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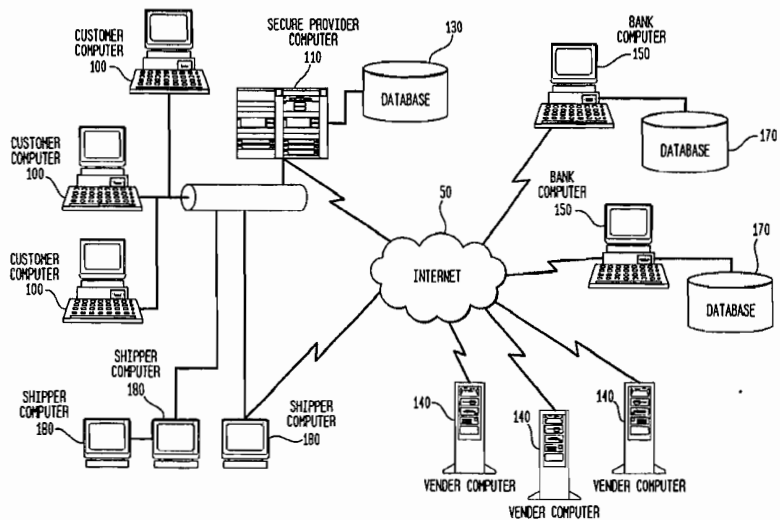
(57) Abstract

A computer–implemented method delivers goods purchased from a vendor web site without revealing the customer's identity or physical shipping address to the vendor computer (140). The method includes associating the identity and physical location of each customer with computer (100) linking information which is stored at a secure computer such as a secure provider computer (110) or banking computer (150). The customer computer (100) anonymously connects to the vendor web site (140) and orders goods without revealing his actual identity or physical location. The goods are given by the vendor to a common carrier in a package encoded by the vendor with a transaction identifier or a customer object. The common carrier retrieves the identity and address of the customer from the secure provider computer (110) using the transaction identifier or customer object and delivers the package to the customer's physical address.

ELECTRONIC COMMERCE WITH ANONYMOUS
SHOPPING AND ANONYMOUS VENDOR SHIPPING

5 TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates to a method and system of conducting electronic commerce which allows a customer to anonymously visit vendor web sites, anonymously purchase goods and anonymously receive goods without disclosing the customer's identification and home address information to the web site vendor.

10 BACKGROUND ART

At present day, more and more consumers are using a global communications network such as the Internet to do their shopping. On-line shopping allows users the freedom to quickly browse different vendor web sites, compare prices, locate hard-to-find items, shop across the country and the world, all within an abbreviated

15 period of time. However, for good reasons, many people today are worried about privacy issues when using the Internet and World Wide Web ("the web"). Merely by visiting a web site, detailed information about the customer can be obtained, such as what computer the customer is using, where the computer is connected, which web site the customer last visited, etc. Furthermore, more and more sites are requiring that customers log into the

20 site with personal information in order to use the services of the site. Many customers, however, do not wish to compromise their privacy and reveal their name and address since it will likely be placed in a database and sold as a part of a mailing list to other companies. Further, consumers worry about transmitting personal information such as credit card numbers or bank account numbers on-line, for fear of a third-party monitoring their

25 transmission.

At present, Internet billing systems are known that maintains the confidentiality of the customer information by an Internet access provider vis-à-vis a vendor web site. The Internet access provider creates access to the Internet through the secure provider's web site for the user. The provider then bills the customer's account

30 with the provider or another specified account for transactions with outside vendors,

without the need for the customer to send his bank account number or credit card information to the vendor. The problem with these billing systems is that they do not provide complete privacy. While customers using such a billing system do not have to reveal their bank account numbers or credit card numbers to outside vendors, they do need

5   to reveal their home addresses to the vendor so that the vendor can mail or ship the customer their order. Many customers, when shopping on-line, wish to remain completely anonymous to vendors in order to avoid future solicitations from the vendor, as well as having their names and addresses potentially added to a mailing list. Although anonymity is important, many shoppers enjoy the benefit of returning to vendor web sites which store

10   information about the shopper (such as via "cookies") so that the same information need not be reentered each time and custom offerings and information can be communicated to the shopper upon revisiting a favorite web site. Accordingly, what is needed is a secure Internet e-commerce system that eliminates the need to provide vendors with both customers' actual identities and shipping addresses, and accordingly provides customers

15   with complete anonymity. It would also be desirable to provide such an e-commerce system whereby the customer can remain anonymous but still visit web sites as a character or persona such that he or she is recognized upon return to the vendor web site.

DISCLOSURE OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with a preferred aspect of the present invention, a computer-

20   implemented method of delivering goods is provided whereby good are purchased from a vendor having a vendor web site accessible over a computer network by a plurality of customers at physical locations. The customers have customer computers connected to the computer network for accessing the vendor web site and electronically purchasing goods therefrom. The method includes: (a) associating the identity and the physical location of

25   each customer with a respective customer object via linking information; (b) storing the linking information at a secure computer at a location remote from the vendor web site; (c) anonymously connecting to the vendor web site by the customer computer using the identity of the customer object without revealing the identity and physical location of the customer; (d) ordering goods at the vendor web site by the customer using the customer

30   computer, and upon initiation of an order by the customer, (i) automatically generating a

- 3 -

transaction identifier by the vendor computer, (ii) encoding a package of the goods ordered by the customer with the transaction identifier by the vendor and (iii) sending the transaction identifier together with the customer object to the secure computer by the vendor computer; (e) associating the transaction identifier sent by the vendor computer

5   with the identity and physical address of the customer at the secure computer using the linking information and automatically forwarding the transaction identifier and associated identity and physical address of the customer to a computer of a common carrier; (f) delivering the encoded package to the common carrier by the vendor; and (g) reading the transaction identifier by the common carrier, using the identity and the physical location of

10   the customer associated with the transaction identifier and physically delivering the package to the physical location of the customer.

In an alternative preferred embodiment, the computer-implemented method of delivering goods comprises (a) associating the identity and the physical location of each customer with a respective customer object via linking information; (b) storing the linking

15   information at a secure computer at a location remote from the vendor web site; (c) anonymously connecting to the vendor web site by the customer computer using the identity of the customer object without revealing the identity and physical location of the customer; (d) ordering goods at the vendor web site by the customer using the customer computer, and upon initiation of an order by the customer, encoding a package of the

20   goods ordered by the customer with the customer object; (e) delivering the encoded package to the common carrier by the vendor; (f) providing the linking information to the common carrier; and (g) reading the customer object by the common carrier, retrieving the identity and the physical location of the customer associated with the customer object and physically delivering the package to the physical location of the customer.

25   Desirably, the above methods further comprise sending information representing the cost of the goods ordered by the customer and the customer object from the vendor computer to a financial institution computer via the computer network for credit approval, ascertaining the credit status of the customer object, and automatically sending a message approving or declining credit to the customer to the vendor computer from the

30   financial institution computer. Ascertaining the credit status of the customer object can also

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