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(54) **SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR MAIL VERIFICATION**

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(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 1290 days.

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

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G06Q 10/00 (2006.01)

G06Q 20/00 (2006.01)

G07B 17/02 (2006.01)

G06F 21/00 (2006.01)

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(58) **Field of Classification Search** 705/1, 705/28, 29, 1.1, 64, 401–402, 408; 713/186
See application file for complete search history.

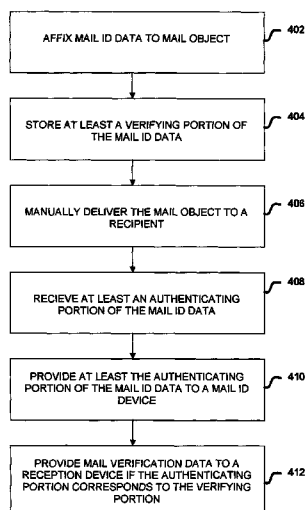
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56 Claims, 3 Drawing Sheets



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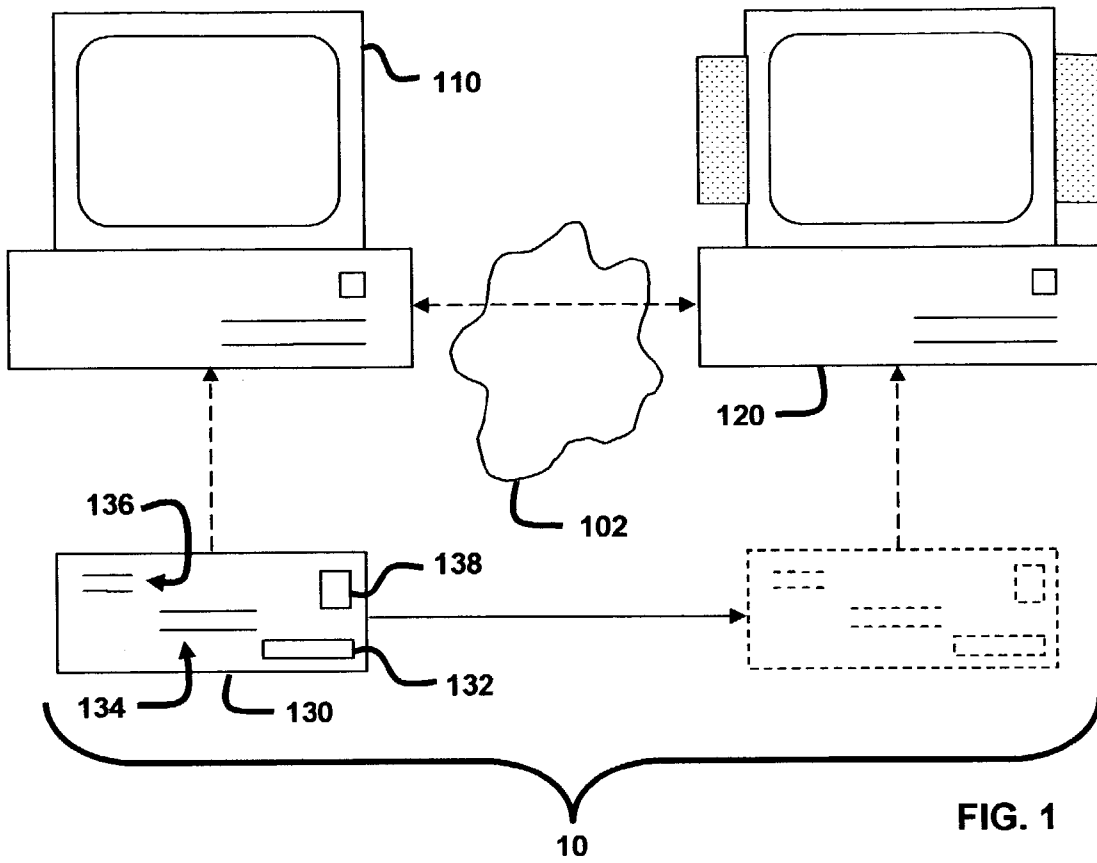


FIG. 1

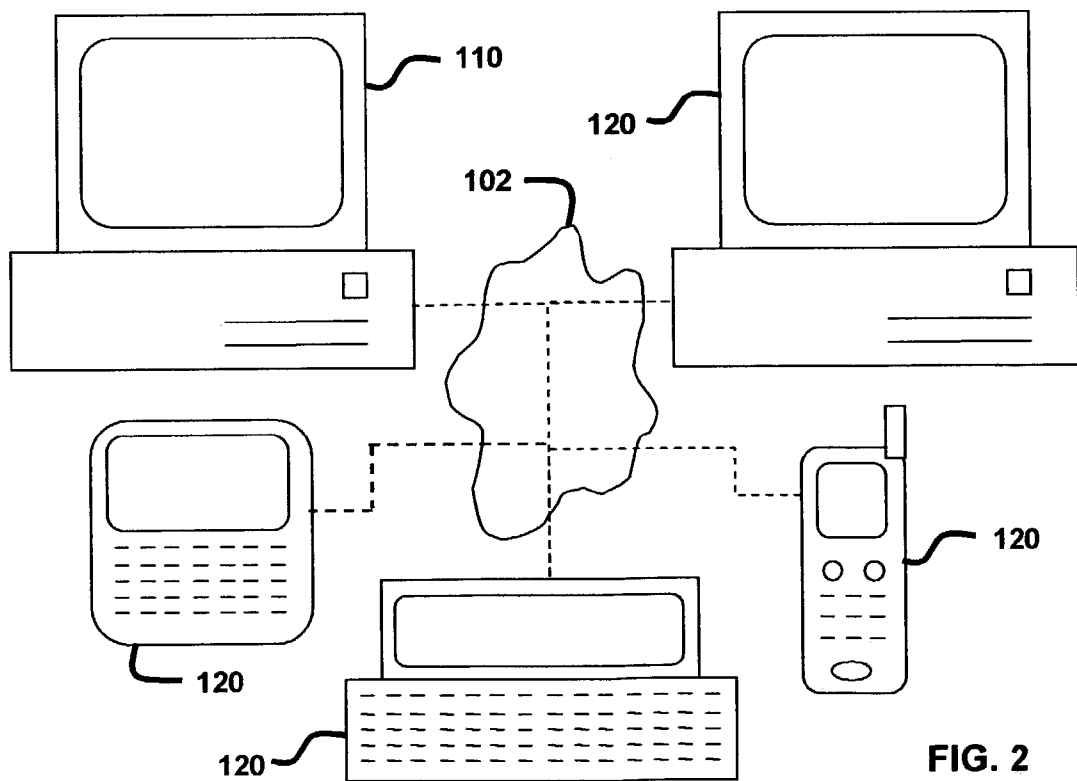


FIG. 2

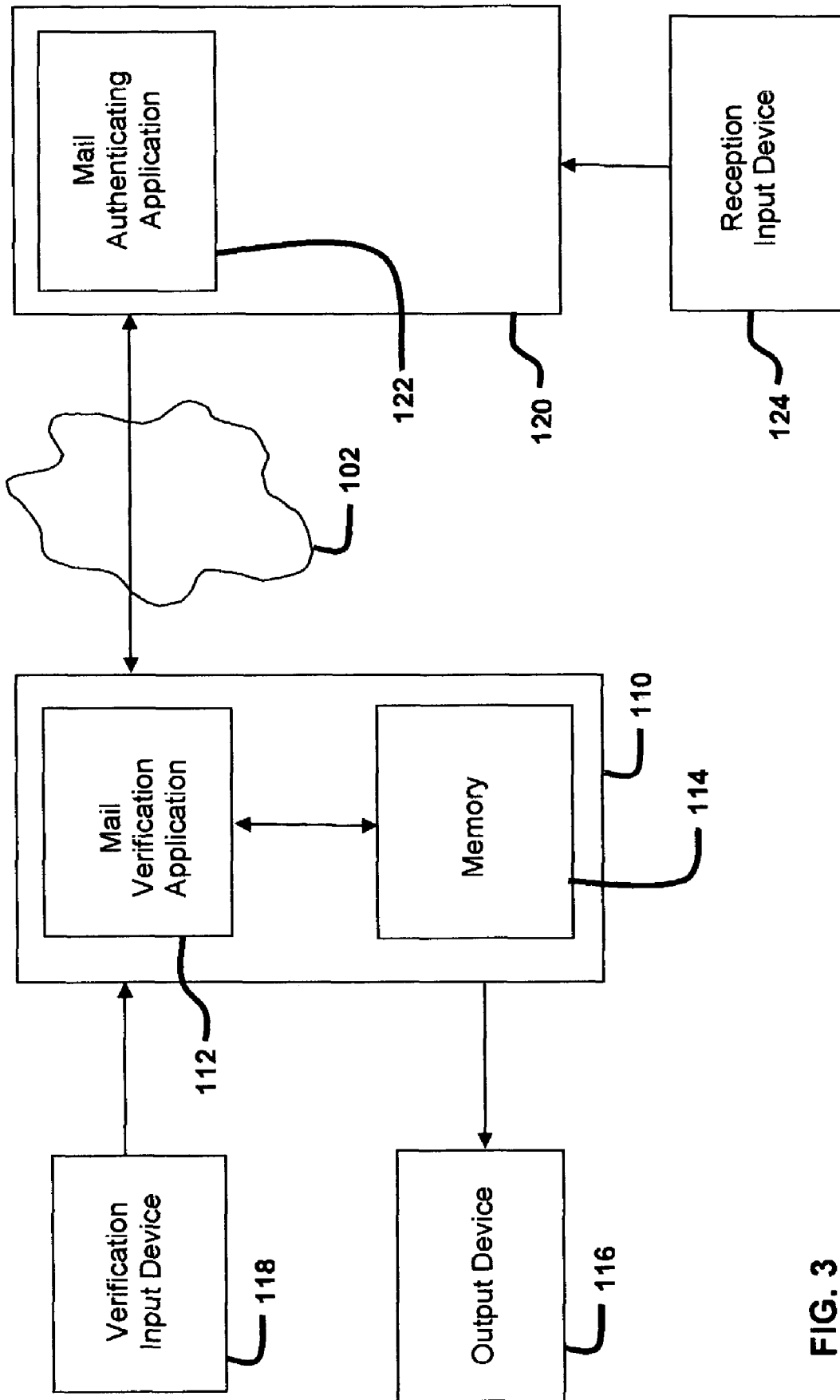


FIG. 3

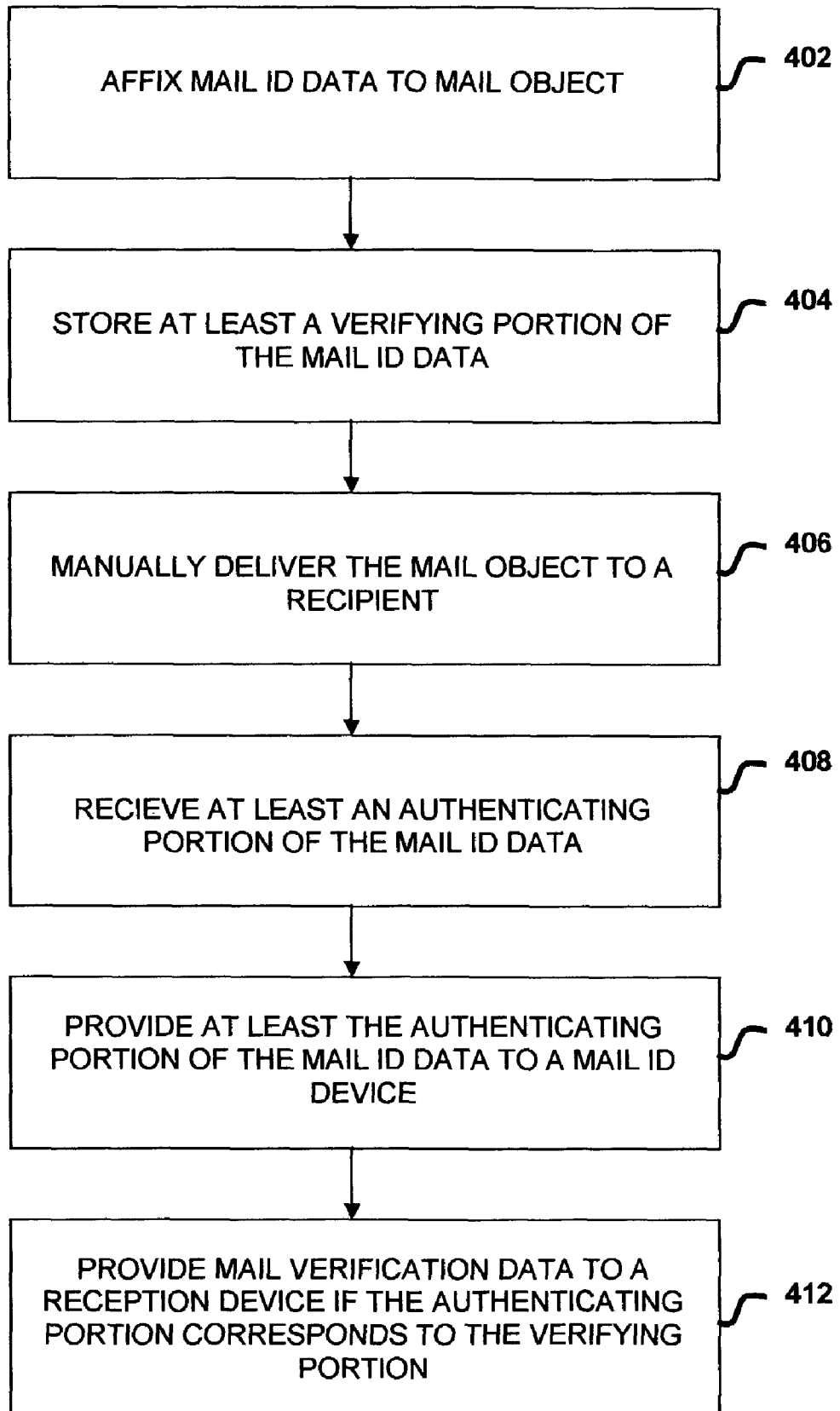


FIG. 4

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR MAIL VERIFICATION

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

This application claims benefit pursuant to 35 U.S.C. §119(e) of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/330,031 filed Oct. 16, 2001, which application is specifically incorporated herein, in its entirety, by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to mail verification, and more particularly to a system and method of authenticating at least one mail object by providing at least a portion of mail identification data over a wide area network, such as the Internet, in order to receive mail verification data.

2. Description of Related Art

Currently there are two ways to provided mail objects (e.g., letters, documents, packages, etc.) to an end user; that being electronically (e.g., email, etc.) and through traditional mail services (e.g., U.S. Postal Service, Federal Express, UPS, Courier, etc.). However, because certain mail objects cannot be delivered electronically (either because its impossible or impractical), they are delivered using traditional mail services.

There are several problems with delivering mail objects through traditional mail services. First, the mail object is typically secured inside packaging (e.g., envelops, boxes, etc.) before it is provided to the mail service. Thus, neither the mail service nor the recipient is aware of the contents of the package until such package is opened by the recipient. This creates a problem in that hazardous mail objects (i.e., Anthrax, explosives, etc.) are not detected until they are opened by the recipient, thus exposing the recipient to the hazardous material. It also creates a problem in that mail objects (in general) are not known until they are opened by the recipient, thus making it difficult for the recipient (or his designee) to properly screen, sort or avoid certain mail objects (e.g., offensive mail, annoying mail, etc.).

Second, a manually delivered mail object is limited to a one-way production of a finite set of information and/or products. This becomes problematic when the sender of the mail object is interested in providing or receiving additional information (e.g., product instructions, warranty information, etc.). Finally, contents that can be delivered electronically (e.g., advertisements, software, etc.) are often included in mail objects that are delivered via traditional mail services. The drawback with this is that it increases the cost associated with producing and/or delivering the mail object and increase the size of the mail object. For at least these reasons, a need exists in the industry for a system and method of providing mail verification data in response to receiving mail ID data over a wide area network, such as the Internet.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a system and method for providing mail verification data over a wide area network, such as the Internet, in response to receiving and authenticating at least a portion of mail identification (ID) data. Preferred embodiments of the present invention operate in accordance with at least one reception device, a mail identification (ID) device, a memory, and a mail verification application adapted to communicate with the reception device over a wide area

network, such as the Internet. Specifically, the mail verification application is adapted to store at least a verifying portion of mail ID data in memory. In one embodiment of the present invention, the verifying portion of the mail ID data includes an identifiable code portion (e.g., an alpha code, a numeric code, an alphanumeric code, a symbolic code, a digital code, etc.), a shipping portion (e.g., ship date, shipping location, shipping method, etc.) and/or a recipient portion (e.g., the recipients name, address, email address, IP address, account number, social security number, etc.). The mail ID data is then affixed to a mail object. The mail object, which may further include a mail-to-address, a return-mail-address, and/or postage, is then manually delivered to a recipient. In one embodiment of the present invention, the mail ID data further includes mail-to-address data, return-mail-address data, and/or postage data.

At least an authenticating portion of the mail ID data is then provided to the reception device. The reception device, which communicates with the mail ID device over a wide area network, transmits at least the authenticating portion of the mail ID data to the mail verification application operating on the mail ID device. The mail verification application then compares the authenticating portion of the mail ID data with the verifying portion stored in memory. If the authenticating portion corresponds to the verifying portion (e.g., matches, is reasonably related, etc.), then mail verification data is sent to the reception device. In one embodiment of the present invention, at least a portion of the mail verification data includes authenticating data (indicating that the mail ID data has been authenticated), securing data (indicating who secured the mail object), sender data (indicating who sent the mail object), recipient data (indicating the intended recipient of the mail object) and/or additional data (e.g., the contents of the mail object, downloadable product data, sender web-page information, third party advertisements, etc.).

In one embodiment of the present invention, the mail ID device further includes an input device adapted to provide at least a verifying portion of the mail ID data to the mail verification application and/or an output device adapted to affix the mail ID data on the mail object. In another embodiment of the present invention, the reception device includes an input device for receiving at least an authenticating portion of the mail ID data from the mail object and/or a mail authenticating application adapted to receive at least the authenticating portion of the mail ID data from the input device and provide at least the authenticating portion of the mail ID data to the mail ID device. In another embodiment of the present invention, the U.S. Postal Service (or an interim authenticating or screening entity) is the recipient of the mail object, thus interacting with the reception device to receive mail verification data.

A more complete understanding of the system and method for providing mail verification data in response to receiving at least a portion of mail ID data will be afforded to those skilled in the art, as well as a realization of additional advantages and objects thereof, by a consideration of the following detailed description of the preferred embodiment. Reference will be made to the appended sheets of drawings which will first be described briefly.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 illustrates one embodiment of the mail verification system.

FIG. 2 illustrates a mail ID device communicating with a plurality of reception devices over a wide area network, such as the Internet.

FIG. 3 illustrates one embodiment of the mail ID device and the reception device depicted in FIG. 1.

FIG. 4 is a flow chart illustrating one method of providing mail verification data in response to receiving at least a portion of mail ID data.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

The present invention provides a system and method for providing mail verification data over a wide area network, such as the Internet, in response to receiving and authenticating at least a portion of mail identification (ID) data. In the detailed description that follows, like element numerals are used to describe like elements illustrated in one or more figures.

Preferred embodiments of the present invention operate in accordance with at least one reception device, a mail identification (ID) device, a memory, and a mail verification application adapted to communicate with the reception device over a wide area network, such as the Internet. FIG. 1 illustrates one embodiment of the mail verification system 10, which includes a mail ID device 110 and a reception device 120 communicating through a wide area network 102, such as the Internet. It should be appreciated, as depicted in FIG. 2, that the reception device(s) 120 includes, but is not limited to, personal computers, set top boxes, personal digital assistants (PDAs), mobile phones, land-line phones, televisions, bar code readers, and all other physically and wirelessly connected reception devices generally known to those skilled in the art. It should further be appreciated that the number of reception devices 120 depicted in FIGS. 1 and 2 are merely to illustrate how the present invention operates, and are not intended to further limit the present invention.

As shown in FIG. 3, the mail ID device 110 further includes a mail verification application 112 and a memory 114. The mail verification application 112 is adapted to store at least a portion (i.e., a verifying portion) of mail ID data in the memory 114, receive at least a portion (i.e., an authenticating portion) of mail ID data from the reception device 120, and provide mail verification data if the portion of the mail ID data received from the reception device 120 is authenticated. It should be appreciated that the mail verification application 112 may further be adapted to generate the mail ID data and provide it to an external device (e.g., a printer, etc.) or receive at least a verifying portion of the mail ID data from an external device (e.g., a scanner, etc.). It should also be appreciated that the mail verification application 112 may exist as a single application, or as multiple applications (locally and/or remotely stored) that operate together to perform the verification functions as described herein. It should further be appreciated that the location of the memory device 114 depicted in FIG. 3 is not intended to further limit the present invention. Thus, a memory device that is, for example, external to the mail ID device 110 is within the spirit and scope of the present invention.

Referring back to FIG. 1, where the dashed arrows indicate data transactions and the solid arrow indicates physical movement, mail ID data 132 is affixed to a mail object 130 (as used in its broader sense to encompass the packaging that surrounds the content). It should be appreciated that mail ID data can be encoded/encrypted (e.g., using bar code data, digital data, etc.) to prevent fraudulent usage. It should further be appreciated that affixing the mail ID data 132 on the mail object 130 includes, but is not limited to, printing or attaching mail ID data directly on the outer surface of the mail object 130 or printing/storing the mail ID data 132 on labels, ICs,

smart cards, RFID tags, or any other data storage devices (or materials) generally known to those skilled in the art, and attaching them to the outer surface of the mail object 130. It should also be appreciated that the location of the mail ID data 132 on the mail object 130 in FIG. 1 is merely to exemplify how the invention operates, and is not intended to further limit the present invention. Thus, affixing the mail ID data 132 in some other location, such as over the sealing flap of an envelope, is within the spirit and scope of this invention.

At least a portion (i.e., a verifying portion) of the mail ID data 132 (either before or after the mail ID data is affixed) is stored in the mail ID device 110, or more particular (as shown in FIG. 3) in a memory 114 located within the mail ID device 110. Specifically, the mail verification application 112 either receives or generates at least the verifying portion of the mail ID data 132. The verifying portion is then stored in the memory 114. In one embodiment of the present invention, the verifying portion of the mail ID data includes a identifiable code portion (e.g., an alpha code, a numeric code, and alphanumeric code, a symbolic code, a digital code, etc.), a shipping portion (e.g., ship date, shipping location, shipping method, etc.), and/or a recipient portion (e.g., the recipients name, address, email address, IP address, account number, social security number, etc.). The mail object 130, which may further include a mail-to-address 134, a return-mail-address 136, and/or postage 138, can then be manually delivered to a recipient. It should be appreciated that the mail ID data 132 can also be encoded (e.g., in a bar code, etc.) to include mail-to-address data, return-mail-address data, and/or postage data. In other words, for example, mail ID data could be encoded to include both coded data and postage-account data.

Once the recipient (or their designee) receives the mail object 130, at least an authenticating portion of the mail ID data 132 is provided to the reception device 120. The reception device 120, which communicates with the mail ID device 110 over a wide area network 102, transmits at least the authenticating portion of the mail identification data to the mail verification application 112 operating on the mail ID device 110. The mail verification application 112 then compares the authenticating portion of the mail ID data with the verifying portion stored in memory 114. If the received portion is authenticated, or corresponds to the verifying portion (e.g., matches, is reasonably related, etc.), then mail verification data is sent to the reception device 120.

In one embodiment of the present invention, at least a portion of the mail verification data includes authenticating data (e.g., image data, audio data, etc.) indicating that the mail ID data has been authenticated. This would allow, for example, the reception device 120 to produce at least one authenticating image on a display and/or perform at least one authenticating sound on a speaker. In one embodiment of the present invention, at least a portion of the mail verification data includes securing data (indicating who secured the mail object), sender data (indicating who sent the mail object), recipient data (indicating who is to receive the mail object) and/or additional data (e.g., the contents of the mail object, downloadable product data, sender web-page data, third party advertisements, etc.).

In another embodiment of the present invention, the mail ID device and/or the reception device further include an input device (e.g., 118, 124) adapted to receive at least a portion of the mail ID data. It should be appreciated that that the input devices depicted and discussed herein (e.g., 118, 124) include, but are not limited to, scanners (e.g., bar code scanners, etc.), keyboards, RFID readers, smart card readers, IC readers, and all other input devices generally known to those skilled in the art.

In another embodiment of the present invention, the mail ID device further includes an output device **116** adapted to affix (e.g., print, store, etc.) the mail ID data on the mail object. It should be appreciated that affixing the mail ID data on the mail object includes, but is not limited to, printing or attaching mail ID data directly on the outer surface of the mail object or printing/storing the mail ID data on labels, ICs, smart cards, RFID tags, or any other data storage devices (or materials) generally known to those skilled in the art, and attaching them to the outer surface of the mail object. It should further be appreciated that the output device depicted and described herein (e.g., **116**) includes, but is not limited to, printers, data storage device (e.g., device capable of storing data on ICs, smart cards, RFID tags, etc.), and all other output devices generally known to those skilled in the art.

In another embodiment of the present invention, as shown in FIG. 3, the reception device **120** further includes a mail authenticating application **122** adapted to receive at least the authenticating portion of the mail ID data from the input device **124** and provide at least the authenticating portion of the mail ID data to the mail ID device. It should be appreciated that the mail authenticating application **122** may exist as a single application, or as multiple applications (locally and/or remotely stored) that operate together to perform the authenticating functions as described herein.

In one embodiment of the present invention, the mail ID data further includes software-booting data adapted to boot the mail authenticating application, an email application and/or a browser application. Either one of these applications could then be used to provide at least an authenticating portion of said mail ID data to said mail ID device, provide additional information to said mail ID device (or the sender of the mail object), and/or receive additional information from either the mail ID device, the sender of the mail object, or a third-party. In another embodiment, the mail verification data further includes software-booting data adapted to boot an email application and/or a browser application. Either one of these applications could then be used to provide additional information to the mail ID device and/or receive additional information from either the mail ID device, the sender of the mail object, or a third party.

In another embodiment of the invention, the reception device **120**, or more particularly the mail authenticating application **122** is adapted to provide a reply email to the mail ID device **130** or the sender of the mail object. This reply email may either be sent automatically, to acknowledge the reception of the mail ID data and/or mail verification data, or manually, to allow the recipient to communicate with the mail ID device and/or sender of the mail object. In another embodiment of the invention the mail verification application **112** is adapted to provide the mail verification data to the reception device **120** via an email.

In another embodiment of the present invention, the U.S. Postal Service (or an interim authenticating or screening entity) is the recipient (as defined by this application) of the mail object **130**, thus interacting with the reception device **120** to receive mail verification data. If mail is authenticated (or approved in the case of screening), the mail object **130** is forwarded on to the actual intended recipient.

FIG. 4 is a flow chart illustrating one method of providing mail verification data in response to receiving at least a portion of the mail ID data. Specifically, in step **402** mail ID data is affixed to a mail object. At step **404**, a verifying portion of the mail ID data is stored in a memory device. The mail object is then delivered to its recipient (or designee) at step **406**. At step **408**, a reception device receives at least an authenticating portion of the mail ID data. The reception device then pro-

vides at least the authenticating portion to a mail ID device at step **410**. If the authenticating portion of the mail ID data corresponds to the verifying portion of the mail ID data, then mail verification data is provided to the reception device at step **412**. It should be appreciated that storing the verifying portion of the mail ID data before the mail ID data is affixed to the mail object is within the spirit and scope of the present invention.

Having thus described multiple embodiments of a system and method of providing mail verification data in response to receiving mail ID data, it should be apparent to those skilled in the art that certain advantages of the system have been achieved. It should also be appreciated that various modifications, adaptations, and alternative embodiments thereof may be made within the scope and spirit of the present invention. The invention is further defined by the following claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of verifying mail identification data, comprising:
 - affixing mail identification data to at least one mail object, said mail identification data comprising a single set of encoded data that includes at least a unique identifier, sender data, recipient data and shipping method data, wherein said unique identifier consists of a numeric value assigned by a sender of said at least one mail object;
 - storing at least a verifying portion of said mail identification data;
 - receiving by a computer at least an authenticating portion of said mail identification data from at least one reception device via a network, wherein said authenticating portion of said mail identification data comprises at least said sender data and said shipping method data; and
 - providing by said computer mail verification data via said network when said authenticating portion of said mail identification data corresponds with said verifying portion of said mail identification data.
2. The method of claim 1, wherein said step of affixing mail identification data further comprises affixing a bar code on said at least one mail object.
3. The method of claim 1, wherein said step of affixing mail identification data further comprises printing said mail identification data at least indirectly on said at least one mail object.
4. The method of claim 1, wherein said step of affixing mail identification data further comprises storing said mail identification data on a device attached to said at least one mail object.
5. The method of claim 1, wherein said step of receiving at least an authenticating portion of said mail identification data further comprises receiving at least said authenticating portion of said mail identification data from said at least one reception device via said network, wherein said authenticating portion of said mail identification data further comprises at least said unique identifier.
6. The method of claim 5, wherein said step of affixing mail identification data further comprises affixing at least a human readable version of said unique identifier on said at least one mail object.
7. The method of claim 5, wherein said step of affixing mail identification data further comprises affixing at least a human readable version of recipient data on said at least one mail object.
8. The method of claim 5, wherein said step of affixing mail identification data further comprises affixing at least a human readable version of said sender data on said at least one mail object.

9. The method of claim 1, wherein said step of receiving at least an authenticating portion of said mail identification data further comprises receiving at least said authenticating portion of said mail identification data from said at least one reception device via said network, wherein said authenticating portion of said mail identification data further comprises

10. The method of claim 1, wherein said step of receiving at least an authenticating portion of said mail identification data further comprises receiving at least said authenticating portion of said mail identification data from said at least one reception device via said network, wherein said authenticating portion of said mail identification data further comprises at least said recipient data and said unique identifier.

11. The method of claim 1, where said step of providing mail verification data further comprises providing said mail verification data to said at least one reception device.

12. The method of claim 1, wherein said step of providing mail verification data further comprises providing at least authenticating data to said at least one reception device.

13. The method of claim 1, wherein said step of providing mail verification data further comprises providing said mail verification data to a recipient of said at least one mail object.

14. The method of claim 13, wherein said step of providing mail verification data further comprises providing said mail verification data to said recipient of said at least one mail object via an email.

15. The method of claim 13, wherein said step of providing mail verification data further comprises providing at least said sender data to said recipient of said at least one mail object.

16. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of sending a web page to a sender of said at least one mail object, said web page including data related to said at least one mail object.

17. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of sending an email to a sender of said at least one mail object, said email including data related to said at least one mail object.

18. A method of verifying mail identification data, comprising:

receiving said mail identification data from a mail object, said mail identification data comprising a single set of encoded data that includes at least a unique identifier, recipient data, shipping method data and sender data, wherein said unique identifier consists of a numeric value that is assigned by a sender of said mail object;

providing by at least one computer at least said sender data and said shipping method data to a mail identification device over a network;

receiving by said at least one computer mail verification data from said mail identification device when said at least said sender data and said shipping method data are stored on said mail identification device, said mail verification data indicating, at least in part, that said at least one mail object was sent by an identifiable entity, and therefore traceable to a source; and

routing said at least one mail object to be delivered to a recipient if said mail verification data is received.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein said steps of providing at least said sender data and said shipping method data and receiving mail verification data further comprises providing at least said recipient data to said mail identification device over said network and receiving said mail verification data from said mail identification device if said sender data, said shipping method data and said at least said recipient data are stored on said mail identification device.

20. The method of claim 19, wherein said steps of providing at least said sender data, said shipping method data and said recipient data and receiving mail verification data further comprises providing at least said unique identifier to said mail identification device over said network and receiving said mail verification data from said mail identification device if said sender data, said unique identifier, said recipient data and said shipping method data are stored on said mail identification device.

21. The method of claim 18, wherein said steps of providing at least said sender data and said shipping method data and receiving mail verification data further comprises providing at least said unique identifier to said mail identification device over said network and receiving mail verification data from said mail identification device if said sender data, said shipping method data and said at least said unique identifier are stored on said mail identification device.

22. The method of claim 18, further comprising using said mail identification data to generate an email addressed to said mail identification device.

23. The method of claim 18, further comprising using said mail identification data to generate an email addressed to a sender of said mail object.

24. The method of claim 18, further comprising booting a mail authenticating application in response to receiving said mail identification data.

25. The method of claim 18, further comprising producing an authenticating image on a display after said mail verification data is received.

26. The method of claim 18, further comprising producing an authenticating-sound on at least one speaker after said mail verification data is received.

27. The method of claim 18, further comprising the step of sending a web page to a sender of said mail object, said web page including data related to said mail object.

28. The method of claim 27, wherein said steps of providing at least said sender data and said shipping method data and receiving mail verification data further comprises providing at least said unique identifier to said mail identification device over said network and receiving said mail verification data from said mail identification device if said sender data, said shipping method data and said at least said unique identifier are stored on said mail identification device.

29. The method of claim 28, wherein said steps of providing at least said sender data, said shipping method data and said unique identifier and receiving mail verification data further comprises providing at least said recipient data to said mail identification device over said network and receiving said mail verification data from said mail identification device if said sender data, said shipping method data, said unique identifier and said at least said recipient data are stored on said mail identification device.

30. The method of claim 18, further comprising the step of storing a shipping location of said mail object on said mail identification device.

31. The method of claim 18, further comprising the step of storing a shipping date of said mail object on said mail identification device.

32. The method of claim 18, further comprising the step of sending an email to a sender of said mail object, said email including data related to said mail object.

33. A mail verification system for authenticating at least one mail object, said at least one mail object being a physical object and including mail identification data, comprising:
at least one mail verification device adapted to communicate with at least one reception device via a network, said at least one mail verification device comprising:

a memory; and
 a mail verification application adapted to:
 store at least a verifying portion of mail identification data in said memory, said mail identification data comprising a single set of encoded data that includes at least a unique identifier, sender information, recipient information and shipping method information, wherein said unique identifier consists of a numeric value assigned by a sender of said at least one mail object;
 receive at least an authenticating portion of said mail identification data from said at least one reception device via said network, wherein said authenticating portion comprises at least said sender information and said shipping method information; and
 provide mail verification data via said network if at least said authenticating portion of said mail identification data corresponds to said verifying portion of said mail identification data.

34. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein a portion of said mail verification application under said sender's control is further adapted to generate at least said verifying portion of said mail identification data.

35. The mail verification system of claim 34 further comprising an output device adapted to affix said mail identification data on said at least one mail object.

36. The mail verification system of claim 35, wherein said output device is adapted to affix said mail identification data on said at least one mail object by printing said mail identification data on at least one label.

37. The mail verification system of claim 35, wherein said output device is adapted to affix said mail identification data on said at least one mail object by storing said mail identification data on at least one tag.

38. The mail verification system of claim 33 further comprising an input device adapted to receive at least said verifying portion of said mail identification data.

39. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein said authenticating portion of said mail identification data further includes at least said unique identifier.

40. The mail verification system of claim 39, wherein said authenticating portion of said mail identification data further includes at least said recipient information.

41. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein said mail identification data is encoded on said at least one mail object through a bar code.

42. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein a portion of said mail verification application under said sender's control is further adapted to generate at least said unique identifier.

43. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein said mail identification data further includes at least postage data.

44. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein said mail verification data includes at least authenticating data.

45. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein said mail verification data includes at least said sender information.

46. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein said mail identification data includes at least mail-object-content data.

47. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein said mail verification data includes at least securing data.

48. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein said mail verification application is further adapted to send an email in response to receiving said authenticating portion of said mail identification data.

49. The mail verification system of claim 33, wherein said mail verification application is further adapted to send an email if said authenticating portion of said mail identification data corresponds to said verifying portion of said mail identification data.

50. The mail verification system of claim 33, further comprising said at least one reception device.

51. The mail verification system of claim 50, wherein said at least one reception device comprises an input device for receiving at least a portion of said mail identification data from said at least one mail object.

52. The mail verification system of claim 51, wherein said at least one reception device further comprises a mail authenticating application adapted to:

receive said at least a portion of said mail identification data from said input device; and

provide at least said authenticating portion of said mail identification data to said at least one mail verification device.

53. The mail verification system of claim 52, wherein said at least one reception device further includes a display, said mail authenticating application being further adapted to display at least one authenticating image on said display if said mail verification data is not received.

54. The mail verification system of claim 52, wherein said at least one reception device further includes at least one speaker, said mail authenticating application being further adapted to produce at least one authenticating sound on said at least one speaker if said mail verification data is not received.

55. The mail verification system of claim 52, wherein said mail authenticating application is further adapted to send an email in response to receiving said mail identification data.

56. The mail verification system of claim 52, wherein said mail authenticating application is further adapted to send an email in response to receiving said mail verification data.