

**SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR ASSESSING AND MANAGING FINANCIAL
TRANSACTIONS**

REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] This application is a continuation of U.S. Patent Application No. 13/076,203, filed March 30, 2011 which is a continuation of U.S. Patent Application No. 12/911,552 filed October 25, 2010, now U.S. Patent No. 8,005,752, which is continuation of U.S. Patent Application No. 10/996,122, filed November 23, 2004, now U.S. Patent No. 7,827,009, which claims priority to United States Provisional Patent Application No. 60/525,233, which was filed November 25, 2003 and is entitled "SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR ASSESSING AND MANAGING FINANCIAL TRANSACTIONS." The foregoing applications are hereby incorporated by reference in their entirety into this application.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

[0002] Embodiments of the system and method described herein relate to alerting dealers when favorable financial terms are available to customers.

Description of the Related Art

[0003] Rather than paying cash for a product, a person may enter a financial agreement (e.g., a purchase agreement, a lease agreement, deferred or balloon payment agreement, or the like) in which the person makes a series of payments for a specified term. Often, these payments are periodic, such as weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly, or the like. For example, if a person purchases an automobile, the person may expect to pay a series of substantially similar monthly payments for one or more years.

[0004] During the term of the financial agreement (the "current agreement") covering the first product ("the current product"), a person may desire to use a second product (a "replacement product") in lieu of the current product. In such an instance, to obtain the replacement product, a person may be willing to return the current product and enter a second financial agreement (a "replacement agreement") that satisfies the first financial agreement. For example, a person

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having two years of payments remaining on his automobile lease may be willing to return the automobile to a dealership and enter a new lease for a latest model. The replacement agreement may be any suitable type of financial agreement (e.g., a purchase contract, a lease, deferred payment, or the like), including the same type as the current agreement or a different type. In some instances, a person will agree to enter a replacement agreement if the replacement product and payments are acceptable. For example, a person may find the replacement product and the payments under the terms of the replacement agreement acceptable if they are sufficiently similar to the current product and payments under the current agreement.

[0005] If a seller of products, such as an automobile dealership, knows when a customer is able to enter into a new financial arrangement under terms favorable to the customer, the seller can take advantage of this knowledge by offering a deal to the customer that includes the favorable terms. Accordingly, such knowledge, if possessed by the dealer, can drive increased sales. Nevertheless, no system or method has existed for alerting a seller when a customer is able to enter a new financial arrangement under terms favorable to the customer.

Summary of the Invention

[0006] Embodiments of the system and method described herein systematically generate and send alerts to dealers when customers are able to enter new financial arrangements under terms favorable to the customer. Advantageously, the knowledge that embodiments of the system and method make available to dealers can significantly increase the dealers' sales.

[0007] In one embodiment, a financial terms alert generation system comprises an information retrieval module, a financial terms comparison module, and an alert transmission module. The information retrieval module is configured to retrieve financing information, customer information, and product information from one or more sources accessible on a network. Such information can be retrieved, for example, from websites located on the World Wide Web. The financial terms comparison module is configured to compare a customer's current financial arrangement to a potential new financial arrangement to determine whether the customer is able to enter into a new financial arrangement on terms favorable to the

customer. In one embodiment, the financial terms comparison module performed at least one calculation based on the retrieved information in order to make this comparison. The alert transmission module is configured to transmit an alert to a dealer in cases in which the financial terms comparison module determines that a customer is able to enter into a new financial arrangement on terms favorable to the customer. Such alerts identify to the dealer the customer that is able to enter into a new financial arrangement on terms favorable to the customer and identify to the dealer the terms of the new financial arrangement.

[0008] Embodiments of the system disclosed herein perform a number of processes for alerting a dealer when a customer can enter into a new financial arrangement with terms favorable to the customer. For example, one such process includes (1) retrieving financing, customer, and product information, (2) comparing, for each of a plurality of customers, the customer's current financial terms for a financial arrangement related to a first product currently owned or leased by the customer with potential financial terms related to a second product comparable to the first product that would be available to the customer under a new financial arrangement in order to determine whether the new financial arrangement has terms favorable to the customer, (3) generating, for each customer for which the comparing shows that the new financial arrangement has terms favorable to the customer, an alert comprising information identifying the customer and indicating the terms favorable to the customer under the new arrangement, and (4) transmitting the alerts to at least one dealer.

[0009] Another process that can be performed by an embodiment of the system includes (1) receiving a modified financial variable, (2) comparing, for each of a plurality of customers, the customer's current financial terms for a financial arrangement related to a first product currently owned or leased by the customer with potential financial terms related to a second product comparable to the first product that would be available to the customer under a new financial arrangement, taking into account the modified financial variable, in order to determine whether the new financial arrangement has terms favorable to the customer, (3) generating, for each customer for which the comparing shows that the new financial arrangement

has terms favorable to the customer, an alert comprising information identifying the customer and indicating the terms favorable to the customer under the new arrangement, and (4) transmitting the alerts to at least one dealer.

[0010] Advantageously, by performing the foregoing process, embodiments of the system are able to determine how changed financial variables affect whether customers can enter new financial arrangements with favorable terms. For example, this process can be used to generate alerts when a new financial incentive, such as a manufacturer rebate or a dealership incentive, allows customers to enter new financial arrangements with favorable terms.

[0011] Advantageously, embodiments of the system are able to generate alerts related to a particular customer in real-time. This advantageous capability can be used to generate an alert when a customer enters a dealership, such as when a customer has taken his car to a dealership for service. Advantageously, in this embodiment, the alerts are generated in real-time, such that if favorable financial terms are available to the customer, the dealer can attempt to sell a new product to the customer while the customer is still at the dealership. Accordingly, this embodiment can be used to drive increased sales. In accordance with the foregoing embodiment, the system performs a process including (1) receiving an identification of a customer, (2) retrieving, in real-time, financial information regarding a current financial arrangement of the customer identified by the identification, wherein the current financial arrangement relates to a first product currently owned or leased by the identified customer, (3) comparing current financial terms of the current financial arrangement with potential financial terms related to a second product comparable to the first product that would be available to the identified customer under a new financial arrangement in order to determine whether the new financial arrangement has terms favorable to the identified customer, (4) generating an alert comprising information identifying terms favorable to the identified customer under the new financial arrangement if the comparing shows that the new financial arrangement has terms favorable to the identified customer, and (5) transmitting the alert in real-time to at least one dealer.

[0012] Accordingly, the foregoing embodiments timely alert dealers regarding opportunities to sell new products to customers by identifying circumstances under which a customer can enter a new financial arrangement with terms favorable to the customer. This and other advantages of the foregoing embodiments will be apparent to a skilled artisan in light of this disclosure.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0013] Figures 1A-1G illustrate an example deal sheet generated by one embodiment of a financial terms alert generation system.

[0014] Figures 1H-1J illustrate formulae for calculating certain terms of financial arrangements, as used by one embodiment of a financial terms alert generation system.

[0015] Figures 1K-8 are example screen shots illustrating functionality of various embodiments of a financial terms alert generation system.

[0016] Figures 9 and 10 illustrate an example deal sheet generated by one embodiment of a financial terms alert generation system.

[0017] Figures 11-33 are example screen shots illustrating functionality of various embodiments of a financial terms alert generation system.

[0018] Figure 34 is a block diagram illustrating how, in one embodiment of a financial alert generation system, internal data, external data, and historical data are used to generate one or more alerts.

[0019] Figure 35 illustrates an example deal sheet generated by one embodiment of a financial terms alert generation system.

[0020] Figure 36 is a flowchart that illustrates a process of alerting a dealership when a customer can be offered a new lease or other financial arrangement, as performed by one embodiment of a financial terms alert generation system.

[0021] Figure 37 is a flowchart that illustrates another embodiment of a process of alerting a dealership when a customer can be offered a new lease or other financial arrangement, as performed by one embodiment of a financial terms alert generation system.

[0022] Figure 38 is a flowchart that illustrates process for detecting and presenting a deal to a customer in real-time, as performed by one embodiment of a financial terms alert generation system.

[0023] Figure 39 is a block diagram that illustrates one embodiment of a financial terms alert generation system attached to a computer network.

[0024] Figure 40 is an example screen shot that illustrates a class selection feature of one embodiment of a financial terms alert generation system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0025] Embodiments of the system described herein may be used to assess the desirability of a new financial arrangement such as a replacement agreement. For example, in response to a customer's inquiry, a salesperson may use certain embodiments of the system to generate a deal sheet to determine whether replacement product and payments are acceptable to the client. In another example, certain embodiments of the system may generate notifications or alerts, which may advantageously indicate a potential replacement agreement satisfies certain parameters that indicate that the potential replacement agreement has terms favorable to the customer. Using these alerts, a person (such as a salesperson) may proactively contact a customer to offer the potential replacement agreement. To help manage client-contact-related tasks, certain embodiments may advantageously include contact management features.

[0026] Details regarding several illustrative preferred embodiments for implementing the system and method described herein are described below with reference to the figures. At times, features of certain embodiments are described below in accordance with that which will be understood or appreciated by a person of ordinary skill in the art to which the system and method described herein pertain. For conciseness and readability, such a "person of ordinary skill in the art" is often referred to as a "skilled artisan."

[0027] It will be apparent to a skilled artisan, in light of this disclosure, that the system and method described herein can advantageously be implemented using computer software, hardware, firmware, or any combination of software, hardware, and firmware. In one embodiment, the system is implemented as a number of

software modules that comprise computer executable code for performing the functions described herein. In one embodiment, the computer-executable code is executed on one or more general purpose computers. However, a skilled artisan will appreciate, in light of this disclosure, that any module that can be implemented using software to be executed on a general purpose computer can also be implemented using a different combination of hardware, software, or firmware. For example, such a module can be implemented completely in hardware using a combination of integrated circuits. Alternatively or additionally, such a module can be implemented completely or partially using specialized computers designed to perform the particular functions described herein rather than by general purpose computers.

[0028] It will also be apparent to a skilled artisan, in light of this disclosure, that the modules described herein can be combined or divided. For example, a skilled artisan will appreciate, in light of this disclosure, that any two or more modules can be combined into one module. Thus, referring to Figure 39, the information retrieval module 3930 and the financial terms comparison module 3935 can be combined into a single module that performs the functions of both modules. Conversely, any one module can be divided into multiple modules. For example, the information retrieval module 3930 can be divided into multiple modules such that each individual module performs part of the functions of the information retrieval module 3930 and all of the modules collectively perform all such functions.

[0029] Similarly, a number of databases are described herein. A skilled artisan will appreciate, in light of this disclosure, that any two or more databases can be combined into one database and that any one database can be divided into multiple databases.

[0030] A skilled artisan will also appreciate, in light of this disclosure, that multiple distributed computing devices can be substituted for any one computing device illustrated herein. In such distributed embodiments, the functions of the one computing device are distributed such that some functions are performed on each of the distributed computing devices.

[0031] The foregoing and other variations understood by a skilled artisan can be made to the embodiments described herein without departing from the

invention. With the understanding therefore, that the described embodiments are illustrative and that the invention is not limited to the described embodiments, certain embodiments are described below with reference to the drawings.

[0032] Figure 1A illustrates an embodiment of a deal sheet 102, which may advantageously include a description of a client's current agreement (FIGURE 1B), the client's contact information and a description of the replacement product (FIGURE 1C), and a comparison between the client's current agreement and one or more replacement agreements (FIGURE 1D). Any suitable number of replacement agreements may be displayed, including but not limited to one, two, three, four, five, six, or more replacement agreements. Any suitable number of lenders for replacement agreements may be displayed, including but not limited to one, two, or more lenders. The replacement agreements may be for any suitable term, including but not limited to 36 months, 48 months, 60 months, or any other period. As illustrated, a replacement agreement's payment is advantageously shown along with the difference between the client's current financial agreement's payment and the replacement agreement's payment. Thus, using the deal sheet, a salesperson may advantageously review a plurality of replacement agreements from a plurality of lenders.

[0033] Figures 1E, 1F, and 1G illustrate portions of an embodiment of a deal sheet. As illustrated in Figure 1E, the text 104 indicates that the deal sheet is associated with an alert. Text 106 advantageously identifies information about the deal sheet. As illustrated, text 106 illustrates that it is a manager-level view of a lease. In one embodiment, varying levels of detail from the detail sheet are shown to different persons accessing the system. Accordingly, the system may be advantageously used to customize varying views for the persons accessing the system to an appropriate level of detail. For example, a salesperson may need less detail than a manager. In one embodiment, the system determines the identity, the employment position, or both to ascertain the level of detail to display to a user of the system. Although a lease is illustrated, the information displayed may be use for other agreements, such as a purchase agreement. Text 108 may indicate that the

alert is associated with a particular person (e.g., a salesperson) or a group of persons (e.g., a "house account" for some or all salespersons).

[0034] As illustrated in Figure 1E, section 110 of the deal sheet includes information about the current product. The information about the current product may include any suitable information, including but not limited to a product identifier that preferably uniquely identifies the product (e.g., a vehicle identification number or VIN or the like), a class identifier identifying a group of models, a series identifier identifying a particular model, a model year, a make, a model, or the like. The information about the current product may be obtained from any suitable resource, including but not limited to a governmental agency (e.g., a department of motor vehicles), the current product's manufacturer, a local distributor of the current product (e.g., the local car dealership that sold the current product or the like), an online database of transactions, or the like. The information about the current product may be added to the system in any suitable manner (e.g., including but not limited to manual entry, automated entry, manual importation, automatic importation, static addition, dynamic addition, or the like) and using any suitable form of data (e.g., database, flat file, or the like). In some instances, the local car dealership that sold the current product may have some or all of the information about the current product in a software system from which the information may be obtained. In some instances, the current product's manufacturer may have some or all of the information about the current agreement in a website from which the information may be obtained.

[0035] As illustrated in Figure 1E, section 112 includes information about the current agreement, which may include any suitable information, including but not limited to the date the agreement started, the date the agreement ends, the original capitalized cost (or amount financed), the end of term residual (or deferred) payment, the term of the agreement, a base periodic payment (which may be pre tax in certain states), an actual periodic payment (which may be post-tax in certain states), the payoff amount (e.g., the amount owed to the lender to satisfy the agreement), a date until which the lender will accept the payoff amount in satisfaction of the agreement (e.g., a date representing the end of a ten-day period

or other suitable period), a trade-in value associated with the product under the agreement, a trade equity (e.g., the trade-in value less the payoff amount), and a security deposit (if any) held by the lender. In one embodiment, the trade-in value is an average of trade-in values over a suitable period, which values may be obtained from one or more suitable sources. In one embodiment, values over a ten-year period are obtained from an online auction website and grouped by a suitable geographic region. In one embodiment, the trade-in value is manually adjustable. Trade-in values may be selected from any suitable location, including but not limited to one or more car dealerships. In one embodiment, trade-in values may have associated assumptions (e.g., mileage, condition, or the like). Of course, any suitable method for calculating a trade-in value may be used. The term "trade-in value" is a broad term and is used herein in its ordinary sense and further includes without limitation aspects of some embodiments disclosed herein. As illustrated in Figure 1E, section 114 includes additional information concerning the current agreement, including the number of payments the client has made under the agreement, the number of payments remaining under the agreement, the number of times (if any) the client has made late payments (including payments 30 days late, 60 days late, 90 days late, or the like), and the total of remaining payments and any additional fees to conclude the agreement as scheduled under the agreement.

[0036] The information about the current agreement (e.g., Figure 1E) may be obtained from any suitable resource, including but not limited to the lender that financed the current agreement, a governmental agency (e.g., a department of motor vehicles), the current product's manufacturer, a local distributor of the current product (e.g., the local car dealership that sold the current product or the like), an online database of transactions, or the like. The information about the current agreement may be added to the system in any suitable manner (e.g., including but not limited to manual entry, automated entry, manual importation, automatic importation, static addition, dynamic addition, or the like) and using any suitable form of data (e.g., database, flat file, or the like). In some instances, the local car dealership that sold the current product may have some or all of the information about the current agreement in a software system from which the information may

be obtained. In some instances, the current product's manufacturer may have some or all of the information about the current product in a website from which the information may be obtained.

[0037] As illustrated in Figure 1F, the text 120 indicates that the deal sheet is provided by a particular car dealership. Text 122 indicates the client for whom the deal sheet was created. Section 124 includes information contact information for the client, such as the client's name, address, and telephone numbers. The information about the client may be obtained from any suitable resource, including but not limited to a governmental agency (e.g., a department of motor vehicles), the current product's manufacturer, a local distributor of the current product (e.g., the local car dealership that sold the current product or the like), an online database of transactions, or the like. The information about the client may be added to the system in any suitable manner (e.g., including but not limited to manual entry, automated entry, manual importation, automatic importation, static addition, dynamic addition, or the like) and using any suitable form of data (e.g., database, flat file, or the like). In some instances, the local car dealership that sold the current product may have some or all of the information about the client in a software system from which the information may be obtained. In some instances, the current product's manufacturer may have some or all of the information about the client in a website from which the information may be obtained.

[0038] As illustrated in Figure 1F, section 126 may include any suitable information about the replacement product, including but not limited to a class identifier identifying a group of models, a series identifier identifying a particular model, a model year, a make, a model, a selling price associated with the product (e.g., an average selling price), the trade equity value illustrated in section 112 (FIGURE 1E), a subsidy amount (if any) the seller of the replacement product would be willing to accept below the selling price associated with the product, the total selling price (or capitalized cost) on the replacement product including any equity and including sales tax (if any), sales tax (if any), and the total amount financed including trade equity and sales tax. The information about the replacement product may be obtained from any suitable resource, including but not limited to a

governmental agency (e.g., a department of motor vehicles), to the replacement product's manufacturer, a local distributor of the replacement product (e.g., a local dealership), an online database of transactions, or the like. The information about the replacement product may be added to the system in any suitable manner (e.g., including but not limited to manual entry, automated entry, manual importation, automatic importation, static addition, dynamic addition, or the like) and using any suitable form of data (e.g., database, flat file, or the like). In some instances, a local car dealership may have some or all of the information about the replacement product in a software system from which the information may be obtained. In some instances, the replacement product's manufacturer may have some or all of the information about the replacement product in a website from which the information may be obtained.

[0039] As illustrated in Figure 1G, the section headings 130 indicate the names of the lenders associated with the replacement agreements shown under the section headings 130. Any suitable information about the replacement agreements may be displayed, including but not limited to a contract term (e.g., 36 months, 48 months, 60 months, or the like), the type of agreement (e.g., lease, purchase, deferred payment), a residual or deferred payment amount, a capitalized cost or amount financed, a money factor or interest rate charged on the replacement agreement, a periodic payment associated with the replacement agreement, and difference (e.g., text 134) between the client's periodic payment under the current agreement (e.g., text 116 in FIGURE 1E) and the payment under the replacement agreement (e.g., text 132). For one of the illustrated replacements agreements, text 134 indicates that the replacement agreement's payment is twelve dollars less than the current agreement's payment. In one embodiment, the actual replacement agreement that the client enters may differ from those displayed in the Figure 1G; for example, upon review of the current product, particular values (e.g., a trade-in value or selling price) may be adjusted higher or lower for any suitable reason. Accordingly, a deal sheet may advantageously display an indication that the values on the deal sheet are estimates.

[0040] The information about the replacement agreements (FIGURE 1G) may be obtained from any suitable resource, including but not limited to the lenders offering financing for the replacement agreement, the replacement product's manufacturer, a local distributor of the replacement product (e.g., a local dealership), an online database of transactions, or the like. The information about the replacement agreement may be added to the system in any suitable manner (e.g., including but not limited to manual entry, automated entry, manual importation, automatic importation, static addition, dynamic addition, or the like) and using any suitable form of data (e.g., database, flat file, or the like). In some instances, a local car dealership may have some or all of the information about the replacement agreement in a software system from which the information may be obtained. In some instances, the replacement product's manufacturer may have some or all of the information about the replacement agreement in a website from which the information may be obtained.

[0041] In the example illustrated in Figure 1G, the replacement agreements are leases; however, replacement agreements may be any suitable type of agreement, including but not limited to a lease agreement, a deferred or balloon agreement, a purchase agreement, or the like. The term "agreement" is a broad term and is used herein in its ordinary sense and further includes without limitation aspects of some embodiments disclosed herein. Figure 1H illustrates one embodiment of a lease payment formula; however, any suitable lease payment formula may be used. The term "lease" is a broad term and is used herein in its ordinary sense and further includes without limitation aspects of some embodiments disclosed herein. Figure 1I illustrates one embodiment of a deferred or balloon payment formula; however, any suitable deferred or balloon payment formula may be used. The term "deferred" is a broad term and is used herein in its ordinary sense and further includes without limitation aspects of some embodiments disclosed herein. The term "balloon" is a broad term and is used herein in its ordinary sense and further includes without limitation aspects of some embodiments disclosed herein. Figure 1J illustrates one embodiment of a purchase payment formula; however, any suitable purchase payment formula may be used. The term

“purchase” is a broad term and is used herein in its ordinary sense and further includes without limitation aspects of some embodiments disclosed herein.

[0042] A general architecture that implements the various features of embodiments of the invention will now be described with reference to drawings. The drawings and the associated descriptions are provided to illustrate embodiments of the invention and not to limit the scope of the invention.

[0043] Certain figures illustrate various views of a system, which may be displayed to a user of the system and which the user may access, review, use, or any suitable combination thereof. Some or all of these views may be used with any other suitable views. In one embodiment, the system uses a hypertext interface, such as HTML, MICROSOFT™ Active Server Pages, or the like. In one embodiment, the system is accessed via a secure system, such as a local area network or the like. For example, the system may be hosted using an in-house server with one or more local computers. However, any network may be used, including wide area networks, the Internet, or the like. Further, the system may be implemented using one or more computers.

[0044] As described with respect to some embodiments herein, persons employed at an automobile dealership use the system; however, other suitable uses are contemplated outside of the automobile context. Further, although in some embodiments particular features are described with reference to a salesperson and a management person, any persons may use some or all aspects of the embodiments of the system.

[0045] Figure 1K illustrates an internet browser that has buttons 101 advantageously used to access functions of various embodiments.

[0046] Figure 2 illustrates an initial log in screen in which a user enters a username and password into fields 201 to gain authorized access to the system.

[0047] When the user accesses the system, an initial view screen is advantageously displayed as illustrated in Figure 3. The screen advantageously displays the name 302 of the person associated with the username and password. In the instance illustrated in Figure 3, the person is a salesperson. The system may advantageously associate the salesperson with clients. Any suitable association

with clients may be used. For example, the clients may include but are not limited to persons to whom the salesperson may have sold an automobile, persons to whom the salesperson has been assigned by a supervisor, other persons, or any suitable combination thereof. Thus, by managing the salesperson-client associations, the system may advantageously be used to limit the client data that a salesperson may view to the associated clients.

[0048] Figure 3 illustrates contact management entries 300, which advantageously may include client information, transaction information, or any other suitable information associated with clients. A client may have an entry associated with the client's current automobile transaction, as illustrated by hyperlinks 304 that display the client name and one or more associated automobile identifiers (e.g., make, model, year, or the like). In response to selecting one of the hyperlinks 304, a contact management view associated with the client is displayed, as described below. In one embodiment, contact management entries may advantageously be associated with a particular date. Contract management entries may advantageously be displayed and grouped according to one or more dates. In another embodiment, new contact management entries are displayed. The displayed entries may display any suitable parameter in the system, including but not limited to a stage in the contact management process, items associated with a particular date, tasks associated with a particular date, actions taken during the contact management process, or the like. In one embodiment, the contact management entries may be used to schedule and track tasks associated with contact management. The user may advantageously scroll down through this area and view tasks that have scheduled for future follow up. In one embodiment, a contact management entry is associated with a deal sheet. In one embodiment, when a new deal sheet is generated, an associated contact management entry is also created. The system may generate deal sheets or contact management entries at any suitable time. In one embodiment, the system generates a deal sheet and an associated contact management entry when the system receives an update of information used to calculate replacement agreements that are advantageously displayed in deal sheets. In one embodiment, deal sheets are generated

periodically (e.g., weekly). In one embodiment, deal sheets are generated dynamically. In one embodiment, deal sheets are generated substantially continuously. In one embodiment, when a new deal sheet is calculated, the prior deal sheet is retained and accessible through the client's history accessible through a contact management entry or the like. In one embodiment, deal sheets are generated in response to a user request. In an embodiment wherein one or more deal sheet parameters are customizable (e.g., a rebate amount or the like), a person may alter the one or more parameters and review the number and types of deal sheets generated (e.g., how many alerts). Categories of deal sheets include, but are not limited to, an "alert," a "sale," an "expired alert," and a "lease ending."

[0049] As illustrated in Figure 3, a user may choose to customize the display of the contact management entries by filtering entries, sorting entries, ordering entries, ranking entries, or any suitable combination thereof. Although particular parameters are illustrated in Figure 3, any suitable parameter in the system may be used as a reference for customization. Selecting one or more of checkboxes 306 may be used to limit the displayed contact management entries to a particular combination of sale or transaction types associated with a client, such as a lease, a retail sale, a balloon, or the like. For example, a client may have an existing lease of an automobile or may have purchased an automobile and is currently making payments. Selecting one or more of checkboxes 308 may be used to limit the displayed contact management entries to a category of deal sheets associated with a client, such as a sale, an alert, an expired alert, a lease ending, or the like. In one embodiment, an alert comprises a deal sheet that fits into one or more parameters. For example, in one embodiment, an alert comprises a deal sheet in which a replacement agreement for an associated replacement product has an associated payment within 10% of a payment associated with the client's current agreement. Any suitable range may be used. For example, the range could be set from at any value from 1% to 200% or more than 200%. In one embodiment, a lease ending deal sheet comprises a deal sheet for a client whose current agreement is a lease and that lease will end within a specified time (e.g., near the end of the lease). In one embodiment, a lease ending deal sheet comprises a deal

sheet for a client whose lease will end in 6 months, 180 days, or the like. Any suitable time prior to the end of the client's lease may be used to identify a lease ending deal sheet. Accordingly, the contact management entries may be queried for leases ending within a specific period. In one embodiment, the display of entries may be ordered to view contact management entries associated with lease ending deal sheets beginning with those furthest from maturity or beginning with the leases which will end soonest. In one embodiment, an "expired alert" deal sheet comprises a deal sheet that was previously within one or more parameters associated with an alert, but no longer is because one or more parameter values changed. The expired alert deal sheet advantageously provides a reference point as sales associates continue to communicate with their clients. In one embodiment, a "sale" deal sheet comprises a deal sheet that is a default category that is not an alert, a lease ending, or an expired alert. Selecting one or more of checkboxes 310 may be used to limit the displayed contact management entries to those at one or more particular stages in the contact management process, such as where the entry is new, where a telephone call has been made, where an appointment has been made, where a sale occurred, where no sale occurred, or any other stage suitable for managing contacts with persons. Entering one or more words into field 312 may be used to limit the displayed contact management entries to those including those words. For example, if the user wanted to see only entries associated with a particular model of car, the user could enter the particular model of car into field 312. Similarly, to view entries associated with a client having a particular name, the user could enter the name into field 312. In one embodiment, to view the customized display of contact management entries, button 314 is selected. In one embodiment, radio buttons or other suitable graphical user interface elements (not shown) associated with data fields in the system may be used to sort the contact management entries.

[0050] Figure 4 illustrates an embodiment of the display shown in Figure 3 in which the hyperlink 402 is selected. In response to the selection of hyperlink 402, a contact management view 500 is displayed as illustrated in Figure 5. Text 501 identifies the name of client associated with hyperlink 402. The client name and vehicle descriptor is also shown in text 502. Listbox 503 displays the owner of the

entry (e.g., a salesperson assigned to the client). Listbox 504 indicates the current stage in the contact management process. In one embodiment, a user may select a stage and save the newly selected stage in the system. Listbox 505 indicates a priority associated with the contact management process. In one embodiment, a user may select a priority and save the newly selected priority in the system. Priorities may advantageously indicate whether specific contact must take place, should take place, or is not needed. In one embodiment, an icon, text, or the like (not shown) is advantageously displayed adjacent entries 304 (FIGURE 3) to indicate an associated priority. Any suitable icon, color, or text may be used to indicate different priorities. In one embodiment, a different colored icon is associated with each priority. Listbox 506 indicates a status associated with the contact management process. For example, the user may record contact management-related actions taken for the client by selecting a particular status from the list box 506, which displays a list of selectable statuses 601 (Figure 6). In one embodiment, a user may select a status and save the newly selected status in the system. A status may indicate, for example, that the salesperson called the client and left a message, called the client and set an appointment, or the like. Field 507 allows text to be entered and subsequently stored for display in history list 508. Selection of listbox 510 allows a user to select a time from list 702 (Figure 7A). Selection button 512 allows a user to select a date displayed in a calendar view 708 (Figure 7B), where selection of a date from the calendar view 708 causes the date to appear in field 514. The user may also enter a date directly into field 514. The dates and times may be advantageously used to schedule future activities such as a future call, or an appointment set. The history log may advantageously record a user's use of the contact management screen, list what deal sheet calculations and generations the system has performed, and show any saved remarks. In one embodiment, newly generated contact management entries are associated with a "new" stage indication. A salesperson may advantageously use view 500 to track contact with the client through various contact stages, to document appointments made, and schedule future contacts. In one embodiment, a status change will advantageously be recorded in history section 508. In one embodiment, when the

save button is selected, the information from view 500 is logged into the history section as a separate line showing the date the entries were made along with the information entered.

[0051] Figure 8 illustrates an embodiment of the contact management view from Figure 5 in which remarks are entered the field 507 and then stored in the history view. When a view button 802 is selected, a deal sheet view 902 (FIGURE 9) is displayed. When a print button 803 is selected, a deal sheet formatted for printing is displayed.

[0052] Figure 9 illustrates the deal sheet 902. A deal sheet may include some or all of the data displayed in deal sheet or any other suitable data. Thus, a deal sheet showing a different set of data is shown in FIGURE 9. For example, Figure 10 illustrates a view of a deal sheet highlighting the client's current transaction. Although a particular presentation is illustrated in Figure 9, a deal sheet may use any suitable presentation and, thus, may be configured to show the data in a variety of ways, whether similar to or not similar to that shown in FIGURE 9. A user may browse from a displayed deal sheet to the contact management view (FIGURE 11). For example, after calling a client and discussing the displayed deal sheet, a salesperson may wish to access the contract management view to update the current status of the contact management process.

[0053] Figure 12 illustrates an internet browser that has buttons 1201 advantageously used to access functions in various embodiments. Figure 13 illustrates an initial log in screen in which a user enters a username and password into fields 1201 to gain authorized access to the system. When the user accesses the system, an initial view 1400 is advantageously displayed as illustrated in Figure 14. The view 1400 advantageously displays the name of the person associated with the username and password. In the instance illustrated in Figure 14, the person is a manager.

[0054] Using the view 1400, the manager may customize the data displayed in view by filtering data, sorting data, ordering data, ranking data, or any suitable combination thereof. Although particular parameters are illustrated in Figure 14, any suitable parameter in the system may be used as a reference for

customization. Entering one or more words into field 1401 may be used to limit the displayed data to those including those words. For example, if the user wanted to see only entries associated with a particular car name, model, make, or year, the user could enter some or all of those into field 1401. Similarly, to view entries associated with a client having a particular name, the user could enter the name into field 1401. Selecting one or more of checkboxes 1402 may be used to limit the displayed data to a particular combination of sale or transaction types associated with a client, such as a lease, a retail sale, a balloon, or the like. Selecting one or more of checkboxes 1403 may be used to limit the displayed contact management entries to a category of deal sheets associated with a client, such as a sale, an alert, an expired alert, a lease ending, or the like. Selecting one or more of checkboxes 1404 may be used to limit the displayed contact management entries to those at one or more particular stages in the contact management process, such as where the entry is new, where a telephone call has been made, where an appointment has been made, where a sale occurred, where no sale occurred, or any other stage suitable for managing contacts with persons. For example, the user can see all of the new deal sheets calculated, those that are scheduled to receive a call, appointments set, and so on. Selecting the sort radio buttons 1405 may be used to sort the data in a variety of ways such as follow up date, by prospect or client, by maturity date as in when the term of the purchase or lease will expire, and by series of vehicle. Selecting radio buttons 1406 may be used to view the data in ascending or descending order. After configuring the filtering, sorting, and ordering functions, the search button 1407 may be selected to see data associated with the selected the parameters. For example, Figure 15A illustrates an example of search criteria, including a particular client name, and FIGURE 15B illustrates the results of that search. In one embodiment, to view data associated with a particular salesperson, a hyperlink (e.g., hyperlink 1408) is selected. The hyperlink may advantageously display the name of the salesperson.

[0055] Any screens suitable for performing administrative functions may be used in connection with the system. These screens may be used to maintain and manage information used to perform the calculations within the system. For

example, Figure 16 illustrates a reports generator screen. Selecting hyperlink 1602 opens an average selling price screen 1701.

[0056] Using screen 1702, the user may view a display of costs associated with some or all of a set of car models. In one embodiment, the set comprises a set of available car models offered by a particular car dealership (e.g., list 1706). The “active series” designation indicates the series which may be displayed in the display of costs. To move one or more series from one series box to the other, the series may be selected and the appropriate single-arrow button pressed. The double-arrows buttons are for selecting and moving all items from one series box to the other. Checkboxes 1710 may be used to select the data to be displayed, including but not limited to a series or model identifier, a replacement series identifier, a base price, a delivery charge, a sunroof package, automatic transmission, metallic paint, other costs associated with the financing or price of automotive-related features, or any other suitable costs. A submit button 1714 is selected to display the data in a report 1802 (FIGURE 18), which may advantageously be used to evaluate the average selling price information the system uses to calculate the deal sheets. In one embodiment, the average selling price information the system uses to calculate the deal sheets may be edited or entered manually. Accordingly, the report 1802 advantageously allows a person to review the average selling price information used by the system determine whether to edit that information.

[0057] Referring to Figure 16, selecting hyperlink 1604 opens a bank rate screen 1902 (FIGURE 19). Using screen 1902, the user may view a display of financing rates associated with some or all of a set of car models. The “active series” designation indicate the series which may be displayed in the display of financing rates. To move one or more series from one series box to the other, the series may be selected and the appropriate single-arrow button pressed. The double-arrows buttons are for selecting and moving all items from one series box to the other. In one embodiment, the set comprises a set of available car models offered by a particular car dealership (e.g., list 1908). In one embodiment, the user may limit the financing rates displayed to those rates offered by one or more financial institutions. For example, listbox 1912 may be used to select a financial

institution. In response to selecting button 1916 A submit button 1912 is selected to display the data in a report 2002 (FIGURE 20), which may advantageously evaluate the financing rates used in the system. The report 2002 advantageously may include financing rate information, including a model identifier, the duration of the term, a money factor, a residual percentage, and MRM. A model identifier may be advantageously used to associate a rate residual with a particular model because rates and residuals may vary by model. The duration of the term is the length of the agreement. The money factor comprises a leasing interest rate or APR of the lease. The residual percentage comprises the portion of the original selling price that the financing company expects the product to be worth at the end of the lease or purchase. MRM is a maximum residual amount used that may be used for calculating payoffs.

[0058] Referring to Figure 16, selecting hyperlink 1606 opens a mailing list screen 2102 (FIGURE 21). Using screen 2102, the user may view a display of client-related, contact information associated with some or all of a set of clients. In an embodiment where sets of clients are associated with one or more salespersons, the display of the client-related, contact information may be displayed for one or more selected salespersons. The “active sales associate” designation indicate the sales associates which may be displayed in the display of the client-related, contact information. To move one or more sales associates from one sales associates box to the other, the sales associates may be selected and the appropriate single-arrow button pressed. The double-arrows buttons are for selecting and moving all items from one sales associates box to the other. Selecting one or more checkboxes may limit the column-displayed, client-related, contact information to particular parameters, including but not limited to names, organization name, addresses, city, state, zip, home telephone, work telephone, mobile telephone, or the like. Selecting one or more checkboxes may limit the displayed client-related contact information to a category of deal sheets associated with a client, such as a sale, an alert, an expired alert, a lease ending, or the like. Selecting one or more checkboxes may limit the displayed client-related contact information to those at one or more particular stages in the contact management process, such as where the entry is

new, where a telephone call has been made, where an appointment has been made, where a sale occurred, where no sale occurred, or any other stage suitable for managing contacts with persons. A submit button 2116 is selected to display the data in a report 2202 (FIGURE 22), which may advantageously to view list of the client-related, contact information.

[0059] Referring to Figure 16, selecting hyperlink 1608 opens a salesperson screen 2302 (FIGURE 23). Using screen 2302, the user may view a display of information associated with some or all of a set of salespersons. Selecting one or more checkboxes may limit the column-displayed salesperson information, which may include but is not limited to a salesperson identifier, a username, a password, an email address, or the like. A submit button 2316 is selected to display the data in a report 2402 (FIGURE 24), which may advantageously to review a display of the salesperson information.

[0060] Referring to Figure 16, selecting hyperlink 1610 opens a subsidy screen 2502 (FIGURE 25). Using screen 2502, the user may view a display of information associated with subsidies (e.g., rebates, discounts, promotions, or the like) associated with some or all of a set of car models. The “active series” designation indicate the series which may be displayed in the display of financing rates. To move one or more series from one series box to the other, the series may be selected and the appropriate single-arrow button pressed. The double-arrows buttons are for selecting and moving all items from one series box to the other. In one embodiment, the set comprises a set of available car models offered by a particular car dealership (e.g., list 2508). A submit button 2516 is selected to display the data in a report 2602 (FIGURE 26), which may advantageously to assess one or more models and any associated subsidies. In one embodiment, the system uses the subsidies to create deal sheets.

[0061] Referring to Figure 16, selecting hyperlink 1612 opens a task stage by task owner screen 2702 (FIGURE 27). Using screen 2702, the user may view a display of contact management task information associated with some or all of a set of task owners (e.g., a salesperson). In an embodiment where set tasks are associated with one or more salespersons, the display of the task information may

be displayed for one or more selected salespersons. The “active sales associate” designation indicate the sales associates which may be displayed in the display of the client-related, contact information. To move one or more sales associates from one sales associates box to the other, the sales associates may be selected and the appropriate single-arrow button pressed. The double-arrows buttons are for selecting and moving all items from one sales associates box to the other. Selecting one or more checkboxes may limit the task information to a category of deal sheets, such as a sale, an alert, an expired alert, a lease ending, or the like. Selecting one or more checkboxes may limit the task information columns displayed to those at one or more particular stages in the contact management process, such as where the entry is new, where a telephone call has been made, where an appointment has been made, where a sale occurred, where no sale occurred, or any other stage suitable for managing contacts with persons. In an embodiment where the task information is associated with a particular date, a range of one or more dates may be entered into one or more of the start field and finish field using any suitable method, including but not limited to manual entry or using calendar buttons in a manner substantially similar to that described above with respect to calendar view 708 (Figure 7B) and field 514 (Figure 5). A submit button 2716 is selected to display the task information in a report 2802 (FIGURE 28). As illustrated in Figure 28, report 2802 advantageously displays each selected salesperson with a total number of tasks for the sales person, a subtotal of tasks at each particular stage for the sales person, and an associated percentage relative to the total number of tasks for the particular stage and sales person. In one embodiment, report 2802 may include totals by any suitable group, including by division, type of sales, organization, or the like.

[0062] Referring to Figure 16, selecting hyperlink 1616 opens a trade-in history screen 2902 (FIGURE 29). Using screen 2902, the user may view a history of trade-in values associated with some or all of a set of car models. The “active series” designation indicate the series which may be displayed in the display of financing rates. To move one or more series from one series box to the other, the series may be selected and the appropriate single-arrow button pressed. The

double-arrows buttons are for selecting and moving all items from one series box to the other. In one embodiment, the set of car models comprises a set of car models accepted as a trade-in by a particular car dealership (e.g., list 2908). The user may view a history of trade-in values associated with some or all of a set of dates. The "active trade-in date" designation indicate the trade-in dates which may be displayed in the display of financing rates. To move one or more trade-in dates from one trade-in dates box to the other, the trade-in dates may be selected and the appropriate single-arrow button pressed. The double-arrows buttons are for selecting and moving all items from one trade-in dates box to the other. In one embodiment, the set of dates comprises a set of dates on which a particular car dealership accepted particular models accepted as a trade-in (e.g., list 2916). Selecting one or more checkboxes may limit the column-displayed trade-in information, which may include but is not limited to a vehicle identification number, the trade-in amount, an auction price, and a dealer adjustment. The dealer adjustments are those figures where the dealer can actually make changes to the average trade in value. These values are subsequently put into and become part of the calculations. A submit button 2924 is selected to display the + information in a report 3002 (FIGURE 30), which may be used to evaluate the trade-in values used by the system. In one embodiment, a trade-in value, adjustment, or other parameter value associated with a particular current product may be manually altered (e.g., receive user input) to customize that parameter value. In one embodiment, any parameter value associated with a particular replacement product may be manually altered (e.g., receive user input) to customize that parameter value.

[0063] Figure 31 illustrates an embodiment wherein money factor, residual percentage, or both may be altered for one or more replacement products and for one or more suitable replacement agreement terms (e.g., 36 months, 48 months, 60 months, or the like). Accordingly, a person may enter suitable values to update such values in the system. In one embodiment, these changes are advantageously reflected in view 2002 (FIGURE 20).

[0064] Figure 32 illustrates an embodiment wherein money factor, residual percentage, both may be altered for one or more replacement products.

Accordingly, a person may enter suitable values to update such values in the system. In one embodiment, these changes are advantageously reflected in view 2602 (FIGURE 26).

[0065] Figure 33 illustrates a display of contact management related activities for one or more accounts (e.g., a house account, a salesperson account, or the like), a group of one or more accounts, or both.

[0066] Figure 34 illustrates one embodiment in which internal data, external data, and historical data are used to generate one or more alerts. The external data comprises trade-in data, payoff amount data, money factor data, and residual data. The internal data comprises rebates and adjustments, average selling price data, and sales effort results data. Management reports, alert lists, and deal sheets are advantageously provided. Further, a sales associate may access the system via a sales associate interface and a manager may access the system from an interface.

[0067] Figure 35 illustrates an embodiment of a deal sheet. As illustrated in Figure 35, deal sheet may have one, two, three, or more types of agreements (e.g., lease, balloon, retail purchase, or the like). Further, different types of agreements may have the same or different sets of parameters displayed in the deal sheet.

[0068] In one embodiment, a server computer collects information advantageously used to assess the potential replacement agreement, including but not limited to automobile trade-in values. The server computer may reside in any suitable location, including but not limited to a location remote from a dealership.

[0069] In one embodiment, when a client with a current agreement visits a dealership, information sufficient to identify the client is provided to the system. For example, in one embodiment, the current product's vehicle identification number is entered into the system. In response, a deal sheet or an alert sheet associated with the client's current agreement may advantageously be created. In one embodiment, a notification is automatically sent to one or more persons at the dealership. Thus, persons at a dealership may proactively offer the client with potential replacement agreements. For example, in one embodiment, when a client visits a dealership for

car maintenance, a car maintenance system may automatically communicate with the system to generate a notification to a salesperson.

[0070] In some embodiments, a replacement product may comprise one or more automobiles among the dealership's new or pre owned inventory. a new car offered by a manufacturer, or an automobile from any other suitable provider.

[0071] In some instances, the lease or contract-ending customers may advantageously be directed to a contract-ending specialist who can adjust the parameters on the remaining months left.

[0072] In one embodiment, a manager or sales representative may advantageously adjust the rebates and finance parameters to change when a deal sheet is considered an alert. Thus, a person may try various scenarios and view the results. For example, if an automobile dealership is considering a \$1,000 rebate for a certain model of automobile, a manager could enter the \$1,000 rebate into the system and then evaluate the number of new alerts generated by this rebate. Similarly, the manager could view the results from altering the interest rate, money factor, or any other suitable parameter associated with an alert.

[0073] In one embodiment, the alerts will be integrated into an enterprise software system that tracks client-customer contact, facilitates outreach, facilitates follow through, or the like. For example, in one embodiment, the alerts are integrated into a Customer Relationship Manager system that will function with one or more aspects of the daily working of an automotive dealership to include sales representatives, business development centers, call centers, lease termination departments, managers, finance departments and service departments. Thus, interaction with various aspects of these systems may advantageously trigger a notification of a potential replacement contract. For example, when a call center receives a call from the client, the call center's system would preferably access the alert aspects of the system and, if an alert was associated with the client, the call center's system would be automatically notified. In one embodiment, a person may be notified of new alerts, lease endings, or the like via a pop-up screen, an email, or the like. In one embodiment, a person may be notified of new alerts, lease endings, or the like via a wireless transmitter (e.g., PDA, cellular phone), a wired transmission

(e.g., telephone), or any suitable method. Any suitable person may receive such notifications.

[0074] In some embodiments, the system uses internal data, external data, or both. In one embodiment, the internal data comprises rebates, adjustments, average selling prices, historical sales data. In one embodiment, the external data comprises trade-in values, payoff values, money factors, and residual. In one embodiment, alerts are provided to any suitable person, including but not limited to outbound marketers (e.g., telephone or the like), salespersons, managers, or the like.

[0075] In some embodiments, additional fees (e.g., license fee, bank acquisition fee, or the like) may be required in addition to the replacement product payments. In some embodiments, the payments calculated for a replacement product includes fees (e.g., delivery charge, fuel-economy tax) related to the replacement agreement. The replacement product may have any suitable combination of features financed in its payment. In one embodiment, the replacement product includes a set of predetermined features. In one embodiment, a set of predetermined features includes automatic transmission, sunroof package, and metallic paint.

[0076] In one embodiment, a current product is associated in the system with one or more replacement products. Accordingly, when the system executes a process to generate a deal sheet, the system determines the one or more replacement products associated with the current product and displays a deal sheet for those one or more replacement products. Associations may be made in any suitable manner, including but not limited to a database, a data file, or the like. In one embodiment, a particular make, model, and year of an automobile may be associated with one or more other combinations of make, model, and year. In this embodiment, when the system executes a process to generate a deal sheet, the system identifies the make, model, and year of the current product and display a deal sheet with associated combinations of make, model, and year. In one embodiment, these associations are entered manually into the system for general use (e.g., a manager determines that customers generally would accept particular

types of replacement products for certain types of current products). Any suitable way of determining what replacement products to display may be used. For example, where a client requests a particular make, model, and year, the system may advantageously receive that particular make, model, and year and display a corresponding deal sheet. Although automobiles may be categorized using make, model, series, class, year, or the like, any suitable category, classification, or grouping of automobile may be used to create associations for a client's current automobile and a replacement automobile. Further, for current products or replacement products, any category, classification, or grouping may be used to association current products with replacement products.

[0077] In one embodiment, when the system executes a process to generate a deal sheet (e.g., for an alert), the system identifies one or more replacement products associated with the current product and determines whether a payment associated with the replacement agreements is less than or equal to a certain threshold percentage value relative to a payment associated with the current agreement. For example, in one embodiment where the threshold percentage value is 10 percent, if a client leases a first automobile at \$500 a month and a second associated automobile is available for lease at \$550 a month, the system would generate an alert because the second automobile's payment is within 10%. Any suitable threshold percentage value may be used. In one embodiment, the threshold value is 5%. The threshold percentage value may be between and including 3% and 10%. Of course, the threshold percentage value may be at or about any suitable value. Further, this comparison of payments may be used to generate an alert alone, in combination with associations among products within the system, or in combination with any other suitable parameters. Further, alerts may be generated without reference to a comparison of payments.

[0078] In one embodiment, a local distributor tracks the identity of a person that sold the client the current product, and the system uses that information to route one or more alerts related to that client's current product to the person. In one embodiment, any suitable person may receive an alert.

[0079] As will be apparent to a skilled artisan in light of the foregoing disclosure, the system disclosed herein perform a number of useful processes for alerting a dealership when a customer can be offered a new and advantageous lease or other financial arrangement. Advantageously, providing such information to a dealership in a timely fashion can drive a significant number of sales and leasing arrangements for a dealership. Accordingly, embodiments as described herein allow for the automated performance of a number of processes that can significantly increase dealership profits. Embodiments of such processes are described below with regard to Figures 36 through 38.

[0080] Figure 36 illustrates a process of alerting a dealership when a customer can be offered a new lease or other financial arrangement. Such a process 3600 commences with a block 3610. In the block 3610, the process 3600 retrieves customer information, financing information, and product information. Preferably, such customer information and financing information includes information about any leases or other financial arrangements that each customer is already involved in, along with information about financial arrangements currently available from financial institutions. Accordingly, such information provides a basis for allowing the process 3600 to compare current financial arrangements with potential financial arrangements to determine whether a customer can switch to an advantageous financial arrangement. In one embodiment, an automated information retrieval module, such as the information retrieval module 3930 of Figure 39, automatically retrieves the customer and financial information from various electronic sources, such as, for example, public and private web pages, databases maintained by a dealership, external databases, and the like. A number of techniques for automatically retrieving such information are known to skilled artisans and can be employed to implement the information retrieval module 3930.

[0081] In a block 3620, the process 3600 compares each customer's current financial terms with potential financial terms being offered by financial institutions. Preferably, the comparison block 3620 takes into account all available financial variables that affect whether a customer can advantageously switch financial arrangements, including, for example, interest rates, payoff periods, amount

due on the current financial arrangement, any dealer or manufacturer incentives currently available, and the like. The foregoing list of financial variables is exemplary and non-exhaustive; a skilled artisan will appreciate, in light of this disclosure, other financial variables that are relevant, under some circumstances, for determining whether a customer can advantageously switch financial arrangements. In one embodiment, a financial terms comparison module, such as the financial terms comparison module 3935 of Figure 39, performs the processing of the block 3620.

[0082] In a block 3630, the process 3600 generates, based on the comparison of the block 3620, a number of alerts to inform a dealership that a customer can advantageously switch financial arrangements. In one embodiment, the process 3600 generates an alert whenever the difference between the amount that a customer will pay for a new but comparable financial arrangement as compared to the customer's current financial arrangement is below a threshold value. For example, in one embodiment, the process 3600 generates an alert whenever the difference in payment amount is less 10%, such that, for example, an alert is generated when a new payment amount would be \$540 and a current payment amount is \$500. Alternatively, the process 3600 can be configured to generate an alert only when the difference between a new payment amount and a current payment amount is negative; that is, when the new payment amount is less than the current payment amount. A skilled artisan will appreciate, in light of this disclosure, that a wide variety of thresholds can be set depending on the particular types of sales opportunities that a dealer wants to know about. In one embodiment, the processing of the block 3630 is performed by the financial terms comparison module 3935. Alternatively, as will be apparent to a skilled artisan, the processing of the block 3630 can be performed by a separate module, such as, for example, an alert generation module.

[0083] In a block 3640, the process 3600 transmits the generated alerts to a dealership. Advantageously, the transmission of alerts informs the dealership of sales opportunities that may provide to the dealership a significant opportunity to boost profits. As will be apparent from the description of the system provided above, the alerts can be transmitted by email, pager, web page, database record, fax, or

any other known method of transmitting electronic data. In one embodiment, the processing of the block 3640 is performed by an alert transmission module, such as, for example, the alert transmission module 3940 of Figure 39.

[0084] Though additional blocks are not illustrated by Figure 36, it will be apparent to a skilled artisan in light of this disclosure that the dealer can invoke additional processing of the alerts once the dealer has received the alerts. For example, the dealer can invoke the contact management and task management functions as have been described herein. Accordingly, in addition to alerting the dealer, embodiments of the system can perform a number of processes for managing alerts. Advantageously, such alert management provides dealers an effective way to follow up with each alert in a way that maximized the dealer's chances to convert an alert of a potential sale into an actual sale.

[0085] Figure 37 illustrates another embodiment of a process of alerting a dealership when a customer can be offered a new lease or other financial arrangement. In this embodiment, in a block 3710, the process 3700 receives at least one modified financial variable. For example, in one embodiment, the process 3700 may receive a financial variable that indicates that a dealer rebate has increased from \$500 to \$1,000.

[0086] Based on the new information, the process 3700 executes much of the same processing that was explained with regard to Figure 36 in order to generate alerts that take into account the newly entered information. Advantageously, therefore, the process 3700 can be used by a dealer to answer questions such as "How many customers could be switched to a new financial arrangement if we increase the dealer incentive to \$1,000?" In one embodiment, the modified financial variables received in the block 3710 are received by an automated process such as the information retrieval module 3930. In another embodiment, the modified variables are entered manually using a data entry module, such as, for example, the data entry module 3925 of Figure 39. Advantageously, allowing for manual entry allows for great flexibility in allowing a dealership to change variables over which the dealership has control in order to determine whether new sales opportunities can be generated.

[0087] As indicated, the process 3700 performs much of the same processing that is performed by the process 3600. In a block 3720, the process 3700 compares current financial terms to potential financial terms, substantially as explained with respect to the block 3620. In a block 3730, the process 3700 generates alerts, substantially as explained with respect to the block 3630. In a block 3740, the process 3700 transmits the alerts, substantially as explained with respect to the block 3640.

[0088] Advantageously, one embodiment of the system can be used to determine, in real time, whether a deal can be presented to a customer, while the customer is, for example, in a dealership showroom. Figure 38 illustrates such a process for detecting and presenting a deal to a customer in real-time. The process 3800 commences, in a block 3810, to receive a potential customer identification. In one embodiment, a potential customer identification, such as, for example, a customer number, can be entered manually into the system using the data entry module 3925. In a block 3820, the process 3800 retrieves the potential customer's financial information in real-time. In a block 3830, the process 3800 compares the current financial terms of the financial arrangements associated with the identified potential customer with potential financial terms for comparable financial arrangements, substantially as explained with regard to the block 3620. In a block 3840, the process 3800 generates alerts, substantially as explained with regard to the block 3630. In a block 3850, the process 3800 transmits the alerts, substantially as explained with regard to the block 3640. In a block 3860, the dealership uses the transmitted alert to present a deal to the potential customer. Advantageously, the entire process 3800 occurs while the potential customer is still in the presence of the dealer, giving the dealer a higher probability to derive increased sales based on the alerts.

[0089] Figure 39 illustrates a financial terms alert generation system attached to a computer network, according to one embodiment of the system described herein. A financial terms alert generation system 3905 comprises financing information 3910, customer information 3915, product information 3920, a data entry module 3925, an information retrieval module 3930, a financial terms

comparison module 3935, and an alert transmission module 3940. The financial terms alert generation system 3905 is preferably connected, via a computer network 3945, to external financing information 3950, external customer information 3955, external product information 3960, and at least one dealer terminal 3965. In some embodiments, the financing information 3910, customer information 3915, and product information 3920 does not exist permanently within the financial terms alert generation system, but is retrieved from external sources 3950, 3955, and 3960, as needed. In other embodiments, at least portions of the financing information 3910, the customer information 3915, and product information 3920 is stored permanently within the financial terms alert generation system 3905 to provide local storage and caching of data. A skilled artisan will appreciate, in light of this disclosure, that the illustrated storage and modules can be distributed across multiple network hosts rather than being centralized in one location.

[0090] In one embodiment, the data entry module 3925 is configured to receive input from a user to enter or modify data stored in the financing information 3910, the customer information 3915, the product information 3920, the external financing information 3950, the external customer information 3955, or the external product information 3960. In general, the data entry module 3925 is not used for a large percentage of data entry, because the information retrieval module 3930 generally automatically retrieves information from sources available on the network 3945. However, advantageously the data entry module 3925 provides a manual tool for entering data for cases in which a user desires to fine tune the information stored in the databases. For example, in certain cases, a dealership may have special incentive programs that are not captured in sources available on the network 3945, and a dealer may want to manually enter data that takes such special incentive programs into account.

[0091] In one embodiment, the information retrieval module 3930 is configured to automatically retrieve information about products, customers, and financing from sources available on the network 3945, such as, for example, from the external financing information 3950, the external customer information 3955, and the external product information 3960. Upon retrieving such information from

sources available on the network 3945, the information retrieval module 3930 makes the information available to the financial terms alert generation system 3905, such that the system 3905 can use the information in order to perform the calculations necessary to determine whether a customer can advantageously enter a new lease or purchase transaction. For example, in one embodiment, the information retrieval module 3930 stores the retrieved information in local storage accessible to the financial terms alert generation system 3905, such as by storing the information in the financing information 3910, the customer information 3915, and the product information 3920. Alternatively or additionally, the information retrieval module 3930 can store the information in memory rather than in local storage. A skilled artisan will appreciate, in light of this disclosure, a variety of techniques for retrieving information from sources available on the network 3945, including, for example, by scraping public websites. In light of these known techniques, a skilled artisan will readily understand, in light of this disclosure, how to implement the information retrieval module 3930.

[0092] As previously described, embodiments of the system and method described herein determine when a customer is able to enter into a new financial arrangement under financial terms that are favorable to the customer. In many cases, financial terms that are favorable to a customer are those in which the customer will pay less under a new arrangement than under an old arrangement. However, in certain cases, a customer may find terms favorable to the customer even when the customer will pay more under the new arrangement. For example, in certain cases, a customer may want to “buy up,” or purchase a product with a higher level of quality or luxury. Accordingly, embodiments of the system and method described herein allow a dealer to determine financial arrangements that are available to a customer in such a “buy up” situation. In certain embodiments, for example, a dealer selects, using, for example, a pull-down menu, a class of products that a customer potentially desires to buy. For example, with respect to cars, a dealer may select a model of car, such as a Mercedes-Benz C class, or a Mercedes-Benz E class. Figure 40 illustrates an example screen shot in which a dealer may make such a selection. Upon receiving such a selection, embodiments of the

system determine new financial arrangements that are available to the customer for that class of product. Advantageously, the dealer can use such information to present the customer with an offer to “buy up” to a higher quality product.

[0093] Similarly, embodiments of the system and method allow a dealer to select a lower class of product to find out about opportunities for the customer to “buy down,” or purchase a lower class product in order to save money. In certain embodiments, such “buy up” or “buy down” inquiries are limited to products from the same manufacturer as a product that the customer currently owns or is leasing. In other embodiments, such “buy up” or “buy down” inquiries can include manufacturers that are different from the manufacturer of a product that the customer currently owns or is leasing.

[0094] Advantageously, by automatically retrieving a large amount of information relating to products, customers, and financing, the information retrieval module 3930 contributes to the ability of the financial terms alert generation system 3905 to generate a large amount of alerts regarding financing opportunities in a timely fashion such that dealers can be informed of such opportunities in time to convert many such opportunities into sales. Advantageously, the automation provided by the information retrieval module 3930 also allows for periodic alert generation based on up-to-date information. Accordingly, the financial terms alert generation system 3905 can generate alerts whenever new information is retrieved by the information retrieval module 3930 that affects whether customers are able to advantageously enter a new lease or purchase transaction.

[0095] In one embodiment, the financial terms comparison module 3935 performs comparisons and calculations necessary to determine whether a customer is able to advantageously enter a new lease or purchase transaction. In one mode of operation, the financial terms comparison module 3935 performs batch comparisons periodically. In another mode of operation, the financial terms comparison module 3935 performs batch comparisons whenever new information is added to any one or more of the financing information 3910, the customer information 3915, or the product information 3920. In another mode of operation, the financial terms comparison module 3935 performs a comparison for a particular

identified customer and returns results of such a comparison in real time. When operating in this mode, the financial terms comparison module 3935 can advantageously lead to the generation of an alert in real time while, for example, a customer is in a dealership showroom. Advantageously, the financial terms comparison module 3935, in one embodiment, is configured to be able to perform comparisons and calculations in any one or more of the above-described modes of operation, such that the most advantageous mode of operation under the circumstances can be chosen.

[0096] Preferably, the financial terms comparison module 3935 compares each customer's current financial arrangements with potential financial arrangements for similar products in order to determine whether a replacement arrangement can be entered into on more favorable or almost as favorable terms. To perform such calculations and comparisons, the financial terms comparison module 3935 employs the comparison method steps and calculation formulas as are described herein above. Upon performing the calculations and comparisons, the financial terms comparison module 3935 generates information for an alert to a customer whenever a favorable replacement financial arrangement can be had.

[0097] In one embodiment, the alert transmission module 3940 receives alert information generated by the financial terms comparison module 3935 and transmits the alerts to a dealer. In one embodiment, the alert transmission module 3940 transmits the alerts to a dealer terminal 3965 via email. Alternatively or additionally, the alert transmission module 3940 can be configured to transmit alerts via pager, telephone, fax transmission, a webpage accessible to the dealer terminal 3965, or any other known mechanism for communicating information using electronic devices. In one embodiment, the alert transmission module 3965 is configured to transmit an alert to the dealer terminal 3965 in real time, such that the dealer receives the alert, for example, while a customer is still in a dealership showroom. Such real time alert generation and transmission can be advantageously employed to generate an alert for each customer that comes into a dealership's service department. That is, whenever, the customer brings a product to be serviced, the dealership can quickly run a comparison and generate any alerts, as

applicable, to determine whether the customer can advantageously enter into a new lease or purchase transaction. If the customer can enter into such a transaction under favorable terms, the dealer can use the information from the alert to make an offer to the customer while the customer is in the service department. Advantageously, this usage of the financial terms alert generation system 3905 can lead to a substantial increase in sales, as it has been found that at any given time, approximately eight percent of customers can enter new loans or leases on favorable terms. Advantageously, the financial terms alert generation system 3905 identifies a large percentage of those customers that can enter new loans or leases on favorable terms.

[0098] Although the system is disclosed with reference to preferred embodiments, the invention is not limited to the preferred embodiments only. Rather, a skilled artisan will recognize from the disclosure herein a wide number of alternatives for the system. Unless indicated otherwise, it may be assumed that the process steps described herein are implemented within one or more modules, including logic embodied in hardware or firmware, or a collection of software instructions, possibly having entry and exit points, written in a programming language, such as, for example C++. A software module may be compiled and linked into an executable program, installed in a dynamic link library, or may be written in an interpretive language such as BASIC. It will be appreciated that software modules may be callable from other modules or from themselves, and/or may be invoked in response to detected events or interrupts. Software instructions may be embedded in firmware, such as an EPROM or EEPROM. It will be further appreciated that hardware modules may be comprised of connected logic units, such as gates and flip-flops, and/or may be comprised of programmable units, such as programmable gate arrays or processors. The modules described herein are preferably implemented as software modules, but may be represented in hardware or firmware. The software modules may be executed by one or more general purpose computers. The software modules may be stored on or within any suitable computer-readable medium. The data described herein may be stored in one or more suitable mediums, including but not limited to a computer-readable medium.

The data described herein may be stored in one or more suitable formats, including but not limited to a data file, a database, an expert system, or the like.

[0099] Although the foregoing invention has been described in terms of certain preferred embodiments, other embodiments will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art from the disclosure herein. For example, although described in the context of automobiles, any good or service associated with a series of one or more payments may be used with embodiments of the invention. Thus, any good or service, whether related to automobiles or unrelated to automobiles, is contemplated. Accordingly, the concepts represented herein may apply to any consumer or commercial good that is financed or leased over time, such as aircraft, heavy equipment, high tech equipment, or the like. Further, although particular make, models, and other automobile-specific information is described, any make, model, or other information may be used. Also, any use related to vehicles or unrelated to vehicles may be used. Additionally, other combinations, omissions, substitutions and modifications will be apparent to the skilled artisan in view of the disclosure herein. Accordingly, the present invention is not limited to the preferred embodiments. Rather, the claims that follow define the invention.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method comprising:

by a computer system comprising computer hardware:

retrieving at least a portion of customer information, first financial terms that a customer has for a first vehicle, and first vehicle information;

retrieving at least a portion of second vehicle information for a second vehicle and second financial terms available to the customer for the second vehicle;

receiving a configuration request for replacing the first vehicle of the customer with a different vehicle;

in response to the configuration request, retrieving current information associated with at least one of the customer information, the first financial terms that the customer has for the first vehicle, the first vehicle information, the second vehicle information, or the second financial terms available to the customer for the second vehicle;

determining, by the computer system, whether the current retrieved information may affect whether it is favorable for the customer to replace a first vehicle and first financial terms with a second vehicle and second financial terms by at least:

calculating one or more new payments based on an estimated equity value of the first vehicle derived from the first financial terms, and, based on the second financial terms; and

determining if the one or more new payments satisfy at least a condition based at least in part on the first financial terms and the second financial terms, wherein the determination comprises calculating a difference between the one or more new payments and an existing periodic payment for the first vehicle, and determining whether the difference is less than or equal to a preset acceptable threshold value;

generating a message if it is determined that the retrieved information may affect whether it is favorable for the customer to replace the first vehicle and first financial terms with the second vehicle and second financial terms; and

transmitting the message to a dealer.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the condition comprises determining if the customer, under the second financial terms, would pay no more than ten percent per periodic payment over what the customer pays under the first financial terms.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein the condition comprises determining if the customer would pay no more per periodic payment under the second financial terms than under the first financial terms.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein the message is configured to be read by a dealer terminal configured for managing the message, wherein managing the message includes at least one of assigning the message to a user for handling, associating a task with the message, and assigning a status to the message.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein the one or more new payments comprise payments for different respective time periods.

6. A computing system comprising:

a processor; and

a computer readable medium storing machine-executable instructions including one or more modules configured for execution by the processor in order to cause the computing system to:

retrieve at least a portion of customer information, first financial terms that a customer has for a first vehicle, and first vehicle information;

retrieve at least a portion of second vehicle information for a second vehicle and second financial terms available to the customer for the second vehicle;

receive a configuration request for replacing the first vehicle of the customer with a different vehicle;

in response to the configuration request, retrieve current information associated with at least a portion of the customer information, the first financial terms that the customer has for the first vehicle, the first vehicle information, the second vehicle information, or the second financial terms available to the customer for the second vehicle;

determine whether the current retrieved information may affect whether it is favorable for the customer to replace a first vehicle and first financial terms with a second vehicle and second financial terms by at least causing the computing system to:

calculate one or more new payments based on an estimated equity value of the first vehicle derived from the first financial terms, and derived from the second financial terms; and

determine if the one or more new payments satisfy at least a condition based at least in part on the first financial terms and the second financial terms, wherein the determination comprises calculating a difference between the one or more new payments and an existing periodic payment for the first vehicle, and determining whether the difference is less than or equal to a preset acceptable threshold value;

generate a message if it is determined that the current retrieved information may affect whether it is favorable for the customer to replace the first vehicle and first financial terms with the second vehicle and second financial terms;; and

transmit the message to a client.

7. The computing system of claim 6, wherein the computing system is configured to retrieve the changed information with respect to a plurality of customers.

8. The computing system of claim 6, wherein the configuration request is received when the customer enters a dealership.

9. The computing system of claim 6, wherein the configuration request is received from a requesting user.

10. The computing system of claim 6, wherein the configuration request is received in response to a customer inquiry.

11. The computing system of claim 6, wherein elements or functions may be executed out of order from that shown or discussed, including substantially concurrently or in reverse order, depending on the functionality involved.

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR ASSESSING AND MANAGING FINANCIAL TRANSACTIONS

Abstract of the Disclosure

A financial terms alert generation system comprises an information retrieval module, a financial terms comparison module, and an alert transmission module. The information retrieval module is configured to retrieve financing information, customer information, and product information from one or more sources accessible on a network. The financial terms comparison module is configured to compare a customer's current financial arrangement to a potential new financial arrangement to determine whether the customer is able to enter into a new financial arrangement on terms favorable to the customer. The alert transmission module is configured to transmit an alert to a dealer in cases in which the financial terms comparison module determines that a customer is able to enter into a new financial arrangement on terms favorable to the customer. Such alerts identify the customer and the favorable financial terms.

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