

Love, honour and eBay

With 34 million items for sale at any one time and 125 million users buying anything from a sandwich bearing an image of the Virgin Mary to beat-up rusty old cars, Vicky Allan finds the thrill of a bargain on eBay has gone from being a secret thrill to part of our shopping culture

EVERY auction, you could say, tells a story. There is the one about the biker who came across his ex-wife's wedding dress in the attic, dressed up in it for a photo, told his sad tale and sold it over eBay. It made \$3850, attracted five marriage proposals and launched him on to a string of talk shows. Then there's the one about the Italian, Roberto Palmas, who sold his father Giuseppe's photographs of Fifties-era film stars to a Denver restaurant, where they were then spotted, ending up in a New York gallery. The photos are now in hot demand and Palmas manages the archive. There is the couple in America who met and got married through eBay. There is the guy who tried to auction off his kidney. Then there's the story of the woman who tried to flog the dead Volvo 345 GL that she had shared with her ex-boyfriend over eBay and didn't get a single bid. That last, unexciting one is my own – but we'll come to that later.

Almost everybody who has been on eBay has something they like about the online market place. For some, it's the weird esoterica you find; for others it's the thrill of the bargain; for me it's the stories. Almost every auction, apart from the bland sales from big corporations, is some fragment of a life, a small pocket of experience listed, sold and bought. We talk endlessly of the soulless consumer Christmas, but this year, perhaps, as more Britons than ever will do their shopping over eBay, in search of obscure objects of novelty or desire, it will seem, at least that little bit less impersonal.

eBay Christmas shopping, after all, for all its potential to crash in a disastrous pile-up of fraud or late postal delivery, also offers the possibility of personal adventure, a heart-warming story to tell over turkey and trimmings as you find that old boardgame your mother used to play as a child, or the vinyl record your brother has been searching for. One eBay staff member told me, "My mother wanted a 'trug'. I'd never heard of a trug. It turns out to be this Sussex basket for carrying fruit. I found it on eBay."

In the UK we are recent converts. Over the past 15 months Richard Ambrose, category manager of collectibles for eBay UK (based in Richmond, in a rather dotcom-style office with table tennis, coffee culture and a work-hard-play-hard ethic) has seen a huge increase in sales. "There's more than double the number of items listed than there were back then. eBay has gone from being a well-known website to being quite a deep-rooted part of the culture in the UK."

Here a mobile phone sells every minute, a car every four minutes, an item of clothing every four seconds. I am, myself, an eBay virgin. What I know of the site is the crazy stuff; like Diana Duyser, the woman who sold a ten-year-old toasted sandwich with an image of the Virgin Mary melted in the cheese for \$28,000; or Adam Burtle, the 20-year-old American who tried to sell his soul, saying, "I make no warranties as to the condition of the soul. As of now, it is in near-mint condition, with only minor scratches."

I know of the big-money sales, the Learjet that went for \$4.9 million and Margaret Thatcher's handbag that drew a top bid of £103,000. But the bread and butter of eBay, the everyday tradings, the small businesses selling minority interest products, vintage clothing, crafts, art, collectibles – I know little of that. "There was a lot of press initially on the wacky items," says Ambrose. "You still get that, but there's an increasing amount of coverage of the ordinary people using it to sell and make a living."

A Tuesday before Christmas. Azita Qadri, eBay 'listings wizard' – someone who brings new business on to the website – is sitting in a radio studio with earphones clamped to her head, doing the last of a series of 18 interviews about eBay shopping. If she is starting to feel like a broken record it doesn't show as she slips into her favourite eBay tip of the day. "Listeners should have a look at what they have at home – items they got for Christmas last year that they didn't like – and put them up for sale before and raise some cash for gifts this year. Then after Christmas they should put the stuff they didn't

like up again for sale on eBay." It's an appealing idea and one that highlights one of the principles on which eBay is founded: one person's junk is another person's treasure, and if they can be connected, they both reap reward.

That was what eBay founder Pierre Omidyar discovered when he set up his auction web site in 1993 with his own "broken laser pointer" offered up for sale only to find that bids crept up to \$14 for a seemingly defunct piece of trash. It was clear from very early on that the French-Iranian who ran the site as a hobby out of a spare bedroom in his Silicon Valley home had stumbled across something that would work: people were willing to buy the most surprising things online.

By the end of 1995 the site had hosted thousands of auctions and attracted more than 10,000 bids. By 1997 it would adopt the name eBay (the shortened form of Omidyar's web consultancy name, Echo Bay Technology) and by 2001 it was already established as the world's most successful commercial website with 20 million users and 1,664,000 visitors a day. The principles have changed little over the years. It's still just a venue where "the community" can trade. At eBay they want to persuade us not just to be consumers but to sell, to participate in trade at any level, even if that be just to get rid of last year's Mark Darcy-style Christmas sweaters that haven't quite made it to Cancer Research yet. For every listing they get a 15p (or more) listing fee, plus the commission on sale of 5.25 per cent. With, currently, 34 million items for sale at any one time and 125 million registered users, this all adds up.

For many, the real buzz of eBay lies less in the possibility of being a seller as much as a buyer. As Qadri says, "There's a market trader in most of us deep down." Gareth Griffith, head of Trust and Safety at eBay UK, tells me he has already sold his "old kitchen, old bathroom and a car that was a write-off". He tells a story about a powerseller – a virtual market trader selling their wares online – who sold his old TVR over eBay, ▶



Vicky Allan attempts to sell her “old rust-bucket of a car”, complete with close-ups of the rust patches, left, on eBay

► bought a Porsche, then resold it for £1000 more than he bought it. This, he says, was because he had “great feedback and he knows how to put something up there in a way that makes you really want it”.

Already I am convinced. I realise I do have something to sell: an old rust-bucket of a car whose engine sputters like it’s on the verge of exploding. There are several reasons for flogging it. First: a friend of mine described it as

a “deathtrap”. Second, it has a troubled emotional history. Third, perhaps with the money, I too will be able to buy a Porsche.

“The prices are pretty good in cars,” says Richard Ambrose from Collectibles.

“I don’t know about mine.”

“No, trust me.”

“To be honest, it’s making a lot of funny noises.”

“Actually, people in that category really like honesty. Because a lot of the buyers are people

who look for cars that need a bit of fixing up. So I would be totally honest. Loads and loads of photos. And if there's any horrible rusty bit, you should take a close-up."

I write up a listing and put the car up for a three-day auction, starting price £100. "This car was passed on to me and my boyfriend by his parents last year. It's not perfect. It has a few small patches of rust (see photographs), takes a while to warm up and makes nasty banging noises when you first start it. But once it gets going it runs well and I feel, with a bit of care, someone who knows what they're doing could make it go like new again. The main reason for selling it is because my boyfriend and I split up (after 14 years) and can't quite decide who it really belongs to." I do not mention the "deathtrap". I do, however, include a photograph of a stuffed cockerel at the wheel. This, I feel, is an optimistically honest entry.

One of eBay's core values, sported by staff on their badges and displayed on their site, is that "basically people are good". Honesty and trust are the prime currency of the site and the whole company has a vaguely libertarian approach to maintaining this. It is, of course, in the interests of eBay to foster trust and therefore facilitate trade. To do this they have the feedback system, a means by which you give a positive, negative or neutral rating of your experience of any buying or selling transaction.

As a beginner, of course, I have none, and, at two days, 22 hours and three minutes till auction-time is over, I begin to hope I get no

bids. I wonder if I really have been honest. What if someone does buy the car? The fear that I might already be setting myself up for a bad reputation sets in. Reputation after all is everything on eBay. People constantly boast "100 per cent" positive feedback. The more of a history of positive feedback you have, the more of a good bet you are for a buyer and the more likely they are to trust you.

But does the feedback system really chime

What I know of the site is the crazy stuff; like Diana Duyser, the woman who sold a ten-year-old toasted sandwich with an image of the Virgin Mary in the cheese for \$28,000,



with the idea that people are "basically good"? Not quite. Rather it suggests that people can be motivated to be good if it seems a possible future profit is at stake. Gareth Griffith, head of Trust and Safety at eBay UK, recalls originally having been sceptical about the whole idea of trust and eBay.

"I heard about it eight years ago when I was in the US, and thought it would never take off. You just think, why would I buy a car, for instance, from someone I've never met? And yet our motors business is our fastest growing area at the moment." The system is one that seems to work (at least well enough for 125 million users

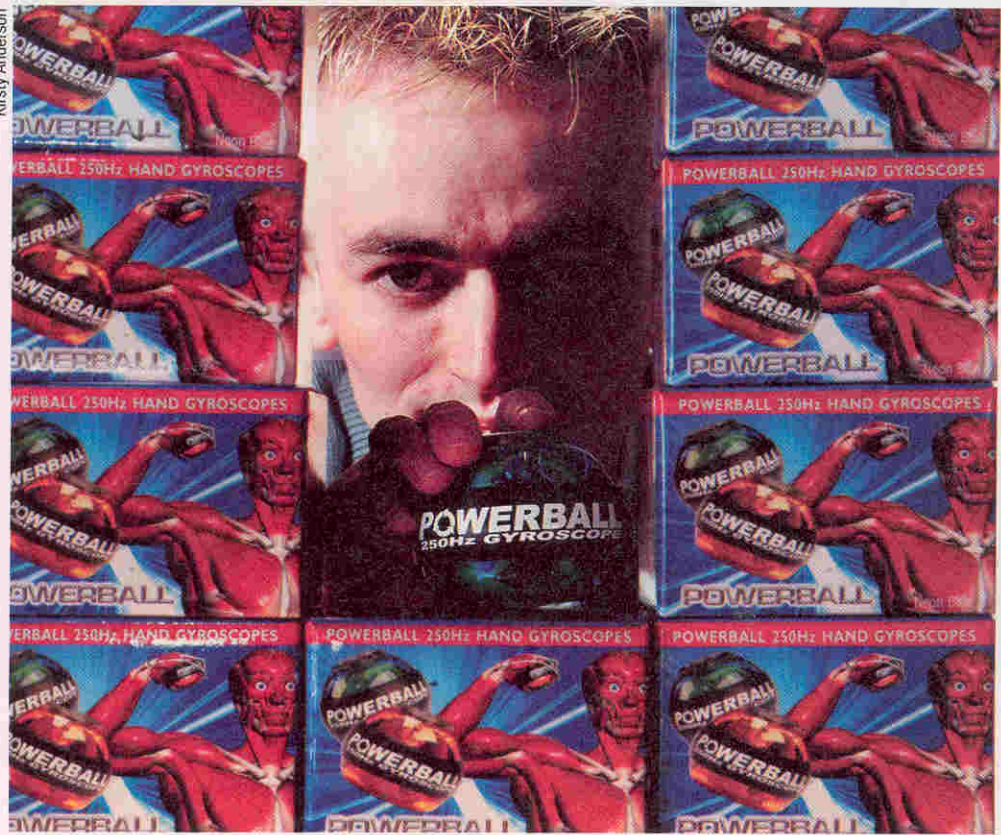
to trust it) and one that, like almost everything else on eBay, was partly devised by the community of internet surfers using the website.

"The fascinating thing," says Griffith, "is that Pierre Omidyar started eBay with this tacky little site and, at each point along the way, the community would have some say. They would say, 'Well how do I know if I'm going to trust this guy?' 'Well, why don't you just give him a rating or something?' It's incredible when you track the history of eBay where you learn the community fed into just about everything."

In his book, *The Perfect Store*, Adam Cohen describes how Omidyar always maintained a hands-off approach to the site, and this is one of the reasons for its success. eBay allows the community to do most of the work itself, to treat it as their marketplace, to judge each other, settle their own disputes, store and ship their own goods. The current core of the eBay community is the small businesses, set up like virtual market traders selling their wares, referred to by the company as powersellers.

They are people like Robert Murray in Scotland who was first drawn to the eBay website when he dropped his mobile phone down the toilet. It fell, he explains, out of his pocket mid-flush. Someone had suggested that on eBay he might pick up a new one cheaply, but searching the site he soon discovered that he could pick up the necessary parts to fix his old waterlogged model for £6, and, while looking, realised "there were a lot of bargains on there".

Up until six months ago, Murray was working as the general manager of a central heating installers. Back then he hated salesmen with a vengeance. Now selling is his business. He has ▶



'Powerseller' Jamie Miller, 23, with his gyroscopic toy/muscle-strengthening gadget that he sells online from his bedroom

transformed himself into a classic trader, flogging everything from "a five pound note to a toilet seat", a range that has included internet domain registrations, mobile phone contracts, remote control toys, Disney paraphernalia, Forever Friends bears. Murray prides himself on the personal nature of his service. Once, he says, when sending a giant teddy bear to a woman in Glasgow, he offered to strap it into his passenger seat and personally drive into town with it. "If I go to a shop," he says. "I don't stand for ten minutes and have a conversation with the shop assistant. Whereas I can have any number of questions asked on eBay. It ties you up a little, there's the time, but it's very rewarding."

Murray is part of a seemingly vibrant online community of Scottish and UK powersellers who keep in contact with each other over a chatboard and email. He has his friends and colleagues in the marketplace, people like the car trader little-old-lady or Jamie Miller, a 23-year-old from Eaglesham, who sells 'powerball' gadgets over eBay and the internet. Whereas Murray is a generalist, Miller is a specialist. He

really sells only two products, the powerball, a gyroscopic toy and muscle-strengthening gadget, and 20 Questions, an artificial intelligence game. It was only last Christmas when he was searching to buy a powerball for his father and was struggling to track one down in Scotland that he realised that there might be a niche for a supplier.

But there are criticisms to be made of eBay. Some say, for instance, it takes the fun out of collecting, killing the thrill of the hunt, of turning over every stone to find that perfect gem. Richard Ambrose tells of one man who had slowly collected 40 of a set of 55 volumes of the Guinness Book of Records. "He'd found the odd book here and there in a car-boot sale or second-hand shop. Then he logged on to eBay one day and the 15 remaining ones he needed were there."

More seriously, there are problems with the feedback system, stories of occasional fraudulence, of people pumping up each other's reputations and of shill - or fake - bidding to inflate prices. A recent Watchdog report looked

into a trade in feedback, where good reputations were being sold on. While the percentage of dodgy deals on the site is low, at 0.1 per cent, it is significant. Naturally eBay tries to play it down.

"Essentially," says Griffith, "we are like a big high street with lots of choices. We've got a pub - the Nag's Head chatboard - we have an auction house, we've got the guy pushing his wheelbarrow and occasionally we've got the guy with something under his jacket. You know how to deal with him intuitively when you walk down the high street, but we're working with the government and other companies on how to drive that awareness into eBay."

Even among the long-term users there are those who are not happy with aspects of eBay. In The Perfect Store, Cohen records the views of a small proportion who believe eBay has become too corporate - accepting advertisements on the site and straying from its grassroots identity - and describes how a rebel group attempted to organise a protest known as the Million Auction March. But, the fact remains that the site facilitates trade at roots level. One of eBay's virtues is it has made viable a whole range of businesses that without this wide online market, would have failed. Monika Carrie, for instance, of Alford in Aberdeenshire, could never have launched her fabric and embroidery business, from such rural isolation.

A hobbyist turned powerseller, from her 'no-man's land' at the top of a hill, she sells patchwork squares, threads and embroidery kits through eBay and her own website. Juggling her fabric business with running a plant nursery, she uses her home as a base, staying up late into the night to take orders. "If it hadn't been for eBay I would have had to move to do the business, because this area can't support a shop like that."

eBay does often seem like a perfect store, a traditional-style marketplace online, with all the chat and bustle, where you can sell or buy anything in an instant. Even, I had hoped, a Volvo deathtrap. An email pings up in my inbox. Auction over. "The following eBay item listing ended without a winning bidder". eBay suggests I consider changing some aspect of my entry. Perhaps they are right. My brother, after all, has already pointed out that maybe including the picture of a stuffed cockerel at the wheel may not have enhanced the sale. Rust and banging are one thing, but no one wants a car with chickenshit all over the seats. Anyway, I already have my new entry planned: "Volvo 345 GL: spare parts or repair."

Optimistically honest, I feel ♦
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