

What Do I Hear....: eBay's Utility in a Library

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Abstract

The online auction site eBay provides library staff and patrons an important tool in many areas. Libraries can use eBay as an additional avenue to buy and sell books, answer reference questions, promote computer literacy and even as a means to encourage library use. Examples of easy-to-use strategies are given, as well as a short list of recent book selections about how to get more out of eBay.

Introduction

eBay is a veritable treasure trove for collectors, bargain-hunters, and the like. This well known site also holds a treasure of resources that libraries may wish to employ. eBay may function as an acquisition tool, reference tool, or a vehicle for promoting the library. The usefulness of this well-known auction site for acquiring and selling books is evident; however, it's utility as a reference tool and as a library promotion tool is less obvious. For reference work, some patron inquiries require creative searching to find an answer, and there are certain types of inquiries that lend themselves well to information gathering in eBay. The strength of eBay as a library promotion tool lies in the auction sites immense popularity. By offering hands-on eBay training classes, libraries can reach out to community members interested in this online auction site, possibly providing some with their first introduction to the Web.

Short Primer on Online Auctions Sites Like eBay

To truly understand how to best take advantage of eBay for library collection development and maintenance, a basic understanding of how online auctions work is

needed. The English auction, the auction type used by eBay and similar to what is seen in auction houses around the world, is an ascending bid auction (bidding continues upward until only one bidder remains). The traditional process requires all the bidders to be in the same room at the same time, but with the wonders of modern technology, computer-assisted asynchronous bidding is now possible. Rather than remaining present for the length of the auction, on eBay and other online auction sites, the future bidding is done by the computer system. This process works by allowing a person to make a maximum bid (\$100 for example) on an item, as well as a minimum bid (\$5 for example). The system will bid the minimum \$5 for the person. As another bidder bids \$6, the system will inform the new bidder that they have been outbid by the first bidder. New bidders will now have to bid higher than the new \$6 bid. This process goes on until the end of the auction or until the \$100 bid is topped. If the maximum bid is exceeded, then an email will be sent to the person alerting them to the fact that they are no longer the highest bidder and offers them a chance to raise their bid.

While bidders may start with a sizable opening bid, many bidders prefer to follow the bidding more closely and hope to get a bargain by sniping. Sniping is the strategy many bidders employ by waiting until very late in the auction, usually in the last few seconds, hoping to place a winning bid without other bidders having time to respond to that bid. This is such a common strategy that there are a number of special programs (e.g., AuctionStealer, BidNapper) set up to do just that, and relieve the bidder of the obligation to place the bid at the last possible moment.

Many busy people like the immediate gratification of paying for an item in a store over the vagaries of bargain hunting on a several day long auction that might not be won.

eBay has developed a couple of ways to cater to these customers: “Buy-It-Now” prices are available through some auction listings that allow the buyer to purchase an item at a set price. Items can also be purchased through “eBay Stores” without going through the bidding process. For example, a book may be on sale in an “eBay Store” for \$20. The same title may also have an auction listing which may go for more or less than \$20. Some will find it better to pay a premium to get a book than to hope that they can get a bargain through an auction.

eBay as an Acquisition Tool

Online commerce has increasingly changed the dynamics of buying and selling items of all types. The exponential growth of online resources has created possibilities for buying and selling which simply did not exist just a few years ago. Libraries have typically established relationships with vendors or book-jobbers to help with purchasing. Vendors and book-jobbers offer expertise and volume discounts that are an undeniable asset for libraries. However, much as Google and other popular search engines have cut into the market of customers at the reference desk by allowing searching by the end-user, online auction sites have provided alternatives to the typical “library middlemen” for acquiring books.

Online auction services have now been serving customers for over 10 years. Libraries, with a few notable exceptions, have been slow to participate in them. While there may be valid reasons for not participating in online auctions, there are also some real advantages to making use of this exciting environment. An early case study presenting a library director’s use of eBay for collection development was found in *Library Journal’s* long-running series “How Do You Manage?” In this April 1, 2001 article entitled

"Director, Do Thy Bidding", the use of eBay by a library director to replace lost, stolen, and badly damaged books that were needed in the library's reference collection is discussed. Most of the books were out-of-print and difficult to find. By utilizing eBay, the library director was able to acquire these valuable reference resources at a fraction of the cost that would have been paid to a book dealer. Also, the director generated funds through eBay to purchase the replacement books by selling weeded items from the collection that had been removed from the shelves because they were no longer circulating. The article goes on to discuss the pros and cons of such transactions and the morality of libraries using eBay.¹ From this article, it is obvious that eBay can be a valuable resource for obtaining books to enhance libraries' collections and improve the information resources available to library patrons.

eBay as a Collection Maintenance Tool in Libraries

The library literature actually has several examples of librarians taking the initiative to use eBay to assist in collection maintenance within their libraries. Library book sales, often run by "Friends of the Library" organizations, have often been a great place for library patrons to pick up weeded library materials at a steep discount. Many used booksellers have earned a tidy profit by purchasing select, discarded library books and reselling them at a profit. An early example of a library using eBay to attempt to sell weeded library books at a premium can be found in Kathleen Baxter's "Your Discards May be Somebody's Treasure" in *Library Journal* (2000). At Anoka County Library, a suburban system in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, Baxter began selling weeded books on eBay. Using the user ID ACLBOSS (Anoka County Library Books Online Sales Service), this system has sold nearly 200 books on eBay. Without a supply of volunteers

to take care of this, staff members did the actual work. Unfortunately, the service has been discontinued because library staff no longer have the time to devote to it.² Another library which had early experience in selling weeded books on eBay was the Los Gatos Public Library. The author, part of the Library Board and the Friends of the Los Gatos Public Library, conceded that it is a project best suited to volunteers over library staff because it is time consuming, requiring approximately 65.5 minutes per book. The online auctions generated \$6700 for 167 books, netting the library approximately \$40 per book.³

eBay as a Collection Development Tool in Libraries

While selling discarded library books on eBay has been used as an alternative to the annual library book sale at several libraries, when it comes to purchasing books, librarians and library staff are more accustomed to the traditional route of buying books through vendors who make it easy to purchase a large number of books at a known discount. eBay, along with a multitude of online booksellers, creates a new avenue for libraries to add to their collections. The Web gives library staff the opportunity to buy books (possibly at large discounts), and may give them access to materials that are in short supply. A great example of a library taking an active role in using eBay to add materials to their collection is Western Oregon University (WOU). WOU's archivist, with the support of the library director, has used eBay not only to inexpensively replace the occasional reference book which was lost, such as a Gale directory volume which are hard to replace through regular channels, but also to add to their archives. Between July 2004 and June 2005, carefully crafted searches on eBay by the archivist and director yielded 300 hits. Of the 100 unique items that these searches found, WOU actually purchased about one third of them.⁴

John Mutter, Jim Milliot and Karent Holt wrote a very illuminating article explaining the revolution brought about by the Web and the ability to sell books online. It is written from the publisher's point of view and explains how the traditional sale of new books can be adversely affected by the easy availability of used books. It is "a more perfect market in the classical economic sense, where every buyer is exposed to every seller and vice versa." No longer will buyers be bound by working exclusively with local booksellers. This is especially true regarding used textbooks, creating a real problem for the trade book world. According to this article, used books may someday make up to 20 percent of the market. An interesting observation made by the authors is that this change will depend on alterations in consumers' habits on selling their books, not on buying them online, which has already happened.⁵ With the ability to find multiple sales for most items, customers feel more confident that they are not overpaying for a book. With the possibilities of purchasing books at discounted prices through online auctions and through the more traditional route of library vendors or book-jobbers, how can a library decide when to use eBay or other online auction services to buy or sell books? Beyond making sure that proper policies, procedures, and ethical considerations are taken into account, there are certain criteria that can be examined to help determine if eBay use is right for the library. When considering purchasing items on eBay, library personnel should search for alternate suppliers of items to determine if purchasing through this route will truly yield a bargain. When considering selling items on eBay, there are multiple considerations, including the presence or absence of a substantial pool of potential buyers, the market-value of the items to be sold, and adequate staffing and knowledge-base to perform the necessary duties for eBay transactions. For example, if a

library has some finer volumes that are being sold because they have been deselected, were donated for a book sale, etc., they may wish to consider using eBay if: 1) these books may have an opportunity to bring a higher price online than at an annual book sale 2) there is a much smaller number of potential buyers at the local book sale 3) local buyers may not be aware of the true market-value of these books. To ultimately have a successful auction, with a positive cost/benefit ratio, the library needs to have a staff (be they paid staff or volunteer staff) who have the necessary skills and experience to process these volumes. Selection of these materials, creating the listing online, responding to bidder inquiries, processing the final sale, including arranging payment and mailing of the volume can be a detail-oriented process that not all staff may be adept at. With an average time of 65.5 minutes processing time per book to sell on eBay, potential benefits to the library can hinge on the efficiency of those processing the materials.³

eBay as a Reference Tool in Libraries

eBay can be a valuable information resource and sometimes the site of choice for quickly answering reference questions at the library. The primary reference-related applications where eBay may be most appropriate are those related to product identification and those aimed at determining market value of specific items or item types. Of course, with creativity, many additional reference applications for eBay may be discovered.

One librarian, Nisa Asokan, who is employed by a newspaper, has used eBay for identifying particular magazine issues (2003). Asokan suggests that eBay is often very useful for finding particular magazine issues (much more useful than a library catalog

record) when only the magazine title is known and what is on the cover. For example, searching eBay for “Rolling Stones magazine Beatles” quickly brought up multiple hits of issues with the entire band or individual band members on the cover of the magazine, including pictures of the magazines, issue numbers and publication dates. Asokan also reports that eBay is quite useful as an image archive and is sometimes more successful at retrieving relevant images than *Google’s* image directory.⁶

Personal experience in the library setting has also demonstrated the utility of eBay as a reference resource. *Google* is a frequently used search engine in the library setting and in general. When trying to answer a query through *Google*, eBay is often a highly ranked site. On two occasions, eBay has been highly effective at answering reference questions. In both instances, *Google* was consulted before proceeding to eBay for answers and in one instance *Google* led to the answer on eBay. To answer one query, eBay was used as an image archive, as suggested by Asokan. A patron had bought an old farm implement, and knew only that it had something to do with corn and was likely manufactured by a specific company. Not only was she curious about what exactly she had purchased, but she was also interested in the item’s potential value. A search of eBay using keywords such as *farm*, *corn*, and *implement*, brought up a picture that looked very much like the picture provided by the library patron. The patron was pleased with the available information, as well as the information regarding the price the item had fetched. On another occasion, a patron wished to obtain a repair manual for a particular model Case tractor. Searching the OPAC for this manual proved fruitless; however, a search of eBay using the search phrase *Case tractor repair manual* brought up multiple hits for the needed repair manual, with a title that could easily be searched in

the OPAC. In this instance there was no ISBN for the publication; however, this information might also be located through an eBay search and easily applied to an OPAC search.

There are a couple of ways that the “fair market value” of products can be found through eBay. One way of determining the going rate for a particular item or item type is by searching eBay’s completed listings (information on this search strategy available at <http://pages.ebay.com/completedlistings/>). Searching only completed listings is easily accomplished by selecting the eBay Advanced Search and clicking on the check box beneath the search box that reads “Completed listings only.” Because some completed auctions may skew towards a high or low price, the median or average price should be sought and utilized as an indicator of the fair market value. For example, if attempting to determine the value of a used set of the “Great Books of the Western World”, which was first published in 54 volumes in 1952 by the Encyclopaedia Britannica and expanded in 1994 to 60 volumes, one may wish to monitor sales in the completed listings, and probably look for a narrow range of prices. A helpful feature built into the system is the ability to resort by a number of parameters, including price. Sometimes there will be a set that was sold at a bargain price, and other times sellers will list them so high that the set will not sell. Usually the set will be listed a second time at a more reasonable price if the initial auction was unsuccessful. The older 54-volume set of the “Great Books of the Western World” regularly goes for about \$200 and the current 60-volume set, which retails for \$995, can often be purchased used for about \$350! If \$350 appears to be the average going rate for the used set, then that price may be considered the “fair market value.”

Another route that can be used to determine product value is through a pay service offered by eBay, called *Market Research*. *Market Research* offers information beyond average prices fetched for items, including popular searches for items within certain categories, market trends, etc. The *Market Research* option has a modest cost (\$9.99/month for the Basic version and \$24.99/month for the Pro version), but is more likely a tool for individual sellers/buyers to purchase, rather than a library.

A tool that unfortunately seems not to have received much maintenance by eBay is the *eBay Community Library*, available at <http://pages.ebay.com/community/library/>. This little known eBay site has a modest collection of information on items in different categories, including antiques, coins, computers, stamps, and more. Although the resources available from the eBay library do not provide precise product value information, they do provide information regarding factors that will influence the value of the items, as well as tips for locating and selling items of particular types.

As an example of the creative researching possible using eBay, one need only follow the lead of a savvy lawyer who utilized eBay to purchase evidentiary items to be used in litigation. A brief communication by Brenda Jeffreys in the *National Law Journal* reported on W. Mark Lanier's use of eBay to acquire evidence and pertinent information for asbestos related lawsuits. By typing in the keyword asbestos, Mr. Lanier was able to purchase many items (some fairly commonplace household items) known to contain asbestos. However, his most significant find was an unpublished corporate draft report that indicated the company had knowledge about the potential health hazards of asbestos, an admission contradicting the published report.⁷ This was undoubtedly weighty evidence for Mr. Lanier's asbestos cases. If this article recounting Mr. Lanier's

use of eBay receives attention from the legal community, it could encourage further use of this website for evidence gathering and legal learning purposes.

eBay as a Tool for Library Promotion

To get an idea of the potential impact of eBay, especially as it pertains to community draw and library promotion, some basic facts about this online auction site may be helpful. eBay is the most popular online auction site, with an impressive 90% of the online auction market dominated by this giant.⁸ According to the Nielsen//NetRatings, eBay was the most often utilized search term in November of 2005⁹ and was ranked amongst the top ten websites during the same month.¹⁰ Even though there are other websites that are more heavily trafficked, people spend a lot of time on eBay. According to statistics gathered by iMediaConnection.com, an average visit to eBay is lengthy, at 40 minutes and 23 seconds and there is a large time gap to the nearest competitor, Amazon, at 14 minutes and 23 seconds.¹¹ It was also ranked as “qualitatively, the single best Internet site” by *P.C. World* magazine, based on such factors as “usefulness, content, and ease of use.”¹² A July 2005 survey by AC Nielsen indicated that the number of individuals in the United States making full or part-time livings by selling on eBay exceeded 700,000, and many hundreds of thousands more are supplementing their income by selling on Ebay.¹³ The number of worldwide registered eBay users exceeded 221 million in the fourth quarter of 2006.¹⁴ Based on these statistics, it would appear that eBay would have a significant community draw, as well as a number of items that might be of interest to libraries wanting to add to their collection, and a number of buyers that would be interested in buying items weeded from libraries’ collections.

Some libraries may be reluctant to use eBay as a library promotion tool since it is an obvious commercial website. However, this website is extremely popular and advertising eBay classes or resources may encourage library patronage. Indeed, by searching Google for “eBay classes” and restricting the domain to organizations or educational institutions, a plethora of eBay class offerings (past and future) could be found. eBay class providers were from a multitude of different institutions or organizations, including libraries, Parks & Recreation groups, computer groups, senior groups, colleges & universities, continuing education providers, etc. The first result returned when searching for eBay classes restricted to the educational domain illustrated well the potential popularity of eBay classes. From Adams State College in Colorado, the announcement reads, “Due to the success of the first eBay workshop, ASC’s Business Support Center is again hosting two classes that will teach the keys to selling on the eBay online auction site....”¹⁵ It is noteworthy that even though there was a registration fee, the eBay classes offered by Adams State College were very popular. eBay classes without a monetary fee may provide an even greater community draw. From these initiatives to teach eBay, some individuals are obtaining their first introduction to the Internet. A course that was offered at Westchester Community College in New York on eBay use was taught in three separate sessions, allowing time to advance from the basics of Internet use and eBay use, to more advanced skills, such as posting items for auction.¹⁶ By inspiring individuals to use the Internet, eBay is spurring the learning of a very valuable information resource. One group in particular that eBay Inc. has targeted for eBay classes is seniors. eBay Inc. wants to teach users how to be effective on their site, as well as decrease the digital

divide for seniors, a major user group of eBay. Focusing on the senior citizen group, it is interesting to note that there was a 54% growth in the use of eBay by individuals 55 and older during the period of April 2003 - 2004, and during the same period seniors were also the fastest growing user group of the Internet according to Nielsen NetRatings.¹⁶ To help encourage the use of computers and the Internet, eBay initiated the *Digital Opportunity Program for Seniors*. eBay partnered with *SeniorNet*, a non-profit group that provides computer training to older Americans and has numerous learning centers throughout the nation, to help to insure the success of the program. This partnership allows senior citizens access to computers through various *SeniorNet Centers* in the United States. The goal of this program is to provide computer and Internet training to at least 1 million senior citizens within a five year time period. In support of this program, eBay is providing significant funding, training of educational specialists, building new computer training centers, and adding courses to the current *SeniorNet* curricula that will help enhance knowledge of e-commerce.¹⁷

If the library is having moral issues with using a popular commercial website for library promotion, perhaps focusing on the learning opportunities that eBay can afford will lessen these ethical concerns. Valuable skill development can occur by utilizing eBay. A lengthy dissertation by Lillard about information use online by eBay entrepreneurs found that eBay promotes learning in many different areas, including: computer literacy, writing, advertising skills, technical skills, basics about accounting/monetary business transactions, HTML skills, value assessment, digital camera use, and the ability to upload photographs and manipulate photographs. By surveying eBay users about initial problems encountered when first starting to work on this site and later after more

experience had been obtained, Lillard found that the initial problems encountered primarily were technical difficulties, and these concerns were later overtaken by practical concerns about consumers, such as payment issues.¹⁸ This progression from having many technical concerns to primarily concerns about consumers indicates that eBay is encouraging the development of technical skills.

A dissertation by Ghostbear also indicates that eBay is encouraging much “informal learning.” A discussion of the principles of andragogy, or how adults learn, indicates that adult learning on eBay follows the basic andragogical assumptions:

- Adults must need to know why they are learning something before participating in optional learning activities
- Learning will move from dependency to self-direction as adults become more adept and focus more on personal interests in developing skill
- Personal experience plays a large role in adult learning as this is the foundation that adults will build from and this foundation impacts learning processes, perceptions, etc.
- Adults must be ready to learn and find that the topic has pertinence to them.¹⁹

It appears that eBay is acting as an impetus for learning and eBay users are following familiar learning patterns.

eBay can also encourage information searching and posting skills. Search skills are at the heart of successful Internet use, and while eBay’s search system does not operate exactly the same way as some search engines, the search skills used to find items on eBay can be readily applied when seeking information through Google, Yahoo, Ask.com, etc.

Incidentally, eBay has recently teamed up with Google in an effort to improve searches for items, with Google providing related search links for product searches on eBay.²⁰

This partnering may make searching in eBay more easily generalizable to standard search engine queries.

Learning more about eBay and Optimizing Performance in eBay

Whether you want to learn more about eBay to prepare to provide eBay classes, or you want to develop a collection to aid patrons with using eBay, there are many information resources to be found. On the eBay website alone, there is much information available to help you with searching for, buying, or selling an item. The eBay Learning Center, available at <http://pages.ebay.com/education/?ssPageName=home:f:f:US>, is a particularly useful starting point within eBay's numerous websites to learn the basics about using eBay.

If you would like to build a collection of library books on eBay, there are many to be found. Some are more oriented towards "power sellers" who want to learn about "killer apps," while others are more for the beginning eBay user or those who are merely interested in company history and company information. Some recent books available on eBay include:

Angela C. Adams. *The eBay Success Chronicles : Secrets and Techniques eBay Powersellers Use Every Day to Make Millions* (Ocala, Fla: Atlantic Pub. Group, 2007).

Marsha Collier. *eBay for Dummies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Pub, 2007).

Clifford R. Ennico. *The eBay Seller's Tax and Legal Answer Book : Everything You Need to Know to Keep the Government Off Your Back and Out of Your Wallet* (New York: AMACOM, 2007).

Greg Holden. *1000 Best eBay Powerseller Secrets* (Naperville, Ill: Sourcebooks, 2007).

Amy Joyner. *The eBay Billionaire's Club : Exclusive Secrets for Building an Even Bigger and More Profitable Online Business* (Hoboken, N.J: Wiley, 2007).

Amy Joyner and Literary Productions. *The Online Millionaire : Strategies for Building a Web-Based Empire on eBay and Beyond* (Hoboken, N.J: Wiley, 2007).

Jacquelyn Lynn. *Entrepreneur Magazine's Start Your Own Business on eBay : Your Step-by-Step Guide to Success* (Irvine, Calif: Entrepreneur Press, 2007).

Ron Mansfield. *Launching a Successful eBay Store* (Indianapolis, IN: Que, 2007).

J. S. McDougall. *Expand Your Business on eBay* (Irvine, CA: Entrepreneur Press, 2007).

Michael Miller. *Making a Living from Your eBay Business* (Indianapolis, Ind: Que, 2007).

Dennis L Prince. *How to Sell Anything on eBay-- and Make a Fortune!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007).

Brad Schepp and Debra Schepp. *eBay Powerseller Million Dollar Ideas : Innovative Ways to Make your eBay Sales Soar* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007).

Joseph T Sinclair. *eBay Business the Smart Way : Maximize Your Profits on the Web's #1 Auction Site* (New York: American Management Association, 2007).

Jennifer Viegas. *Pierre Omidyar : The Founder of eBay* (New York: Rosen Pub. Group, 2007).

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