

Getting Started on eBay

If you're thinking of buying or selling on eBay, do it! There's no reason not to. There are millions of people using eBay and a good number of them are making a very good living. Minimally, you'll find some good bargains if you're buying. Or, you'll make some money and/or clear up some clutter if you're selling.

The following tips and hints are based on a presentation I gave to the Neon Guild late in 2004. If you have any questions that aren't addressed in what's presented here, feel free to write me (Jack.Smith@PeopleSpace.com).

There are books and books about buying and selling on eBay and here's tons of information online. My goal with this document is just to give you some basics so you can get started making money (or spending money) and having fun.

An eBay Account

Whether you're buying or selling, you'll need an account. There's a "Register" link on the top of the eBay home page. It will only take you a few minutes. Also, consider signing up for Pay Pal (www.PayPal.com). It's an online payment system, but it has built in protections for you both as a buyer or seller. More on this later.

Buying on eBay

Buying on eBay is easy, but not without danger. The old "buyer beware" saying is very true. But with a little care, you should have a pleasant experience and some fun in the process. Here are some key points to make your dealings easier.

Finding Items

There are millions of items for sales on eBay at any time... from cars and houses to dead batteries. It is the ultimate flea market. So, the first thing is to find something you're interested in buying. eBay has a very sophisticated Search Engine and it's worth spending some time to properly learn its power. For example, here's one of the searches I use to find carved Eskimo ivory:

carved (ivory, walrus, tusk) (vintage, antique, old) -asian -oriental -netsuke -japan -chin**

What the above says is give me all the items with the word "carved" in their description as well as "ivory" or "walrus" or "tusk". Also, include the words "vintage" or "antique" or "old". However, I don't want anything that has "asian", "oriental" or "netsuke" in it. Plus, don't include anything that has "Japan" or "Japanese" or anything similar for "Chinese" or "China". Searches can get pretty complicated, but you can let the commands help you find only what you are interested in. Some times the best searches are based on being able to tell eBay what you're NOT looking for (that's what the minus sign is used for in the above sample).

Here's a link to some good explanations on the advanced search options:

http://pages.ebay.com/help/find/search_commands.html?fromFeature=Advanced%20Search

As you get more involved, you find more tricks of searching. You can look for typos (think of all the variations of a word like Kaleidoscope). People transpose letters and misread labels. Some

people collect Ironstone which is really only "white china". What are the different terms that can be used to describe something like a hospital bed (I found out, some folks call them "over bed tables")? Think outside the box. Think of a way to describe an item without using its common name. To an ignorant seller, Roy Rogers looks like Hopalong Cassidy and Rolex might be the same as Rollex. I collect watercolors, but always search under "water colors" and "watercolours" (the English spelling).

eBay also lets you research and track Buyers and Sellers. You can see items that a seller is listing or a buyer has bid on. It seems sneaky, but it's part of the eBay culture. There's more info at:

<http://pages.ebay.com/help/find/ia/searching.html>

You can also just browse (like wondering the aisles of a store). In this case, you just find a category that is of interest and check out the listings. You'll find Category listings on the eBay home page. There are also subcategories and you can drill down fairly deep just using the text index before you start looking at items.

It's good to have a fast connection, so if you're using dial up and want to browse, it might be better to go to a friend's house who has DSL or hit the library (or do it at work or school).

Before you Bid

Once you find an item you are interested in, you still have some work to do. First, you need to research the seller. For every seller, there are ratings by other members and an indication of their Positive Feedback. Spend some time and learn what this information means. If at all possible, you want to deal with people who have been selling for a while and don't have any (or have VERY few) problems.

Make sure you know all the associated costs with your purchase. Watch out for hidden shipping or handling charges. You can write the seller through eBay and ask questions about condition or anything that isn't covered in an item's description.

Look at the online photos carefully. Some sellers are very sparse in their descriptions and let their photos do the talking. They use phrases like "the photo shows it all." Then, when you look closely at the pictures, you see the item is cracked or missing a piece. And be wary of general terms like "it has typical wear for its age." What the hell does that mean?? To some it might mean it's broken with missing pieces.

And, you should do some more specific research on the item you just found. It's possible to search on Completed auctions on eBay. If you're interested in an item, you should check out the past auctions to get a sense of what things have sold for before. You'll have to sign up for eBay before you can search past auctions. If you use the Advanced Search page, there's a "Completed Auction" checkbox. Please note that you can only search auction Titles in past auctions... not the complete description text.

Also, don't forget about Google and other search engines. You can search on part numbers, artist names, company names and such. You should know what items sell for in stores and other resources if they are available. You don't want to buy a great piece of electronics on eBay and find out it was on sale at Best Buy down the street (or online) for 25% less.

Bidding

There is a type of tool referred to as Sniping Software. Search in Google on the term and you should find a number of links. I use something called Cricket. It lets you schedule a bid at the very last moment of an auction. Why would you want to do this? Well, if you bid too early in an auction, you're giving all the other people time to think about their bid and re-evaluate their goal price. If you bid at the last minute, no one has time to second guess. There's a LOT of discussion about this online. It's worth researching and being informed. It's a tool of the trade and I recommend it if you're going to be doing much buying.

If you bid manually, try and set your "best" price ahead of time. eBay uses an automated system that tracks your highest entered bid amount against the current bid. For example, let's say an iPod is for sale and the current high bid is \$50. You're willing to go to \$150 and enter that as your bid. When you check the item, you see you're the high bidder at \$86.50. Why is that? Well, it takes some getting used to, but it means that the previous high bidder had left a high bid of something like \$85. His bid only showed as \$50 because the previous high bidder was at \$49 and eBay only showed the necessary portion of his/her bid. It didn't need to show \$85 because only \$50 was needed. Confused? Yeah... it takes getting used to. Then you came along with your \$150 bid, but eBay only displayed what was necessary to put you on top above the other guy's \$85.

And then there are Reserve auctions and "Buy it Now" options. I can't explain it all here, but don't worry if you don't get it. It takes time and the only way to get truly good, is to spend some time reading... and then jump in. Basically a person creating a Reserve auction has set a price below which they won't sell the item. You'll see a "Reserve Not Met" message on screen if the bid prices are lower than the Reserve.

So practice on some small items to get some experience. I wouldn't buy a car or a big ticket item as my first purchase. Buy a book or CD or toy or something for a few bucks. If you make a mistake, it won't hit your banking account too.

After the Auction (you bought something!!)

Okay. You have the winning bid and the item will be yours. What's next? eBay should send an email to you and the seller confirming the purchase information. It's up to you to contact the seller and make payment. Be very careful of sellers who only take cashiers checks. The best way to pay is through a service like PayPal. Since eBay owns PayPal, they've gone out of their way to build in protections so they can maintain their good image. Check out www.PayPal.com.

If you've done your research properly before hand, you should know the total cost and shipping. If the seller starts to add things on or change the terms, now's the time to raise the alarm... not after you've paid.

Save a copy of the online product description and images on your hard drive (often, the seller hosts the sales image and takes them down after completion of the sale). It's good to have a copy of the information you used to make your purchase decision.

Always get insurance. Items can get lost or broken. It's worth a bit extra for peace of mind. Many sellers won't ship without insurance.

I've bought and sold over 500 items and never gotten screwed... but it's taken some patience at times. If you have problems, you have a number of options. But, like any consumer issue, you

want to first write to the seller, detail the problems and see if you can work out a solution. And, be sure to cc yourself on the communication. PayPal, your credit card and/or eBay all can help in some form. But nothing beats being an educated consumer and a careful buyer.

eBay has some good files online and advice in their Buyers area. Check out:

<http://pages.ebay.com/education/buying.html>

As you get more involved, eBay has tools and systems that automate a lot of activities. But, to best use them, you really need some hands-on experience first. Jump in and try things out. One of my first purchases was a \$13 Tattoo Barbie that popped up in a search. It was cheap and let me practice (it was a conversation piece too in my office bookcase <g>).

Selling on eBay

My first recommendation is that before you sell on eBay, you should buy at least one item. It really helps to understand the process the buyer has to go through to find an item and put up the winning bid. So, if you jumped right to this section and skipped Buying... at least go back and read that section.

What you need

Selling on eBay requires some equipment and software. You'll need access to:

- 1) Digital camera
- 2) Photo editing software
- 3) eBay account
- 4) PayPal account (not required, but recommended)
- 5) Time and patience
- 6) Something to sell

The camera or editing software don't need to be high end. And, if you're just getting started, ask around... you might be able to borrow a camera. There are services that will do everything for you, but it's going to cost you. Plus, it takes time to list things correctly and nothing beats doing it yourself.

Fees

eBay makes its billions of dollars by charging fees for listing and selling items. You pay the listing fee just like you would pay a newspaper for a classified. You pay this money whether or not the item sells. But, keep in mind you can list items on eBay for under 50 cents. Or, you can spend close to a hundred dollars for a listing with special visibility. eBay also charges a sales commission if an item sells (around 5%). There are a number of options (like Reserves) that can add to the cost and it gets a bit complicated. But that's paid only if the item sells (and remember, the buyer usually pays all shipping costs). Here's a link that explains it more:

<http://pages.ebay.com/help/sell/fees.html>

When you create a listing for an item to sell, eBay always shows you the up-front charges and gives you the option to revise listing features. So, you should never be surprised by the charges.

I tend to spend more to list items I think are valuable. You can pay for highlighting and other features that help items stand out. I think the most I ever paid for a successful listing was about \$80 total (for an item that sold for over \$700). And, I've paid as little as \$1.00. If an item isn't worth listing and paying a small fee for... there's always Goodwill or the Salvation Army.

Pre-Auction (Research)

The more an item is worth, the more time you should invest in your sales preparation. But every item (no matter the value) requires some research and prep.

First, you need to know what you're selling. Check out similar items for sale (and that have already sold... using the Complete Auction option I discussed in the Buying section) on eBay. You want to see what prices things have sold for. You're also looking at the terminology sellers used to sell their pieces. One thing I like to do is to do is to conduct a search and then rank the found items, showing Highest Prices first. On the Search Results page, there's a "Sort by:" option.

Sometimes the highest priced item will be selling for a LOT more than items further down the list. This could be because the item is better. But sometimes it's because the seller had better photos... or gave more detail... or used appropriate terminology... or chose better categories to sell an item in. See what the better sellers did differently and this will help you with your listings.

If the item might be valuable, spend some time on Google and maybe even the library.

Some collectors have a jargon they use. For example, with comic book collectors, if you say something is in "fine" condition, there is a fairly exact expectation about the amount of damage on the item. Marble collectors use the term "wet" to describe an exceptional piece. Stamp collectors have an extensive language.

Your goal with your research is to know what you're selling, what it might be worth, and any jargon or terms that buyers might be using to find it.

Also, you might want to research packing and shipping. Will the item be hard to pack? How much will it cost to ship?

Writing the Description

Okay, you have something to sell and you've done your research. Now what? Next you write the description. I believe in being wordy and here's why... in most cases, the buyer is hunting for your item based on keywords and phrases. You want to make sure he/she has the best chance of finding your item.

Here's what you want to include in your description:

- 1) Size and weight
- 2) Condition
- 3) Material (what's it made of)
- 4) Where you bought it
- 5) Why you're selling it
- 6) Unique elements
- 7) Markings

- 8) History and any story
- 9) Damage or problems
- 10) Include links to good online info if you found some
- 11) Sales terms (how and when you want to be paid)

As a sample, here's a description I wrote for a paperweight I bought. I paid \$45 for it at an estate sale and sold it for over \$650 to a collector in Austria. You can see how I included all the above elements and I probably spent two hours researching it to make sure I had the right terms and such. But, if I wasn't sure about something (like the artist), I made sure to state that. Most of this description was designed so that someone who knew what there were doing, would find the piece. Here's the description:

I have several great paperweights I'll be selling, so check my other auctions. This is my favorite.

I'll give you as much information and description as I can, but I don't collect paperweights and I'm not totally familiar with the terminology. So, I did quite a bit of research online to see if I could use the right terms so you could find the piece at least. I'll let you be the final expert and I'll gladly answer any and all questions (except, "will you end the auction now and sell me the piece?"). I do collect marbles, however... so I understand collectible, blown glass.

I believe this is a paperweight by Paul Ysart, but it's only an educated guess based on my research. The smokey color of the glass and the canes and their patterns look very close to those on the Ysart information site at:

<http://www.btinternet.com/~kevh.glass/pages/catalog/py-spoke.htm>

I've collected blown glass marbles for years and these weights appealed to me for their design. This weight is about 2 inches tall and the base is about 2.5 inches across. It has a transparent, emerald green flooring with a millefiori center. Radiating out from that in a spoke pattern are complex rods (like arms) with rods on end in between (check out the photos). The spoke rods have latticinio swirls around them and a clear "shell" over a solid core. It's beautiful. And, in addition, some of the rods have gold aventurine (like lutz marbles)

The piece is not signed, but it looks similar to Ysart's work I found online. And the woman who had owned it (deceased) had spent time in Scotland.

As for condition, the base has very fine surface scratches, but nothing large or problematic. The main body itself is very nice with no observable problems (It has a really nice shine to it... what we call "wet" in marble collecting). There's only one, pin head sized inclusion that I could see. I collect a lot, so I try and comment on anything you might be interested in... and if you look at my rating, folks are always more than pleased. This is a great and beautiful piece.

I picked this and several other old paperweights up at an estate sale this past winter in the Washington DC area. The elderly woman had traveled a great deal to Europe and had a house packed with interesting items... almost everything in the house was pre WWII... and even the newest items in the house were no later than the 1970s. I have

some other paperweights I'll be selling (I think a few are older Paul Ysart pieces like this one... and there's a wonderful Crown weight as well).

I'll accept checks or Paypal. You pay actual shipping costs calculated when the auction is closed. I expect payment within 7 days of the end of the auction or I'll relist the item. See my other auctions. I'll gladly ship to Europe.

If you're selling used kids clothes or a bunch of old toys, you aren't going to go to this trouble. But, the more work you put into at least the basic description will help the sale. If you're just trying to clean out the basement and have mostly junk... keep it short and simple. But, I promise that all things being equal, buyers will pay more when they have all the details they need.

Photographs

Everything deserves at least one photo... even junk. No one wants to buy "sight unseen" or if they do, they certainly want to pay the minimum. You want to have good, clear photos that give a good sense of what you're selling. Some folks won't read your description and will only glance at the pictures.

So, here are some tips relating to taking good photos:

- 1) Have a good, clean background. Use a colored sheet or clean table or something that will be a good contrast. Don't put a dark sweater on a dark table or a white plate on a white sheet.
- 2) Have good lighting. If you need to take close ups, beware of glare and reflections.
- 3) Show Detail. If you've ever seen people shopping, they like to pick up an item and take a good, close look. If you're selling an old spoon, try and get the makers mark... even if you can't read it (the buyer may know it by design).
- 4) Show all related parts. I had a number of small tin buckets that came in a plain box. I included a photo of the box with the buckets. I paid \$10 for them and they ended up selling for over \$400 to a collector of a certain brand of toys. She recognized the print design on the cardboard box (the buckets were unmarked). So, if it's part of what you're selling... show it.
- 5) Show scale. I often put a ruler or a coin or hold an item at least in one photo so people get a sense of the size.
- 6) Show all sides. If there's a side... show it. Many sellers only show the front or top... and yet the bottoms of a piece tell a great deal or may have markings that a collector is looking for.

Obviously if you're selling some old coffee mugs from work, you don't need a ton of shots. But, the more you show, the better your selling price (I think). When you're taking photos, take more than you think you'll need. There's always something that doesn't work or didn't turn out.

Creating an Auction

As with most things on eBay, the company does a pretty good job of providing information and making things easy. Here's a link with some of their info related to their sales form and listing items:

<http://pages.ebay.com/sellercentral/syioverview/index.html>

eBay has an online form that will help you find the Category to list an item in, post the description, they'll host the photos... etc. It's very easy to use and you're not committed until the very end... and even then, you can edit your listing.

You should have a good description and good photos and are ready to start.

One of the first questions you'll have to deal with is what Category to place an item in. This is a far trickier question than you would think and can make a BIG difference in the money you make. For example, there are Categories just for certain brands... like Anri which is a company that creates wood carvings (the heading Anri is under Decorative Collectibles). But, some of the Anri items are bottle stoppers which has its own heading under Barware.

eBay lets you list items in two categories... but all the listing fees are double, so this can be expensive. This is where your research comes in. I usually use Advanced Search and search under "Completed Auctions" and then sort the results starting with the Highest Price (these are described in more detail in the Buying section earlier). What you're looking for are the items similar to yours that sold for the most money. Take a look at those listings and at the top of the listing page for each item, it tells you what Category (or Categories if there were two) that the item was in.

It does make a difference and there is no simple answer. I once had a painting of a little girl from the 1930s holding an old Mickey Mouse doll. The artist was listed, so I put the item in the Painting category... but I also listed it in a Mickey Mouse category. I could have gambled that Mickey collectors would find it from the keywords I used... but there are so many items, I wanted to make his/her job easier.

Hopefully this makes sense. It's like a grocery store... should Salsa be in the condiments section with ketchup... or in the ethnic foods section... or both? You want to make sure the customer who will want to pay the most will find you.

Here are some additional tips for listing items for sale using the eBay sales form:

- 1) You can have up to twelve photos hosted by eBay. The first is free and the remaining are 15 cents each. It's worth the money to show more photos if the item is worth more than \$20 or so.
- 2) There are highlighting and bold options that make your listing stand out a bit more. Bold is reasonable and I've had good luck with that.
- 3) Allow overseas sales. Unless an item is huge or a major problem to pack, you should allow as broad a sales area as possible. With PayPal, overseas payments come in dollars. I had one German buyer FedEx me US dollars. I've shipped to New Zealand, Germany, England and Japan. Overseas buyers usually write ahead of time so they can factor in shipping costs. You can get US and overseas shipping rates at:

<http://www.usps.com> (not all the shipping methods allow insurance)

Sometimes the overseas buyer wants the item declared as a gift so they save duty. That's your call.

4) Don't get fancy with the layout. Simple is better on the site and the basic, default listing page is fine.

5) The normal auction runs 7 days and ends exactly 7 days after it starts. So, remember that if the world sleeps and wakes and a lot of different times. If an item might be of interest to folks in California, you don't want it to list it at 7 a.m. because it will end at the same hour one week later which would be 4 a.m. and that's going to mean a lot of potential bidders are in bed. You can schedule a specific starting time for 10 cents extra. If you do that, stagger the ending times if you're listing more than one item to give a bidder a chance to bid on them all.

The form is pretty simple and you shouldn't have a problem. It lets you preview the look of the page before you finalize and you'll know all the costs.

During the Auction

Running an auction is not a passive sport. Depending on the item, you could be contacted for a number of reasons.

1) Sometimes a potential buyer will write you and say, "I want this item, but will be out of town. Please end it early and I will pay you \$X." Or, they'll want it quickly because it's a friend's birthday and they want to give \$X as a present. Don't do it. Reply nicely that once an auction starts, you let it run. These folks could be sincere... but just as often, they're trying to cut out the competition and get the item for less. In all the times this has happened to me, the price I'm offered to end the auction early has ALWAYS been less than the final sales price... often by hundreds of dollars. Be polite, but just say no.

2) Sometimes someone will write you and say "You say this item could be X, but it's really Y and worth only a few dollars." Or, "You say the X is antique and it's really made recently." This is a very touchy situation. There are times the person is writing you with incorrect information in order to get you to post it and thereby lower the potential sales price. But, quite often, the person is a sincere collector who is trying to help. The problem with this is that sometimes they're right... and sometimes their information is wrong. I usually thank everyone who offers advice or an opinion. In rare cases, I'll post an addendum to the description (you can do that up to 24 hours before closing), that a friendly eBay buyer stated this or that. But, you don't have to post their information. It's a buyer beware world. But, if you're selling something you know little about and the person has bought hundreds of them (you can check their history), it's something to consider.

3) Don't panic if there are no bids. People often wait until the end to bid and prices can jump dramatically in the last few minutes.

4) Enjoy the entertainment.

5) If the item doesn't sell, you can relist it for little or no extra cost.

After the Auction (you sold something!!)

When an item has sold, you need to be responsive to the buyer. eBay has forms and systems now that can make life easier, but they can be confusing. Basically, here's what you want to do after the end of the auction:

1) Communicate quickly with the buyer. You'll need information from them so you can calculate shipping. You can use www.usps.com, www.fedex.com and www.ups.com for pricing.

2) You need to be prepared to ship. Boxes can be expensive. However, the Post Office has free boxes online that you can order (for shipping Priority Mail). It can really save you money. Also, you'll need packing materials. Don't be cheap with the shipping materials.

3) Always include insurance. It costs more but things do get lost and broken and you don't want an irate buyer (and usually the buyer pays all costs anyway).

4) Keep all your receipts and copies of emails (going and coming) related to the sale.

5) Be patient with slow payers and communicators. eBay has some reminder systems and will be helpful if money is slow in coming. The nice thing about being a seller is that it's hard to get screwed. If payment doesn't come, you don't send the item.

6) Mail promptly. The buyer is waiting... but it's easy to forget or postpone mailing. Do it as soon as payment comes.

7) Give feedback. The whole feedback aspect of eBay is its own unique culture element. Do some research on the site... but basically if someone pays you promptly and is a good buyer, you give them positive feedback. And, if you send the item and it's as described, they should do the same for you.

Stay in touch with buyers and at least keep their emails. You might be able to sell other items to them directly... or you can at least alert them if you list something you know they collect.

Good Links

Here are some good links for more information:

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/online/auctions.htm> (useful tips and such from the FTC)

<http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,55204,00.html> (article about sniping software)

Go Have Fun

eBay is a global bazaar with all the thrills and pitfalls. You can easily find multiples of items that pre-eBay you would have had to search your whole life just to find one. It takes some time and some effort, but you can sell a whole range of items and get some cash as you clean your basement or attic. So, give it a try and just use some common sense.

And let me know your success stories... or adventures.

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