption is transmitted from the point of redemption to the system provider. Finally, as indicated by step 54, the system

provider retains a commission (e.g., \$2) and forwards the balance of funds paid by the buyer (e.g., \$88) to the seller, as previously authorized.

[0089] FIG. 2 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, indicated generally at 60, wherein store credit sold to a buyer 66 by a system provider 64, is redeemable with a seller 62, and a rebate is provided to the buyer 66. It is important to note that the rebate provided in this example, could also be provided in other embodiments as e.g., incentive (or a reward) associated with a successful redemption, or a shared commission (e.g., where the seller is offering the store credit), etc. Store credit provided via the system could be customized and/or provided as non-transferable (optionally with the exception of transferring the store credit to, or through, the system provider), and identification could be required upon redemption. This feature could protect buyers against theft and/or fraud. Additionally, buyers could be provided with a means to transfer such store credit to another buyer through the system provider 64 (including a means of changing rebate destinations).

[0090] As shown by blocks 68a-68b, the seller 62 and the buyer 66 could enter enrollment contracts with the system provider 64; this could be a requirement of the system provider 64. A platform could be provided within the system where the seller 62 and the system provider 64 could agree to provisions, terms and/or conditions regarding store credit, redeemable with the seller 62. As provided by block 70a, the seller 62 could authorize the system provider 64 to issue store credit to the buyer 66, provided that the system provider 64 pays the seller 62 a percentage (e.g., ninety six percent) of the monetary amount associated with the redemption of the store credit.

[0091] The system provides an intermediary (the system provider 64) which allows the buyer 66 to use the store credit anonymously. This anonymity could preserve the buyer's 66 leverage to negotiate discounts on goods and/or services with the seller 62.

[0092] The system could provide numerous benefits to sellers and suppliers, as the system could enable parties other than a seller, to offer store-wide store credit, redeemable with the seller. For example, an automobile manufacturer (a supplier) could offer buyers store-wide store credit, redeemable in connection with the purchase (e.g., \$5,000 worth) of goods and/or services with any of the manufacturer's dealerships (or specified dealerships). Such store credit could be offered at any price (e.g., \$4,000). An offer such as this could help promote the automobile manufacturer's products, ultimately resulting in more sales for the manufacturer. It could also benefit the dealerships (sellers) in that the potential savings provided, could incentivize buyers to purchase the dealership's goods and/or services, yet the savings provided to buyers does not necessarily effect the dealership's profit margins.

[0093] As mentioned earlier, buyers could be provided with a platform to customize provisions, terms and/or conditions relating to store credit, redeemable with an affiliated seller(s). Or, buyers and alternative parties could use the platform to negotiate provisions, terms and/or conditions regarding store credit, redeemable with an affiliated seller(s). As depicted in block 70b of the present example, a buyer 66 has accepted the posted offer of the system provider 64, and has chosen not to counter offer, or request a better offer, perhaps because the posted offer was about to expire, or was the last of a limited

offering. In any case, as illustrated, an offer to purchase a \$50,000 store credit, plus a \$1,000 rebate on the store credit, was accepted for \$50,000.

[0094] Contingent upon the offer being accepted, the system provider **64**, as per a previous agreement, could be required to honor the accepted offer for a stated and pre-agreed to time period, or as otherwise provided and/or agreed to. Store credit could be created and held for a pre-agreed to period of time, or until payment is received, or created and transferred after payment is received, or as otherwise provided.

[0095] As described in block **72**, the buyer **66** could send a \$50,000 payment to the system provider **64**, for store credit fully redeemable in connection with the purchase of \$50,000 worth (including any taxes, etc.) of goods and/or services from the affiliated seller **62**.

[0096] As shown in block **74**, data transmitted from the system provider **64** to the seller **62** could notify the seller **62** of the store credit purchase and/or indicate the seller's obligations regarding the same. Information regarding the store credit purchase could also be automatically generated and transmitted to the buyer **66**. Also, as shown in block **74**, the system could be authorized and programmed to create vouchers on behalf of the seller **62**, representing obligations previously agreed to by the seller **62**. As provided by the example, a \$2,000 voucher is issued to the system provider **64** on behalf of the seller **62** and is available for use in conjunction with a \$48,000 payment, in connection with a \$50,000 store credit redemption.

[0097] As shown in block **76**, after the buyer's payment is received and entered into the system, the store credit, redeemable as provided, is conveyed to the buyer, along with a rebate voucher (e.g., \$1,000) which could be provided in various forms (e.g., a paper voucher, a digitally provided voucher, etc.). As provided by the example and depicted by FIG. **2**, the rebate voucher is redeemable with the system provider **64**, as previously agreed.

[0098] The store credit could be redeemed in connection with a purchase of goods and/or services from the seller **62**, as shown by block **78**. Upon redemption, data could be transmitted to the system provider **64** detailing the redemption and/or indicating further obligations. Information regarding the cost of store credit to buyers could be withheld from sellers indefinitely, or for a period of time (perhaps depending upon which party is providing the store credit to the buyer) in order to prevent unscrupulous sellers from trying to renegotiate deals and/or to avoid any discomfort between buyers and sellers.

[0099] As shown in block **80**, after the store credit has been redeemed, data could be transmitted to the system provider **64** from the seller **62** indicating the amount of money owed to the seller **62** (e.g., \$48,000), plus or minus any applicable fees owed to either party as per any previous agreements. As shown in block **82**, the system provider **64** pays the seller **62** the \$48,000 due the seller **62** and simultaneously provides the aforementioned \$2,000 voucher (this could be done electronically or otherwise). The system provider **64** could then optionally request the rebate voucher, wait for the rebate voucher to be presented, or preemptively send the \$1,000 provided by the rebate to the buyer **66**, as shown in block **84**. Again, payment could be made via various methods.

[0100] FIG. **3A** is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, indicated generally at **90**, wherein store credit redeemable with a seller **92**, is sold to a buyer **96**

by a system provider **94**, and the monetary amount paid to the seller upon or after redemption is greater than the monetary amount paid by the buyer **96** for the store credit.

[0101] As shown by blocks **98a-98b**, the seller **92** and the buyer **96** could enter into enrollment contracts with the system provider **94**. As discussed above, enrollment contracts **98a-98b** could obligate parties towards one another, as well as towards the store credit itself. For example, the seller enrollment contract **98a** could obligate the seller **92** to accept store credit provided to a buyer **96**, by the system provider **94**, as if it was issued by the seller **92** without use of the system.

[0102] As indicated by block **100a**, the system could be set up where the seller **92** and the system provider **94** agree to parameters regarding the offering of store credit, redeemable with the seller **92**. For example, the seller **92** and the system provider **94** could agree to the following: the seller **92** will accept payment equaling no less than, ninety percent of the monetary amount connected with a store credit redemption. Also, the system provider **94** and seller **92** could agree that, upon or after, a store credit redemption, the system provider **94** will owe the seller **92** a monetary amount equaling, e.g., two percent more than the monetary amount a buyer is able to purchase the affiliated store credit for.

[0103] Additionally, an agreement could authorize the seller **92** to negotiate provisions, terms and/or conditions regarding store credit with buyers, on behalf of the system provider **94**. As per FIG. **3A**, the seller **92** and the system provider **94** could agree that the monetary amount provided to the system provider **94** (e.g., \$100) by the buyer **96**, as payment for store credit, the seller **92** agrees to accept, e.g., two percent more (\$102) as payment from the system provider **94**, in connection with the store credit redemption. The agreed upon monetary amount provided to a seller could also be equal to, or less than the amount the store credit is associated with upon its redemption.

[0104] As further depicted in FIG. **3A**, the system provider **94** has authorized the seller **92** to negotiate (e.g., accept an offer, reject an offer, make a counter offer, etc.) on the system provider's **94** behalf. A platform could be provided where the system provider **94** and the seller **92** can agree that the system provider **94** will pay the seller **92**, e.g., 102% of the buyer's purchase price of the store credit upon or after redemption. Accordingly, the system provider **94** only benefits if the store credit is not redeemed. As provided herein the seller **92** agrees to accept the same amount that the system provider **94** is charging the buyer **96**, plus two percent in connection with a redemption. Thus, the seller **92** is content to sell \$110 worth of goods and/or services, for what will amount to a \$102 payment.

[0105] Prior to an offering or acceptance of an offer, a platform could be provided to parties where parameters regarding provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit and offers therefor, could be agreed to. Such a platform is provided to a seller **92** and a system provider **94**, as depicted in block **100a**. Upon agreement, the system provider **94** could create, issue and/or sell store credit knowing that the seller **92** has committed to redeem the store credit upon a valid presentation. Alternatively, a system provider could consign or purchase store credit issued by a seller, and then sell or re-sell it in its original form or in an authorized transformed version (e.g., rebranded), as provided by agreement.

[0106] As depicted in block **100b**, a platform for customization, negotiation, and acceptance can be accessed by the

buyer **96** and the system provider **94**. The platform could be provided as an interactive website, and associated hardware and software could implement the functionality of the website. Upon acceptance of an offer, a buyer **96** could pay the system provider **94** for the store credit, as shown in block **102**. Payment could be provided electronically through the network and automatically entered within the system. As shown in block **104**, data could be transmitted from the system provider **94** to the seller **92**, which could notify the seller **92** of the issuance of store credit and any associated obligations relating thereto. Similar data could also be transmitted to the buyer **96**.

[0107] The store credit could be conveyed in various forms, such as but not limited to, forwarding a magnetically-encoded card, a coded electronic transmission, an e-card, a printed bar-coded document, etc. The form of the store credit could also include branding by the system provider **94**, or co-branding by the system provider **94**, the seller **92** and/or other parties. As indicated by block **106**, the system could be programmed to automatically issue and transmit the store credit to the buyer **96**.

[0108] After the store credit has been conveyed to the buyer **96**, the buyer **96** could redeem the store credit in connection with a purchase of goods and/or services with the affiliated seller **92**, as shown in block **108**. Depending in part on its form, the store credit could be redeemed using various methods, e.g., by swiping a magnetically-encoded card in a credit processing machine/system, utilizing bar-codes and scanners for data entry at the point of sale, etc. Store credit provided by, though, or in conjunction with the system, could also be redeemed on-line as an online purchase is being made, or by phone with use of numerical and/or alphabetical identification, etc.

[0109] As shown in block **110**, upon redemption of the store credit, data could be automatically transmitted to the system provider **94** from the point of redemption, indicating the monetary amount owed to the seller **92** (e.g., \$102), as previously agreed between the seller **92** and the system provider **94**. As shown in block **112**, the system provider **94** could electronically transfer payment (e.g., \$102) to the seller **92**.

[0110] As provided in FIG. 3A, the seller **92** has sold \$110 worth of merchandise, and has received a \$102 payment. The buyer **96** has saved \$10. The system provider **92** has lost \$2, however, had the store credit not been redeemed and/or if the store credit expired, the system provider **94** could have conceivably retained the \$100 payment from the buyer **96**.

[0111] FIG. 3B is a flowchart showing processing steps indicated generally at **120**, carried out in the example of the embodiment shown in FIG. 3A. Beginning in step **122**, the buyer and seller could enter enrollment contracts with the system provider. In step **124**, the buyer engages in customization and/or negotiation of provisions, terms and/or conditions regarding store credit, culminating in an accepted offer. Subsequently, step **126** occurs, wherein the buyer pays the system provider for store credit (e.g., the buyer pays the system provider \$100 for store credit redeemable in connection with the purchase of \$110 worth of goods and/or services from the seller). In step **128**, data could be transmitted to the seller, notifying the seller of the issuance of store credit and any associated obligations. In step **130**, the system provider could issue and transmit the store credit to the buyer in any of the ways previously discussed. Then, in step **132**, the buyer redeems the store credit with the seller in connection with a purchase of goods and/or services. In step **134**, data could be

provided to the system provider indicating the amount of money owed to the seller. Finally, in step **136**, the system provider could pay the seller the monetary amount due the seller.

[0112] FIG. 4 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, indicated generally at **140**, wherein store credit is sold to a buyer **146** by a seller **142**, and a credit card company is utilized. As depicted in block **150**, a seller **142** and a credit card company **148** have a contractually bound relationship (or they form one) where the seller **142** has agreed to accept credit cards (provided by or in conjunction with the credit card company **148**) as a method of payment. As provided by this example, the system provider could be a bank and as indicated by block **152**, the system provider/bank **144** and the credit card company **148** form a relationship where the system provider/bank **144** provides store credit in conjunction with the credit card company **148**.

[0113] As depicted in block **154**, the system provider/bank **144** provides banking services to the buyer **146** and, for example, has a balance of \$10,000 in an account. A platform for customization, negotiation, and acceptance (as previously discussed) is provided to the buyer **146** and the seller **142**, as indicated by blocks **156a** and **156b**. Utilizing the platform, the seller **142** and the buyer **146** could agree to provisions, terms and/or conditions regarding store credit, including the monetary amount associated with the full redemption of the store credit (e.g., \$5,000), the price to be paid (e.g., \$4,500) by the buyer **146** for the store credit, an expiration period (e.g., one year), etc. The buyer **146** also agrees to pay the system provider/bank **144** a \$100 commission (or fee), as further indicated in block **156b**.

[0114] Upon an accepted offer, as indicated in block **158**, the buyer **146** could place an order for store credit (e.g., \$5,000) and further authorize the system provider/bank **144** to deduct \$4,600 from the aforementioned bank account and transfer \$4,500 to an escrow account provided to the buyer **146** and the credit card company **148** by the system provider/bank **144**. An escrow account could be utilized where funds are held in trust until the store credit is redeemed. This could provide benefits to parties, for example, a buyer could customize store credit where funds associated with unredeemed store credit could revert back to the buyer upon the expiration of the store credit. Also, as indicated by block **158**, the buyer **146** could authorize the system provider/bank **144** to retain the remaining \$100 as a commission (or fee). Alternatively, a system provider/bank could loan funds to buyers, as is conventionally done with credit card transactions.

[0115] Upon the transfer of funds to the escrow account, a store credit redeemable with the seller **142** in connection with the purchase of \$5,000 worth of goods and/or services (including any taxes, etc.) is transmitted to the buyer **146**, as depicted in block **160**. The store credit could be provided jointly by the seller **142** and the credit card company **148**, or as otherwise provided. The buyer **146**, as provided by the present example, could redeem the entire store credit, in connection with a purchase of at least \$5,000 worth of goods and/or services (including any taxes, etc.) from the seller **142**, as depicted in block **162**. The redemption could transpire in connection with the seller **142**, who has no formal agreements with the system provider/bank **144** but does accept credit cards from the credit card company **148**. It is of note that store credit provided in this fashion is not likely redeemable in connection with all the credit card company's affiliated merchants. Also, as depicted by block **162**, the seller **142** is

provided with \$4,500 minus any pre-agreed to fees via a credit processing service. Processing associated with store credit provided via the system could function similarly to the processing of credit cards and/or gift cards. A system provider could also provide all the means to process store credit utilizing the same or similar systems and methods. Also as indicated by block 162, the \$500 savings provided to the buyer 146 is indicated to the seller 142 and the buyer 146, e.g., on a printed receipt.

[0116] As depicted in block 164, data regarding the redemption could be transmitted from the point of redemption to the system provider 144; such data could be transmitted to other parties as well. As previously authorized by the buyer 146, upon the redemption of the store credit, the funds held in trust within the escrow account are transferred to the credit card company, as depicted in block 166. Finally as depicted in block 168, a \$4,500 payment is provided to the seller 142, in connection with the store credit redemption.

[0117] FIGS. 5 through 8 are diagrams of examples of embodiments of the system, wherein targeted store credit is utilized. Furthermore, all the examples relating to store credit provided throughout this document, could also relate to targeted store credit as would be understood by someone skilled in the art.

[0118] As mentioned above, targeted store credit is store credit that is redeemable only in connection with specified goods and/or services. Embodiments of the system enable sellers, suppliers, system providers, other alternative parties and/or combinations of the same to provide buyers with targeted store credit. Agreements between sellers and other parties could ensure that targeted store credit is redeemed upon valid presentation.

[0119] Targeted store credit could be bought, sold, gifted, won, inherited and/or provided in any conceivable way (e.g., offered for sale in a retail store). Targeted store credit could be provided in forms similar to store credit (e.g., a plastic card incorporating an apparatus for data storage, a digital transmission, etc.). Furthermore, a buyer could be provided with a platform to customize and/or negotiate provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with targeted store credit, and/or offers therefor. Specified (or targeted) goods and/or services could be identified by SKU (Stock Keeping Unit), a group of SKUs, a supplier's business identification number, the names of the goods and/or services, or any other suitable manner.

[0120] Coding, such as bar codes, associated with stock keeping units (SKUs), business identification numbers, etc., could also be utilized within systems and methods relating to targeted store credit. Targeted store credit could be purchased at a price that is less than the monetary amount associated with the full redemption of the targeted store credit. Targeted store credit could provide benefits to sellers, suppliers, buyers, system providers and/or other parties. Targeted store credit could be offered in conjunction with a credit card company.

[0121] Targeted store credit could provide savings to buyers over and above any other savings. For example, a seller offering a 20% discount on a particular video game might state that the discount is not combinable with other offers pertaining to the video game, however, a system provider and a seller could enter a contract that could clearly stipulate that targeted store credit shall be accepted by the seller, regardless of its initial cost to a buyer. In essence, a buyer could save money in connection with the purchase and redemption of the targeted store credit, as well as save money utilizing the 20%

discount offered. The same benefit could also be provided by store-wide store credit (non-targeted).

[0122] Sellers could benefit from targeted store credit in that targeted store credit is redeemable in connection with the purchase of specific items only. For example, targeted store credit could be issued in connection with goods that are overstocked by a seller, or services, for example, that traditionally provide larger profit margins to a seller. Furthermore, sellers could be provided with buyers who have additional incentive to buy goods and/or services from the seller, at a shared cost, or even no cost to the seller, as parties other than the seller could benefit from offering targeted store credit to buyers.

[0123] A supplier could benefit in that targeted store credit could be targeted towards a seller's goods and/or services which are supplied to the seller, by the same supplier. Suppliers also benefit in that targeted store credit provides additional incentive to buyers, and thus, could provide additional incentive for buyers to purchase goods and/or services from a seller that are supplied by the supplier, perhaps at a shared cost, or even no cost to the supplier. Many suppliers currently offer coupons to consumers in order to promote sales of their goods and/or services; however a relatively small percentage of coupons are redeemed, as opposed to a gift certificate, which is redeemed at a much greater percentage.

[0124] FIG. 5 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, indicated generally at 190, where a buyer 196 purchases targeted store credit from a system provider 194 which is redeemable with a seller 192. Not shown in FIG. 5, the seller 192 agrees to allow the system provider 194 to offer targeted store credit to buyers redeemable in connection with the purchase of specified goods and/or services from the seller 192. Prior to an offer, the system provider 194 and a supplier 198 could agree to parameters regarding provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with targeted store credit and offers therefor. As provided in FIG. 5, a supplier 198 could commission the system provider 194 to offer buyers targeted store credit (targeted towards goods and/or services provided to a seller or sellers, by the same supplier 198), for a price, e.g., five percent less than the monetary amount associated with the full redemption of the targeted store credit. The supplier 198 could agree to pay the system provider 194 a fee equaling, for example, seven and a half percent of the monetary amount associated with the redemption of the targeted store credit.

[0125] Still referring to the example depicted in FIG. 5, as indicated by block 200, the buyer 196 sends payment to the system provider 194 in the amount of \$950, for a targeted store credit fully redeemable in connection with the purchase of \$1,000 (including taxes, etc.) worth of specified goods and/or services from specified sellers. In block 202, the system provider 194 could enter details regarding the buyer's payment into the system, and correlating data could be transmitted to the supplier 198, notifying the supplier 198 of its obligations, as well as verifying that previously authorized parameters were adhered to.

[0126] As depicted in block 204, the system provider 194 issues and transfers a targeted store credit (e.g., \$1,000) to the buyer 196. The targeted store credit could be provided in a multitude of forms, for example, the system provider 194 could provide the buyer 196 with a plastic card containing a magnetic strip capable of storing and transferring data such as, for example, account identification, etc. Such cards could be used in connection with future purchases of store credit as

well, i.e., the card could be “reloaded” with store credit and/or re-used in association with another purchase of store credit. As depicted in block 206, the buyer 196 redeems the store credit in connection with the purchase of specified goods and/or services from the seller 192. The targeted store credit could be processed via conventional credit card and/or gift card processing systems and apparatus. Alternatively, barcodes and scanning devices, etc., could be used to store, transfer and/or process such data.

[0127] Data associated with the redemption of the targeted store credit could be transmitted from the seller 192 to the system provider 194 via the network, as indicated in block 210. This data could encompass proof of purchase, including SKU’s identifying the specified goods and/or services affiliated with the targeted store credit redemption. Then as indicated by block 212, the system provider 194 could forward the data along with an invoice for services provided (e.g., an invoice for \$75), as previously agreed. As indicated in block 214, the supplier 198 could then pay the system provider 194 via previously mentioned payment methods.

[0128] FIGS. 6A and 6B are diagrams showing an example of an embodiment of the system indicated generally at 220 and 250, where a credit provider is utilized within the system. A credit provider as used herein could be a lender, a credit card company, a credit processing company, or any combination of the three. As per the example provided in FIGS. 6A and 6B the credit provider is a combination of all three.

[0129] As depicted by block 230, targeted store credit is being sold by a supplier 228. Like FIG. 5, FIG. 6A picks up where a buyer sends payment (e.g., \$4,500) through a system provider 224 for targeted store credit, redeemable in connection with the purchase of \$5,000 worth of specified goods and/or services (including any taxes, etc.) from a seller 222. Upon receipt and entry of the payment (this process could be automated), data regarding the purchase of the targeted store credit could be automatically transmitted to the supplier 228 via the network, as indicated by block 232.

[0130] As indicated by block 234, upon notification of the accepted offer and receipt of the buyer’s payment, the system provider 224 could usurp \$5,000 from a line of credit provided to the buyer 226, by a credit provider 268 (FIG. 6B), as per previous agreements between the system provider 224 and the supplier 228, and the system provider 224 and the credit provider 268. Furthermore, the system provider 224 could be pre-authorized to issue and transfer a targeted store credit (e.g., \$5,000) to the buyer 226, on behalf of the supplier 228, as indicated by blocks 234 and 238.

[0131] As indicated by block 236, the system provider 224 could retain a commission (e.g., \$250) and forward the balance of the buyer’s payment (e.g., \$4,250) to the supplier 228, as previously agreed. Commissions and/or fees could also be paid by buyers or other parties. As described in block 240, the targeted store credit could be redeemed in connection with a purchase of specified goods and/or services from the seller 222, and the seller 222 could collect its funds via systems and apparatus related to credit processing.

[0132] Data associated with the redemption of the targeted store credit could be transmitted from the seller 222 to the system provider 224 through the network, as indicated in block 242; this data could include proof of purchase and identification of the specified goods and/or services. As indicated by block 244, data could be transmitted to the supplier 228, for verification or other purposes.

[0133] FIG. 6B is a diagram showing a portion of the example provided in FIG. 6A in greater detail. As indicated by block 252, a contract could be entered between the system provider 224 and the credit provider 268, perhaps providing the credit provider 268 with exclusivity on credit services offered within the system. A contract or agreement could require the credit provider 268 to process store credit and/or targeted store credit as requested by the system provider 224.

[0134] The system could provide a platform, where a party could apply for credit with another party, and the system could account for these transactions. An agreement between the supplier 228 and a credit provider 268 could be entered into, as indicated by block 254. It is important to note that a system provider could also provide credit, credit card services and credit processing services, in addition to other services such as banking, factoring, advertising, etc. As indicated by block 256, a credit line could be provided to a supplier 228, by the credit provider 268. This credit line could be used within the system in connection with store credit. Indicated generally by 250, the system provider 224 could be authorized to access the supplier’s line of credit, contingent upon and/or in conjunction with, the acceptance of an offer for targeted store credit, as per this example, from the supplier 228, by the buyer 226. As depicted in blocks 258 and 259, the supplier 228 could authorize (via a previous agreement) the system provider 224 to issue and transmit the targeted store credit to the buyer 226, redeemable in connection with the purchase (e.g., \$5,000 worth) of specified goods and/or services from the seller 222. As described in block 260, processing machines and systems could be used in connection with the redemption. The date the targeted store credit is redeemed could be the date that the credit is initially provided to the supplier 228 by the credit provider 268, or previous agreements could dictate when the credit is initially provided.

[0135] The system could be programmed to transmit data regarding the targeted store credit redemption (e.g., identifying the specified goods and/or services purchased), to the supplier 228, the credit provider 268 and the system provider 224, as indicated by block 262. The credit provider 268 could send the supplier 228 a bill and/or statement relating to principal, interest and/or fees associated with the accessed line of credit, as indicated by block 264. The supplier 228 could then pay the credit provider 268, as per block 266. The credit provider 268 could also bill the seller 222 in connection with a processing fee (not shown).

[0136] The system allows for offers related to store credit and targeted store credit to be combined. These offers could be marketed to buyers as joint or combined offers or they could be presented as an offer from an individual party. In either case, more than one party could subsidize the savings provided to buyers.

[0137] FIG. 7 is a diagram showing an example of such an embodiment, indicated generally at 270, where targeted store credit is provided to a buyer 276 based on a combined offer. Parties including buyers, suppliers, sellers or any other parties could craft a joint, combined, or mutually contributed to offer, similar to the example provided herein, and then post the offer for acceptance by the affiliated parties, or optionally for further negotiation. These offers could be conditionally based upon another party’s action. Again, this Figure represents an example of an embodiment of the system, and does not show the only way of carrying out this embodiment.

[0138] As depicted in block 282 of the example, a seller 272 proposes multiple offers (e.g., up to 500) for store credit

redeemable in connection with the purchase of \$1,000 worth of goods and/or services from the seller 272, where the seller 272 is willing to accept \$900 minus a (e.g., a 2½%) commission in connection with the full redemption of each store credit, contingent upon a supplier converting the offer (or providing a different offer, or further enhancing the offer, etc.) to targeted store credit, to be offered to buyers for \$800 each, and redeemable in connection with a purchase of \$1,000 worth of specified goods and/or services (supplied by the supplier 278) from the seller 272. As depicted by block 284, the system could be programmed to automatically present the offer to specific and/or multiple suppliers who provide goods and/or services to the seller 272. Alternatively, the seller 272 could choose to present the offer to specific and/or multiple suppliers of its own choosing. As described in block 286, the supplier 278 could accept the offer in part, and post one hundred offers for targeted store credit (e.g., for \$800 each), each redeemable in connection with the purchase (e.g., \$1,000 worth) of specified goods and/or services.

[0139] As per block 288, the system could be programmed to notify buyers of such offers and as indicated by block 290, a buyer 276 could accept an offer (or as the system may provide, make a counter offer, or request a better offer, etc.). Upon acceptance, payment (e.g., \$800) could be sent through the system provider/bank 274 in numerous ways, including credit provided by the system provider/bank 274.

[0140] As per the example, the system provider/bank 274 provides the supplier 278 with a line of credit and is authorized to access the line, contingent upon accepted offers by buyers or the supplier 278. As depicted in block 286, the supplier 278 has authorized (via previous agreements between the supplier 278 and the system provider/bank 274), the system provider/bank 274 to use the buyer's payment (e.g., \$800) to finance the store credit, as well as deduct \$130 from the supplier's line of credit, for each targeted store credit (e.g., \$1,000) sold to a buyer.

[0141] As indicated by step 292, the system could be programmed to issue and transmit a targeted store credit (e.g., \$1,000) to the buyer 276, on behalf of the supplier 278, which is redeemable with the seller 272 who provided the initial offer to the supplier 278. The targeted store credit could be redeemed in connection with a purchase of specified goods and/or services from the seller 272 as indicated by block 294. As per the example, the redemption could transpire with use of credit processing machines and systems provided by the system provider/bank 274. Payment provided to the seller 272 in connection with the credit processing (i.e., associated with the redemption), could be stipulated via previous agreements. As per the example provided, the savings (e.g., \$100) initially offered by the seller 272, could be deducted from the payment (associated with the redemption) to the seller 272, as well as a \$25 (i.e., a two and a half percent) commission, for a total payment of, e.g., \$875 to the seller 272.

[0142] Upon redemption, data (e.g., identifying the specified goods and/or services purchased) could be transmitted to the system provider/bank 274 and the supplier 278, as indicated by block 296 and 297. As block 298 indicates, the system provider 274 could send an invoice and/or statement to the supplier for the credit provided (e.g., \$100), a commission charge (e.g., \$25), a credit service fee (e.g., \$5), and/or as otherwise agreed. The supplier 278 could then send payment to the system provider/bank 274, as indicated by block 300. Multiple combinations of parties could provide and/or be

provided with similar combined or joint offers in other embodiments of the system, as would be understood by someone skilled in the art.

[0143] FIG. 8 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, indicated generally at 310, where a buyer 316 purchases targeted store credit redeemable with a seller 312, from the seller 312, and a supplier 318 is able to pay its obligations with a credit voucher.

[0144] Not shown in FIG. 8, the parties depicted could enter into agreements that could obligate them towards one another and to perform as specified. Like other embodiments, a platform can be provided where parties could agree to provisions relating to targeted store credit and offers therefor, as well as a platform where parties could customize, negotiate and/or accept terms and/or conditions associated with targeted store credit.

[0145] As depicted in this example, a seller 312 and a supplier 318 agree that the seller 312 will offer buyers targeted store credit (targeted towards goods and/or services supplied to the seller 312 by the supplier 318) for, e.g., up to twelve percent less than the monetary amount associated with the full redemption of the targeted store credit, for a limited time. Furthermore, the seller 312 and the supplier 318 could agree that the supplier 318 will provide the seller 312 with credit equal to, e.g., two thirds of the monetary amount of all the savings provided to buyers via the limited time offer. This credit could be deducted from the seller's accounts payables owed to the supplier 318, applied to future purchases of goods and/or services supplied by the supplier 318 to the seller 312, redeemed for cash based on a pre-agreed to percentage (e.g., 100%), or as otherwise agreed. Furthermore, the seller 312 has previously agreed to allow the system provider to deduct a commission or fee, (e.g., 5% of the monetary amount that the store credit is redeemable in connection with) from the payment for the associated redemption.

[0146] In the example provided, an offer for targeted store credit has been accepted. As per other examples, FIG. 8 picks up where the buyer 316 is paying for the targeted store credit. As depicted in block 320, the buyer 316 pays (e.g., \$4,500) for targeted store credit, redeemable in connection with the purchase of a greater amount (e.g., \$5,000 worth) of specified goods and/or services from the seller 312. Upon receipt of the payment, as indicated by block 322, information regarding the purchase of the targeted store credit, including any pre-agreed to obligations, could be transmitted to the supplier 318 as well as other parties. As indicated in block 324, the system provider 314 retains a \$250 commission (previously authorized by the seller 312) and a targeted store credit (e.g., \$5,000) is issued and transferred to the buyer 316. Unredeemed funds could be kept by the system provider 314, or sent to the seller 312, the supplier 318, or even the buyer 316, or distributed between two, three or all these parties in a variety of ways, possibly depending upon previous agreements.

[0147] In block 326, the targeted store credit is redeemed in connection with a purchase of specified goods and/or services from the seller 312. In block 328, data indicating obligations (e.g., payment for the redemption) to the seller 312 and data providing proof of purchase of the specified goods and/or services, could be automatically transmitted to the system provider 314. As indicated by block 330, the system provider 314 could forward the proof of purchase to the supplier 318, along with notification that the system provider 314 will create a \$333.33 credit voucher (also previously authorized

by the supplier **318**) on behalf of the supplier, for transfer the seller **312**, and for use in connection with a reduction of monies owed to the supplier **318**. As described in block **332**, the system provider **314** creates the aforementioned credit voucher, and as described in block **334**, transfers the balance of monies paid by the buyer **316** (e.g., \$4,250) to the seller **312**, along with the \$333.33 credit voucher provided on behalf of the supplier **318**. The seller **312** has previously agreed to accept both (the voucher and money) as payment in connection with the credit redemption.

[0148] As provided by the example depicted in FIG. **8**, the buyer **316** has saved \$500. The system provider **314** has earned a \$250 commission. The seller **312** has sold \$5,000 worth of goods and/or services (which cost the seller, e.g., \$2,500) and has received \$4,250 plus a \$333.33 credit from its supplier **318**. The supplier **318** has promoted the sale of its goods and/or services through the business chain by essentially subsidizing a 6.66% savings by the buyer **316**, with a \$333.33 reduction on its accounts receivable with the seller **312** (not out of pocket) and by further increasing the seller's profit margin.

[0149] FIG. **9** is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, indicated generally at **370**, wherein a facilitator **380** sells or assists in the selling of store credit, redeemable with a seller **372**. Like other embodiments, an alternative party could provide store credit to a buyer. As referenced above, alternative parties include any party other than the buyer (in relation to a specific transaction), including, but not limited to sellers, system providers, suppliers, facilitators.

[0150] A facilitator could be a referring party, an agent, a franchisee, an independent sales representative, a retail store, etc. For example, a dentist concludes that a patient needs root canal surgery. The dentist has two surgeons that she highly recommends. In an attempt to save the patient money, the dentist asks the two surgeons if they would accept store credit provided via the system, from patients she refers to them. One of the surgeons is not interested, but the other agrees. The surgeon goes on to use the present invention, (as a seller). Additionally, a travel agent, for example, could use the system in a similar fashion, providing savings to their customers. Alternatively, a facilitator could represent a system provider as an independent sales agent, or a franchisee, etc.

[0151] The example provided in FIG. **9** illustrates an embodiment of the system where the facilitator **380** is selling store credit to a buyer **376** that is redeemable with the seller **372**, and monies for the store credit are payable to the facilitator **380**.

[0152] Store credit could be issued and branded by the system provider **374** and then sent to the facilitator **380** for sale and/or re-sale (depending upon previous agreements) to the buyer **376**. Like other embodiments, choices, actions, obligations, authorization, performance, etc., provided to a party in one example could be provided to a party in another example, or there could be variations in the choices, actions, obligations, authorization, performance, etc. For example, buyers could customize and/or negotiate terms and/or conditions associated with store credit in this embodiment of the system as well.

[0153] As indicated by block **384**, a facilitator **380** and the system provider **374** enter an agreement regarding their business relationship. Also as per block **384**, the agreement could

entail that the system provider **374** and the facilitator **380** agree to split gross profits relating to the sale of store credit equally.

[0154] As provided by block **386**, the seller **372** and the system provider **374** enter an agreement that could encompass acceptable provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit, including the sale or re-sale of such, rights (e.g., the seller **372** could provide the system provider **374**, with the right to offer, create and/or issue store credit, which is redeemable with the seller **372**, etc.). Also as indicated in block **386**, the seller **372** agrees to accept eighty cents as payment for every dollar associated with store credit provided via the system and redeemed with the seller **372**. The system provider **374** could further provide the facilitator with parameters regarding the offering of store credit or the acceptance of the same (not shown). As per the agreements **384** and **386**, the facilitator **380** is authorized to sell store credit provided via the system and redeemable with the seller **372**, as indicated by block **388**. As described in block **390**, the buyer **376** could then pay the facilitator **380** (e.g., \$900) for store credit redeemable in connection with the purchase of goods and/or services (e.g., \$1,000 worth) from the seller **372**. Payment could be provided directly or by methods previously discussed herein.

[0155] As depicted in block **392**, the facilitator **380** could retain part of the buyer's payment (e.g., \$50, i.e., 50% of the gross profits) as previously agreed, and forward the balance (e.g., \$850) to the system provider **374**. Also as indicated in block **392**, the facilitator **380** places a custom order via the network, for store credit redeemable in connection with the purchase of goods and/or services (e.g. \$1,000 worth) from the seller **372**. As described in block **394**, store credit is issued and transmitted to the facilitator **380** for further transfer to the buyer **376**. The facilitator **380** could obtain and transfer the store credit using a computer system which has the ability to communicate with the network.

[0156] As described in block **396**, the store credit, backed by the system provider **374** and/or a credit provider, could be conveyed to the buyer **376** via a wireless digital transmission to the buyer's smartphone. Also as provided by this example, the system provider **374** is being provided with a line of credit by a credit provider. The credit provider could finance and process the store credit as instructed by the system provider **374** (e.g., pay the seller \$800).

[0157] As indicated in block **398**, the store credit is redeemed in connection with a purchase of goods and/or services from the seller **372**. The difference (e.g., \$200) between the monetary amount invoiced to the buyer **376** for goods and/or services in connection with the redemption (e.g., \$1,000) and the monetary amount to be collected by the seller **372** (e.g., \$800) in connection with the redemption, could be indicated automatically upon redemption (e.g., upon a printed receipt). Also not shown by the diagram (FIG. **9**), the credit provider could bill the system provider **374** for credit services and payment for the same could ensue.

[0158] This embodiment of the system, as provided by other embodiments, allows for multiple variations as to what the different parties do, and/or may be obligated and/or authorized to do. As per other embodiments, there are multiple ways to carry out this embodiment using different processing steps. For example, the full value of the goods and/or services (e.g., \$1,000) previously described, could have been paid to the seller **372** upon redemption, and the seller **372** could have

been billed (e.g., \$200) by the system provider **374**, as per what could have been provided by a different agreement and/or contract.

[0159] FIG. **10** is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, indicated generally at **400**, wherein the system is licensed to a seller **402**. A licensee could be any person or entity who is granted a license relating to the present invention by a party with the right to do so (a licensor). A licensee could be given the right to implement all or some of the embodiments of the present invention. The functionality provided by the present invention could be provided by a licensee (wherein the licensee would also be the system provider) or provided by a licensor (wherein the licensor would also be the system provider). If and/or when functionality is provided by the licensor, it could appear to the buyer that the functionality is provided by the licensee, i.e., buyers may not be aware the system or parts of the system involve a party other than the licensee. Licensing fees could be paid to a licensor for rights relating to intellectual property, software, hardware, etc. Again, this embodiment could be set up in a multitude of ways.

[0160] As described in block **408** of FIG. **10**, a seller **402** and a licensor **404** could enter a licensing agreement. Having been granted the right to sell store credit via the system, the seller/system provider/licensee **402** could advertise or notify buyers of offerings, or encourage buyers to customize offers for store credit. Again, formal agreements and/or contracts could be entered into, or may not be entered into. As provided by this example, no formal agreement between the seller/system provider/licensee **402** and buyer **406** has been entered.

[0161] As provided by this example and indicated by block **410**, a platform could be accessed where provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit could be customized by the buyer **406** and/or negotiated by the seller/system provider/licensee **402** and buyer **406**. As further described in block **410**, an offer is accepted and as indicated by block **412** the buyer **402** could contemporaneously place an order for the affiliated store credit and send an electronic payment (e.g., \$90) in conjunction with an automated clearinghouse service provided within the system.

[0162] As provided by block **414**, store credit (e.g., \$100) redeemable with the seller/system provider/licensee **402**, is sent to the buyer **406** by the seller/system provider/licensee **402**. As block **416** indicates, the buyer **406** could redeem the store credit in connection with a \$100 purchase of goods and/or services from the seller/system provider/licensee **402**. The store credit could be processed via different methods depending upon its form. Finally, as indicated by block **418**, the seller/system provider/licensee **402** could pay the licensor **404** a fee, as provided by the licensing agreement.

[0163] Additionally, the system could provide alternative parties (e.g., sellers) with a platform where terms and/or conditions associated with store credit and/or targeted store credit could be customized with the exception of one key term and/or condition (e.g., the monetary amount provided in connection with the full redemption of the store credit).

[0164] Upon completion of the customization, the system could provide buyers with a platform where the aforementioned terms and/or conditions could be viewed by buyers and the excluded term and/or condition could be provided by a buyer(s). A digital countdown of time remaining to provide the excluded term and/or condition and/or provide offers to

buy and/or sell the affiliated store credit could be provided in conjunction with this embodiment, as well as other embodiments of the system.

[0165] Upon providing the excluded term and/or condition, an offer to purchase, or a request for an offer to sell the affiliated store credit could be transmitted via the network to the affiliated alternative party (e.g., the seller). The system could be programmed to automatically accept and/or reject offers etc., on behalf of a party, based on parameters and authorization previously provided to the system provider by the party. For example, the system could be programmed to accept the best offer or a percentage (e.g., 10%) of the best offers on behalf of a seller. Additionally, the system could be programmed to accept all the offers that meet or exceed previously agreed to parameters, for example, a seller could authorize a system provider to accept any offer where the monetary amount provided (to the buyer) in connection with the full redemption of the store credit and/or targeted store credit, is less than or equal to a particular stated monetary amount (e.g., \$1,000).

[0166] Alternatively and/or additionally, buyers could be provided with a platform to customize terms and/or conditions associated with store credit and/or targeted store credit with the exception of one key term and/or condition (e.g., the price to be paid for the store credit and/or targeted store credit). Upon completion, a platform could be provided to alternative parties where the uncompleted terms and/or conditions could be viewed, and a request from the buyer could be transmitted to alternative parties to provide the excluded term and/or condition (e.g., set a price for the store credit) as well as provide an offer to sell the associated store credit to the buyer. The platform and/or process could optionally include a digital countdown of time remaining to complete the said terms and/or conditions. Offers could optionally be posted within the platform for all to see. Upon seeing offers from, for example, other alternative parties (e.g., other sellers), an alternative party (e.g., a seller) could submit or resubmit a better offer.

[0167] Depending upon how the system is being implemented, offers could be accepted at any time. Alternatively, offers could be accepted as provided by the implementation, for example, upon completion of a stated time period and/or digital countdown, the system could be programmed to provide buyers with all of the responses and/or offers, or programmed to provide a single (e.g., the best) or a group (e.g., a percentage) of the best responses and/or offers. Buyers may want to be provided with multiple responses because factors such as location of a store, or a negative past experience with a particular store, etc., could weigh on a decision. Buyers could review the completed terms, and or conditions and perhaps offer to purchase the desired store credit and/or targeted store credit from the affiliated alternative party(s), which could then be accepted by the affiliated alternative party(s). Or, buyers could accept an offer(s) from the affiliated alternative party(s) and possibly be required to accept at least one offer.

[0168] The system also provides options for store credit; such options could be converted to store credit, used to purchase store credit as provided, used to activate store credit held in reserve, etc. Terms and/or conditions associated with an option for store credit could relate to the option itself, as well as the affiliated store credit.

[0169] Options for store credit could be priced, for example, at the equivalent of a declared percentage (e.g., 3%)

of the monetary amount associated in connection with the full redemption of the associated store credit, or in any other fashion of choice. Furthermore, a buyer could be granted the right and/or opportunity to purchase store credit in connection with a further payment (e.g., equaling 90% of the monetary amount associated with the full redemption of the associated store credit). Moreover, a buyer could be granted the right and/or opportunity to convert an option (for store credit) to store credit, in connection with a further payment (e.g., equaling 90% of the monetary amount associated with the full redemption of the associated store credit). Alternatively, this system or method could be viewed where the initial payment is, for example, payment for a commission, or a card fee, etc., and the second payment is in connection with the store credit. Agreements between parties could insure that options are exercisable as provided.

[0170] The present invention comprises systems and methods for securing provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with an optional purchase of store credit (an option for store credit) in the future. An option for store credit could be provided to a buyer in connection with a payment. Computer readable media containing information associated with the buyer's account (e.g., the buyer's identification, etc.) could be created and distributed to the buyer in connection with the payment. In connection with a second payment, the system could provide means at the buyer for the exercising of an option for store credit. The system could be provided in connection with a network and apparatus to update the buyer's account in connection with the exercising of the option (i.e., providing the store credit to the buyer), as well as a means for the seller to redeem the store credit and receive payment in connection with the redemption.

[0171] A system provider could provide guidance (e.g., formulas and/or ratios) to buyers, in order to help buyers customize and/or negotiate offers for options. For example, a system provider could inform buyers that a particular seller has accepted recent offers on options (for store credit) based at a 3 to 1 savings/price ratio. Provided with this knowledge; a buyer could offer \$100 for an option, which could be converted to store credit (e.g., \$1,000), with a further payment of \$700 to the seller. The store credit could then be redeemed in connection with the purchase of \$1,000 worth of goods and/or services from the seller (savings \$300, price \$100). Or, buyers could customize offers without such guidelines, as the buying, selling and/or providing of options for store credit could transpire in any conceivable fashion. Additionally, options for store credit could be gifted, sold, transferred, etc. multiple times before they are exercised.

[0172] Buyers could benefit from options for store credit in that provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with store credit and the offering of such, could be determined and secured (perhaps for a stated period of time) and a buyer could be afforded the opportunity to purchase the store credit as agreed, without the buyer having to purchase the store credit. Sellers could benefit, for example, in that options for store credit could drive sales, perhaps at no cost to the seller. Suppliers could benefit, for example, in that such options could be associated with targeted store credit.

[0173] Many of the previous embodiments of the systems and methods relating to store credit and/or targeted store credit described herein, could apply to options for store credit in a similar fashion, as would be understood by someone skilled in the art. For example, options for store credit could also be provided in connection with a facilitator, similarly to

how store credit is provided within FIG. 9. Or, for example, a buyer could customize provisions, terms and/or conditions regarding targeted store credit, where multiple parties subsidize the buyer's potential savings, and then the buyer could purchase an option for the same targeted store credit. Like store credit, options for store credit could be provided to buyers by alternative parties such as sellers, suppliers, system providers, facilitators and/or other parties. Options for store credit and systems and methods related thereto, could also be licensed.

[0174] FIG. 11 is a diagram showing an example of another embodiment of the system, indicated generally at 430, wherein the system provides options for store credit which could be exercised in various ways (e.g., converted to store credit). As described in block 438, a platform is provided where a system provider 434 and a seller 432 could enter an agreement regarding options, convertible to store credit that is redeemable with the seller 432. The seller 432 could also agree to provide a system and apparatus which could enable buyers to exercise such options. A platform could be provided to parties by the system provider 434, in which provisions, terms and/or conditions associated with options for store credit, the affiliated store credit (including targeted store credit) and/or offers for such, could be customized, negotiated, reviewed, posted, offered, counter-offered, accepted, rejected, etc., by buyers and alternative parties. As indicated by block 440, a buyer 436 is provided with such a platform. Parameters regarding options for store credit, the associated store credit and/or offers for the same, could also be proposed and/or agreed to, using the platform. Buyers could purchase the aforementioned options on such a platform as well, as is shown in block 440. Additionally, the system could provide a platform where options for store credit are bought and/or sold in any fashion.

[0175] As indicated by block 442, the buyer 436 could place an order and simultaneously pay (e.g., \$3) for an option for store credit. Upon acceptance, an option for store credit could be created and held in reserve for a stated period, or until payment for the option for store credit is received, or as otherwise provided. As described in block 444, the option for store credit is transmitted to the buyer 436.

[0176] An option for store credit could provide a buyer, with the right and opportunity to convert the option (for store credit) to store credit with a further specified payment. The buyer 436 could present the seller 432 with a magnetically encoded card and upon swiping the card in a processing machine, the seller 432 could be notified that a balance (e.g., \$92) is due to be paid before the option can be exercised. As provided by FIG. 11 and depicted in block 446, the buyer 436, pays the seller 432 (e.g., \$92) and converts the option (e.g., activates the store credit) to store credit redeemable in connection with the purchase (e.g., \$100 worth) of goods and/or services from the seller 432. Upon receiving the payment (e.g., \$92), the seller 432 could enter information regarding the payment into the system program via the network, and the store credit (redeemable in connection with the purchase of \$100 worth of goods and/or services) could be instantly and automatically activated by the system program (system provider) and made available for redemption using the very same magnetically encoded card. Options for store credit could also come in various forms such as, but not limited to, printed paper bar coded with pertinent data, digital transmissions to a mobile device, etc. Like with other embodiments, variations

and modifications could be made of this embodiment without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

[0177] FIG. 12 is a diagram showing sample hardware components that could be utilized to implement the present invention. The hardware components depicted in FIG. 12 and discussed herein could be utilized within any embodiment of the system disclosed herein, and are not intended to limit the spirit or scope of the present invention. As previously mentioned, the system provider 450 could include a processing server 452 which could provide functionality and/or processing previously discussed, a web server 454, which hosts a web site that allows buyers 464 and alternative parties to access the platform for previously described purposes, and a firewall 456 which could provide security for the servers 452, 454. It shall be understood that the method steps associated with the present invention could be performed at least in part by a computer-readable medium having computer-executable instructions stored thereon for causing performance of said method steps. A reference to any party (e.g., a seller) in this document could also be construed to encompass a reference to the computer system of that party, which may for example, be similar to the server 452 and could include a processor, a memory, a user input device (e.g., keyboard or mouse), an output device (e.g., a display), a network interface device, etc.

[0178] The network 468 could include the Internet, an intranet, a wide area network (WAN), a local area network (LAN), etc. A system provider 450 can communicate, via the network 468, with a seller computer system 460 operated by a seller 458, a buyer computer system 466 operated by a buyer 464, a supplier computer system 472 operated by a supplier 470, an optional payment or credit processing service 474 (which operates a server 476), a credit card company 482 and its computer system 484, a credit provider 486 and its computer system 488, a facilitator 490 and its computer system 492, an automated clearinghouse 494 and its computer system 496 or any other party 478 and its computer system 480. The computer systems 460, 466, 472, 476, 480, 484, 488, 492, and 496, for example, could each be any suitable computer system having the ability to communicate with the network 468 (e.g., having Internet connectivity), such as a personal computer, a laptop computer, a tablet computer, a smartphone, etc. The servers 452, 454 could include single or multiple processors (or a single processor having multiple processor cores), and could include any suitable operating system and associated system software, such as the UNIX operating system, Linux, Microsoft Windows, etc. Furthermore, the functions performed by the servers 452 and 454 could be provided by a single computer system, or by multiple networked computer systems (e.g., "cloud" or "grid" computing).

[0179] A payment and/or credit processing service 474 could optionally process store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, presented to sellers 458. Card readers and/or bar code scanning devices 462, etc., could also be utilized within the system, and data interpreted and collected by them, could be communicated via the network 468. Other electronic means for conveying information relating to store credit and options for store credit such as, but not limited to wireless digital transmissions, electronic cards (e-card), e-mail, text (SMS) messaging, etc., could also be utilized.

[0180] FIG. 13 is a diagram showing hardware and software components of the processing server 452 depicted in FIG. 12, in greater detail. The server 452 could include a storage device 500, a network interface 504, a communica-

tions bus 506, a central processing unit (CPU) (microprocessor) 508, a random access memory (RAM) 510, a display 512, and one or more input devices 514, such as a keyboard, mouse, etc. The storage device 500 could comprise any suitable computer-readable storage medium such as disk, non-volatile memory (e.g., EPROM, EEPROM, a flash memory), etc. The functionality provided by the present invention could be provided by a processing software engine 502, which could be embodied as computer-readable program code stored on the storage device 500 and executed by the CPU 508 using any suitable, high or low level computing language, such as Java, C, C++, C#, .NET, etc. The network interface 504 could include an Ethernet network interface device, a wireless network interface device, or any other suitable device which permits the server 452 to communicate via the network. The CPU 508 could include any suitable single or multiple-core microprocessor.

[0181] Various systems and methods are contemplated by the embodiments of the present invention. For example, a system provider could assist and/or enable another party in the selling of store credit to buyers or a system provider could sell store credit directly to buyers. Or, for example, the system can be provided in the form of an exchange residing on at least one or more servers.

[0182] Some embodiments of the present invention could include a system for providing store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit comprising a processing server 452 in communication with a network, a first communication link between a seller computer system and the processing server 452 for communication concerning the sale of store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, a second communication link between the processing server 452 and a buyer computer system for communication concerning the purchase of store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit, a means for receiving payment from parties, and a means for delivering apparatus and data associated with the present invention to parties. The system provider could provide means at the seller for receiving and processing store credit. The first communication link could also provide for communication between the seller and the processing server 452 regarding redemption and payment therefore.

[0183] The system further provides means for digitally transferring store credit, targeted store credit and/or options for store credit via communication links within the network. The system can provide a third communication link between the processing server 452 and a supplier computer system concerning communication associated with the buying and selling of store credit, targeted store credit and options for store credit. The system can further provide for a fourth communication link between the processing server 452 and a credit processing entity concerning the providing of credit processing services. Other parties could also communicate with the processing server 452.

[0184] Having thus described the invention in detail, it is to be understood that the foregoing description is not intended to limit the spirit or scope thereof. It will be understood that the embodiments of the present invention described herein are merely exemplary and that a person skilled in the art may make many variations and modifications without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. All such variations and modifications, including those discussed above, are intended to be included within the scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A system for the provision of store credit, comprising a provider computer system hosting an electronic platform (a) configured to receive from a first party computer system of a first party a request for an option to purchase a store credit associated with parameters including (i) a second party, (ii) an amount of the store credit associated with redemption thereof,

and (iii) a price less than and for the amount of the store credit, (b) configured to send to a computer system designated by the first party the option for the amount at the price, and (c) configured to convert the option to purchase the store credit at a later time with the parameters.

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