

.net/eBay



Build an eBay empire

Whether you're a seasoned trader or a self-starter eager to improve your earnings on the side, sharpening your selling skills can pay handsomely. eBay PowerSeller **Mark Buckingham** leads the way ...

+ Image iLovedust
iLovedust is a small, multi-disciplinary graphic design studio. It produces creative solutions for print and web.
www.ilovedust.com

+ Words Mark Buckingham
is a PowerSeller on eBay. He's also proprietor of NetSeek, a London-based copywriting, pay per click and search engine optimisation consultancy.
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eBay is a gripping pursuit, ripe with bouts of fulfilment and frustration. Sourcing sought-after stock cheaply, getting your listings noticed amid a sea of bargains, measuring profitability, keeping that demanding customer happy and tending to mountains of admin are just a few of the challenges. But if you're willing to take a few risks, there's a burgeoning market just waiting to be explored and mined.

It's estimated that at least 68,000 Britons make at least 25 per cent of their income on eBay (ACNielsen, 2006), with more than 181 million buyers in the UK and overseas. Many sellers,

however, are falling short of their potential.

eBay's potential rewards are attractive for small and large traders alike. The ability to be creative combined with a readiness to evolve underpin most eBay success stories. As an eBay PowerSeller (these are "top sellers who sustain a consistent high volume of monthly sales and a high level of total feedback – with 98% or better positive ratings by other eBay users"), I know that one of the barriers to sustained success is complacency.

Matt Priddle, eBay's head of seller education for UK and Ireland, agrees: "What typically happens is that when someone starts selling, they do well and they're happy. They don't want to change things because they fear they'll erode what they're doing." Using the transparency and competitiveness of eBay to your advantage is a vital part of the game. "Every day, something on eBay changes," he adds, "be it the product or the marketplace. Another seller could pop up or someone could be undercutting you. There are techniques you can learn all the time."



Even if you're an established pro, take a moment to consider what you could do differently. eBay University (a series of classes to help sellers become accustomed to the demands of selling on eBay) offers an opportunity for sellers to glean insight from industry experts and fellow eBayers. Matt Priddle is also responsible for eBay University: "It's a day of seminars designed for anybody wanting to get started, from a basic level right up to your top PowerSeller businesses. Depending on where you are in your seller life-cycle, it can be especially useful for those people thinking it's going to become a business, or at least a significant income."

You can also use eBay's discussion groups to find solutions from those who've been there before you. "The PowerSeller boards are brimming with people who are well-versed on how eBay works. If you come up against a challenge, there's probably someone who has experienced it before you," says Priddle.

Professional branding

Getting your listing seen is one battle, but if you don't make a good first impression, your efforts (and fees) could be wasted. For some traders starting out, an eye-catching design may not be at the top of their agenda. Yet, for larger businesses, it's paramount. Having the technical nous is a good start, but you need professional photographs and punchy, descriptive text to win over your buyers, too. Perfecting the design can be a challenge, and it



Left eBay Express is ideal for shoppers wanting a quick sale. It's for aficionados of the "Buy It Now" method

is a key factor," says Matt Priddle, "but the quality of your listings also comes into play. How much care and attention do you put into them?"

So what should you include in your listings? Any serious seller should spend time creating a listing that accurately draws attention to assets, with a description that accentuates the unique selling points of the product and, perhaps more important,

as not all buyers will take the time to peruse all of your recent feedback comments.

Jane Hoskyn, author of *eBay.co.uk for Dummies*, is clear about what she thinks works: "Fiddly extras like borders, bold listings and so forth don't bump up your business as much as clear, descriptive, well-worded ads and titles, clear photos and a great feedback archive."

As a copywriter, I know the importance of compelling copy. Most buyers will make up their minds in a matter of seconds, so clear, brief, easy to scan, pertinent text that strikes a connection with your readers' aspirations or frustrations will help capture their attention, as will catchy subheaders that precis your product features. A persuasive call to action, combined with an open invitation to contact you with buying queries, may help potential customers to make that final decision to commit.

You should also ensure your item titles and descriptions read well and are proofed for errors. If you're not so adept at writing descriptive sales copy, consider hiring expert help to drive the message home. And having clear, well-lit photos is crucial, as pictures really do speak a thousand words on eBay.

"Fiddly extras don't bump up your business as much as well-worded ads, clear photos and a great feedback archive"

Jane Hoskyn

could be argued that eBay in-house design tools offer greater functionality. A cursory knowledge of HTML enables you to create a good listing using eBay's tools, but you may require the services of a web designer specialising in eBay listing design to help you create a striking presence that helps you stand out. If you're as serious about your website as you are your trading, it will be money well spent. "Price

your reputation. Don't overload your reader with too much information, either. We've all visited ads cluttered with profligate text and embellishments and then swiftly searched elsewhere. If you have lots to say, offer links to your FAQ, your Terms & Conditions and other important information included on separate custom eBay pages. It's also worth including a concise selection of recent feedback,

Safe selling

Here are a few suggestions to help you ensure a smooth sale, and to avoid falling into the hands of unscrupulous mercenaries ...

Think you have a spoof email?
Don't click on any links! Type in the address manually and forward any dubious-looking email to spoof@ebay.co.uk or spoof@paypal.co.uk.

Use a common sense approach
Look for anything that doesn't sound or feel right when communicating with your buyer. Use your instinct.

Regular check-ups
Do third party checks on high-value items to validate that the purchaser is

registered to the shipping address (you can use Directory Enquiries).

Qualify for PayPal seller protection
Get verified with PayPal so you can ask your customers for a PayPal-verified shipping address.

Don't use your own email address
Contact buyers via eBay's messaging system, and keep all correspondence.

Screen your bidders
Block and avoid bidders operating with -2 feedback ratings.

Do your homework
Study the PayPal and eBay trust and safety guidelines.



Treat yourself to an online, 10-minute internet safety guide at www.getsafeonline.org. In particular, click the section called "Buying or selling online?"

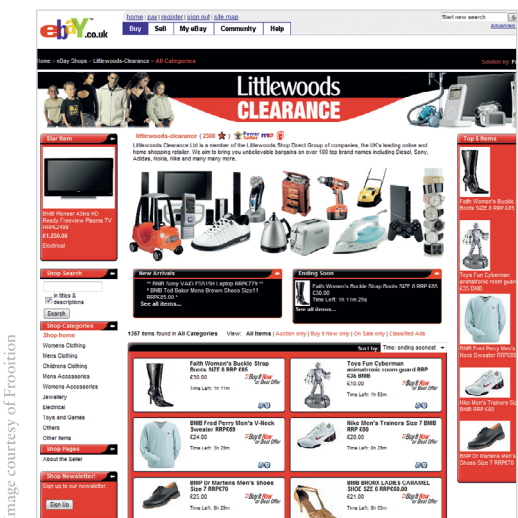


Image courtesy of Frooition

Branding exercise Littlewoods Clearance Ltd has benefited from bolstering its presence with a bespoke shop design

Fortifying your shop frontage by enhancing your design, and growing your listings to convey size and credibility, can help you forge ahead in your category. Bodypower Sports, a UK supplier of fitness equipment, opened an eBay Shop in January 2007 (stores.ebay.co.uk/Bodypower-Sports-PLC). Managing director, Paul Walker, believes eBay could prove to be a valuable sales channel for the company. “We saw a few competitors doing well on eBay and felt that, with our industry standing and buying power, we could really steal a march on more established sellers. So we created a decent shop design and grew our listings rapidly. Our sales soon climbed steadily, so we added more products and refined our content. The knock-on effect means we’re now looking at eBay as a bona fide long-term channel. It’s been a steep learning curve, but we’re confident that enhancing our presence further will take us to the next stage, so we’ve invested in having our entire shop and listings professionally redesigned.”

Build your brand

If you’re intent on growing an eBay presence and building your brand, an eBay Shop is a prerequisite. 75 per cent of Shop sellers surveyed by eBay said that opening a Shop increased their sales. I would find it near impossible to generate an income and manage my sales efficiently without Shop tools such as traffic and sales reports, email marketing, merchandising tools and a new facility called Markdown Manager. There are three tiers of Shop available: Basic, Featured Shop, and an Anchor Shop for those requiring heavyweight functionality with the all the trimmings. (Find out more at eBay’s “Anatomy of a Shop” page: pages.ebay.co.uk/storefronts/anatomy.html.) Success on eBay is also about making your buyers aware of your other products. Sellers can set cross-selling rules to promote and up-sell items before, during or following a sale. Paul Walker explains: “A lot of buyers ask us whether we sell benches to go with our weights, so we emphasise this on our listings and apply additional cross-selling rules.”

Know your marketplace

It’s easy to develop tunnel vision on eBay and focus on your own sales, yet it’s important to have an

Turning browsers into buyers

Take every opportunity to promote visibility and reinforce credibility in you and your wares. Jane Hoskyn, author of *eBay.co.uk for Dummies*, says: “you can’t cut corners just because it’s eBay. It’s like a high street – you need to stand out from the crowd. Any small retailer looking to sell on eBay has to pay major attention to customer service and clear, well-presented listings.” Here are a few tips for transforming window shoppers into satisfied customers ...

Lasting visibility

- > It’s all in the title – Include at least one key phrase in your listing title. Use eBay’s reporting tools, eBay Pulse and your website server stats to evaluate popular search terms.
- > Experiment – If your budget allows, try listing the same item twice, each ending at different times, and using slightly different keywords. Monitor your results carefully.
- > Use the space – Make the most of the 55 characters you’re allowed to use in the title.
- > See for yourself – Before you list a new item, do your research. Running a completed item search is a good place to start.
- > Big and bold – Is it worth spending £2.50 to highlight your listing if your margin is £10? A bold listing can be a more economical bet, but if everyone else is doing the same, it loses its impact.
- > Subtitle – While most eBayers search for an item title only, a subtitle is a cheap and effective way to draw surfers in.

Create a good impression

- > Professional, clear listings are crucial – Strive for clarity and style, and don’t overload your reader with lots of text. Offer links to more detailed information in custom pages within your shop.
- > Good copywriting – Be mindful of maximising your conversions and making a connection with your reader.
- > In the gallery – Have your primary photo at the top of your listing, with additional photos at the bottom.
- > Select the right category – Buyers still browse categories, so find the right category for what you’re selling.
- > Badge it – If you’re a PowerSeller and verified by PayPal, display the logos!
- > Be accurate – Spell-check and re-read your listing text, titles and replies to enquiries. When listing new items or enquiries, always run your text through a Word document and re-read first.

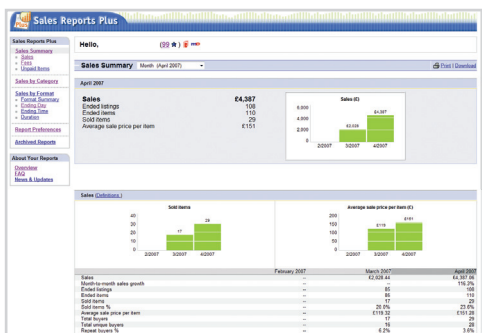
Timing – Do you want your listings to end when everyone else’s do? Test different listing times and schedule your items to start if you know you can’t be at your PC. 10 days gives your auctions more exposure, but items ending sooner typically get more exposure in the search results, so a seven-day “Buy It Now” listing may work best if you want a quick sale.

“Enhancing our presence further will take us to the next stage, so we’re having our shop professionally redesigned” Paul Walker

awareness of what your competitors are doing and what your buyers are looking for. eBay’s Marketplace Research Pro tool is the best way to arm yourself with this information. “It’s an incredibly powerful tool,” says Matt Priddle. “It will show you average selling prices, how many items have been listed and have been sold in shops in the last 90 days, the average postage cost, etc. You could be losing out because your postage costs aren’t attractive – you don’t know – and you’re having to make guesses.” Similarly, signing up to eBay’s Seller & Traffic Reports will tell you useful information, including your most popular listings and the search terms used in your shop. But does it matter what format you use to list your items in your shop? Should you list your items using the auction listing format with or without a reserve, use Buy It Now fixed price, or only Shop inventory

stock? Buy It Now formats offer a great way to appeal to buyers wanting hassle-free instant purchases, giving sellers more control and helping to limit risk, while auction listings can generate extra traffic. For most sellers, a mix of both, plus cheaper inventory listings, is a good balance. They even work as a promotional strategy to help generate that vital buzz. Andrew Main, an eBay consultant at Frooition (frooition.com), an eBay Design and Services company, agrees: “You may have 10 people bidding on an auction but only one person is going to win it. You can then use the Second Chance Offer facility to try to win the business of some of the underbidders.” More importantly, you’re raising awareness. Once you’ve got people into your listings, you’re creating the up-sell and cross-sell environments. Every listing you have should be an advert for every





Good research Sales Reports Plus shows average selling price, percentage of repeat buyers and monthly sales growth

>> single product you have on eBay. When you capture sellers, you want to hold those customers, and you want them to repeat-purchase.

Express delivery and feedback

eBay Express has opened up as another route for those targeting an audience seeking instant purchases. It costs sellers no extra to list here and, if eligible, you can select your listings to show automatically. eBay has drawn the criteria around it quite tightly, with only Buy It Now and new items permitted, and sellers are asked to commit to more stringent delivery and selling criteria. Garreth Griffith, head of trust and safety for eBay UK & Ireland, explains: "If your buyers are convenience-oriented,

"If your buyers are convenience-oriented and just want the 'Amazon experience', you should be on eBay Express"

Garreth Griffith

short on time, want to just go in, find something and get the "Amazon experience", then you should be on eBay Express. It's a tailored shopping experience for those who have just a few minutes to buy."

For buyers happy to take their time to research sellers, eBay has improved its feedback system. eBay's recent Feedback 2.0 upgrade enables buyers to rate a transaction in more specific detail, but has not yet solved eBay's thorny issue of retaliatory feedback. Garreth Griffith says: "Feedback is our fundamental spine of trust, so we've got to get it right. We admit that, for the first 10 years, we purposefully took a laissez-faire attitude to feedback – we didn't want to

be seen to interfere. We know we need to fix it now, and hence Feedback 2.0 was step one towards that."

eBay also recognises that the biggest challenge with feedback is the "I don't want to leave you a negative, because I'll get one back". "It's our top priority," says Gareth. "We're in the early stages of testing a project in the UK that addresses this. It's a cool little solution that I think is going to work well."

Despite your best efforts, though, you can't stop negative feedback, though two parties can agree to withdraw negative or neutral feedback by mutual consent (or comments can be removed if they breach eBay's feedback policy. If you're a first-time buyer, you can't leave neutral or negative comments without going through a tutorial to understand the implications. You can avoid receiving such in the first place by providing an exemplary service, ensuring your descriptions and T&Cs are accurate, and communicating openly during the transaction. The majority of issues are due to miscommunication, and eBay encourages you to do everything you can to ensure a smooth transaction, so take every opportunity to build positive feedback.

eBay gripes and payment systems

Recently, sellers have been giving eBay their own negative feedback, frustrated at its lack of telephone support for the majority of PowerSellers. eBay has listened to the feedback and has launched local technical and general phone support for Silver

PowerSellers. Garreth Griffith explains: "We genuinely recognise that we need to get better at certain niche areas around our customer service offering, and one of those niche areas is PowerSellers. There's a lot of work happening in that area."

Most people will know that PayPal is the de facto standard of payment on eBay, and most sellers prefer it. According to eBay, listings that offer PayPal are six per cent more likely to sell, and experience a five per cent average increase in final price. It's free to receive a cheque, of course, and some credit card transaction facilities may be cheaper, yet PayPal is immediate. And once your information is in the

Seller dos and don'ts

- Do:** **Cross-promote & up-sell**
Don't miss an opportunity. Set your automatic cross-promotion rules.
- Don't:** **Pad out your listings**
Avoid stuffing keywords or links arbitrarily into shop pages or listings.
- Do:** **Add an "About Me" page**
Establish your expertise and interlink these pages throughout your shop and listings.
- Don't:** **Get personal with buyers**
Be firm, polite and stick to the facts.
- Do:** **Use Shops Reporting**
Gauge how well your listings are doing. It's powerful information.
- Don't:** **Automate everything**
A personal email or even a courtesy call often works a treat, especially for a delivery problem.

PayPal system, PayPal doesn't share it. "PayPal has been a fantastic success," says Geoff Iddison, CEO for PayPal UK & Ireland. "We have 15 million accounts in the UK, a growing number, and there are only 24 million online shoppers."

All sellers should also take the straightforward steps to verify their account to benefit from added protection. Iddison adds: "Buyers want to see PayPal buyer protection, so make sure your listings qualify the buyer for Buyer Protection, and that you qualify for Seller Protection."

PayPal has recently increased Buyer Protection in the UK from £250 to £500 and, says Iddison, "there are some products which we're going to roll out this year that will protect the buyer in a better way."

Cheques and Postal Orders in the UK are PayPal's biggest competitors. "The cheque has to be taken to the bank, it has to clear, and even then the whole transaction may be disrupted if it bounces two weeks later," says Iddison. "If there's a record of someone having chargebacks with PayPal, then we'll know about it and we'll stop that person using PayPal."

A last note to all PayPal users: check your fee rates. You may be eligible to pay 2.9 per cent instead of 3.4 per cent, or lower, depending on your monthly volumes. PayPal asks customers to contact them first to initiate this.

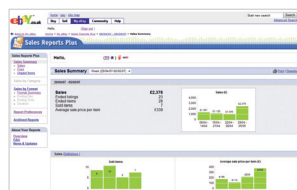
Monitor what works

A little time and investigation into your market and the tools at your disposal can yield the kind of results no car-boot sale will ever bring. Find out what works for you, know your market, your bottom line and give the kind of customer service you'd like to receive yourself. eBay is transparent and so should you be. Be willing to take a gamble, and you could well be on your way to a winning eBay empire. ●

WWW. Are you a die-hard eBay? Share your opinions about online selling at forum.netmag.co.uk

Knowledge is power

A few highly recommended eBay tools to improve your selling skills



Sales Reports Plus

This tool provides a summary of your monthly sales growth, average buying price, repeat buyers and a breakdown on fees. pages.ebay.com/salesreports/salesreportsplus.html



Marketplace Research

This useful tool provides a valuable insight into what's selling based on the popularity of specific keyword terms. pages.ebay.com/marketplace/research/



eBay Pulse

This enables you to view hot picks and survey current search trends by category. It's essentially a snapshot of what's hot and what's not. pulse.ebay.com