METHOD OF MUTUALLY ENHANCING RETAIL SALES AND USER TRAFFIC ON A WEB SITE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to merchandising and web sites, and more particularly, to a method of mutually enhancing retail sales and user traffic on a web site.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 shows a front side of a promotional card distributed to a customer at a retail store in an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 2 shows a back side of the promotional card of **FIG. 1** distributed to a customer at a retail store in an embodiment of the present invention.

FIGS. 3-6 show representations of exemplary screen shots of web pages delivered by a server computer that may be displayed through a web browser on a display device of a customer computer in an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 7 shows an outer front side of a product package containing a product made available to a customer at a retail store in an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 8 shows an outer back side of the product package of **FIG. 7** made available to a customer at a retail store in an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 9 shows an interior side of the product package of **FIG. 7** or **FIG. 8**.

FIGS. 10-11 show representations of exemplary screen shots of web pages delivered by a server computer that may be displayed through a web browser on a display device of a customer computer in an embodiment of the present invention.

FIGS. 12-42 show representations of exemplary screen shots of web pages delivered by a server computer that may be displayed through a web browser on a display device of a customer computer in an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 43 shows a flow diagram of an embodiment of the method of the present invention.

FIGS. 44 and **45** show an example of the item code, instructions, and URL being on the good itself.

FIGS. 46 and **47** show an example of the item code, instructions, and URL being on the packaging material.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Many goods and services traditionally sold in retail establishments are now also sold on-line through web sites on the Internet. An Internet presence helps promote the sale of goods and services both on-line and in retail stores. Advertising and promotion of the goods and services, in addition to traditional advertising avenues (e.g., television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, etc.) is now also done through web sites on the Internet. Many web sites are funded by, or derive revenue streams from, banner ads, click through ads (a link to the advertiser's own web site), and the like displayed on the web site. The more traffic a web site experiences, the larger the potential revenue from ad placement on the web site. The method of the present invention stimulates in-store purchases of goods and services or in-store traffic, as well as enhances traffic on a web site affiliated with, or which advertises, the goods or services.

Referring now to the Figures, in which like reference numerals refer to like components thereof, **Figure 1** shows a front side of a promotional card distributed to a customer at a retail store in an embodiment of the present invention. Referring now to **FIG. 1**, Card Front **100** may be a promotional card given out to the first one-hundred customers to enter a retail store on a given day where no purchase of goods or services is necessary. Or, Card Front **100** may be given out to each customer who purchases goods or services, such as getting a haircut on a particular day or getting a

haircut during a particular period of time during the day at a particular hair salon. Card Front **100** may have Store Name **102**, which identifies the retail store associated with the promotion, and a graphic for Web Site **104**, which identifies the web site associated with the promotion. Card Front **100** may also have Product Graphic Image **106** of the good or service associated with the promotion, such as the plush toy depicted by Product Graphic Image **106**. Card Front **100** may have other printed instructions and graphics to enhance the appearance of the card and to provide the customer with other useful information.

The retail store and the web site in one aspect of the invention may be owned by the same corporate entity or individual, where the web site is an extension of the retail store and vice versa. In another aspect of the invention, the retail store and the web site are owned by different corporate entities or individuals who are partnering together to promote each other's interests. In yet another embodiment of the invention, the promotion may be between the web site and the manufacturer of a product that is sold through various retail outlets. In the later case, the web site and the manufacturer are partnering together for the promotion apart from the various retail outlets that happen to carry the good or service for sale.

Figure 2 shows a back side of the promotional card of **FIG. 1** distributed to a customer at a retail store in an embodiment of the present invention. Referring now to **FIG. 2**, Card Back **200** has a code, such as Item Code **202**. Item Code **202** may be a series of numbers, letters, symbols, etc., or any combination of the above. Instructions **204** instruct the customer to use the Item Code **202** at a Web Site Sponsor **208** whose address is indicated by URL **206**. Item Code **202** may be redeemed for a virtual item by going to URL **206**. A virtual item is an item or object that exists only within the virtual world of Web Site **104**. Card Back **200** may have other printed

instructions and graphics to enhance the appearance of the card and to provide the customer with other useful information. In another embodiment of the invention, only one side of the promotional card contains the information shown on Card Front **100** and Card Back **200**.

In other embodiments of the invention, some or all of the components of Card Front **100** and Card Back **200** may be associated with an item for sale. For example, some or all of the above information may be pre-printed on the inside cover of a note pad which may be shrink-wrapped to protect the Item Code **202** from being misappropriated by someone other than the purchaser. In order to obtain the Item Code **202**, a customer must purchase the item because the Item Code **202** will not be visible and the shrink-wrap must be removed in order to view Item Code **202**. In another embodiment, Item Code **202**, Instructions **204**, and URL **206**, may be found on a sealed tag or sealed card attached to a plush toy, jewelry, or some other good, such that the good must be purchased in order for the customer to open the seal and appropriate Item Code **202**. In another embodiment of the invention, Item Code **202**, Instructions **204**, and URL **206**, are contained on the good or in packaging material of the good for sale. Crack-and-peel labels, as well as scratch-off cards may also be used to conceal Item Code **202**. One skilled in the art will recognize that there are numerous ways utilizing various materials to associate some or all of the components of Card Front **100** and Card Back **200** with a good or service for sale to discourage tampering prior to the purchase of the good or service.

An example of the item code, instructions, and URL being on the good itself is shown in **FIGS. 44** and **45**. **FIG. 44** shows Front Cover **4402** and Back Cover **4404** of Spiral Notebook **4400**, which in this case is a product of the web site sponsor. Spiral Notebook **4400** is sold in various retail outlets in shrink-wrap form such that Front Cover **4402** and Back Cover **4404** are visible through the shrink-wrap, but not

the inside covers or any interior pages. Web Site **4406** and Graphic Image **4408** help identify the source of Spiral Notebook **4400**. Item Code Inside Graphic **4410** informs the customer that an item code may be found inside Spiral Notebook **4400**. In **FIG. 45**, after purchase by a customer, Inside Front Cover **4508** is shown after the shrink-wrap has been removed. Item Code **4502**, Instructions **4504**, and URL **4506**, are printed on Inside Front Cover **4508**.

An example of the item code, instructions, and URL being on the packaging material is shown in **FIGS. 46** and **47**. Sticker Packet **4600** is shown shrink-wrapped, which in this case is also a product of the web site sponsor. Packaging Card **4602** is only partly visible in the shrink-wrapped state, but fully visible once a customer has purchased Sticker Packet **4600** and has removed the shrink-wrap. Two Sticker Sheets **4604**, having an assortment of various character stickers, are packaged with Packaging Card **4602**. Item Code **4702**, Instructions **4704**, and URL **4706**, are printed on Packaging Card **4602**.

In another embodiment of the invention, where the item code is hidden from view prior to purchasing the good or service, there may or may not be an item code found on the good or on the packaging material. In other words, purchasing a good or service does not guarantee that an item code will be obtained, and thus, acquiring a virtual item is not guaranteed. This may add to the element of risk associated with a particular promotion.

Figures 3-6 show representations of exemplary screen shots of web pages delivered by a server computer that may be displayed through a web browser on a display device of a customer computer in an embodiment of the present invention. Referring now to **FIG. 3**, the customer that has received the promotional card with Card Front **100** and Card Back **200** having Item Code **202**, Instructions **204**, and URL **206**, or has purchased a good or service from the retail store

containing Item Code **202**, Instructions **204**, and URL **206**, has entered URL **206** through a web browser displayed on a monitor of the customer's computer. Item Code Web Page **300** is returned to the customer's computer and displayed on the monitor by a server computer associated with URL **206** and Web Site **104**. Registered users of Web Site **104** may have already logged in to Web Site **104** prior to this point from the Home Web Page **600** (**FIG. 6**). If not, the user can log in from Item Code Web Page **300** by clicking on Login Button **308** and following the login procedure for Web Site **104**, such procedures being well known in the art. Instructions **302** provide the customer with information about the virtual item and how to enter Item Code **202**. Entry Box **304** is provided for the customer to enter Item Code **202**.

Referring now to **FIG. 4**, the customer has typed Item Code **202** printed on Card Front **100** into Entry Box **304**. When the customer clicks on Button Bar **306**, the server computer returns Congratulations Web Page **500** (**FIG. 5**) to the customer's computer for display on the customer's monitor.

Referring now to **FIG. 5**, Virtual Item **502** is displayed as a graphic image. Name Text **504** gives the name of Virtual Item **502**. Additional Text **506** provides more information regarding Virtual Item **502**. In this context, Virtual Item **502** may be a rare virtual item on the web site, making it more valuable and desirable to obtain by the customer. In one embodiment of the invention, the only way to obtain Virtual Item **502** is through securing Item Code **202** from a promotion and not from normal use of Web Site **104**. Thus, the rarity of Virtual Item **502**, or its unavailability through normal use of Web Site **104**, motivates the customer to obtain the Item Code **202** from the merchant offering the promotion by buying the goods or service associated with the promotion, or visiting the retail store where the promotional card is made available. Once the customer has obtained the promotional card having Item Code **202** from the merchant, the customer is motivated to go to the

web site to redeem Item Code **202** for Virtual Item **502**.

As an example, for a particular promotion, there may be ten types of rare virtual items that will be made available to the public. Of those ten types, there may be a different number of virtual items of a particular type to be made available. For example, 6,000 virtual items of type one may be made available, 4,000 of type two, 2,000 of type three, 500 of type four, etc. Thus, the rarity of the virtual items may be relative to each other. Also, within each item type, there may be varieties of that particular item type. For example, of the 6,000 virtual items of type one, 4,000 may be of variety one, 1,000 may be of variety two, 500 may be of variety three, 300 may be of variety four, and 200 may be of variety five, totaling the 6,000 virtual items of type one. Thus, the rarity of the variety of an item type may be relative to the number of varieties for a given item type. Having different types of virtual items and different varieties of item types may enhance the element of risk and interest in the promotion.

If the customer has another Item Code **202** to redeem, the customer can click on Button Bar **508**, which will cause the server computer to return Item Code Web Page **300** for display on the monitor of the customer's computer. If the customer does not have another Item Code **202** to redeem, the customer can click on Button Bar **510**, which will cause the server computer to return Home Web Page **600** for display on the monitor of the customer's computer. Or, the user may use Navigation Menu **602** to access other web pages of web site. From Home Web Page **600** or other web pages available from the web site the customer can then manipulate Virtual Item **502** within the context of the web site.

Referring now to **FIG. 6**, Home Web Page **600** is the home web page for the web site associated with the retail store or the manufacturer and the promotion. Navigation Menu **602** provides links that may be clicked on by the customer, also

referred to as the "user", to access various web pages within the web site. In this example, Web Site **104** is an entertainment web site offering virtual pets. However, one skilled in the art will recognize that other types of web sites would be compatible with the method of the present invention, and the virtual item may have quite varied and diverse functions. There are enumerable combinations of merchants, manufactures, and affiliated or unaffiliated web sites that could develop a successful promotion to enhance merchandise sales, store traffic, and web site traffic utilizing the method of the present invention.

As with other entertainment oriented web sites, virtual items can be manipulated within the bounds of the web site environment. For example, virtual items may be auctioned, traded, or donated to other users of the web site. Virtual items may also be stored, displayed, or discarded by the user. In this context, the virtual item has no real world value, and cannot be bought or sold for real cash in an environment outside the web site, such as on eBay. The terms and conditions of the web site typically set forth these parameters, and users are bound by these terms and conditions.

Figure 7 shows an outer front side of a product package containing a product made available to a customer at a retail store in an embodiment of the present invention. Referring now to **FIG. 7**, the promotion in this example is between the web site and the product manufacturer who utilizes various retail outlets for distribution of the manufacturer's product or service. Package Front Side **700** is the front of a cereal box containing cereal, having Product Name **702**, Manufacturer Name **704**, and Product Graphic **706**. A graphic for Web Site **708** is shown, along with Game URL **710**. Character Graphic **712** indicates that an item code for a virtual item is contained within the cereal box. In this promotion, the web site, in partnership with the manufacturer, has developed a Web-Based Game **714** titled "Race For The Taste." The character(s)

associated with the manufacturer's product (the Honey Nut Cheerios Bee in Product Graphic **706**) are incorporated with the character(s) associated with the web site (e.g., the winged dragon labeled "Scorchio" in Character Graphic **712**) in the Web-Based Game **714**.

Figure 8 shows an outer back side of the product package of **FIG. 7** made available to a customer at a retail store in an embodiment of the present invention. Referring now to **FIG. 8**, Package Back Side **800** is the back of the cereal box having a graphic for Web Site **802** along with Game URL **804**. Game Description **806**, Instructions **808**, and Game Graphic **810** provide the customer with information about the promotion. Item Code Inside Graphic **812** indicates that an item code for a virtual item is contained within the cereal box. Several Character Graphics **814** for the web site are shown, as well as Product Graphic **816**.

Joint promotions between the web site sponsor and the manufacturer or retail store may be regionally based within a defined geographic or market area (such as a city, standard metropolitan statistical area, state, or country). In the example shown in **FIG. 7** and **FIG. 8**, the promotion is based in Canada, with text shown in both English and French on Package Front Side **700** and Package Back Side **800**. Only customers in Canada who are also registered as Canadian users of the web site can participate.

Figure 9 shows an interior side of the product package of **FIG. 7** or **FIG. 8**. Referring now to **FIG. 9**, Package Interior Side **900** may be located on the back side of Package Front Side **700**, on the back side of Package Back Side **800**, or on any other suitable interior side of the package. Thus, the customer must buy the packaged product in order to have the right to open the package and appropriate Item Code **902**. Item Code **902** may be a series of numbers, letters, symbols, etc., or any combination of the above. Instructions **904** instruct the customer to use the Item Code **902** at a web site whose

address is indicated by Game URL **906**. Package Interior Side **900** may have other printed instructions and graphics, such as Web Site **908** and Product Name **910** to provide the customer with other useful information.

Figures 10-11 show representations of exemplary screen shots of web pages delivered by a server computer that may be displayed through a web browser on a display device of a customer computer in an embodiment of the present invention. (The Windows top tool bar, bottom status bar, and right scroll bar, and the web browser address bar are not shown for simplicity.) Referring now to **FIG. 10**, the customer that has purchased the packaged product described in **FIGS. 7, 8**, and **9** having Item Code **902**, Instructions **904**, and Game URL **906**, has entered Game URL **906** through a web browser displayed on a monitor of the customer's computer. Web-Based Game Page **1000** is returned to the customer's computer and displayed on the monitor by a server computer associated with Game URL **906** and Web Site **708**. Registered users of Web Site **708** may have already logged in to Web Site **708** prior to this point from the Home Web Page **600** (**FIG. 6**). If not, the user can log in from Web-Based Game Page **1000** by clicking on Login Button **1008** and following the login procedure for Web Site **708**. In one embodiment of the invention, non-registered users can play the game, but only registered users can redeem Item Code **902** for a virtual item as explained in Instructions **1002**.

Product Name **1010** is displayed on Web-Based Game Page **1000**. Clicking on Redeem Your Rare Item Code Here Graphic **1004** will open up Dialog Box **1102** shown in **FIG. 11**. Entry Box **1104** is provided for the customer to enter Item Code **902**, which the customer has done as shown in **FIG. 11**. When the customer clicks on Submit **1106**, the virtual item is deposited into the customer's account, as explained in Instructions **1108**. To view the virtual item acquired, the customer can navigate to Your Items Web Page **1200** (**FIG. 12**) by utilizing Navigation Menu **602**. The customer can click on Play Game Here

Graphic **1006** which will open up a new window in which the web-based game will load, enabling the customer to play the game (not shown).

FIGS. 12-42 show representations of exemplary screen shots of web pages delivered by a server computer that may be displayed through a web browser on a display device of a customer computer in an embodiment of the present invention. (The Windows top tool bar, bottom status bar, and right scroll bar, and the web browser address bar are not shown for simplicity.) Referring now to **FIG. 12**, Your Items Web Page **1200** shows the various Virtual Items **1202** held by the registered user within the context of the entertainment web site. There are many things that a registered user can do with Virtual Items **1202** as part of the entertainment web site. Clicking on an individual Virtual Items **1202**, such as Tiki Staff **1204**, will cause Pop Up Box **1302** (**FIG. 13**) to be displayed. Pop Up Box **1302** contains Information **1304** about what can be done with the virtual item, in this case, Tiki Staff **1204**, and Characteristics **1306** of the virtual item.

Clicking by the user on Down Arrow **1310** of Choose An Action Box **1308** will cause Pop Up Menu **1402** (**FIG. 14**) to be displayed within Pop Up Box **1302**. Pop Up Menu **1402** contains a list of possible actions the user may select. One of the things the user can do with their Virtual Items **1202** is to put them up for sale in the user's virtual items shop. Clicking by the user on Put Into Your Shop **1404** collapses Pop Up Menu **1402** as shown in **FIG. 15**. Clicking by the user on Submit Button **1312** causes Pop Up Box **1602** (**FIG. 16**) to be displayed, which indicates in Message **1604** that Tiki Staff **1204** has been transferred out of the user's account and to the user's virtual items shop.

In order to correctly price virtual item Tiki Staff **1204** for sale, within the context of the virtual economy within the web site and the virtual currency used within the web site, the user can check to see what other users of the web site are

charging for the same item. Using Navigation Menu **602** Marketplace Web Page **1700** (**FIG. 17**) is displayed on the monitor of the user's computer. Entry Box **1702** allows the user to type in the name of the virtual item of interest as shown in **FIG. 18**. Pressing the enter key on a keyboard while the pointer is within Entry Box **1702**, or clicking on Search Shops Button **1802**, displays Marketplace Search Results Web Page **1900** (**FIG. 19**). Price List **1902** shows the results of the search, indicating the different prices being asked for by other users for a Tiki Staff. One of the many different aspects of the entertainment web site is to earn as many virtual currency points as possible. Thus, a rare item such as Tiki Staff **1204** can be very valuable and important to game play for the user. Armed with this information, the user can then choose a price for Tiki Staff **1204** for resale purposes in the user's shop. User Shop Web Page **2000** (**FIG. 20**) shows Tiki Staff **1204** is now one of the Sale Items **2002** in the user's shop with an asking price of 100,000 virtual points.

Referring again to **FIG. 14**, clicking by the user on Put Up For Auction **1406** collapses Pop Up Menu **1402** as shown in **FIG. 21**. Clicking by the user on Submit Button **1312** causes Auctions Web Page **2200** (**FIG. 22**) to be displayed. Only the first ten items in Auction Items **2202** are displayed. By scrolling down the screen Tiki Staff **1204** would eventually be visible at the end of the list of Auction Items **2202** (not shown). Other users can now bid on Tiki Staff **1204** using the virtual currency similar to real world auction sites such as eBay.com.

Another action the user can take with a virtual item such as Tiki Staff **1204** is to trade it with another user for another virtual item. Using Navigation Menu **602**, Trading Post Web Page **2300** (**FIG. 23**) may be displayed on the monitor of the user's computer. The user's current Virtual Items **2302** that are available for trade are displayed, including Tiki Staff **1204**. By clicking in Check Box **2304**, the user can select Tiki

Staff **1204** to create a trade as shown in **FIG. 24**. The user may type in a message in Text Entry Box **2306**. Clicking on Start Trading Button **2308** returns Your Trades Web Page **2500** (**FIG. 25**). From Your Trades Web Page **2500** the user can rescind the trade by clicking on Cancel This Lot Button **2502**.

Another action the user can take with a virtual item such as Tiki Staff **1204** is to give it as a gift to another user. Referring again to **FIG. 14**, clicking by the user on Give To NeoFriend **1408** collapses Pop Up Menu **1402** as shown in **FIG. 26**. Clicking by the user on Submit Button **1312** causes Pop Up Box **2702** (**FIG. 27**) to be displayed. Clicking by the user on Down Arrow **2706** will reveal a pop up menu (not shown) listing previously identified fellow web site users known by the user. The user has selected to give Tiki Staff **1204** to the fellow user displayed in Selection Box **2704** (Samantha Flicker) which is now collapsed. Hitting the enter key while the mouse pointer is pointing within Selection Box **2704**, or clicking on Give Item Button **2708** will automatically transfer Tiki Staff **1204** from the user's account to the account of the fellow user displayed in Selection Box **2704**. Pop Up Box **2802** (**FIG. 28**) is then displayed, indicating that Tiki Staff **1204** has been given to a fellow user through Message Text **2804**. Your Items Web Page **2900** (**FIG. 29**) will be displayed to the fellow user who received Tiki Staff **1204** as indicated by Message Text **2902**. Tiki Staff **1204** is also displayed as one of the virtual items in the fellow user's list of Virtual Items **2904**.

Another action the user can take with a virtual item such as Tiki Staff **1204** is to just keep the virtual item for later use. Referring again to **FIG. 14**, clicking by the user on Put Into Your Safety Deposit Box **1410** collapses Pop Up Menu **1402** as shown in **FIG. 30**. Clicking by the user on Submit Button **1312** causes Pop Up Box **3102** (**FIG. 31**) to be displayed. This automatically transfers Tiki Staff **1204** into the user's safe deposit box area of the user's account for safe keeping until

the user decides to take another action with the virtual item. This is indicated by Message Text **3104**. Clicking by the user on Close And Go To SDB Button **3106** causes Your Safety Deposit Box Web Page **3200** (**FIG. 32**) to be displayed. This automatically transfers Tiki Staff **1204** into the user's safety deposit box area of the user's account for safe keeping until the user decides to take another action with the virtual item. Tiki Staff **1204** is now shown among the list of Virtual Items **3202** within the user's safe deposit box area.

Another action the user can take with a virtual item such as Tiki Staff **1204** is to give the virtual item to one of the user's virtual pets according to the parameters established by the web site. Referring again to **FIG. 14**, clicking by the user on Equip Samalan **1412** collapses Pop Up Menu **1402** as shown in **FIG. 33**. Clicking by the user on Submit Button **1312** causes Pop Up Box **3402** (**FIG. 34**) to be displayed. This automatically equips the virtual pet named "Samalan" with the Tiki Staff **1204**. This is indicated by Message Text **3404**. Using Navigation Menu **602**, Quick Reference Web Page **3500** (**FIG. 35**) may be displayed on the monitor of the user's computer. All of the user's Virtual Pets **3502** are shown, including Samalan **3504**. Again, using Navigation Menu **602**, Battledome Game Web Page **3600** (**FIG. 36**) may be displayed on the monitor of the user's computer. Battledome Game Web Page **3600** is a game within the web site that utilizes the virtual pets, such as Samalan **3504**. A list of Virtual Items **3602** that Samalan **3504** is equipped with is shown, including Tiki Staff **1204**. Scrolling down the web page will reveal more of the Virtual Items **3602**.

Another action the user can take with a virtual item such as Tiki Staff **1204** is to communicate with other users about the virtual item through a message board within the web site. Using Navigation Menu **602**, Chat Web Page **3700** (**FIG. 37**) may be displayed on the monitor of the user's computer. Clicking by the user on Trading/Auctions Icon **3702**

causes Trading And Auctions Web Page **3800** (**FIG. 38**) to be displayed on the monitor of the user's computer. Clicking by the user on Create Board Link **3802** causes Create A Message Board Web Page **3900** (**FIG. 39**) to be displayed. Several text entry boxes are provided for the user to enter information, including Board Name Text Entry Box **3902**, Interest Group Text Entry Box **3904**, and Description Text Entry Box **3906**. After the user has typed in the desired information or made selections from pull-down menus as shown in **FIG. 39**, clicking on Create Message Board Button **3908** by the user automatically posts the message board just created to Trading And Auctions Web Page **3800** (see **FIG. 40**) as Message Board **4002**. Generally, after a period of time, other users will respond to Message Board **4002** as shown in **Fig 41**. Trading And Auctions Web Page **3800** has been updated with more message boards, and an indication that one message has been posted in response to Message Board **4002**. By clicking on Message Board **4002** as shown in **FIG. 41**, Chat Message Web Page **4200** is displayed on the monitor of the user's computer. The full text of the response is found in Response Message **4202**.

FIG. 43 shows a flow diagram of an embodiment of the method of the present invention. Referring now to **FIG. 43**, in step **4302** an item code is offered to a customer at a retail store, a place of business, or other promotional site in one of the ways described above. In step **4304** instructions are provided with the item code directing the customer to visit a web site, the instructions including the URL of the web site. In step **4306** the customer, utilizing a computer equipped with a web browser, a connection to the Internet, and a display device, such as a computer monitor, accesses the web site utilizing the URL address.

A server computer associated with the web site in step **4308** returns to the customer's computer a web page for display on the customer's monitor providing instructions to the user regarding the item code. The customer then follows the

instructions provided and enters the item code where provided for on the web page and submits the item code in step **4310**. In step **4312** the server computer receives the item code, processes the item code, and returns to the customer's computer a web page for display indicating the virtual item that the customer has acquired through the item code. If it is determined in step **4314** that the customer has more item codes to enter, then control returns to step **4308**.

If it is determined in step **4314** that the customer does not have more item codes to enter, then in step **4316** the home page of the web site, or some other web page of the web site, is returned to the customer's computer. In step **4318** the customer may now interact within the environment provided for by the web site with the virtual item(s) acquired.

Having described the present invention, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that many changes in construction and widely differing embodiments and applications of the invention will suggest themselves without departing from the scope of the present invention.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

Claim 1. A method for mutually enhancing retail sales and user traffic on a web site, the method comprising:

(a) offering through at least one retail source an item code to a customer;

(b) entering by said customer said item code in a web page on the web site;

(c) returning a virtual item to said customer through the web site; and

(d) utilizing said virtual item by said customer within the web site.

Claim 2. The method according to claim 1 wherein said offering step further comprises:

not requir ing said customer to purchase a product in conjunction with said offering of said item code through said at least one retail source to said customer.

Claim 3. The method according to claim 2 further comprising the step of:

printing on a promotion al card said item code offered to said customer and a URL for said web page of the web site.

Claim 4. The method according to claim 2 further comprising the step of:

printing an instruction on said promotional card directing said customer to ente r said item code in said web page on the web site in order to redeem said virtual item.

Claim 5. The method according to claim 1 wherein the web site and said at least one retail source are jointly owned.

Claim 6. The method according to claim 1 further comprising the step of:

when the web site and said at least one retail source are not jointly owned, establishing a promotion agreement between the web site and said at least one retail source to mutually enhance the retail sales of said at least one retail source and the user traffic on the web site.

Claim 7. The method according to claim 1 further comprising the step of:

requiring said customer to purchase a one of a product or a service in conjunction with said offering of sai d item code to said customer.

Claim 8 The method according to claim 7 further comprising the step of:

when the web site and a manufacturer of said product or a provider of said service are not jointly owned, establishing a promotion agreement between the web site and said manufacturer or said provider to mutually enhance the retail sales of said one of said product or said service at said at least one retail source and the user traffic on the web site.

Claim 9. The method according to claim 7 wherein said web page returned to said web browser is a web-based game on the web site.

Claim 10. The method according to claim 9 wherein said web-based game is associated with said one of said product or said service.

Claim 11. The method according to claim 10 wherein said web-based game has at least one character associated with said product and at least one character associated with the web site.

Claim 12. The method according to claim 7 further comprising the steps of:

printing said item code offered to said customer on said product, wherein said item code is not visible on said product due to a packaging of said product; and

printing a URL for said web page on the web site on a one of said product or said packaging for said product.

Claim 13. The method according to claim 12 further comprising the steps of:

printing said item code offered to said customer on a packaging for said product, wherein said item code is not visible from an outside of said packaging; and

printing a URL for said web page on the web site on said packaging.

Claim 14. The method according to claim 13 further comprising the step of:

printing an instruction on a one of said product or said packaging for said product, wherein said instruction directs said customer to enter said item code in said web page on the web site in order to redeem said virtual item.

Claim 15. The method according to claim 13 wherein an element of risk is introduced by not printing said item code on a portion of a plurality of said product or on a portion of a plurality of said packaging for said product used in conjunction with said offering of said item code to said customer.

Claim 16. The method according to claim 13 further comprising the steps of:

entering said URL by said customer in a web browser; and

returning said web page to said web browser in response to said entering said URL, wherein said web page has an entry instruction for said item code.

Claim 17. The method according to claim 1 wherein said item code is a one of a plurality of numbers, a plurality of

letters, a plurality of symbols, or a combination of a plurality of numbers, letters, or symbols.

Claim 18. The method according to claim 1 wherein said virtual item is an item that exists only within a virtual world of the web site.

Claim 19. The method according to claim 1 wherein said virtual item is at least one rare virtual item on the web site, wherein said at least one rare virtual item is more valuable and desirable to obtain by said customer.

Claim 20. The method according to claim 19 wherein said at least one rare virtual item is at least one variety, wherein said at least one variety of said at least one rare virtual item enhances an element of risk for said customer in obtaining said virtual item.

Claim 21. The method according to claim 1 wherein said virtual item can only be obtained by said customer through said item code offered through said retail source, and entering said item code in said web page on the web site.

Claim 22. The method according to claim 1 wherein said virtual item is a one of a plurality of type of said virtual item.

Claim 23. The method according to claim 22 wherein each of said plurality of type of said virtual item is a one of a plurality of variety of said plurality of type of said virtual item.

Claim 24. The method according to claim 23 wherein said plurality of type of said virtual item and said plurality of variety of said plurality of type of said virtual item enhance the element of risk and interest to said customer in obtaining said virtual item.

Claim 25. The method according to claim 1 wherein said utilizing step further comprises:

performing an action by said customer with said virtual item within the web site, wherein said action is a one of putting said virtual item up for sale in said customer's virtual items shop, putting said virtual item up for auction on an auction web page of said web site, putting said virtual item up for trade on a trading post web page of said web site, giving said virtual item to a fellow web site user, keeping said virtual item for later use, giving said virtual item to a virtual character of said customer according to a set of parameters established by the web site, and posting a message about said virtual item on a message board on the web site.

Claim 26. The method according to claim 1 wherein said virtual item has a plurality of characteristics and at least one function that can be done with said virtual item according to a set of parameters established by the web site.

Claim 27. A method for mutually enhancing retail sales and user traffic on a web site, the method comprising:

(a) establishing a p romotion between the web site sponsor and a third party;

(b) offering an item code associated with said promotion to a customer;

(c) receiving in a server computer for the web site from said customer said item code entered by said customer through a web page of the web site;

(d) returning from said server to said customer a virtual item through the web site; and

(e) receiving from said customer a plurality of inputs through the web site, wherein said customer interacts with said virtual item within the web site.

Claim 28. The method according to claim 27 wherein said offering step further comprises:

not requiring said customer to purchase a product in conjunction with said offering of said item code to said customer through said promotion.

Claim 29. The method according to claim 28 further comprising the step of:

printing on a promotional card said item code offered to said customer and a URL for said web page of the web site.

Claim 30. The method according to claim 28 further co mprising the step of:

printing an instruction on said promotional card directing said customer to enter said item code in said web page on the web site in order to redeem said virtual item.

Claim 31. The method according to claim 27 wherein the w eb site and said third party are jointly owned.

Claim 32. The method according to claim 27 wherein said third party is a one of a retail sales source or a manufacturer.

Claim 33. The method according to claim 27 further comprising the step of:

requiring said customer to purchase a one of a product or a service in conjunction with said offering of said item code to said customer through said promotion.

Claim 34. The method according to claim 33 wherein said web page returned to said web browser is a web-based game on the web site.

Claim 35. The method according to claim 34 wherein said web-based game is associated with said one of said product or said service.

Claim 36. The method according to claim 33 wherein said web-based game has at least one character associated with said product and at least one character associated with the web site.

Claim 37. The method according to claim 33 further comprising the steps of:

printing said item code offered to s aid customer on said product, wherein said item code is not visible on said product due to a packaging of said product; and

printing a URL for said web page on the web site on a one of said product or said packaging for said product.

Claim 38. The method according to claim 33 further comprising the steps of:

printing said item code offered to said customer on a packaging for said product, wherein said item code is not visible from an outside of said packaging; and

printing a URL for said web page on the web site on said packaging.

Claim 39. The method according to claim 38 further comprising the step of:

printing an instruction on a one of said product or said packaging for said product, wherein said instruction directs said customer to e nter said item code in said web page on the web site in order to redeem said virtual item.

Claim 40. The method according to claim 39 wherein an element of risk is introduced by not printing said item code on a portion of a plurality of said product or on a portion of a plurality of said packaging for said product used in conjunction with said offering of said item code to said customer.

Claim 41. The method according to claim 39 further comprising the steps of:

entering said URL by said customer in a web browser; and

returning said web page to said web browser in response to said entering said URL, wherein said web page has an entry instruction for said item code.

Claim 42. The method according to claim 27 wherein said item code is a one of a plurality of numbers, a plurality of letters, a plurality of symbols, or a combination of a plurality of numbers, letters, or symbols.

Claim 43. The method according to claim 27 wherein said virtual item is an item that exists only within a virtual world of the web site.

Claim 44. The method according to claim 27 wherein said virtual item is at least one rare virtual item on the web site, wherein said at least one rare virtual item is more valuable and desirable to obtain by said customer.

Claim 45. The method according to claim 44 wherein said at least one rare virtual item is at least one variety, wherein said at least one variety of said at least one rare virtual

item enhances an element of risk for said customer in obtaining said virtual item.

Claim 46. The method according to claim 27 wherein said virtual item can only be obtained by said customer through said item code offered through said retail source, and entering said item code in said web page on the web site.

Claim 47. The method according to claim 27 wherein said virtual item is a one of a plurality of type of virtual item.

Claim 48. The method according to claim 47 wherein each of said plurality of type of said virtual item is a one of a plurality of variety of said plurality of type of said virtual item.

Claim 49. The method according to claim 48 wherein said plurality of type of said virtual item and said plurality of variety of said plurality of type of said virtual item enhance the element of risk and interest to said customer in obtaining said virtual item.

Claim 50. The method according to claim 27 wherein said utilizing step further comprises:

performing an action by said customer with said virtual item within the web site, wherein said action is a one of putting said virtual item up for sale in said customer's virtual items shop, putting said virtual item up for auction on an auction web page of said web site, putting said virtual item up for trade on a trading post web page of said web site, giving said virtual item to a fellow web site user, keeping said virtual item for later use, giving said virtual item to a virtual character of said customer according to a set of parameters established by the web site, and posting a message about said virtual item on a message board on the web site.

Claim 51. The method according to claim 27 wherein said virtual item has a plurality of characteristics and at least one function that can be done with said virtual item according to a set of parameters established by the web site.