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Kenn Fischburg, president of Consumers Interstate Corp. in Norwich, Conn., has received a patent for an Internet ordering system, which helps customers save time by giving them access to previous order forms they submitted to the office and janitorial supply company.

Simplified 'Net orders get patent

By **STEPHEN SINGER**
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NORWICH, Conn. — A customer who makes a purchase on the Internet simply clicks and buys.

But businesses seeking to exploit the technology of cyber-

space must pull customers to the Internet with a software that is embedded with formulas, flow charts and methodologies.

The complicated series of steps has been captured by a Norwich businessman who won a rare patent to protect his Web-based property.

Consumers Interstate Corp., which sells office and janitorial supplies, workplace furniture, forms and even candy and bottled water, was driven to the Internet for good reasons.

"Every new customer we've picked up in the last three years has taken on the process of buying their supplies through the Internet," said Kenn Fischburg, president of the company.

Doing business on the Internet isn't new, but Fischburg has come up with a way he hopes will keep bringing customers back. Fischburg, 55, won a patent for an Internet procurement method following a five-year review by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

His system allows customers — typically businesses buying office supplies — to gain access to a custom order form that simplifies buying by storing records of previous purchases.

Customers can select from about 1 million products such as batteries, clipboards, disposable clothes and foam wrapping. The time saved in ordering is an important selling point, Fischburg said. "You reduce costs by reducing steps," he said. "You can't make toilet paper cheaper."

An Internet service that most

By the numbers

■ Last year, only **282 business method patents** were issued by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

■ At the same time, the Patent and Trademark Office issued **187,000 patents issued for inventions** and products.

closely resembles Fischburg's Internet ordering process is Peapod.com, which has put grocery shopping on the Internet.

Scott DeGraeve, senior vice president of merchandising, said about 80 percent of Peapod's customers shop from previous order lists.

Fischburg took over the business in 1974. His father launched it 30 years earlier as a paper supply company. By acquiring competitors, expanding product offerings and using the Internet the privately-held company now racks up annual sales of more than \$20 million, he said.

Business method patents, which include those for investment banking, accounting systems, loan and tax processes, are rare because they must be part of computer process or other system involving a step-by-step computation and may not be abstractions, said Daniel Mackas, the lawyer who handled Fischburg's patent.

The number of business method patents rose dramatically as an increasing number of computer applications were discovered, said Mackas.

For Fischburg, the next move is to license his patent to distribution or office supply businesses to head off lawsuits that could threaten his patent.