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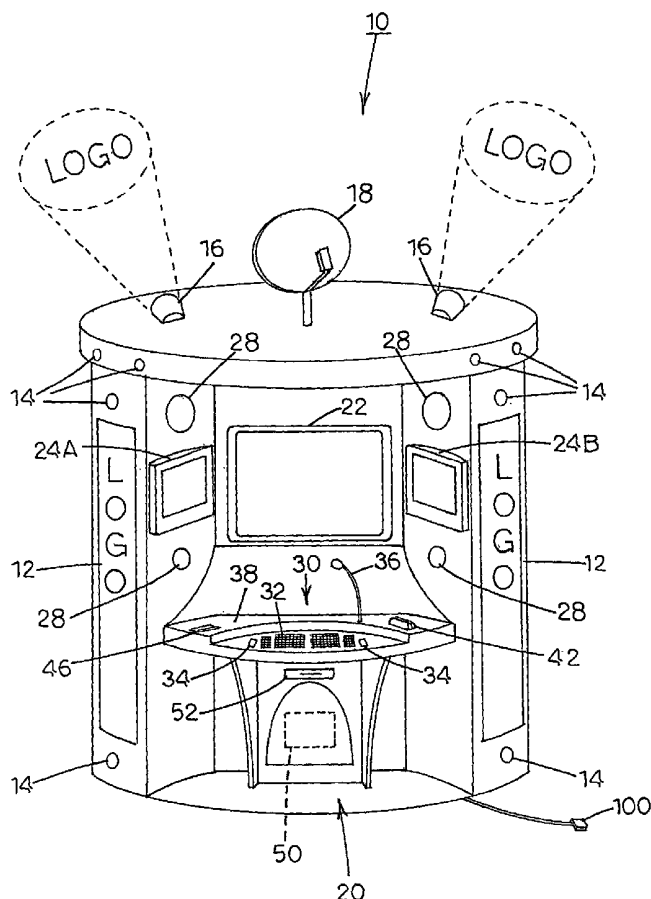
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(54) Title: NETWORK KIOSK



(57) Abstract: A customer interaction station includes a number of displays (22, 24A, 24B) each capable of outputting audio and visual stimuli to a potential customer. The customer interaction station includes a high bandwidth connection (100) to a remote location where sales agents are located. Further, the customer interaction station includes a customer interface complete with multiple inputs (32, 34, 36) by which the customer may convey information to one or more of the sales agents. The customer interaction station includes payment accepting devices (42) as well. In use, the customer interaction station is an eye-catching station that draws potential customers to the station where they are put into contact with a sales agent who can answer their questions about particular products. The sales agent is able to manipulate the displays and other output devices at the station in such a manner as to provide a seamless multimedia sales pitch to the customer. Upon convincing the customer of their need to complete a purchase, the customer is directed to the payment accepting devices (42) and the sale is consummated.

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NETWORK KIOSK

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is directed to a network kiosk having customer interaction stations that help facilitate selling goods or services with the assistance of a remotely located sales force.

Background of the Invention

Alvin Toffler seems prescient in retrospect. The information age is upon us. One of the primary vehicles of the Information age is the Internet. Not only has the Internet driven the growth of the Information age, it has ushered in an entirely new business model in which conventional "brick and mortar" style businesses are forced to compete with virtual stores. These virtual stores have little, if any, real estate, generally tend to have few employees, and may not have much inventory. With such little overhead, these virtual stores are on the cutting edge of commerce, squeezing profits from a landscape heretofore thought barren by other market participants.

These virtual stores typically have an Internet presence through a web page and a well advertised domain name such as AMAZON.COM, PETS.COM, FLOWERS.COM, PRICELINE.COM, or the like. These web pages are designed to be user friendly and to some extent intuitive so that customers may easily use the web page to select items for purchase and then complete the transaction. For example, AMAZON.COM has its now infamous "one-click" technology embodied in U.S. Patent No. 5,960,411. PRICELINE uses several forms of patented reverse auction methodology to effectuate its sales efforts.

Some of these ventures have been very successful; others have had highly successful start ups only to hemorrhage cash at every opportunity and end up lying on the

scrap heap of the Internet with a virtually dusty virtual store with few or no customers. These failures may be attributed to any number of things, but perhaps one of the most relevant factors is the lack of any human interaction throughout the process coupled with a non-user friendly interface. Thus, there remains a need to facilitate some form of human interaction with these virtual stores.

Still another reason that these e-commerce participants may fail is their inability to let potential consumers know about their existence. AMAZON, PRICELINE, PETS, and some others have spent immense amounts of money in advertising campaigns designed to increase awareness as to the products and services that they sell. Attempts by other start-ups to match these advertising expenditures may sometimes contribute to their demise. Thus, there remains a need for a technique for virtual stores to impose awareness of their existence onto the consuming body.

While humanity may be moving to a truly electronic economy where there are no stores, merely inventory holding locations, a substantial portion of the population remains isolated from the Internet - i.e. the so-called "digital divide," or are technophobes who are still leery of the mechanisms by which privacy may be protected over the Internet, or are just reluctant to use computers. Thus, there remains a need to reach out to this potential consumer base. It is highly likely that a bit of human interaction may facilitate reaching this portion of the population.

The aforementioned problems are compounded when dealing with technologically advanced commercial items such as home entertainment equipment, computers, mobile phones, and the like. For items such as these, many consumers want to be able to be told of the advantages and disadvantages associated with particular brands and models before completing their purchase. While much of this information may be available on the

Internet, it may not be linked to the virtual stores selling the products, or otherwise may not be easily located. As the consumer becomes frustrated trying to locate the information, the likelihood of a sale decreases. Thus, there remains a need for virtual commercial entities to more readily promote their product with easy access to the underlying information. This too might be overcome or at least mitigated with a little human intervention.

Technologically complex devices are also suffering from a lack of qualified sales people, even in the traditional brick and mortar stores. In the past, commission based sales agents worked the floors of retail stores. These individuals were trained to understand the complexities of the devices that they sold and were able to answer most questions posed to them. However, such agents have been phased out, replaced with minimum wage sales clerks who are responsible for all the products in the store. Thus, these clerks become veritable "jack of all trades, master of none" type people, who may be able to answer superficial questions about any given product, but are unlikely to know the particulars of another given product. Manufacturers feel that a more qualified sales force may improve sales for a product, and thus, it may be desirable to make knowledgeable sales agents available to the customer.

At the same time that the Internet has exploded, other non-brick and mortar selling techniques have also proliferated. In particular, telemarketing has gained in popularity. DAVOX, IBM, SIEBEL, KANA, and LUCENT have all been active participants in this arena, developing suites of products that help vendors provide adequate phone support and customer response ability to their consumers.

However, while technology does exist, there remains a need for a vendor to wed the disparate technology into an integrated whole that merges Internet based selling with a

healthy dose of human interaction, and a touch of the brick and mortar to provide a truly effective selling vehicle.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention solves many of the aforescribed problems by providing a network kiosk having a customer interaction station in a high traffic location such as a mall, an airport, a video rental store, a plaza, or the like. This network kiosk may include a number of features that make it eye catching and designed to draw in a potential customer. The customer interaction station includes a high bandwidth communications link that allows access to one or more communications networks and through such networks to a virtual vendor and his sales force.

The customer interaction station may be shaped as a booth on which several displays are mounted. In one embodiment, a high definition screen is positioned at eye level on the back wall of the booth with smaller displays on both interior sidewalls of the booth. An additional display may be mounted to the ceiling of the booth. Speakers are associated with the booth so that an audio signal may be generated. Still further, the booth may include bright, flashy, surface indicia designed to attract the eye of the casual viewer. Further, a sample of the product sold through the customer interaction station may be mounted on the roof of the booth together with laser lights or the like. Finally, the booth may include a customer input area including a keyboard, a mouse, roller ball, touchscreen, or the like, as well as a microphone and payment accepting devices including a cash acceptor, a check reader, a credit/debit card reader, and/or an Automated Teller Machine (ATM).

While not seen by the customer, the customer interaction station includes a high speed, high bandwidth connection to one or more communications networks. Through this connection, the customer interaction station may communicate to the virtual vendor, and the virtual vendor may control the outputs of the customer interaction station.

At the virtual vendor, the sales force may be highly trained specialists that are intimately familiar with the products or services being sold. Further, each sales agent may be equipped with sufficient computing power to control the displays and outputs of the customer interaction station. Specifically, a camera may be directed at the agent along with a microphone and the resulting audio and video be sent to the customer interaction station for display on one of the screens. The sales agent may additionally use his computer to bring up web pages, video commercials, or other content and send such content to the customer at the customer interaction station. In one embodiment, the sales agent may send a snap shot of a web page to the customer at the station and both the customer and the agent manipulate the web page as needed. Further, the sales force is networked together so that calls may be internally transferred. In short, the sales agent is provided with many tools and techniques to convey information to the customer so as to help complete a sale.

The methodology of the present invention includes the customer being attracted to the customer interface station by its flashy graphics and the laser light show and asking a question. Voice recognition software may initially screen the customer's request or the customer may have input the question through another form of input such as a touchscreen or keyboard. Regardless of the particular input technique, the query is screened for content and directed to the sales agent most knowledgeable about the query. The sales agent then uses his tools to provide information and the like to the customer so as to

convince the customer to make a purchase. As the customer interface station includes payment accepting devices, the sale may immediately be consummated and the product or service delivered subsequently.

Other objects and advantages of the present invention will become apparent and obvious from a study of the following description and the accompanying drawings, which are merely illustrative of such invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 illustrates a front perspective view of a customer interaction station according to the present invention;

Figure 2 illustrates a top view of the customer interaction station of Figure 1;

Figure 3 illustrates a schematic commerce system according to the present invention; and

Figure 4 depicts a flowchart that illustrates certain steps or occurrences that take place during the course of an interactive sales communication between a customer and a remotely located sales agent.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides network kiosks with customer interaction stations that are typically located in high traffic areas. These stations are connected through a high bandwidth communications link to a vendor and the vendor's sales force. The vendor is then able to manipulate the information provided by the station to the customer in such a way as to promote a sale.

The type of vendor is substantially limitless, however, vendors promoting products or services requiring expertise are best served by the present invention. In particular, technologically based products and services such as satellite television service, audio and visual products, cellular phones, banking, and the like are well served by the present invention.

A network kiosk **10** is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. Network kiosk **10** may include surface indicia **12** such as company logos, banners, promotional phrases or the like. Further, to promote the eye candy feel of the network kiosk **10**, lights **14** may be positioned strategically throughout the network kiosk **10**. Further, top lights **16** may also be incorporated into the network kiosk **10**. Top lights **16** may be spotlights with indicia displayed thereon (not shown), lasers, or the like, as needed or desired. Still further, a mock up of the product **18** sold through the network kiosk **10** may also be positioned on the top of the network kiosk **10**. For example, if the network kiosk **10** were designed to promote DIRECTV and its associated satellites, then the surface indicia **12** may state DIRECTV and the logos shown in the lights **16** may state the same. Further, the product **18** may be a real satellite dish or mock up of a satellite dish. Other arrangements are also possible, however, the overarching concept behind the network kiosk **10** is to attract the eye and draw customers to the network kiosk **10**. Thus, any ornamentation should preferably be designed to do such. For example, a scrolling text bar (not shown) could surround the top of the network kiosk **10**.

While the dimensions of the network kiosk **10** are not material to the present invention, an exemplary embodiment has a height of approximately seven feet tall and a diameter of approximately ten feet. While the network kiosk **10** as shown is round, other shapes and sizes are also within the scope of the present invention.

As seen in Figure 2, multiple customer interaction stations (sometimes referred to as customer communication stations) **20** may be included in one network kiosk **10**, although network kiosks **10** with a single customer interaction station **20** are also contemplated. Each customer interaction station **20** may include a primary display **22**, which in an exemplary embodiment is a computer monitor. Alternatively, a flat, high definition, television screen such as that sold by PHILIPS, SONY, or the like may be used. Supplemental side displays **24A** and **24B** may also be positioned, one on either side of the primary display **22**. A top display (not shown) may be positioned above the primary display **22** or on the ceiling of the customer interaction station **20**. Speakers **28** may further be positioned advantageously about the customer interaction station. In an exemplary embodiment, full stereo sound capabilities are available in the customer interaction station **20**. Other output devices may also be provided as needed or desired to convey information to customers. For example, tactile boards for the visually impaired or other devices may be incorporated into the customer interaction station **20**.

As the purpose of the customer interaction station **20** is customer interaction, each customer interaction station may include customer inputs **30** as well. In particular, a keyboard **32**, a mouse **34**, and microphone **36** may be provided on a table-like area **38**. While a mouse **34** is particularly contemplated, equivalently, a joystick, a roller ball, an electronic writing pad, a touchpad, or the like may be substituted or provided in addition thereto. Such customer inputs **30** may be provided on both the left and right hand sides of the keyboard **32** to accommodate left and right-handed users. Further, the arrangement of customer inputs **30** may preferably be arranged so as to provide an ergonomic environment. While not shown, a chair, stool, or other seat may be provided for a customer. If a seat is provided, the table-like area **38** is lowered to a height corresponding

to the seat. If no seat is provided, the table-like area **38** is at a height for a normal standing person. In one embodiment, table-like areas **38** of different customer interaction stations **20** within the same network kiosk **10** may be at different heights to accommodate differently sized users.

As better seen in Figure 2, in addition to customer inputs **30**, each customer interaction station **20** may further include customer payment devices **40**, which may include a check reader/acceptor **42**, a magnetic card reader **44**, a cash acceptor **46**, or the like as needed or desired. The magnetic card reader **44** may be a swipe type device or an insert type device such as is commonly found on Automated Teller Machines (ATMs). Alternatively, a wireless payment device may be used. Such a wireless payment device is commonly seen on heavily traveled toll roads and comprises an interrogator in the customer interaction station **20** and a transponder with account information thereon in possession of the customer. As such devices are conventional, further discussion thereof will be omitted.

Network kiosk **10** may include a full ATM in place of one customer interaction station **20** if so desired. Then, each customer interaction station **20** may communicate to such ATM as needed to help complete financial transactions. Alternatively, the magnetic card reader **44** may be linked to an ATM network such as HONOR, CIRRUS, PLUS, or the like and function as an ATM for a customer. To facilitate this arrangement, a cash box **50** may be positioned within the kiosk **10** with cash dispenser **52** available at any given customer interaction station **20**. While not required, it is expected that the magnetic card reader **44** read credit cards, debit cards, and ATM cards.

A high bandwidth communications link **100** is also included in the network kiosk **10**. Since each high definition video signal requires approximately 180 MHz, it should be

appreciated that each customer interaction station **20** may require approximately 1 GHz of bandwidth to provide adequate reception of incoming signals and transmission of outgoing signals. Where the network kiosk **10** includes a plurality of customer interaction stations **20**, this bandwidth requirement is increased. Note that each customer interaction station **20** may include its own communications link **100**, or a single communication link **100** may serve the entire network kiosk **10** and all its associated customer interaction stations **20**. The high bandwidth communications link **100**, while shown as a wirebased link, may alternatively be a wireless communications link and instead of a wire and plug (as shown), an antenna may equivalently be provided. Further, wire, in this context, should be interpreted as including fiber optic solutions.

While not shown, it is possible that each customer interaction station **20** may include a controller, such as a microprocessor or other local device that acts as a local intelligence for the customer interaction station **20**. Such controller may include communications software and/or hardware to control the communications link **100**. Alternatively, a single controller may be provided for the entire network kiosk **10**. As another alternative, each customer interaction station **20** may be a "dumb" terminal, with all functions controlled from a remote location. This is not preferred because there must at least be reception and routing capabilities from the communications link **100** to the displays **22** and monitors **24**.

Network kiosk **10** may be dedicated to a single product or multiple products. In the event multiple products are promoted with the network kiosk **10**, these products may be a single line from a single manufacturer, disparate products from disparate manufacturers, or some hybrid amelioration of products. It is also possible, although not

preferred, to have competing products from competing manufacturers sold through the same network kiosk **10**.

Having described the network kiosks **10** with the customer interaction stations **20**, it is appropriate to discuss the system in which the customer interaction stations **20** operates, namely sales system **200**, illustrated in Figure 3. A plurality of network kiosks **10** may be placed in high traffic physical locations **202** such as a mall, an airport, a video store, a plaza, a convention center, or the like. Customers may approach the network kiosks **10**, and particularly a customer interaction station **20**, as previously described. Each customer interaction station **20** is connected to a call center **220** by a high bandwidth communications network **215**.

Communications network **215** may include one or more communications subnetworks. Particularly contemplated as being appropriate for the present invention are satellite communications systems **204**, the Internet **206**, the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) **208**, the Public Land Mobile Network (PLMN) **210**, and the like. It should be appreciated that a particular customer interaction station **20** may be directly connected to one subnetwork, such as the PSTN **208**, and from there connected to other subnetworks such as the Internet **206** before reaching the other end of the communications link, namely the call center **220**. Further, any or all of the subnetworks may include a satellite-based link that may or may not comprise its own satellite communications system **204**. Note further that in a packet based system, some packets of information may use one communications path while other packets use completely different paths, but still arrive at the destination without problem. A dedicated high bandwidth connection **212** may also be used, or the customer interaction stations **20** may only go through one subnetwork to communicate to the call center **220**. Thus, for example, each customer interaction station

20 may have its own IP address and communicate with the call center 220 through the Internet 206. Other equivalent communication schemes are contemplated, but as alluded to elsewhere, a large amount of data may be passing between the call center 220 and the customer interaction station 20. Thus, the communications network 215 needs to be able to accommodate these high data transfer rates. Further, the Internet 206 could include wired connections, such as telephone lines, digital subscriber lines, TV cables, fiber-optic links, and the like, and/or wireless connections, such as microwave, cellular, radio, satellite links, and the like.

Call center 220 may include a switch 222, a main computer or host 224, and a plurality of sales agent workstations 230. Switch 222 may be a Voice Recognition Unit sold by LUCENT as the G3. Other switches may equivalently be substituted. Switch 222 may have its own intelligence or may be slaved to the main computer 224 as needed or desired. Note that switch 222 may be software based or may be hardware.

Main computer 224 may be a personal computer with a microprocessor therein, or may be a dedicated network server, or the like as needed or desired, and may include memory with software implementing the methodology of the present invention stored thereon. Memory may be a hard drive, flash memory, EEPROM, CD-ROM, optical CD, floppy disk, DVD-ROM, magnetic tape, or other form of computer memory as is well understood in the field of computers. The software may be written in any appropriate code as needed or desired. In an exemplary embodiment, the main computer 224 is an ASM 400 sold by IBM.

It should be appreciated that the structure of the main computer 224 is provided as an example, and is not intended to be limiting. Other variations on the structure of the main computer 224 are specifically contemplated. Thus, while the main computer 224 has

been described as a centralized computer at one physical location, those skilled in the art will appreciate that the main computer **224** could use other architectures to accomplish the same functionality. In another embodiment, the main computer **224** could be a distributed system with multiple computer systems, each of them comparable to the centralized main computer **224** described above, and located at one physical location, linked together through a local area network (LAN). Each of the computer systems performs part of the tasks accomplished by a centralized host computer system.

In yet another embodiment, the main computer **224** could be a distributed system with multiple computer systems scattered across a number of physical locations, but linked together through a wide area network (WAN). Each of the computer systems may also perform only one part of the tasks of a centralized host computer system. The software may be resident on the single central computer or distributed throughout the network embodying the main computer **224** as needed or desired.

In a third embodiment, the main computer **224** could in fact be duplicative servers, each with its own switch **222**, and each capable of supporting the present invention. Such arrangements are common for game servers like EVERQUEST, ASHERON'S CALL, and the like. In these configurations, the customer interaction station **20** must access the appropriate server to access their account. However such architectures are well known, and a further discussion will be omitted.

It is specifically contemplated that the switch **222** and main computer **224** may be connected to the communications network **215** at all times and therefore should be adapted to have a fail safe and hot-swappable structure. This will allow continued operation even in the event of isolated failures within the system. Additionally, the software may be

backed-up regularly, as is well known in the industry, to recover in the event of a catastrophic failure.

Further, the main computer **224** may be connected to the Internet **206** not from a communications network standpoint, but as a client seeking information therefrom. In effect, the main computer **224** may act as an Internet Service Provider (ISP) for each sales agent workstation **230**.

A "computer" is defined herein as any data processing device including microprocessors, conventional personal computers, personal digital assistants, mobile terminals or phones, and the like. The term is meant to be construed broadly. While some of the commercial embodiments of these devices may presently lack the processing power to support the present invention, there is nothing that inherently prevents them from serving this function.

Sales agents **232** may be directly connected to the main computer **224**, or more probably, may have workstations **230**. Each sales agent workstation **230** is designed to enable sales agents **232** to interface with the customer at the customer interaction station **20** and may include a number of inputs and outputs such as a video camera **234**, a microphone **236**, a monitor **238**, a keyboard **240**, and speakers (not shown). The relationship between the workstation **230** and the main computer **224** may be peer-to-peer or client-server, and may be connected through a LAN, WAN, or other technique as needed or desired. The communications link between the workstations **230** and the main computer **224** may be a high bandwidth link so as to support the efficient pass through of video signals and the like.

In one embodiment, each workstation **230** has access to the Internet **206** to solicit content therefrom. This may be in addition to using the Internet **206** as a communications

network **215** to connect the customer interaction station **20** to the call center **220**. This additional connection may be done through the main computer **224** or directly as needed or desired.

Further, incoming communication to the call center **220** may be routed between different sales agents **232** as needed or desired. Thus, if a particular sales agent **232** is not trained to provide an answer to an asked question, he may transfer the call to another agent **232** who may provide the desired answer. As part of this internal transfer, a call record may also be transferred which includes any desired information about the call and/or caller to assist the new sales agent **232**. This may be particularly helpful for customer service questions where troubleshooting is occurring. The new sales agent **232** may tell with a glance at the call record what has been attempted and suggest new, non-redundant solutions. Further, this call record may be linked to the customer's purchasing record so that the sales agent may make recommendations based on previous purchases. For example, if the customer were inquiring about DIRECTV, the sales agent **232** could see that the customer had previously purchased a HDTV. The sales agent **232** could state with confidence that the DIRECTV service would be fully compatible with the customer's television, or would need this particular sort of adaptor which is sold by this other company, and so on. A database may be maintained for each customer to promote the use of this sort of information by the call records.

Additionally, the call center **220** may include a full accounting suite of software that facilitates the financial transactions surrounding sales through the customer interaction stations **20**.

DAVOX of Westfield, Massachusetts has a suite of products, variously described in U.S. Patents 5,790,650; 5,784,452; 5,761,285; 5,640,577; 5,592,543; 5,164,981;

5,285,400; 5,276,732; 5,278,898; 5,832,068; and 6,047,054 which are all hereby expressly incorporated by reference that help facilitate the functioning of the call center **220**. Similar products are also be available from KANA, IBM and LUCENT. These products may be implemented by the switch **222** or the main computer **224** as needed or desired.

An exemplary embodiment includes using IBM's CALLPATH software together with IBM's DIRECTTALK software, SEIBEL CALL CENTER software, IBM's AIX servers (250P, M80), and a LUCENT G3 switch. Other arrangements of hardware and software are also possible, however, it is believed that this arrangement provides all the functionality needed. A particularly contemplated arrangement would have a dedicated T-1 or Ds3 line extending from the network kiosk **10** to the call center **220**. At the call center **220**, the call reaches a G3 Lucent switch, which uses Skills Based Routing within the Lucent CallPath software. More specifically, Intelligent Routing allows further selectivity in getting the call to the most appropriate sales agent **232**. Sales agent **232** is equipped with Seibel's Contact Application software on workstation **230**.

With that description of the hardware utilized in the present invention, it is now possible to explain more fully the methodology of the present invention. See Figure 4. In particular, a customer initially approaches a network kiosk **10** in a high traffic area (block 300). The flashing lights, glittering images, and splashy appearance of the network kiosk **10** cause the customer to enter a customer interaction station **20** (block 302).

Once in the customer interaction station **20**, the customer may then input a query (block 304). This may be done by speaking into the microphone **36**, using the keyboard **32**, using a touchpad, or the like as needed or desired. In one embodiment, the controller in the customer interaction station **20** performs some initial signal processing and transmits the query over the communications network **215**.

Regardless of the nature of the input and regardless of what processing is performed at the customer interaction station **20**, the query is linked to the switch **222** (block 306). Switch **222** is responsible for interpreting the incoming query and routing the query to the appropriate sales agent **232** (block 308). It is possible that the desired sales agent **232** is presently helping another customer, and thus unavailable to field the inquiry immediately. In such a circumstance, or perhaps as a matter of course, a hold message may be sent to the customer (block 310). However, in contrast to a traditional audio hold message, the present invention allows the customer to receive a full multimedia hold message. The various displays and monitors **22**, **24A**, **24B**, and optional ceiling monitor may be selectively activated to present a myriad of images to the customer. Further, speakers **28** may supplement the visual imagery in a coordinated fashion so as to present a coherent message to the customer. Such hold message may be as detailed or superficial as desired by the vendor.

Eventually, the sales agent **232** becomes available and comes online (block 312). An image of the sales agent **232** may appear on the display **22**. This image is captured by camera **234** and transmitted through the communications network **215** to the customer interaction station **20**.

The sales agent **232** may “push” additional content to the customer (block 314). In particular, the sales agent **232** may send additional audio and/or visual information to the customer. The customer then interacts with the sales agent **232** and/or the content (block 316). Note that the particular order of these two steps need not occur as indicated, but instead could be reversed. Thus, the sales agent **232** may inquire what sort of questions the customer has and provide answers himself or push the appropriate content down the communications link to the customer to provide the desired answers.

The sorts of content provided to the customer may be almost infinitely varied. The content may be prepared by the vendor in much the same fashion that the hold message was, may be a web page that is accessed from the Internet 206 and pushed down to the customer, may be audio clips, streaming video, or other content containing signal as needed or desired. Further, depending on the nature of the content provided, the customer may interact with the content directly with the sales agent 232 able to perceive the interaction. Thus, for example, if the sales agent 232 pushes a snapshot of a web page down to the customer for viewing on display 24A, the customer may use his mouse 34 to move a cursor around the web page and the movements displayed simultaneously on the monitor 238 so that the sales agent 232 may suggest links or the like that the customer may want to view. The sales agent 232 may have multiple monitors one for viewing the image that the customer is viewing, and one for viewing the customer. At the same time that the customer is viewing content, audio may be playing, or the sales agent 232 may be speaking in a coordinated fashion to promote the product or service for sale.

Still further, the sales agent 232 may transfer the call to another sales agent 232 to provide additional information to the customer, either about a different product with which that original sales agent 232 was unfamiliar or to answer a question for which the original sales agent 232 did not have an answer or for any other reason. As described above, a call record may be maintained and transferred with the call so that the new sales agent 232 is fully apprised of the nature of the inquiry and does not have to solicit information already provided by the customer. While discussed primarily in terms of transferring calls, it should be appreciated that the term transfer as used herein also includes situations where another sales agent 232 is merely brought into the conversation, such as in a conference

call. Again, the new sales agent **232** may send a video signal to the customer interaction station **20** and help promote the sale as needed or desired.

As a result of the coordinated sales pitch, the customer may decide to purchase the product or service. The sales agent **232** may instruct the customer on paying for the product or service at the customer interaction station **20**. In particular, the customer may consummate the transaction (block 318) by inserting cash in to the cash acceptor **46**, swiping a credit card or debit card through the magnetic card reader **44** or providing a check for the check reader **42**. Alternatively, while not shown, a wireless transponder associated with a payment means may also be used.

The product or service is then delivered (block 320). Some products or services may be delivered immediately, for example, many banking services, however, some may be delivered subsequently, or become available for customer pickup as needed or desired.

It should be noted that the sales agents **232** are specialized and able to answer most any question that a customer may have. Thus, the sales agent associated with banking services may be a loan officer or the like. Insurance agents may have the authority to issue policies and the like. For complex electronic products, the sales agents **232** may be company representatives who have immediate access to customer service personnel or the like as needed or desired. In this manner, customers get the best service possible as they go through the sales pitch. This reintroduces the expert sales agent to the sales process promoting better selling.

Of course, while this may be the desired methodology, there may be occasions when customers merely use the customer interaction station **20** as a conventional ATM machine. There may also be occasions when the customer refuses to complete a transaction and walks away. These situations are facts of life for the sales force, and while

regrettable, inevitable. However, market studies show that merely placing an ATM in a store increases traffic in the store as well as increasing in-store purchases. Thus, it is expected that many locations may desire the network kiosk 10 for that reason alone and may be willing to pay a fee for the placement of a network kiosk 10 in a particular location. Thus, while not every inquiry will result in a sale, other moneymaking routes are potentially available to the operators of the network kiosks 10.

The present invention may, of course, be carried out in other specific ways than those herein set forth without departing from the spirit and the essential characteristics of the invention. The present embodiments are therefore to be construed in all aspects as illustrative and not restrictive and all changes coming within the meaning and equivalency range of the appended claims are intended to be embraced therein.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. An interactive communication system that permits customers to communicate and interact with one or more sales agents located at a remote location, comprising:
 - a. a customer communication station adapted to be located remotely from the sales agents;
 - b. the customer communication station including a series of video monitors adapted to be communicatively linked to the remote location such that video and audio generated by the sales agent can be communicated from the remote location to one or more selected video monitors associated with the communication station for viewing by the customer;
 - c. a customer interaction interface associated with the communication station for permitting the customer to communicate and interact with the one or more remotely located sales agents; and
 - d. the customer interactive interface including a keyboard and an audio input for permitting the customer to communicate with a sales agent located at the remote location.
2. The interactive communication station of claim 1, wherein the customer communication station is adapted to provide Internet access through one or more of the video monitors.
3. The interactive communication system of claim 1, wherein the customer communication station is communicatively linked to a communications network

that includes an intelligent switching system that matches customer inquiries with certain sales agents.

4. The interactive communication system of claim 3, wherein the intelligence switching system includes voice recognition capabilities that interprets customer inquiries and route the inquiries to a sales agent that is particularly trained to handle such inquiries.
5. The interactive communication system of claim 4, wherein the communications network includes a main computer.
6. The interactive communication station of claim 1, wherein the customer communication station includes one or more payment input devices that permits the customer to pay for purchases through the communication station.
7. The interactive communication station of claim 6, wherein the payment input device is taken from the group consisting of a check reader, credit card reader, and an ATM device.
8. The interactive communication station of claim 1, including one or more laser emitting devices associated with the communication station for emitting laser beams from the communication station and in the process providing entertainment.

9. The customer communication station of claim 1, wherein the customer communication station forms a part of a broadband communications network that transfers video, audio, data and other information back and forth between the communication station and the sales agents; and wherein the broadband communications network includes a host computer interposed between the sales agents and the customer communication station and one or more broadband communication links coupling the host computer with the customer communication station.
10. The customer communication station and broadband communications network of claim 9, wherein the broadband communications network is internet based such that video, voice and other data may be transmitted back and forth between the sales agents and the customer communication station via the internet.
11. The customer communication station and broadband communication network of claim 9, wherein the broadband communication network includes one or more communication networks for transmitting video, voice information and data between the sales agents and the customer communication station, and wherein the communication network is taken from the group consisting of a satellite system, PSTN, and PLMN.
12. The customer communication station and broadband communication network of claim 9, wherein the host computer is programmed to provide internet access via one or more of the video monitors, and wherein there is provided programming for

internet web page synchronization that permits the sales agent and customer situated at the customer communication station to control navigation over web pages.

13. The customer communication station and broadband communication network of claim 9, wherein the host computer is programmed to enable escorted browsing wherein escorted browsing allows the sales agents to direct a customer to selected internet web pages and to collaborate on web forms in the process of closing transactions.

14. A method of facilitating interactive communications between a customer and one or more sales agents located remotely from the customer, comprising:

locating a customer communication station remotely from a sale site where one or more sales agents are located;

initiating an interactive dialog between the customer at the customer communication station and at least one remotely located sales agent located at the sales site;

the interactive dialog including generating video and audio signals at the sales site and transmitting the video and audio signals to the customer communication station where video images appear on one or more video monitors incorporated into the customer communication station; and

the interactive dialog further including directing communications from the customer at the customer communication station to one or more sales agents

- located at the sales site through an audio input and a keyboard incorporated into the customer communication station.
15. The method of claim 14, including simultaneously directing a series of different video images to the customer communication station where the different images appear on a series of video monitors incorporated into the customer communication station.
 16. The method of claim 14, including providing internet access through one or more video monitors incorporated into the customer communication station.
 17. The method of claim 14, including providing payment for goods or services purchased through the one or more sales agents by directing a payment form into an input payment device incorporated into the central communication station.
 18. The method of claim 14, including directing one or more laser beams from the customer communication station.
 19. The method of claim 14, wherein generating video signals at the sales site includes generating video images of one or more sales agents and transmitting those images to the customer communication station where they appear on one or more video monitors incorporated into the customer communication station.

20. The method of claim 19, further including accessing an internet site and simultaneously displaying one or more web pages from the internet site on one or more video monitors incorporated into the customer communication station while the video image of at least one sales agent also appears on at least one video monitor incorporated into the customer communication station.
21. The method of claim 14, including directing video, audio, data and other information from the sales site to a host computer and communicatively linking the host computer to the customer communication station such that video, audio, data and other information can be readily communicated between the customer at the customer communication station and the one or more sales agents located at the sales site.
22. The method of claim 21, wherein the communications link for transmitting video, audio, data and other information from the host computer to the customer communication station includes the internet.
23. The method of claim 21, wherein the communications link for transmitting video, audio, data and other information from the host computer to the customer communication station is taken from the group consisting of a satellite communications system, the internet, a public switch telephone network (PSTN), a public land mobile network (PLMN) and a dedicated communications line.

24. A network kiosk comprising at least one customer interaction station, said customer interaction station comprising:
at least one customer input device;
at least one output device; and
a communications link for communicating with a remote location from which a sales agent may interact with a customer through the input and output device.
25. The network kiosk of claim 24, further comprising a plurality of customer interaction stations.
26. The network kiosk of claim 24, wherein said at least one customer input device is selected from the group consisting of: a touchpad, a mouse, a keyboard, a microphone, a camera, a joystick, and a roller ball.
27. The network kiosk of claim 24, wherein said at least one output device is selected from the group consisting of: a display, a monitor, and a speaker.
28. The network kiosk of claim 27, further comprising surface indicia representing a product or service sold through the network kiosk.
29. The network kiosk of claim 28, further comprising a sample product mounted on said network kiosk.

30. The network kiosk of claim 29, further comprising lights mounted on said network kiosk.
31. A communications system comprising:
a network kiosk having a customer interaction station and a communications link;
and
a call center staffed by a plurality of sales agents, said call center being communicatively connected through said communications link to said network kiosk; and
whereby said call center may control content delivered to a customer at said customer interaction station and the customer may interact with at least one of said plurality of sales agents through said communications link.
32. A computer readable medium comprising software adapted to:
receive customer input from a customer interaction station;
deliver to at least one sales agent, located remotely from the customer interaction station, information from said customer interaction station;
deliver to said customer interaction station content determined by said at least one sales agent;
control information provided to the customer at said customer interaction station;
and
whereby said at least one sales agent may promote a sale through the information transferred.

33. A method of facilitating delivery of information to a customer, comprising:
- providing a network kiosk having a customer interaction station in a high traffic area;
 - establishing a communications link between said customer interaction station and a call center staffed with trained sales agents;
 - accepting queries from a customer, said queries initiated at said customer interaction station;
 - linking the customer to one of said trained sales agents;
 - controlling from a computer associated with said one of said trained sales agents information delivered to the customer; and
 - providing live interaction between said one of said trained sales agents and the customer.
34. A method of selling goods or services, comprising:
- accepting a customer inquiry from a remote location;
 - routing the customer inquiry to a sales agent suited to answer the customer inquiry;
 - establishing a communications link between said sales agent and the remote location;
 - pushing content over said communications link to said remote location to be viewed by a customer; and
 - allowing interactive two way communication between the customer and the sales agent to facilitate consummating a transaction.

35. The method of claim 34, further comprising accepting customer inputs from said remote location.
36. The method of claim 34, wherein allowing interactive two way communication between the customer and the sales agent comprises sending a video representation of the sales agent to the customer.
37. A sales system comprising:
- a switch adapted to support a high bandwidth communication link and route incoming inquiries to a sales agent suited for answering the incoming inquiries;
 - a main computer communicatively connected to said switch;
 - a plurality of sales agent workstations communicatively connected to said main computer, each of said workstations adapted to push content to a remote network kiosk, said content derived from a sales agent or the Internet and designed to promote a sales transaction with a customer at the remote network kiosk.

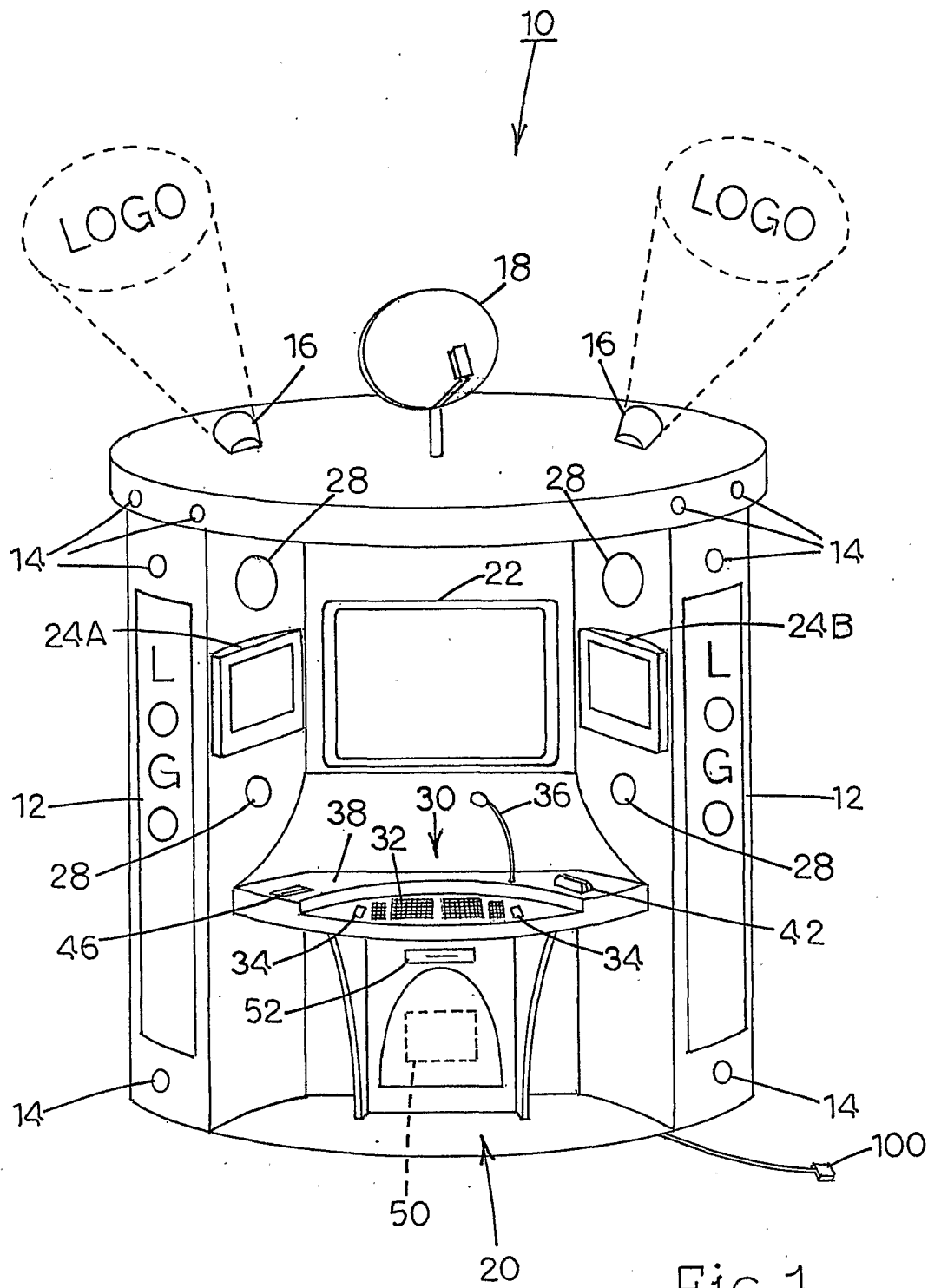
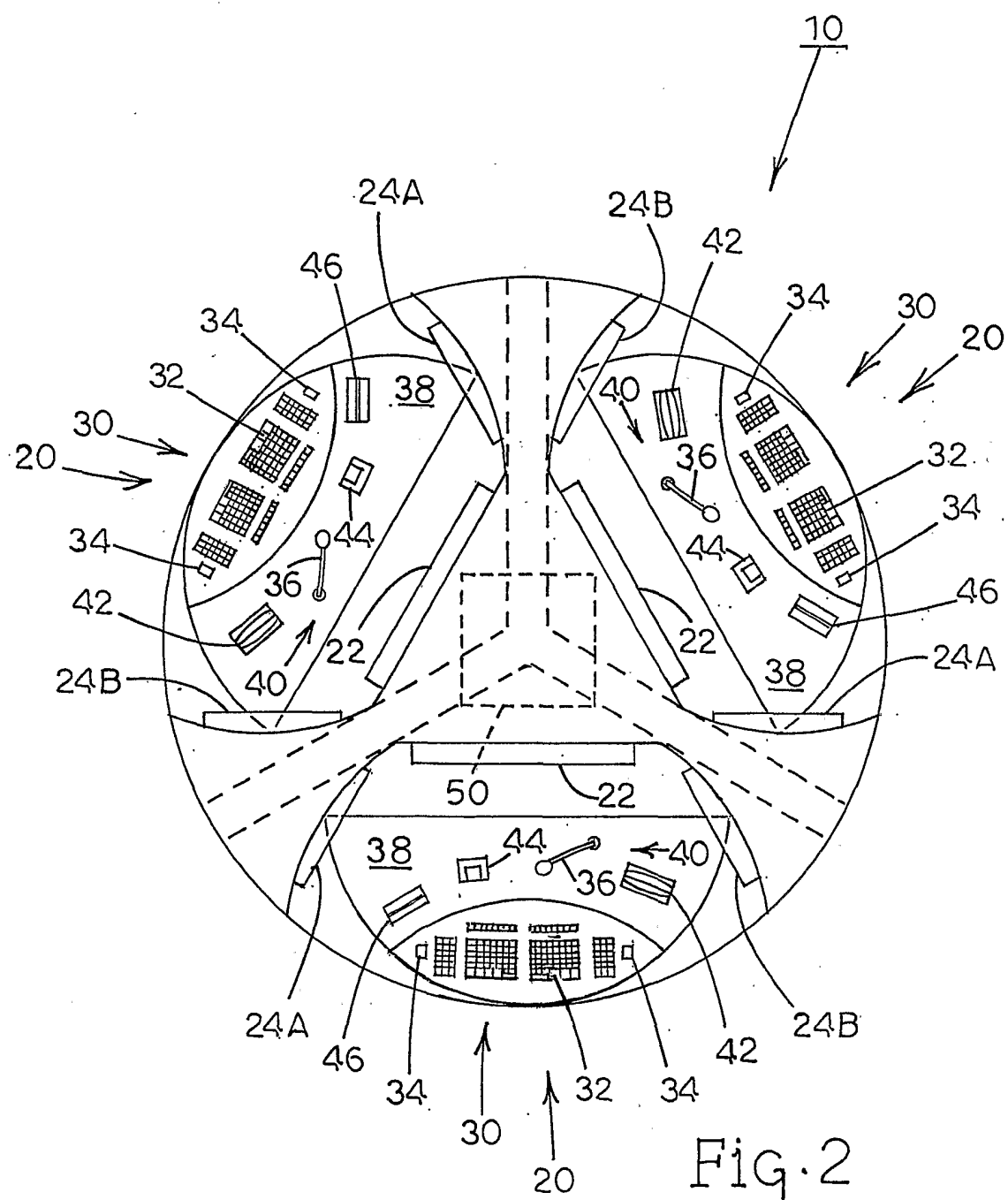


Fig.1



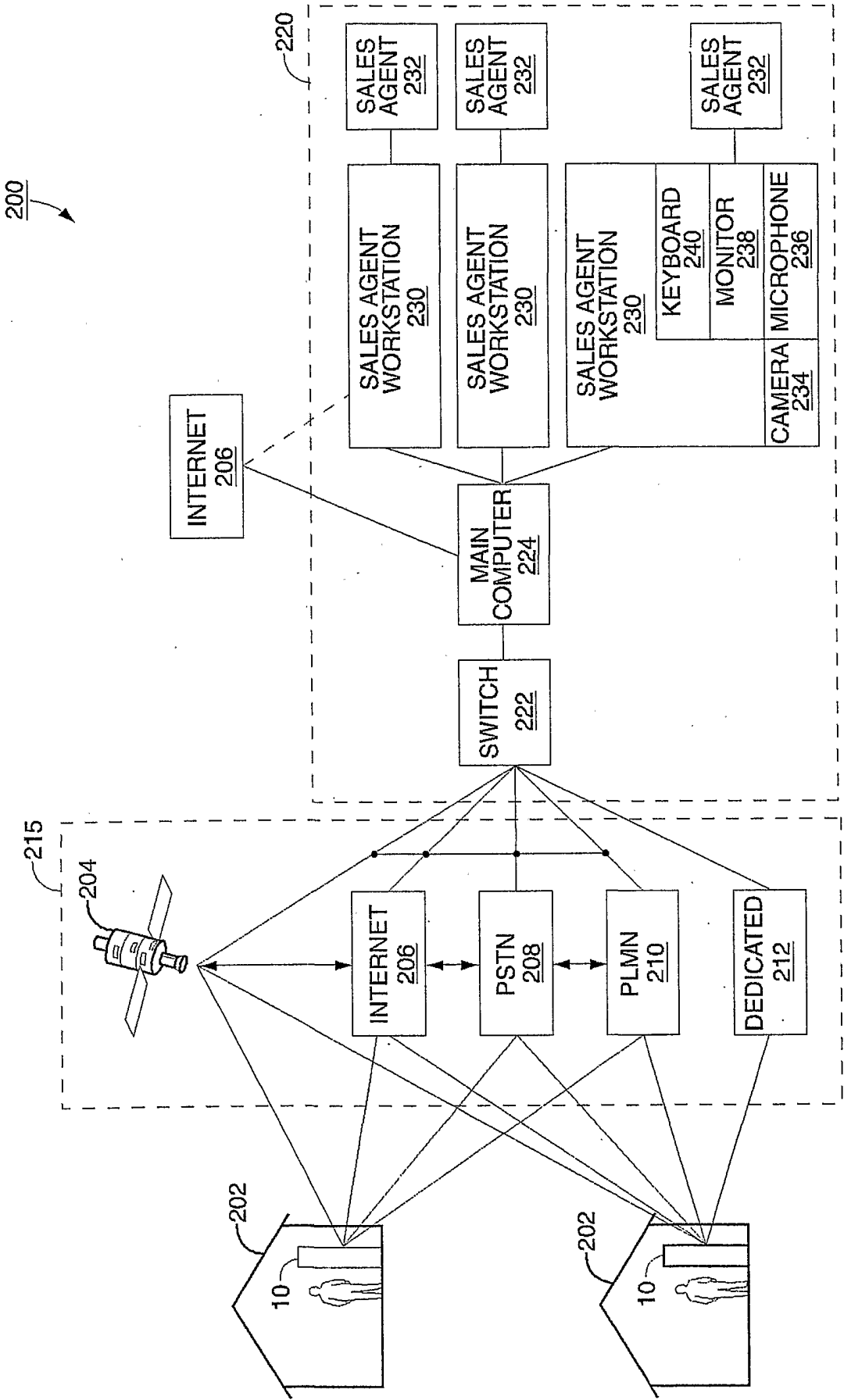
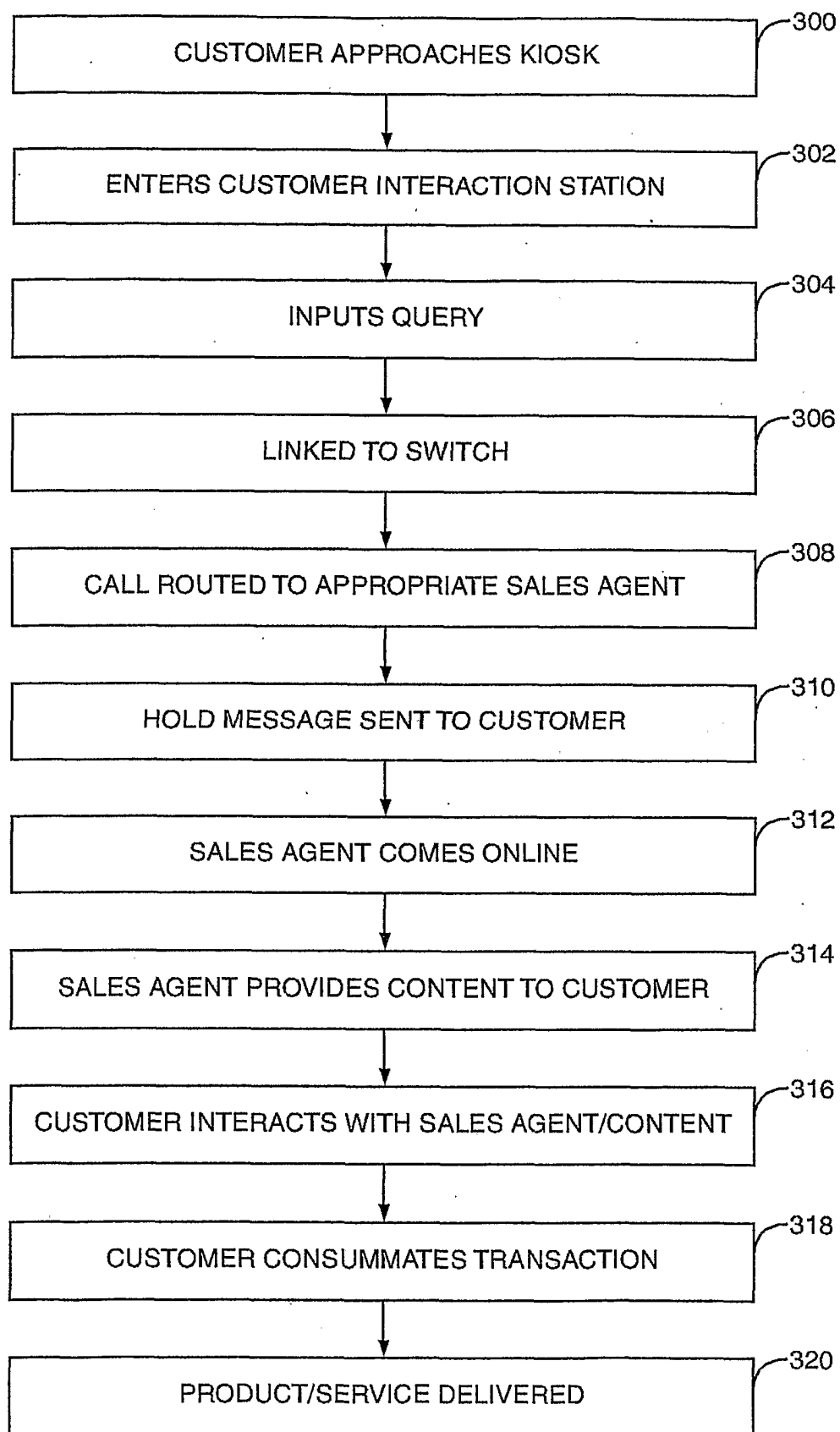


FIG. 3

**FIG. 4**

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US01/20567

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) : G06F 17/60

US CL : 705/26, 27

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 705/26, 27

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	US 6,055,513 (KATZ et al) 25 April 2000 (25.04.2000), column 8, lines 34-62; column 12, lines 40-45; columns 15-16, lines 56-67, 1-12; column 17, lines 15-46; columns 19-20, lines 59-67; 1-22; column 25, lines 11-39; column 26, lines 38-48.	1-37
Y	WO 94/21084 (KATZ) 15 September 1994 (15.09.1994), page 21, lines 35-37; pages 22-27.	1-37
Y, P	US 6,223,165 B1 (LAUFFER) 24 April 2001 (24.04.2001), columns 3-4, lines 56-67, 1-28; columns 8-9, lines 55-67, 1-64.	1-37
Y, P	US 6,141,653 (CONKLIN et al) 31 October 2000 (31.10.2000), column 17, lines 57-67; column 18, lines 18-37; column 19, lines 58-67, Figure 1h.	1-37
Y	US 6,021,428 (MILOSLAVSKY) 01 February 2000 (01.02.2000), Abstract and specification.	1-37
Y	US 6,032,130 (ALLOUL et al) 29 February 2000 (29.02.2000), Abstract and specification.	1-37
Y	US 5,914,951 (BENTLEY et al) 22 June 1999 (22.06.1999), Abstract and specification.	1-37
Y	POLERETZKY, Z. "The call center & e-commerce convergence" Call Center Solutions; January 1999, Vol 17. No. 7, pages 76-89.	1-37



Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.



See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:		"T"	later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention
"A"	document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	"X"	document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone
"E"	earlier application or patent published on or after the international filing date	"Y"	document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art
"L"	document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)	"&"	document member of the same patent family
"O"	document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means		
"P"	document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed		

Date of the actual completion of the international search

09 November 2001 (09.11.2001)

Date of mailing of the international search report

30 NOV 2001

Name and mailing address of the ISA/US

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Telephone No. 703-305-8052

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US01/20567

C. (Continuation) DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	LANSFORD, W. "Real-time, interactive sales and services across the Internet: Optimizing the customer experience" Call Center Solutions; November 1998, Vol 17. No. 5, pages 54-59.	1-37