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(54) **SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR AN INDEPENDENT RETAILER BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS MARKET EXCHANGE**

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(76) Inventors: **Nancy D. Reyda**, Alamo, CA (US); **Kelly J. Heiderich -Lee**, San Ramon, CA (US); **Eric A. Parnell**, Dublin, CA (US)

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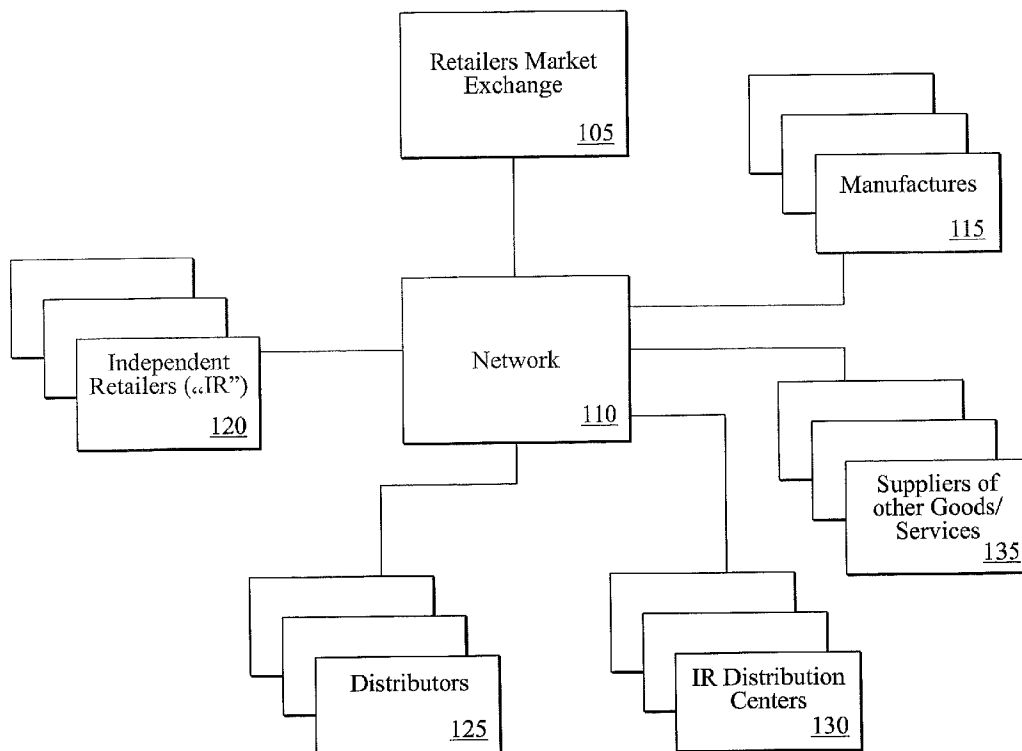
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A method of facilitating operations of a plurality of Independent Retailers ("IR's"), said method comprising: communicating over a network from a service bureau or a plurality of headquarters of a chain of retail stores to their respective IR's; displaying to said IR's a plurality of services for said IR's, for said IR's to select at least one service, wherein said services comprise procurement; receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to its respective headquarters or a service bureau showing said at least one selected service from said at least one store; and serving up to said IR's said at least one selected service.

Correspondence Address:
Timothy J. Hadlock
Chevron Corporation
P.O. Box 6006
San Ramon, CA 94583-0806 (US)

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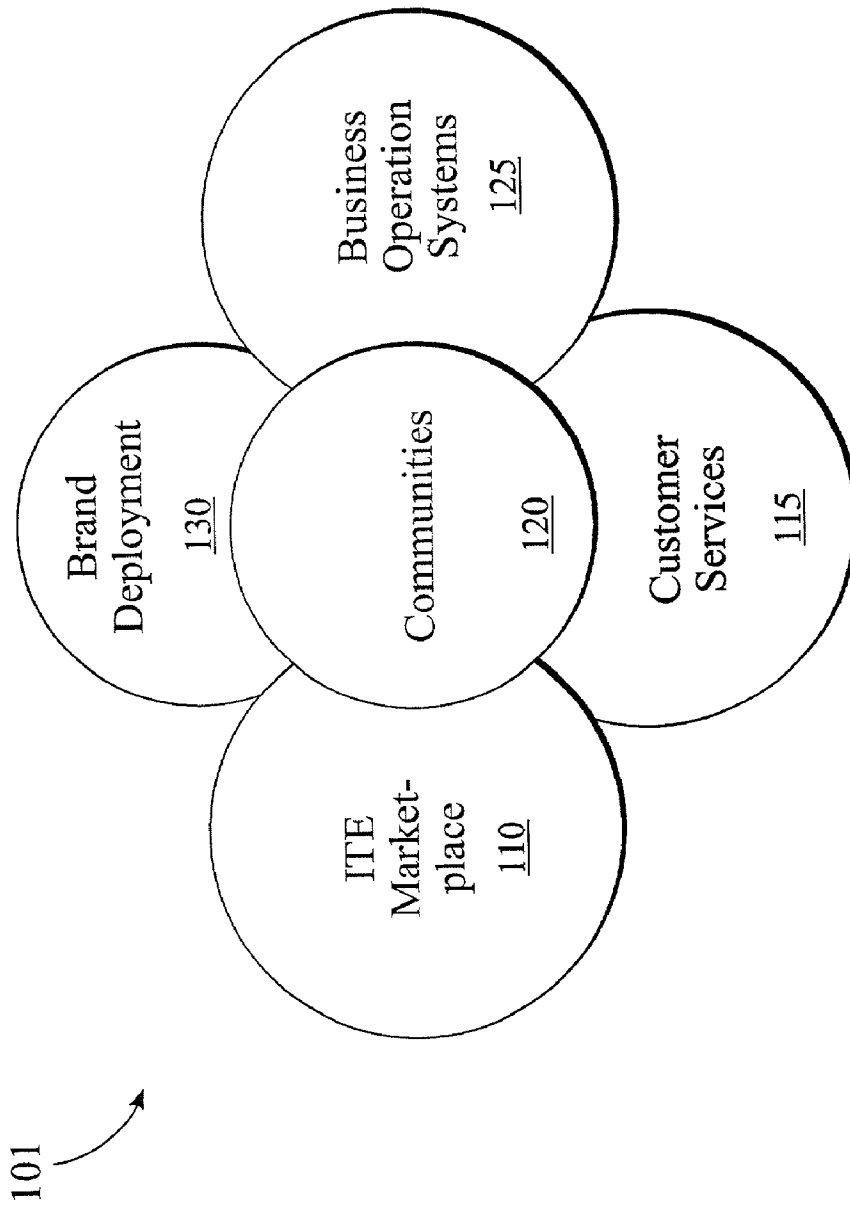


Fig. 1

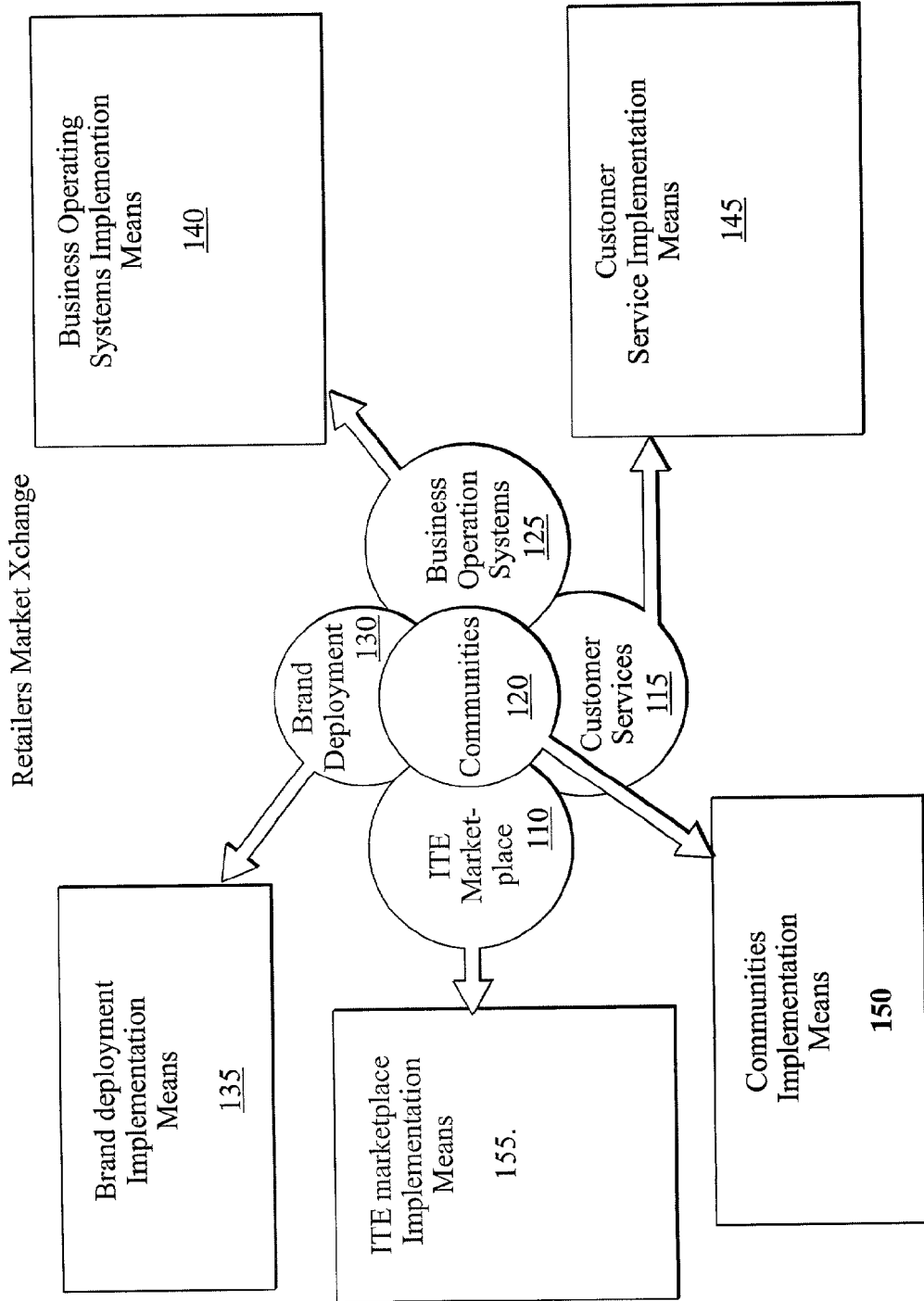


Fig. 2

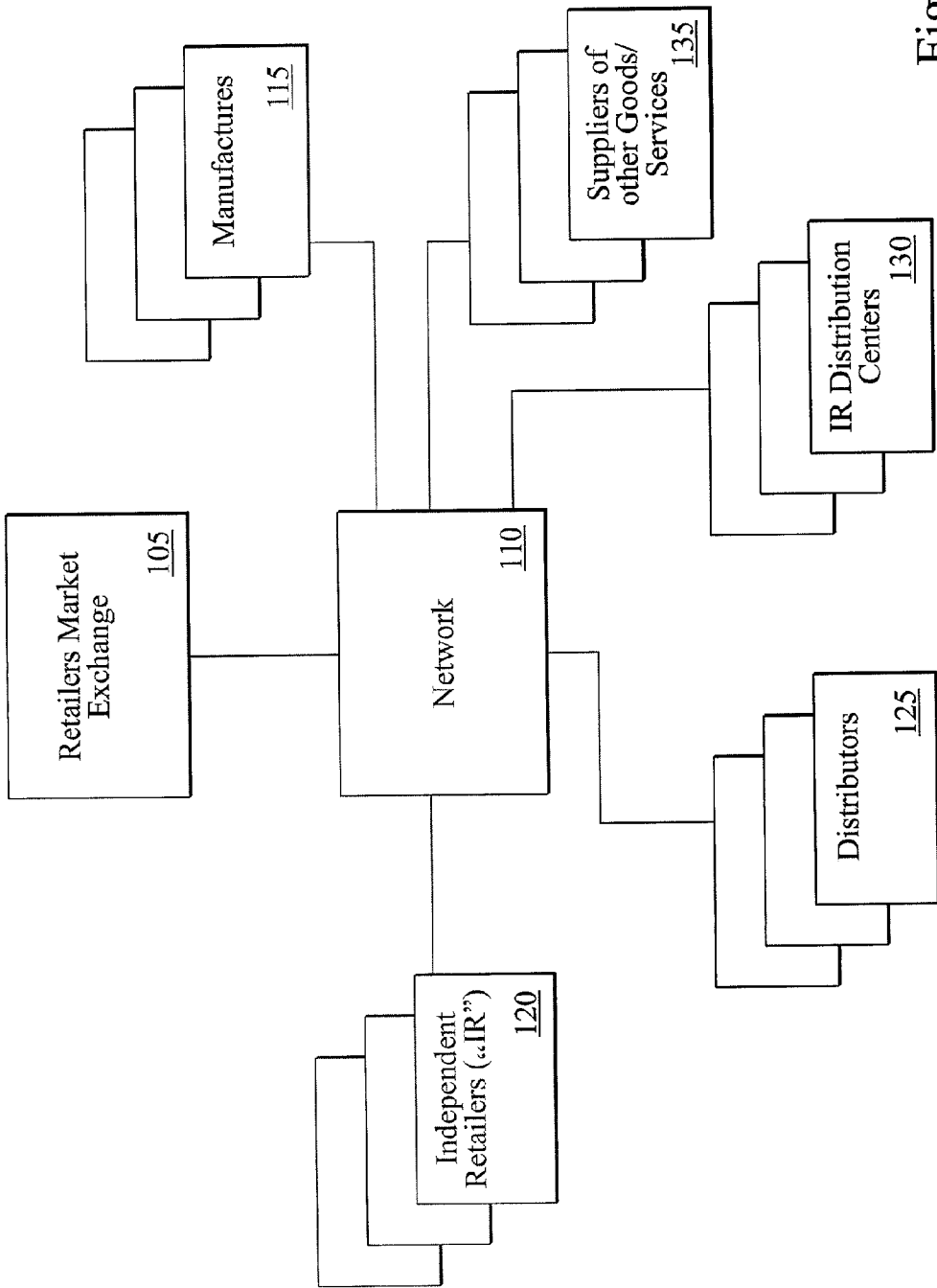


Fig. 3

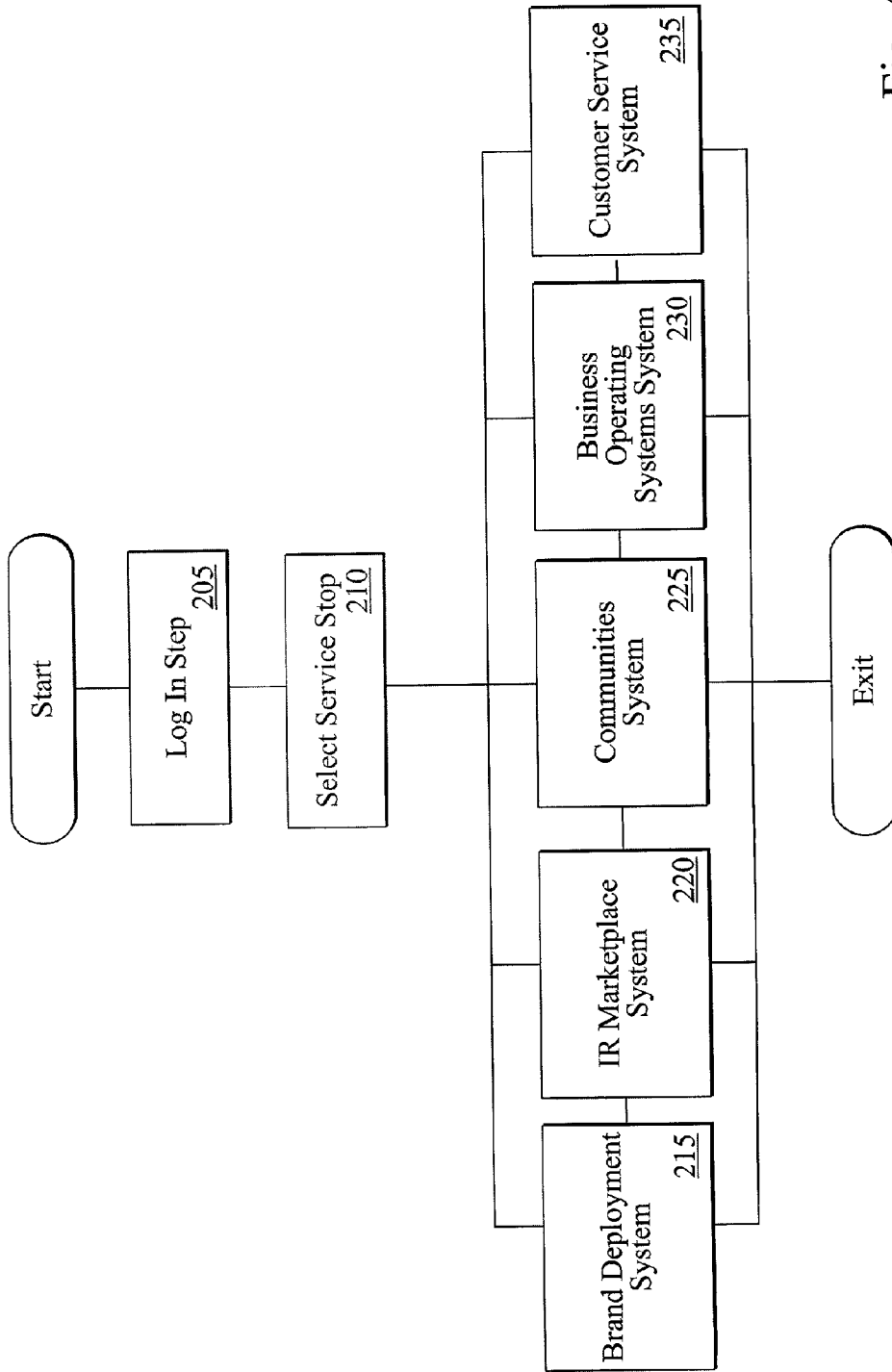


Fig. 4

Brand Deployment Service 215

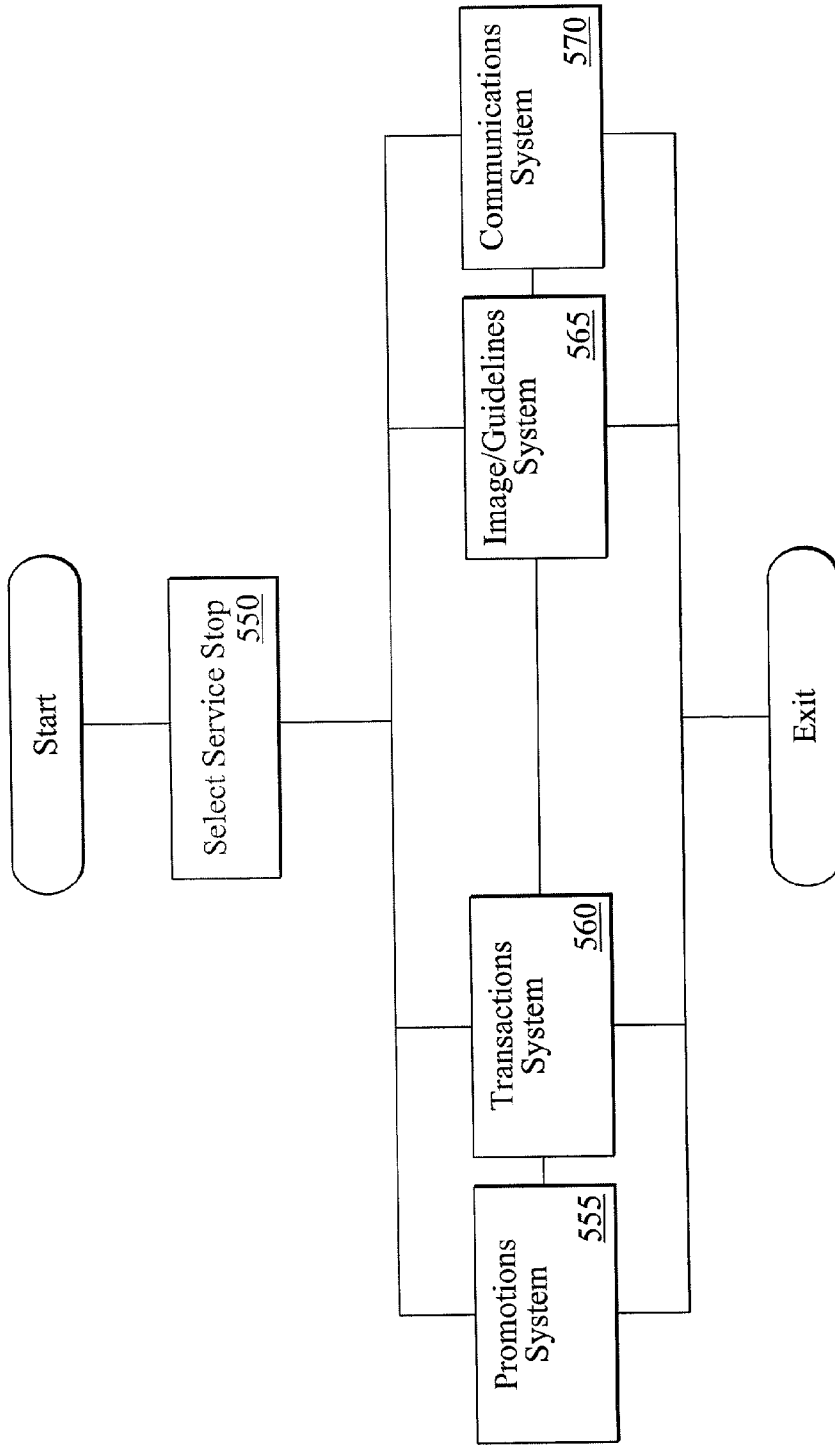


Fig. 5A

Promotions System 515

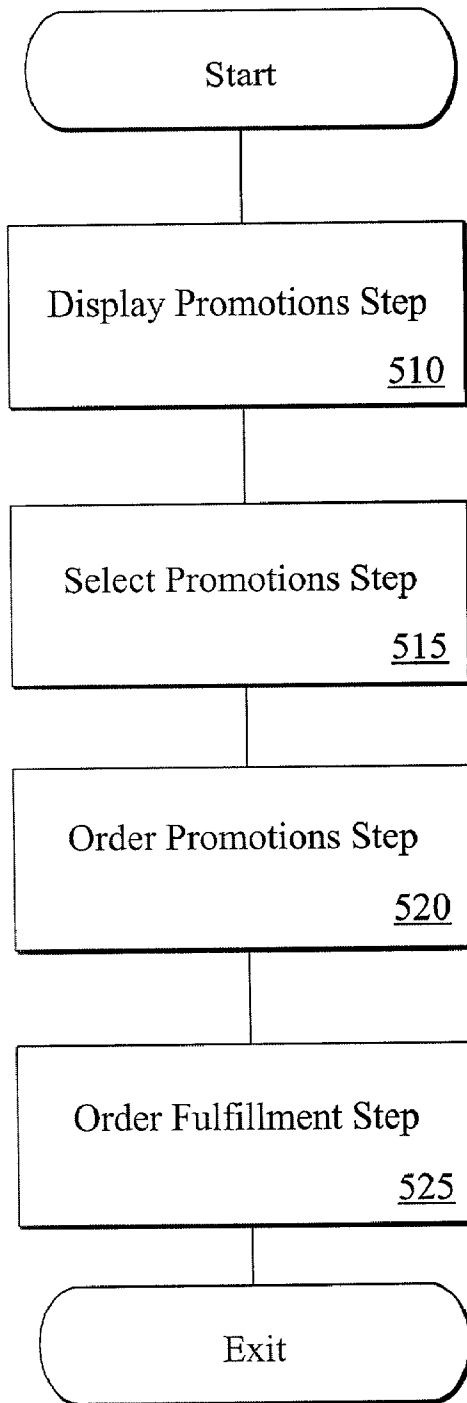


Fig. 5B

IT Marketplace System 220

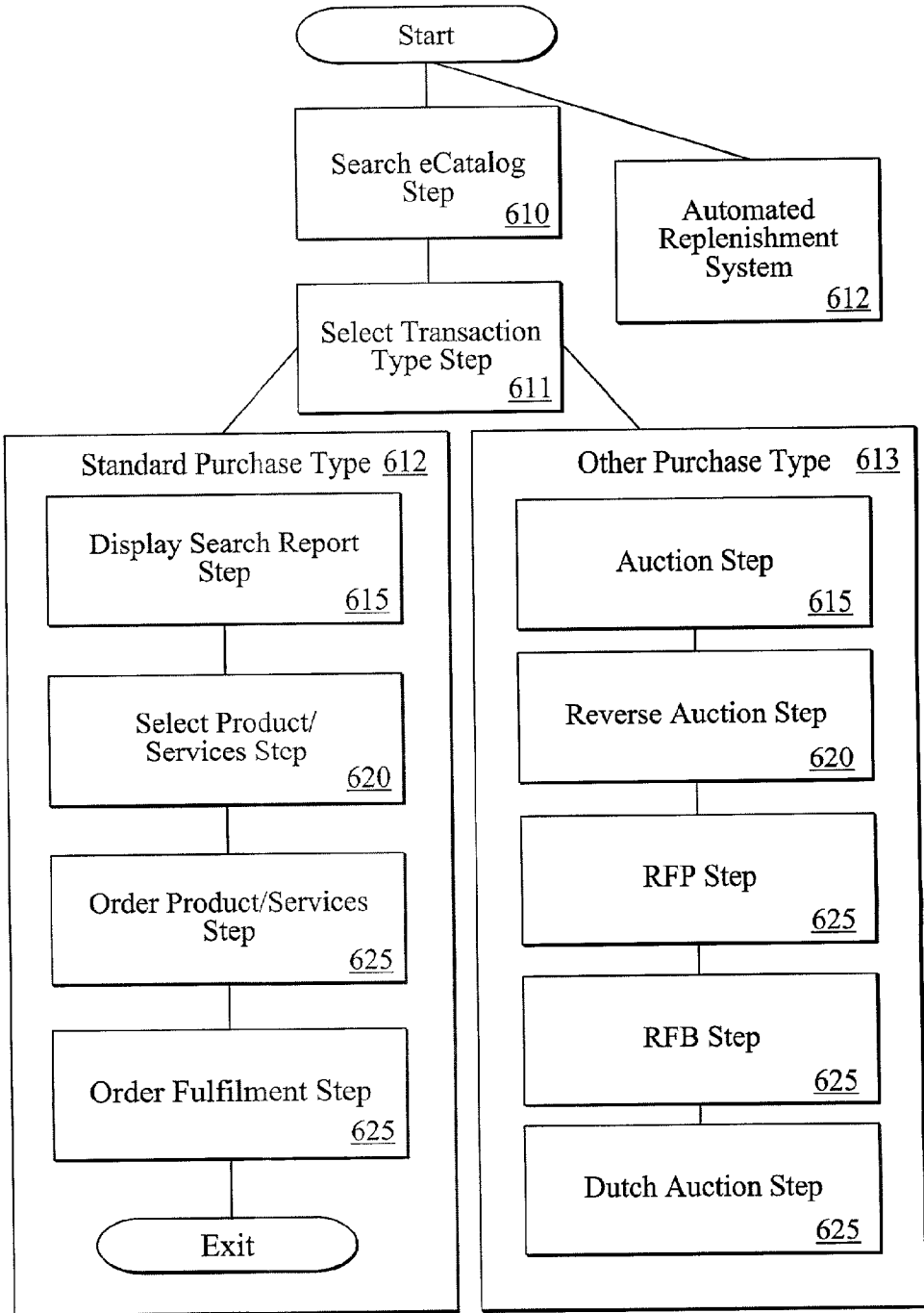


Fig. 6

Customer Service System 235

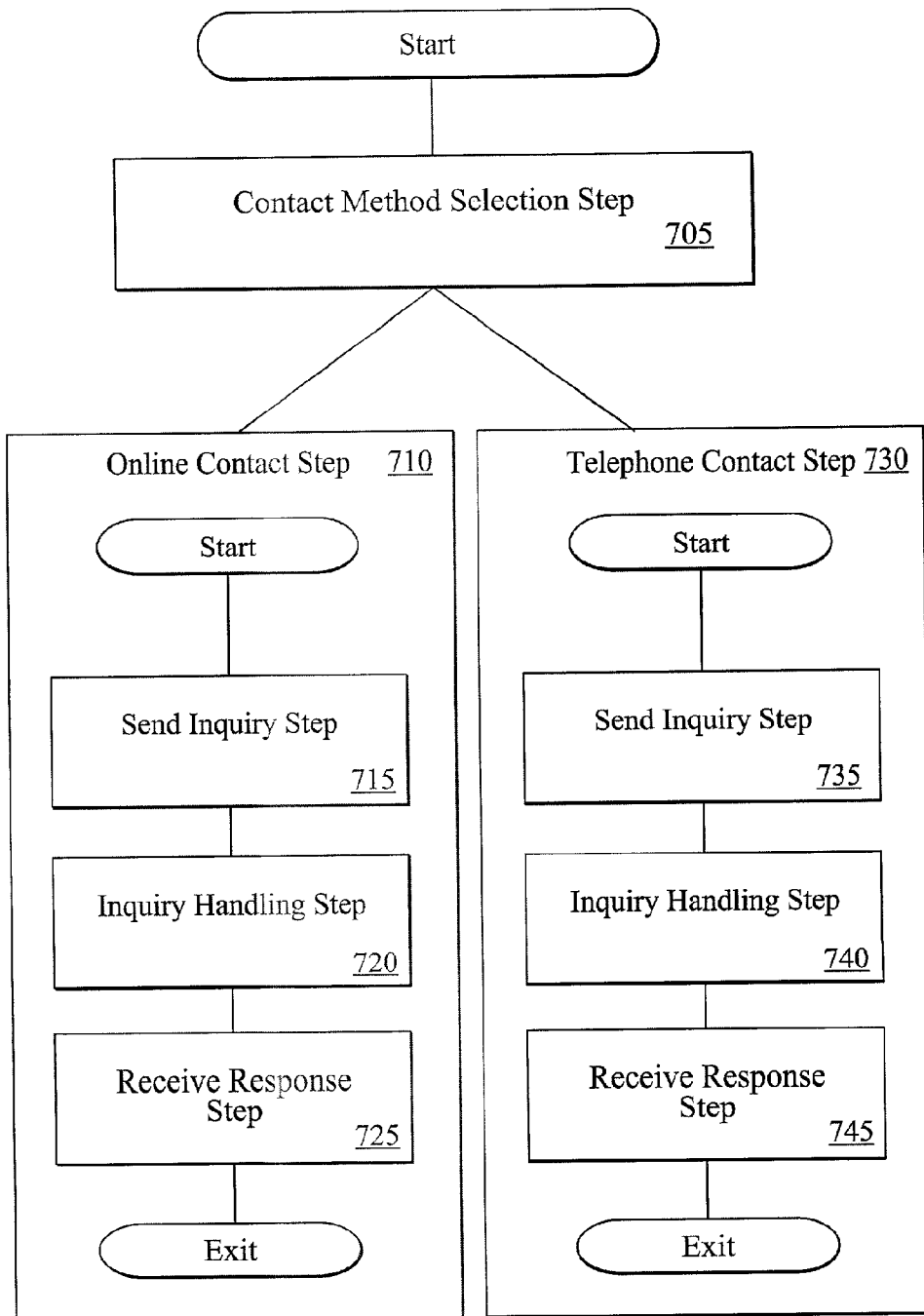


Fig. 7

Business Operating Systems System 230

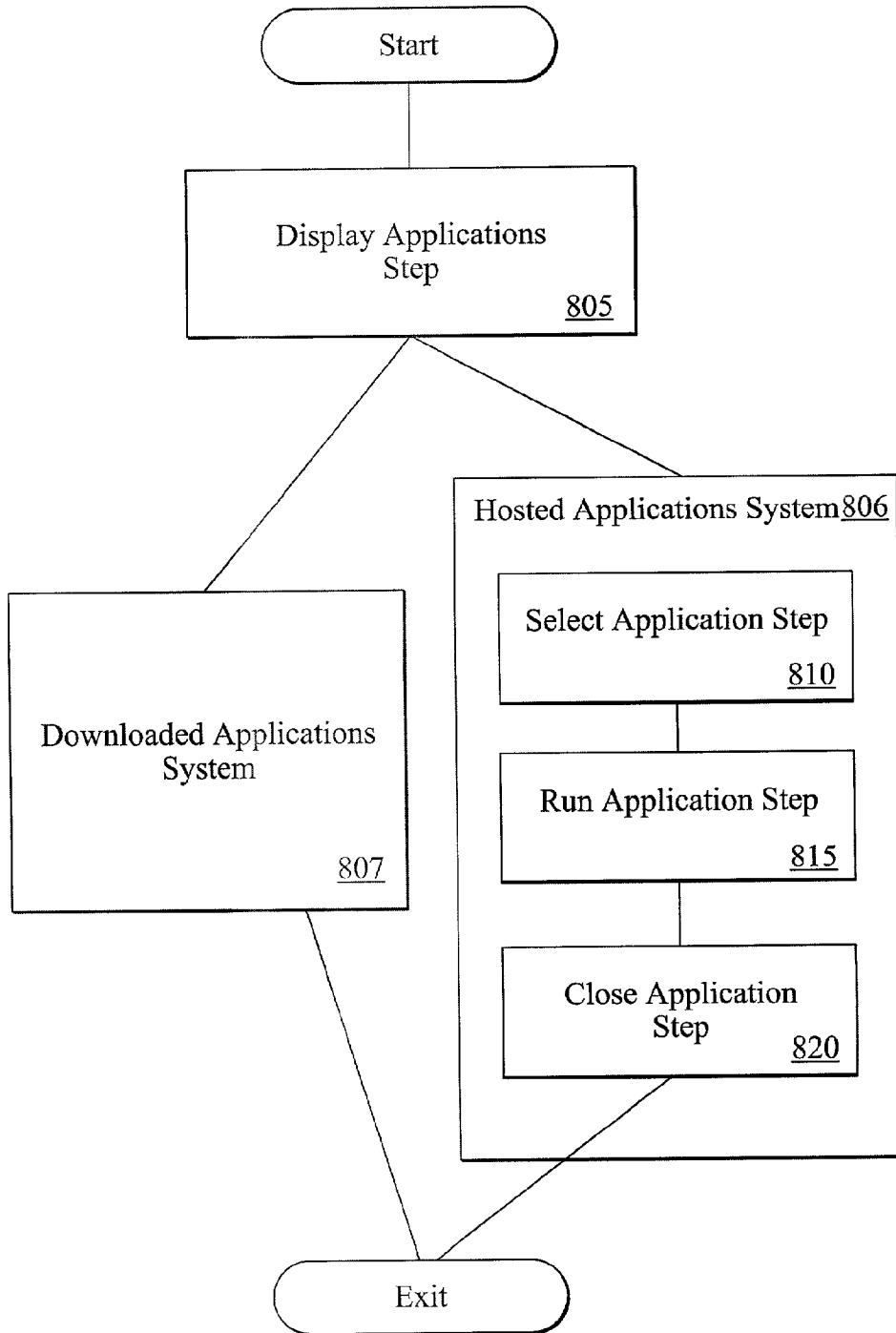


Fig. 8

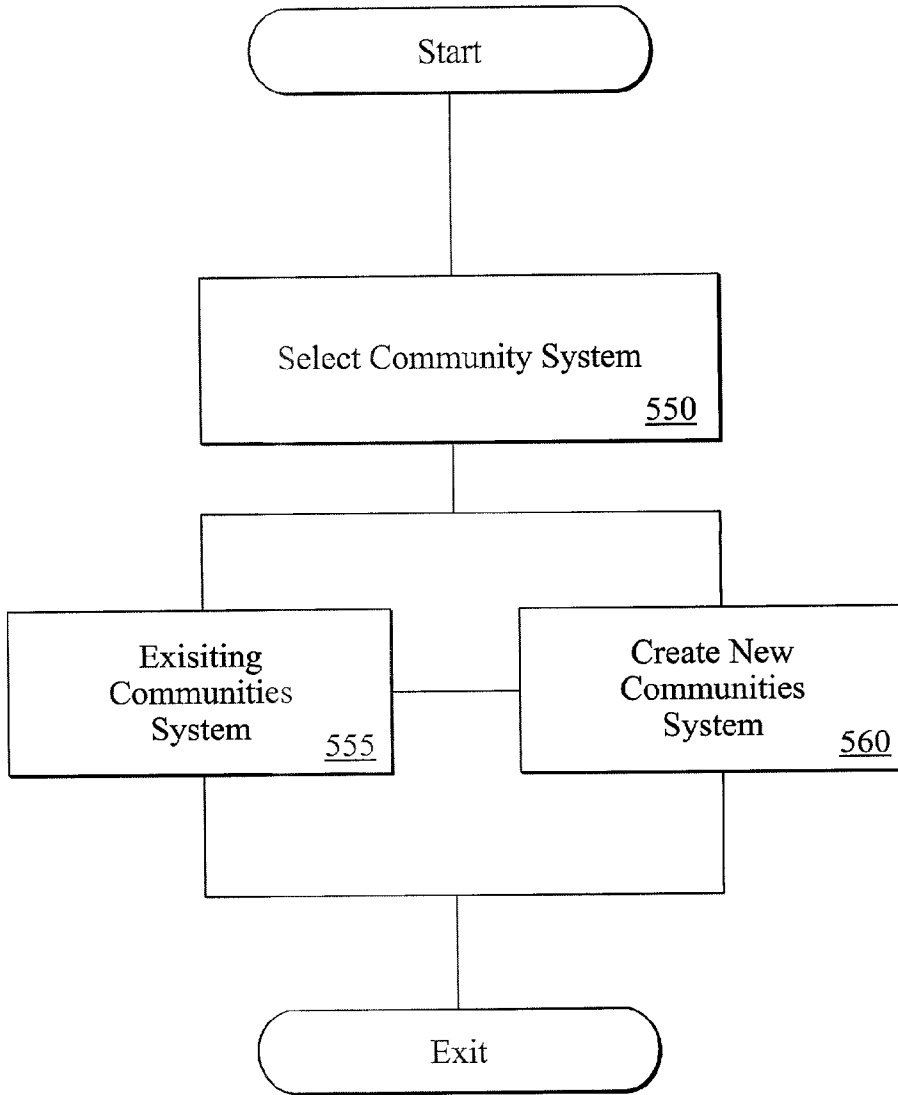


Fig. 9A

Existing Communities System

555

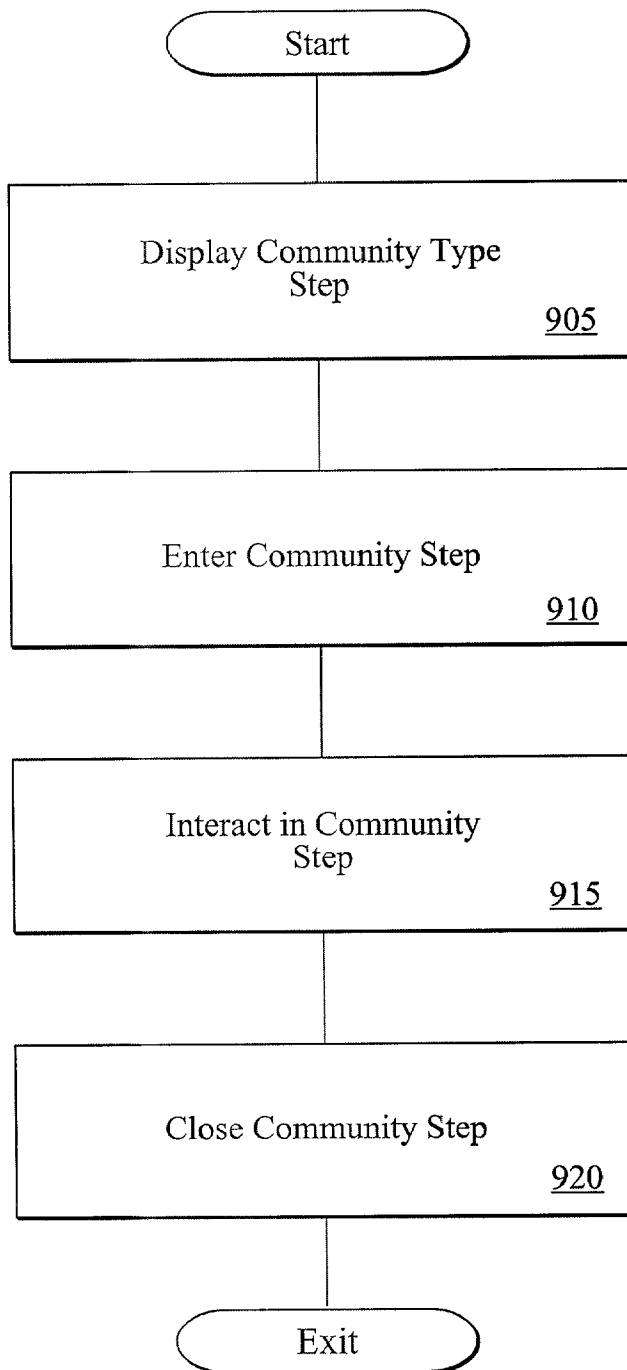


Fig. 9B

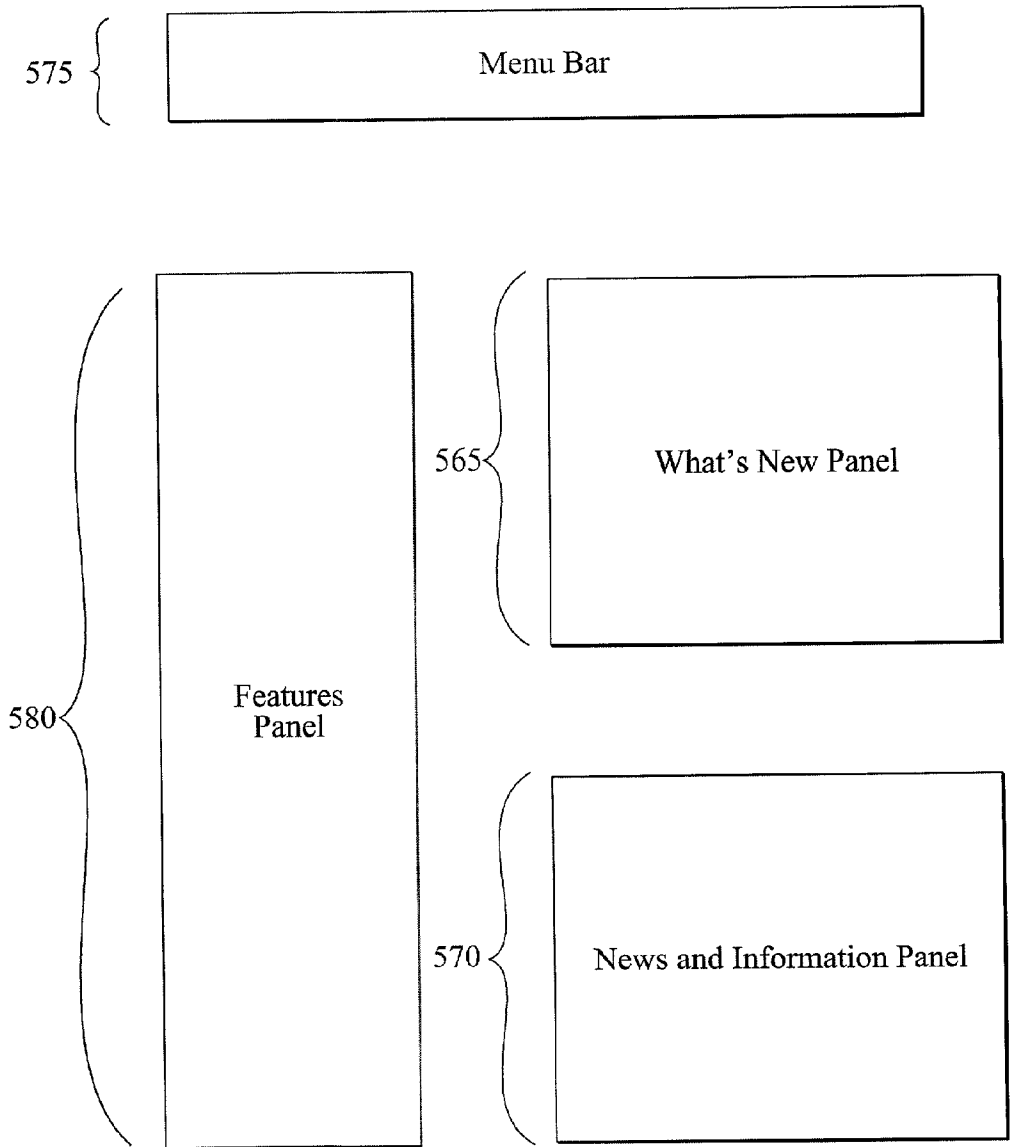


Fig. 9C

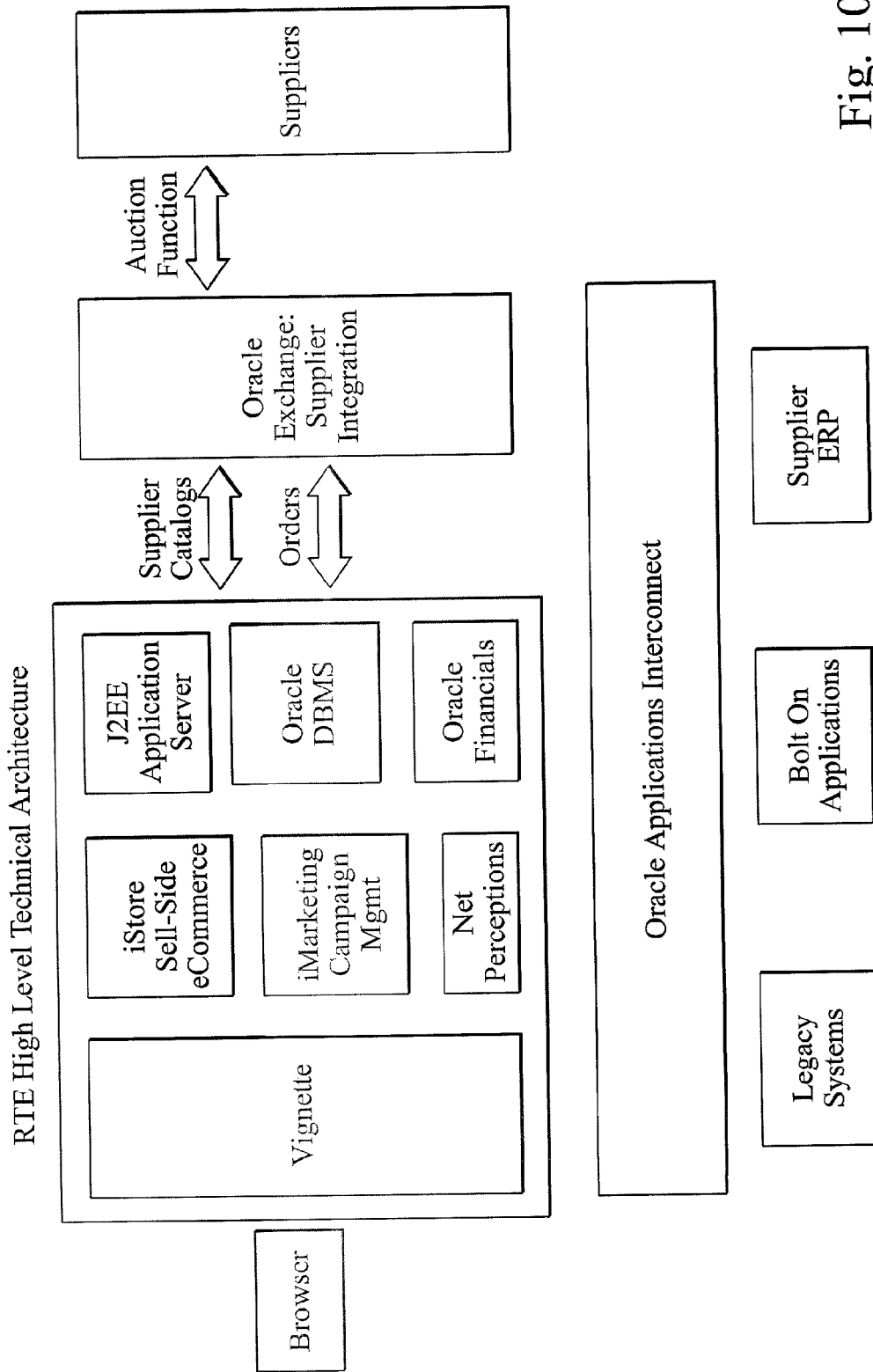


Fig. 10

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR AN INDEPENDENT RETAILER BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS MARKET EXCHANGE

I. COPYRIGHT NOTICE AND AUTHORIZATION

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II. FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0004] This invention relates to system and method for an independent retailer business-to-business market exchange.

III. BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0005] The emerging e-commerce technologies, the utility of the internet, and the need to have a business model that is able to use these two catalysts to serve the needs of the independent retailer is combined with the identification, development, and enablement of products and services required for efficient operation throughout the supply chain of this industry.

IV. SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] Accordingly, the invention includes a business model and intellectual property around the development of that model. The method comprises business model development and hardware and software integration with a wide variety of existing individual and legacy ERP systems.

[0007] The method was discovered in part by identifying key behavioral components of the independent retailing sector, its supply chain, and various participants. The invention includes the subsequent development of processes, hardware and software to address the current and future gaps in that industry. The method can be implemented in various embodiments by matching those key components with emerging technology products for implementation and integration. The evolution of the described business model or "Relationship Trade Exchange" is unique. The five elements of the business model as described, their relationship, combination and many ways in which they can be utilized in whole, part, or various combinations by participants of the "RTE" is the competitive advantage of this business model.

[0008] In one embodiment, the invention is a method of facilitating operations of a plurality of Independent Retailers ("IR's"), said method comprising: communicating over a network from a service bureau or a plurality of headquarters of a chain of retail stores to their respective IR's; displaying to said IR's a plurality of services for said IR's, for said IR's to select at least one service, wherein said services comprise procurement; receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to its respective headquarters or a

service bureau showing said at least one selected service from said at least one store; and serving up to said IR's said at least one selected service.

[0009] The invention also includes a system configure to implement the above-described method. In one embodiment the invention includes a system for managing a plurality of chains of IR's, said system comprising: communication means for communicating over a network from a plurality of headquarters of a chain of IR's to a plurality of said IR's; displaying means for displaying to said IR's a plurality of services for said IR's, and configured to allow said IR's to select at least one service, wherein said services comprise promotion ordering; receiving means for receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to each respective headquarters showing said at least one selected service from said at least one store; and server means for serving up to said IR's said at least one selected service.

[0010] These and other features and advantages of the present invention will be made more apparent through a consideration of the following detailed description of a preferred embodiment of the invention. In the course of this description, frequent reference will be made to the attached drawings.

V. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] FIG. 1 is a schematic conceptual diagram showing the key components of one embodiment of the invention and their interrelationships.

[0012] FIG. 2 has call outs describing each element of the invention depicted in FIG. 1.

[0013] FIG. 3 is a schematic system diagram of one embodiment of the invention.

[0014] FIG. 4 is a schematic block system level 0 flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the invention.

[0015] FIG. 5A is a schematic block process flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Brand Deployment aspect of the invention.

[0016] FIG. 5B is a schematic block process flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Promotions System aspect of the Brand Deployment aspect of the invention.

[0017] FIG. 6 is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Marketplace aspect of the invention.

[0018] FIG. 7 is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Customer Service aspect of the invention.

[0019] FIG. 8 is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Business Operating Systems aspect of the invention.

[0020] FIG. 9A is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Communities aspect of the invention.

[0021] FIG. 9B is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Existing Communities System of the Communities aspect of the invention.

[0022] FIG. 9C illustrates the display of a web page, typically a home page, showing typical components for creating the Community.

[0023] FIG. 10 is a block system diagram showing one preferred embodiment of specific applications and their interrelationships.

VI. DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0024] A. Overview of Invention and Its Utility and Benefits and Advantages

[0025] The invention is the first Internet trade exchange designed as a full-service marketplace for all convenience store and small business retailers and their suppliers. The "independent retail sector" as used in this specification and appended claims means retailers that are: (a) franchised and/or independently owned and/or independently operated (collectively "IRs"), and (b) suppliers of good and/or services to IRs and such suppliers' company owned and/or operated stores (collectively "IR Sector"). Examples of IRs include, but are not limited to: 7-11™ brand retailers, Integrated gasoline and convenience retailers, Dry Cleaners, and Theatre Owners.

[0026] The invention incorporates a proprietary Internet-based retail business model and the world-class fulfillment and distribution network, e.g., of McLane Company.

[0027] The invention, an independent, open marketplace, will offer a variety of e-commerce services to all other trading partners in the IR Sector (and optionally other sectors). The founders would each hold equity interest in the system of the invention (optionally implemented initially by a company named, e.g., "RetailersMarketXchange.com"). Optionally, retailers and suppliers who commit capital and participation will also be equity participants in the joint venture, which at inception would be the world's largest web-based business-to-business marketplace for the IR Sector.

[0028] The new marketplace intends to be the catalyst for revolutionizing the supply chain to the highly fragmented convenience store ("C-store") and other segments of the small business sector and IR Sector. For suppliers, the marketplace has the potential to dramatically reduce costs in this \$200 billion-a-year industry, to improve the marketing reach and effectiveness, and the efficiency of delivering products and services. For IRs, it creates access to the suppliers, programs and scale of a networked economy to dramatically improve their operations.

[0029] In one preferred embodiment implementation of the invention, a new web-based marketplace will optionally initially focus on convenience store retailers, providing them with the means to achieve significant cost savings and revenue generation. The service may be personalized from the retailer's point of view, combining the dynamic marketplace of a trade exchange with specialized software and services that deliver the brands, business systems, customer services and community networking that convenience store and small retailers need to run their business. The portal will include:

[0030] A marketplace providing an unparalleled commerce community between supplier companies, retailer chains and individual retailers.

[0031] The infrastructure for deployment of retail and product brand information and programs.

[0032] Customer services to enable the transformation to a new, more efficient business.

[0033] Business operating systems that enable the full use of RetailersMarketXchange.com and integrate the retailer's onsite operations with those of the suppliers.

[0034] A dynamic, interactive online community network where retailers and suppliers can collaborate and share information.

[0035] RetailersMarketXchange.com is optionally based on a conventional eCommerce catalog and order processing system, e.g., on the Oracle e-business platform and the Oracle Exchange software suite, which enables Internet supply chain networks to dramatically increase purchasing and operating efficiencies. With, e.g., the Oracle CRM suite, the exchange will be well suited to the unique needs of the convenience and small business retailer, based on the experiences gained from the Chevron Retailer Alliance business model. Optimization of supply-chain fulfillment and distribution will optionally be leveraged off utilizing technology and systems existing in the IR Sector as presently practiced by distributors in the IR Sector, e.g., the McLane Company.

[0036] The Internet-based system will significantly reduce operating costs, transform business processes, and establish a platform for growth for independent retailers. The marketplace of the invention will greatly enhance supply chain efficiencies between retailers and suppliers and with all of their manufacturers, distributors and retailing partners. Existing electronic point of sale technology may optionally be employed for inventory and ordering management, e.g., as available from Professional Datasolutions Inc.

[0037] This marketplace of the invention will provide advantages to the retail supply chain to the convenience and small business retailing sector around the power of the Internet. This would be a win for all parts of the independent retailers' channels.

[0038] Benefits for the retailer of the system and method of the invention include making it easy for the independent retailer to do business. The diverse offerings of Business Operating Systems components of the invention (ASP offerings of scanning, accounting, labor scheduling, inventory control, network management, etc.), the ITE component of the invention allows purchase of commodity goods, and the Brand Deployment component of the invention allows deployment of respective brand requirements, all supported by personalized Customer Services in the Customer Service component of the invention, make the system of the invention the place where Independent Retailers will want to do all their business.

[0039] The system of the invention creates new value for the retailer. It allows for an increase in store margin due to increased sales and efficiencies, increased access to programs and promotions, decreased cost of goods sold, and decreased site and network operating expense.

[0040] The system of the invention creates community for the Retailers. It allows Retailers to be part of a community where they can share ideas and hook up with a diversity of groups they may find of interest.

[0041] Benefits for the Suppliers include: New Customers via increased marketing reach and productivity; Increased

Sales via targeted sales and promotional capabilities; Reduced Costs via optimized manufacturing and distribution, more efficient order placement and inventory management, and reduced catalog maintenance costs; Powerful New Data for aiding Supply Chain optimization and for Market and Customer research and Strategy Development.

[0042] B. Main Components

[0043] The major components/modules/functionality/services of the system and method of the invention are briefly described below.

[0044] The Brand Deployment aspect of the invention will provide the efficient deployment of unique and proprietary brand elements to the field organization and Retail and Product brands. This sub-system permits a parent, or headquarters, or franchiser to deploy multiple special promotions through its IR or franchisees. (1) That is, the parent enters into special favorable short-term purchasing agreements with a manufacturer or distributor to purchase its products through the IR's. The IR's learn about the promotions through the Brand Deployment sub-system of the invention. The IR's may select which promotions they sign up for and place an order for the desired quantities directly from the distributor or manufacturer. (2) Additionally, specific business transactions such as invoicing and price notifications unique to that brand can be deployed directly to franchisees through this component. (3) Other brand specific information such as image guidelines, corporate standards, company communication, etc., can also be securely deployed to employees and franchisees of that brand through the brand deployment sub-system. Brands using this component may be a retail chain, a franchiser, a distributor or manufacturer. Shipment tracking and payment processing are optional features of the Brand Deployment sub-system.

[0045] The Independent Trade Exchange aspect of the invention will provide the open marketplace where buyers and suppliers come to transact commodity and auction based items. Optionally, leveraged or aggregated buying power is a function of the system and method of the invention, i.e., IRs group purchases together to obtain volume discounts from suppliers. The goods and services of all distributors, manufacturers, and all other goods and service providers on the RetailersMarketXchange will be placed in a eCatalog/database. The eCatalog will be searchable and accessible to the IR's, within optional access rights limits for each user. During the log-in process, the IR's preferred suppliers will be identified and optionally a dynamically created report will be displayed showing those preferred suppliers and any special pricing agreements between the IR and supplier. Optionally, all or some alternative transaction types are supported, e.g., auction, reverse-auction, request-for-proposal, request-for-bid, aggregated buying, and dutch auction. Order processing, shipment tracking and payment processing are optional supported features of the Independent Trade Exchange sub-system of the invention. An optional automated replenishment system permits automated reordering without human intervention. This is based on user established business rules, e.g., minimum inventory levels and standard reorder quantities.

[0046] The Business Operating Systems aspect of the invention will provide the hardware and software that allows automation, efficiency, and dynamic response to enable the business environment of Independent Retailers at the store

level. This will include an Application Service Provider service whereby IR's may "rent" a business application on a subscription or per use basis and thereby have benefit of top of the line, up to date business applications without the full cost of a internal license, maintenance, installation, and updating. Downloading applications and entering into the appropriate license is another option.

[0047] The Customer Services aspect of the invention will provide the human touch that enables the transformation of the Independent Retailer and is the problem solver, business consultant, and partner in an increasingly automated, e-driven environment. All users of the RetailersMarketXchange will have access to the Customer Services sub-system either on-line, by way of telephone, or both. On-site customer service is optionally provided. The services provided by the Customer Services sub-system optionally include user training, troubleshooting, help desk functions, and account history records. Optionally, the frame on each screen will include a Customer Service button whereby the user may at any time select the button to launch an email window for sending inquiries to Customer Service.

[0048] For the suppliers, Customer Service optionally includes a targeted advertising campaign service for suppliers' goods, services and/or promotions.

[0049] The Communities aspect of the invention will provide the fun, dynamic, interactive participant driven element that facilitates ideas, discussion and partnership with other members of the exchange. The Communities sub-system will include topic-specific newsgroups, member-clubs, bulletin boards, and other on-line community features. This component will be very flexible, e.g., users can participate in an existing user group or create a new one. The groups may use secure on non-secure communications. All participants in the RetailersMarketXchange may access the communities component. It may be used for collaborative planning, design and development of promotions, products, and/or services. The Communities sub-system is optionally utilized for consumer research and feedback to the manufacturers.

[0050] C. Detailed Description of the Figures

[0051] A detailed description of each process/means block follows. Each block, separately or in combination, is alternatively computer implemented, computer assisted, and/or human implemented. Computer implementation optionally includes one or more conventional general purpose computers having a processor, memory, storage, input devices, output devices and/or conventional networking devices, protocols, and/or conventional client-server hardware and software. Where any block or combination of blocks is computer implemented, it is done optionally by conventional means, whereby one skilled in the art of computer implementation could utilize conventional algorithms, components, and devices to implement the requirements and design of the invention provided herein.

[0052] FIG. 1 is a schematic conceptual diagram showing the key components of one embodiment of the invention and their interrelationships. The interconnectivity of each component is represented by the overlapping circles 101. The functionality of this interconnectivity is further discussed below in the description of FIG. 4. The figure depicts aspects of the invention of a relationship based portal that

revolutionizes the Independent Retailing Sector. It combines the strengths of an Independent Trade Exchange module **110** with Brand Deployment module **130**, Business Operating Systems module **125**, Customer Services module **115**, and Community module **115**.

[**0053**] **FIG. 2** has call outs referencing implementation means **135-155** for each module of the invention depicted in **FIG. 1**. Community module **115** includes the fun, dynamic, interactive participant driven element that facilitates ideas, discussion and partnership with other members of the exchange. Customer Services module **115** includes the human touch that enables the transformation of the Independent Retailer and is the problem solver, business consultant, and partner in an increasingly automated, e-driven environment. Independent Trade Exchange module **110** includes the open marketplace where buyers and suppliers come to transact commodity and auction based items. The leveraged buying power of the RTE population is realized here. The efficient deployment of unique and proprietary brand elements to the field organization and Retail and Product brands. Business Operating Systems module **125** includes the hardware and software that allows automation, efficiency, and dynamic response to enable the business environment of Independent Retailers at the store level.

[**0054**] **FIG. 3** is a schematic system diagram of one embodiment of the invention. The general network of the Internet will be used, however, access will typically be limited, e.g., by password and user i.d. or other conventional security methods. Such systems are taught, e.g., in U.S. Pat. No. 6,038,597, issued Mar. 14, 2000, entitled "Method And Apparatus For Providing And Accessing Data At An Internet Site," assigned to Dell U.S.A., L.P., which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. This is because typically only authorized retail store and their suppliers should have access to the system. The public will not have such access typically.

[**0055**] **FIG. 4** is a schematic block system level **0** flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the invention. After logging in at block **205**, the user selects a service in block **210**. One or more of the services may be selected. The diagram shows one embodiment where each service is connected with all other services. Other embodiments include each other possible variation on interconnections between services, e.g., the Customer Service System **235** is accessible from any other service, but the Communities System **225** is only accessible from the select service block **210**. The interconnectivity adds value to the user in ease of transfer to a needed service at the right time.

[**0056**] The available services includes Brand Deployment System **215**, IR Marketplace System **220**, Communities (also referenced as "Messages") System **225**, Business Operating Systems System **230**, and Customer Service System **235**.

[**0057**] Brand deployment system **215** includes promotions deployment and other brand deployment, e.g., headquarters branded credit card programs, customer satisfaction services, e.g., anonymous inspections, loan programs, and facility improvement programs. Promotions typically include limited time period special sales of merchandise, e.g., 2 for 1. Special advertising materials for placement around the retail store are typically included. Transactions records are typically maintained for promotions ordered and

other orders, order status and history. Communities include topic-specific newsgroups, clubs, and bulletin boards.

[**0058**] Customer service includes telephonic and online assistance with any retail store matter and especially use of the system of the invention. Operations support includes, e.g., uniform supplies, dumpster service, and facility cleaning services. Education support is optionally available in one embodiment which includes online courses and catalogs for ordering written or video materials on matters important to the retail store's success, e.g., hiring and retention, training, cleaning, and retailing know-how. The various above-described subsystems of the inventions and examples of each subsystem are only exemplary and are not meant to be limiting. In some embodiments some or all of the subsystems might be renamed, combined, or further divided, yet still be within the invention.

[**0059**] Communication occurs over network including a client-server environment including the Internet, an extranet, a wide area network, a metropolitan area network, and mixtures thereof. Typically, an extranet will be utilized. That is, the general network of the Internet will typically be used, however, access will be limited, e.g., by password and user i.d. or other conventional security methods. Such systems are taught, e.g., in U.S. Pat. No. 6,038,597, issued Mar. 14, 2000, entitled "Method And Apparatus For Providing And Accessing Data At An Internet Site," assigned to Dell U.S.A., L.P., which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. This is because typically only authorized stores in the retail store's chain and their suppliers should have access to the system. The public will not have such access typically.

[**0060**] **FIG. 5A** is a schematic block process flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Brand Deployment aspect of the invention.

[**0061**] **FIG. 5B** is a schematic block process flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the promotions aspect of the Brand Deployment aspect of the invention. An IR retail store. Promotions are displayed in block **510**. The user optionally selects at least one promotion in block **515**, and orders the promotion in block **520**. Order fulfillment occurs in block **525**. Conventional shopping cart or other known eCommerce ordering systems may be use as taught, e.g., in U.S. Pat. Nos. 5,960,411 entitled "Method And System For Placing A Purchase Order Via A Communications Network" and 6,029,142 entitled "Electronic Catalog System And Method," and in Baron, Chris and Bob Weil, "Implementing a Web Shopping Cart," Dr. Dobb's Journal, Sep. 1996, pp. 64, 66, 68-69, and 83-85, which are each incorporated herein by reference in their entireties. The supplier receives the order and fulfills the order in block Embodiments include where the order message is transmitted directly from the retail store to the supplier or, alternatively, where the order is transmitted to the headquarters, who then passes it on directly to the supplier or optionally first combines it with like orders from other retail stores prior to passing it on to the supplier.

[**0062**] Conventional secure transaction systems are optionally utilized as taught, e.g., in U.S. Pat. No. 5,949,876, issued Sep. 7, 1999, entitled "Systems And Methods For Secure Transaction Management And Electronic Rights Protection," assigned to InterTrust Technologies Corporation, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

[**0063**] **FIG. 6** is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Marketplace aspect of the

invention. An eCatalog is searched in step **610**, optionally using conventional eCatalog technology, e.g., as available from Requisite Technologies Inc. Conventional shopping cart or other known eCommerce ordering systems may be used as taught in the Brand Deployment System description above.

[**0064**] Transaction records and history are optionally stored and accessible to each customer for specific business transaction records such as invoicing, shipment, payment history and price notifications. The transaction history optionally can also track transactions that were not entered into over the system, e.g., conventional purchasing methods, i.e., standing orders.

[**0065**] Shipment tracking and payment processing are optional features of the Transaction sub-system. Shipment tracking processes may optionally be implemented with known systems, e.g., as taught in U.S. Pat. No. 5,960,408, issued Sep. 28, 1999, entitled "On-Time Delivery, Tracking And Reporting," which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

[**0066**] **FIG. 7** is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Customer Service aspect of the invention. The user displays and selects contact methods in block **705**. Then for each contact method, online contact in block **710** or telephone contact in block **730**, the user sends/states an inquiry, blocks **715** and **735**, the inquiry is handled by the customer service center, blocks **720** and **740**, and the user receives a response to the inquiry, blocks **725** and **745**.

[**0067**] This subsystem, in one embodiment allows the user to enter real-time communications between any of the stores and a customer service representative of said headquarters, and wherein said steps for communication can be entered into during any step of said brand promotion deployment method.

[**0068**] The Customer Services aspect/subsystem of the invention will provide the human touch that enables the transformation of the Independent Retailer and is the problem solver, business consultant, and partner in an increasingly automated, e-driven environment. All users of the system will have access to the Customer Services subsystem either on-line, by way of telephone, or both. On-site customer service is optionally provided.

[**0069**] The services provided by the Customer Services subsystem optionally include user training, troubleshooting, help desk functions, and account history records. Preferably, the subsystem includes functions for tracking customer interactions whereby the customer service representative can quickly pull up the interaction record, e.g., as taught in U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,014,647 entitled "Customer interaction tracking" and 6,032,184 entitled "Integrated Interface For Web Based Customer Care And Trouble Management", which references are incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

[**0070**] Optionally, the frame on each screen will include a Customer Service button, or other selection means, whereby the user may at any time select the button to launch an email window for sending inquiries to Customer Service. For the suppliers, Customer Service optionally includes a targeted advertising campaign service for suppliers' goods, services and/or promotions. The Customer Services subsystem, and

optionally one or more of each other subsystem in one embodiment includes feedback functions, whereby retail store employees may provide feedback to headquarters about any aspect of the system, e.g., success of or problems with a promotion, suggested improvements, or implementation or operating difficulties.

[**0071**] **FIG. 8** is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Business Operating Systems aspect of the invention. Hosted business applications are displayed in step **805**. Conventional and proprietary application service provider ("ASP") technology is available from a variety of companies, e.g., Quest Cyber-Solutions Inc.

[**0072**] **FIG. 9A** is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Communities/Messages aspect of the invention. **FIG. 9B** is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Existing Communities System of the Communities/Messages aspect of the invention. As shown in **FIG. 9A**, a user at a retail store enters Select Community System block **550**. There the user selects one or more subsystems from the options which in one embodiment include Existing Communities System **555** and Create New Communities System **560**. **FIG. 5B** depicts steps in one embodiment of the Existing Communities System. The user displays community types in block **505**, enters a community in block **510**, optionally interacts in the community in block **515**, and then closes/exits the community in block **520**.

[**0073**] **FIG. 9C** illustrates the display of a web page, typically a home page, showing typical components for creating the Community. In one embodiment, each customer wishing to utilize the brand deployment system may have a customized communities page for viewing by their stores. The components of the page are, in one embodiment, a News and Information section **570**, a What's New section **565**, and a Features section **580**. Menu bar **575** in one embodiment is displayed on many if not all web pages. One skilled in the art would appreciate that these various sections can be omitted or rearranged or adapted in various ways. News and Information section **570**, and optionally other sections, in one embodiment has drill down features, e.g., buttons which when clicked upon opens another panel displaying past news and information features and/or each current news and information feature has an associated hyperlink to a page which elaborates on that current news feature.

[**0074**] The Communities aspect/subsystem (also referenced as Messages system or subsystem) of the invention will provide the fun, dynamic, interactive participant driven element that facilitates ideas, discussion and partnership with other members of the community, i.e., headquarters, retail chain stores and optionally their suppliers, distributors, and suppliers. The Communities subsystem will include topic-specific newsgroups, member-clubs, bulletin boards, and other on-line community features. This component will be very flexible, e.g., users can participate in an existing user group or create a new one. The groups may use secure or non-secure communications. All participants in the system may access the communities component. It may be used for collaborative planning, design and development of promotions, products, and/or services. The Communities subsystem is optionally utilized for consumer research and feedback to a particular IR chain's headquarters and/or the manufacturers/distributors.

[0075] FIG. 10 is a block system diagram showing one preferred embodiment of specific applications/implementations and their interrelationship. The products and brand components shown in FIG. 10 are for illustrative purposes only. Other brands and architectural embodiments may be used in implementing the method and system of the inventions as will be understood by those skilled in the art.

[0076] The web site for the system includes conventional web site development considerations known to experienced web site developers. Such considerations include content, content clearing, presentation of content, architecture, database linking, external web site linking, number of pages, overall size and storage requirements, maintainability, access speed, use of graphics, choice of metatags to facilitate hits, privacy considerations, and disclaimers.

[0077] Optionally, a test environment is used prior to deployment of the production system. In the test environment, the web site is loaded into an isolated test environment for debugging and for other test purposes. A piloting step is also optionally utilized (it may also be called an alpha and/or beta testing step/means. In the pilot step, the system is internally test marketed.

[0078] The piloting step/means optionally includes formally or informally gathering feedback from the internal users of the web site for use in improving and debugging the site and for use in planning the marketing step. The tenant-leasing step/means includes identifying potential tenants, e.g., petroleum industry vendors or customers, and contacting them to lease space on the web site, i.e., to offer for sale their goods and services and/or agree to procure goods or services through the web site. Signing such outside companies may also be necessary to complete testing in the test environment and in pilot testing.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of facilitating operations of a plurality of Independent Retailers ("IR's"), said method comprising:

- (a) communicating over a network from a service bureau or a plurality of headquarters of a chain of retail stores to their respective IR's;
- (b) displaying to said IR's a plurality of services for said IR's, for said IR's to select at least one service, wherein said services comprise procurement;
- (c) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to its respective headquarters or a service bureau showing said at least one selected service from said at least one store; and
- (d) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected service.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein said plurality of services for said IR's further comprises transaction services, communities services, brand deployment services, education support services, business operating systems services, and customer support services.

3. The method of claim 1, further comprising steps for entering real-time communications between any of said IR's and a customer service representative of said service or a service bureau, and wherein said steps for communication can be entered into during any step of said method.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein said network comprises a client-server environment comprising the Internet, an extranet, a wide area network, a metropolitan area network, and mixtures thereof.

5. The method of claim 2, wherein said transaction services comprises:

- (a) displaying a plurality of transaction services comprising automatic replenishment, order history, and pricing, for said IR's to select at least one transaction service;
- (b) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to said headquarters showing said at least one selected transaction service from said at least one store; and
- (c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected transaction service.

6. The method of claim 2, wherein said communities services comprises:

- (a) displaying a plurality of communities services comprising newsgroups, chat rooms, clubs, and message boards, for said IR's to select at least one communities service;
- (b) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to said headquarters or service bureau showing said at least one selected communities service from said at least one store; and
- (c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected communities service.

7. The method of claim 2, wherein said brand deployment services comprises:

- (a) displaying a plurality of brand deployment services comprising supplying database access to corporate guidelines and procedures, for said IR's to select at least one brand deployment service;
- (b) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to said headquarters showing said at least one selected brand deployment service from said at least one store; and
- (c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected brand deployment service.

8. The method of claim 2, wherein said education support services comprises:

- (a) displaying a plurality of education support services comprising supplying training materials, for said IR's to select at least one education support service;
- (b) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to said headquarters showing said at least one selected education support service from said at least one store; and
- (c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected education support service.

9. The method of claim 2, wherein said operations support services comprises:

- (a) displaying a plurality of operations support services comprising uniform ordering services, for said IR's to select at least one operations support service;

(b) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to said headquarters showing said at least one selected operations support service from said at least one store; and

(c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected operations support service.

10. The method of claim 2, wherein said customer support services comprises:

(a) displaying a plurality of customer support services comprising help desk services, transaction history services, trouble-shooting services, and system training services, for said IR's to select at least one customer support service;

(b) receiving a message showing said at least one selected customer support service from said IR's; and

(c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected customer support service.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein said network comprises a client-server environment comprising the Internet, an extranet, a wide area network, a metropolitan area network, and mixtures thereof.

12. A method of managing brand promotion deployment for a plurality of chains of IR's, said method comprising:

(a) entering into volume discount promotion agreements between merchandise suppliers and each headquarters for a chain of IR's;

(b) communicating said volume discounts agreements over a network from each of said headquarters to its corresponding IR's, wherein said IR's may make purchases under said volume discounts agreements;

(c) selecting and ordering merchandise by at least one of said IR's pursuant to at least one of said volume discounts agreements; and

(d) communicating over said network said selected purchases of said IR's to the corresponding merchandise supplier or its respective headquarters, for fulfillment of said purchase.

13. The method of claim 12, wherein said network comprises a client-server environment comprising the Internet, an extranet, a wide area network, a metropolitan area network, and mixtures thereof.

14. A method for a plurality of retail chains to manage brand promotions defined each chain's respective headquarters, comprising:

(a) under control of a client system each of the store's:

(1) displaying information identifying an item in a brand promotion; and

(2) wherein said information is served up from a server system of the corresponding headquarters' of said store;

(b) sending a request to order said item to a server system of a supplier of the item;

(c) under control of said server system of a supplier:

(1) receiving the request;

(2) generating an order to purchase the requested item; and

(3) fulfilling the generated order to complete purchase of the item.

15. A system for managing brand promotion deployment for a plurality of chains of IR's, said system comprising:

(a) a server component for serving over a network a plurality of brand promotions from a plurality of headquarters of chains of IR's to their respective IR's;

(b) a client component for receiving from said server component said plurality of brand promotions and for displaying said brand promotions, and for recognizing a user's selection of specific brand promotions, and for communicating over said network to a corresponding supplier the selected brand promotions and the identity of the selecting store; and

(c) wherein said system is configured to permit any of said IR's to view and select a plurality of brand promotions on a recurring or irregular basis, that selection is communicated to a supplier which fulfills said brand promotion.

16. The system of claim 15, further comprising means for entering real-time communications between any of said IR's and a customer service representative of said headquarters, and wherein said means for communication is configured to be enabled during use of the system.

17. The system of claim 15, wherein said network comprises a client-server environment comprising the Internet, an extranet, a wide area network, a metropolitan area network, and mixtures thereof.

18. A system for managing a plurality of chains of IR's, said system comprising:

(a) communication means for communicating over a network from a plurality of headquarters of a chain of IR's to a plurality of said IR's;

(b) displaying means for displaying to said IR's a plurality of services for said IR's, and configured to allow said IR's to select at least one service, wherein said services comprise promotion ordering;

(c) receiving means for receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to each respective headquarters showing said at least one selected service from said at least one store; and

(d) server means for serving up to said IR's said at least one selected service.

19. The system of claim 18, wherein said plurality of services for said IR's further comprises transaction services, communities services, brand deployment services, education support services, operations support services, and customer support services.

20. The system of claim 19, wherein said transaction services comprises:

(a) displaying a plurality of transaction services comprising automatic replenishment, order history, and pricing, for said IR's to select at least one transaction service;

(b) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to said headquarters showing said at least one selected transaction service from said at least one store; and

(c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected transaction service.

21. The system of claim 19, wherein said communities services comprises:

- (a) displaying a plurality of communities services comprising newsgroups, chat rooms, clubs, and message boards, for said IR's to select at least one communities service;
- (b) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to said headquarters showing said at least one selected communities service from said at least one store; and
- (c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected communities service.

22. The system of claim 19, wherein said brand deployment services comprises:

- (a) displaying a plurality of brand deployment services comprising supplying database access to corporate guidelines and procedures, for said IR's to select at least one brand deployment service;
- (b) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to said headquarters showing said at least one selected brand deployment service from said at least one store; and
- (c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected brand deployment service.

23. The system of claim 19, wherein said education support services comprises:

- (a) displaying a plurality of education support services comprising supplying training materials, for said IR's to select at least one education support service;
- (b) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to said headquarters showing said at least one selected education support service from said at least one store; and
- (c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected education support service.

24. The system of claim 19, wherein said operations support services comprises:

- (a) displaying a plurality of operations support services comprising uniform ordering services, for said IR's to select at least one operations support service;
- (b) receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to said headquarters showing said at least one selected operations support service from said at least one store; and
- (c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected operations support service.

25. The system of claim 19, wherein said customer support services comprises:

- (a) displaying a plurality of customer support services comprising help desk services, transaction history services, trouble-shooting services, and system training services, for said IR's to select at least one customer support service;

- (b) receiving a message showing said at least one selected customer support service from said IR's; and

- (c) serving up to said IR's said at least one selected customer support service.

26. The system of claim 18, wherein said network comprises a client-server environment comprising the Internet, an extranet, a wide area network, a metropolitan area network, and mixtures thereof.

27. A system of managing brand promotion deployment for a plurality of chains of IR's, said system comprising:

- (a) volume discount promotion agreements between merchandise suppliers and each headquarters for a chain of IR's;

- (b) communication means for communicating said volume discounts agreements over a network from each of said headquarters to a plurality of IR's, wherein said IR's may make purchases under said volume discounts agreements;

- (c) selection means for selecting and ordering merchandise by at least one of said IR's pursuant to at least one of said volume discounts agreements; and

- (d) communication means for communicating over said network said selected purchases of said IR's to the corresponding merchandise supplier, for fulfillment of said purchase.

28. The system of claim 27, wherein said network comprises a client-server environment comprising the Internet, an extranet, a wide area network, a metropolitan area network, and mixtures thereof.

29. A system for a plurality of retail chain store to manage brand promotions defined by the store's headquarters, comprising:

- (a) a server system of a plurality of headquarters' of a plurality of retail chain stores configured for serving up information identifying an item in a brand promotion;

- (b) a client system of each of said retail chain store's configured:

- (1) for receiving, parsing, and rendering said information identifying an item in a brand promotion from said server system of the headquarters'; and

- (2) for selecting at least one of said items and sending a request to order said items to a server system of a supplier of the item;

- (c) a server system of a plurality of suppliers configured:

- (1) for receiving the request;

- (2) for generating an order to purchase the requested item; and

- (3) for fulfilling the generated order to complete purchase of the item.

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