



Instant Retirement Loopholes Armchair

Cash in the Attic

WHO CAN (AND WHO 'DESERVES TO') SUCCEED IN THE INTERNET AUCTION BUSINESS

We all have dreams. Some of us grew up wanting to be a famous singer, or an astronaut, or a movie star. Sometimes our dreams were more practical – to have a job we like, a comfortable home, time to spend enjoying friends, family and hobbies.

Some of us are lucky. Our dreams are coming true.

And for many of us, it's because of the opportunities provided by the Internet.

Internet commerce – setting up our own little business in cyberspace – has allowed thousands of us to do work we enjoy. Selling on the Internet means we work as little or as much as we please. We set our own goals, our own hours, and our own unique identity.

Can you make a comfortable living with internet auctions? Absolutely!

Suppose I look you in the eye and tell you that there's not much chance that you'll be absolutely rolling in money immediately just by reading this book and following my advice. If you're disappointed, I honestly think you'd better stop reading right this minute.

But what if I look you in the eye and let you know that I'm **COMPLETELY CONFIDENT** that you can start to make **SOME** money in just days, and that you can build and grow your own business as **quickly** and **creatively** as you want? What if I can assure you that following my advice can lead you to a very comfortable living without a large financial investment or months of tedious study?

You already know that you have the potential of reaching your dreams. You just need the tools to get you there and keep you on track.

If that's what you're looking for, you are just the person this book was written for!

Actually, the minute this book is finished I have three special people who are getting a copy.

The very first book is reserved for my cousin Chuck. He's constantly looking for new ways to make some extra cash. When we were growing up, he was always the kid with the lemonade stand, and the lawn-mowing business, and the paper route.

Chuck taught me a lot about being a businessman. My first job was delivering the papers on HIS paper route. He probably made a nickel on every paper delivered. He gave me three cents of it and kept the rest. I got the sore shoulder and mosquito bites. I got the cranky customer's complaints and the late supper. And I got *part* of the money.

Chuck got part of the money, too, because he invested his time in developing a good paper route. He got it in shape, and then handed it off to me. This did two things.

It allowed Chuck to play after-school basketball and have fun while I was taking care of business.

And it taught ME that I never, ever wanted to be someone else's employee. I wanted to be the guy who takes charge of a project, sets it up well, and then hires people to do the less interesting parts of the business.

Chuck has done pretty well for himself, owning a dozen small businesses and hiring good people to run them for him. He's got more than enough to live on, and plenty of leisure time.

He's not hurting for additional income, but I really want Chuck to read this book. I want to give him an opportunity to get his share of the growing profits of online auctions. I *know* he could benefit from the advice this book can provide.

He sells odds and ends on eBay. Not often, maybe ten things a year. A few months ago his wife's aunt died, and there were a few old things that nobody in the family wanted. Chuck suggested that he might be able to sell some things on eBay. I offered to help, of course, but he said that he knew what he was doing, so I left him alone.

He decided to sell one old vase that looked a lot like one he saw in an antiques book. It was supposed to be worth between 200 and 250 dollars.

Chuck sold it for.... Well, it didn't sell at all. Not one single bid!

I could have given him a couple of simple tips that would have guaranteed a bunch of good bids.

Read this book, Chuck! You'll thank me, I'm sure.

The second person I was thinking about as I researched this book was the couple next door. Dave and Ginny are real eBay fans. They probably list a dozen items every month for sale – mostly things they pick up at yard sales here in town.

Ginny was telling me the other day that they bought a lamp for ten dollars, and sold it for sixty. Well, of course, that's a nice profit. But my guess is that they spend twenty hours a week on their eBay business, and make a couple of thousand dollars a month from Internet sales. It seems to me that they do a lot of work for money that, bluntly, isn't what they call "life-changing cash".

Of course, they got into the business for rewards besides money. They have fun together, scrounging the flea markets and checking out what's been selling well recently. Maybe they're content with the set-up they have.

If they read this book they will realize that they can make MORE money in LESS time by working just a little bit smarter. If that helps them reach their dreams, I'm glad I could help. If not, well, it's their choice.

The third person I'm personally giving a copy of this book to is my sister-in-law, Darlene. She's a bit behind the rest of us when it comes to using the Internet. I think she was the last one in the family to have her own email address, and she used to wait until the kids got home from school to help her download pictures or find cheap airfare.

I've noticed that in the last few months she's getting much more comfortable with her computer. She "discovered" eBay about six months ago. She hasn't bid on anything yet, but she told me that a couple of times she was tempted, but chickened out. Now it seems that every time I visit them she's got a couple of new questions about how to get started as a buyer and seller on eBay and other auction sites.

I'm hoping that this book inspires her to 'go for the gold'. Obviously she needs some very basic information and skills so she won't get frustrated and give up. We aren't born knowing how to ride a bike or play the piano or do math. And we aren't born knowing how to use online auctions. So for Darlene – and for people like her who need a few more basic skills and bits of information – I've included some "beginner's tips" throughout the book.

My guess is that Darlene will do very well selling things online.

She's worked at the church rummage sale for years and years. She has great instincts about what people might want to buy, and what price they would be willing to pay.

She's very creative. She's often the person I call if someone needs help in naming a new product or nailing down the right advertising approach.

She's well-organized. For instance, she does her Christmas shopping by the book – starts with buying clearance items in January and keeps a list of items to look for throughout the year. By early December she has wonderful, inexpensive gifts for everyone on the list. (Oddly enough, she tells me that she isn't an organized person by nature. In fact, she says she was a "horrible, disorganized slob" growing up. When their third child was born, she started keeping lists and finding ways to stretch their budget. As a result, she's become the envy of all of us.)

Her kids are older now, and Darlene is talking about getting a "real" job. I'm betting that if she reads my book and follows my advice she's going to become a very wealthy, happy woman.

What kind of person succeeds at online auctions? There are exceptions, of course, but most of the successful "E-ntrepreneurs" have some traits in common.

- They want success. They want it enough to put daily effort into their project when they first start out.
- They are not afraid of occasional small failures. Nobody wants to crash and burn, but you can't succeed without taking some small risks.
- They are willing to accept honest feedback.
- They aren't ashamed of having big dreams.
- They like making other people happy.
- They "think outside the box".
- They pay attention to what other people say or think.
- They like learning new things.
- They like to fine-tune their ideas. To them, there's room for improvement in almost every project.
- They think their dreams of doing well, and living well, are important.

I've talked to a lot of successful people while doing research for this book. I tracked down men and women who are close to "legends" in Internet sales. I asked them what they thought the key to their success was.

They all had interesting answers: they were excited about what they were doing... they had goals... they were at the right place at the right time... they knew where to go and who to ask for help.

What struck me is what they **didn't** say.

Not one person said they were successful because they were smarter than the next guy. They **worked** smarter, but a high IQ doesn't seem to make a bit of difference.

Education didn't seem to matter that much either. I know a retired surgeon who gave up practicing medicine and made a fortune selling a small medical device he invented. But I also know a lot of people who never went to college who are making money right and left.

Not one person said that they did well because they were computer whizzes. Some of us take to computers like fish in water, but not everyone wants to learn fancy computer languages or take the time to understand all the fine points of what goes on in cyberspace. People with **very basic computer skills** can do just fine.

And no one – absolutely no one – said that they made their fortune cheating. They all said that they were proud of being honest. They wanted customers to trust them... to be happy with the product or service... to be satisfied if there's a misunderstanding or problem.

And there's another thing I noticed about the most successful people who trade on the Internet. Most of them pay close attention to what's going on in the world. They remind me of the people who go on quiz shows: not necessarily an expert in anything in particular, but someone who is curious about what's going on around them, and interested in a strange variety of topics. I think this works to their advantage because that makes them good at recognizing fads... identifying or developing small products that appeal to ordinary people... educating themselves about how to improve their growing business... taking advantage of new technology.

And, above everything else, the successful people are successful because they are having fun. You can support yourself without "working" if you enjoy your job!

Let's be honest. Some of us think that buying and selling through auctions is an absolute blast. It's a mind game, and we LOVE to WIN!

It's a game of strategy. Can you create a market for a unique product? (Remember, someone made a fortune selling Pet Rocks). Can you outbid the millions of potential competitors and get an item you really want for a very attractive price? Can you 'buy low, sell high' and enjoy the rewards?

Can you develop a taste for a life where YOU are the BOSS, YOU are the SCHEDULER, YOU make the CHOICES and YOU keep the MONEY? I certainly hope the answer is yes!

When I was growing up, they used to say that success was ten percent inspiration and ninety percent perspiration. I'm not sure that's true anymore.

I'm sitting here on my balcony, overlooking the ocean. I'm wearing my bathrobe. I'm sipping on the cappuccino my housekeeper just brought me. I'm "working". I don't recall perspiring all that much while becoming VERY successful.

Instead of perspiration, I'd like to think that the 90 percent is composed of

- **The Right Attitude**
- **The Right Equipment**
- **The Right Idea**

Here's what I mean by the Right Attitude:

I know that I can succeed.

I know I can learn the skills and tricks of the trade.

I know that I can make good choices.

I know that my dream of a comfortable home, free time, and control over my work life is worth pursuing.

The Right Equipment for a beginner is

1. A reliable computer. If you have an old one that crashes all the time or is so slow you could just scream... you can still participate in online auctions but you might get frustrated. Make getting a decent computer a priority.

(**BEGINNER HINT** – there's a GREAT selection of used and new computers on eBay and online computer stores. If you don't know ROMS from RAMS and haven't a clue what a MB is, get a friend to help you choose a good one.)

2. A reliable Internet connection.

(**BEGINNER HINT** – you can connect to the Internet with either a telephone line or a TV cable line. Cable connections, provided by the same people who bring in cable TV signals, is much faster but usually a bit more expensive. Cable services are the better option if you plan to spend a lot of time online and worry about missing phone calls. Some providers of telephone-based systems have overcome that problem by alerting you when a phone call is trying to come through.

There's a third option – DSL (Digital Subscriber Line) that uses home wiring to transmit data. It is 'always on' and doesn't interfere with phone use like the telephone line and modem option. It is not available in all areas.

Both cable and DSL use the term *broadband*. That just means that several signals can be sent at the same time over the same wire.

Don't be shy about asking around to see who the best provider in your community is. Your local computer store is a good place to start.)

3. A comfortable chair. Don't laugh. Years ago I sat on a kitchen chair with my big old computer plunked down on a table that was too high. I had sore elbows, an aching back, and cramps in my legs. To be honest, I sometimes had to force myself to sit down and get some work done. After I made a bit of money I treated myself to a good desk and chair (used, but very comfortable) and that made all the difference in the world.

4. A camera. If you have a digital camera, you're all set. But if you don't, an old-fashioned film camera will do. The chapter on **HOW** in this book has some great hints on how to get a professional-looking photo for your Internet ad.

(**BEGINNER HINT** not every ad on the Internet comes with a photo. But almost every successful ad has a picture. Think about magazine and newspaper ads. Doesn't a nice picture of what's for sale make you more likely to buy it?)

5. At least three notebooks: one for SALES, one for BUSINESS PLANS and one for IDEAS. Keep them next to your computer. Keep other IDEAS notebooks handy: bedroom, car, purse/briefcase, wherever you're likely to get inspired.

6. A pocket calculator or adding machine. It's the most important, least expensive business tool on the market. I love using mine. Let's see – if I sell 4,000 of this item this month, at a nine dollar profit each, I'll make more money than most people make in a year. Who wouldn't like having a calculator that can give you such good news!

WHAT TO SELL ON AUCTION SITES

As you probably know, eBay started out as a very small, very specific collectors' exchange. Obviously it was an idea whose time had come. Almost immediately, the website where people could buy and sell Pez dispensers became an international flea market selling books, clothing, jewelry, toys, houses, boats, vacations, autographs, information, services....

For the past two years, more than half of the sales on eBay were not "rummage sale" items. They were the kind of products and individualized services you'd find at the local mall. Still, about 40% of the millions and millions of sales are the used merchandise/ antiques/ collectables that most people associate with the eBay marketplace.

WHAT TO SELL is a wide-open issue. No matter what merchandise you decide to put on the market, there are buyers.

I've noticed some trends that might help you get started.

- More and more, vendors are offering information. How-to books have wide appeal.
- Jewelry – particularly jewelry that can be purchased for less than \$50 – is popular year-round, but is especially sought-after for Christmas, Valentine's Day and Mother's Day.
- Software is also a standard item.
- Gadgets are always a favorite.
- "Fad" merchandise has a limited sales life, but any merchandise that zooms in on a current movie, fashion, activity, celebrity or news item can bring in quick cash.
- Most eBay sales are low price (\$50 or less) items
- Some buyers are looking for specific items to add to private collections (that one bubble-gum card I need, that rare Jeff Gordon toy car), but most are looking for BARGAINS, pure

and simple.

Spend some time perusing <http://listings.ebay.com/> to get a taste of what the current internet market is carrying.

Ultimately, I'm a firm believer in learning while you're doing. My advice is like they say in the Nike™ ads.

Just do it.

Pick a couple of mid priced (\$25- \$50) items, study my advice on WHEN/WHERE and HOW to sell, and list them. Pay attention, learn from success and from mistakes, and fine-tune your work as you go along.

Beginner tip: If you've never sold anything on eBay, or are still just learning the ropes, you probably should devote a couple of months using eBay as a sort of yard sale. Selling the stuff from your attic is less stressful and less risky. Once you're comfortable with how online auctions work, you'll be ready to take it up a notch.

To simplify your first few sales:

- Pick something small, lightweight, and unbreakable. (Save yourself the hassle of worrying about shipping costs and about damage en route)
- Sell something unusual.
- Pick something that doesn't have a sentimental value (if bids come in much lower than you thought, you might be discouraged or upset.)
- Choose something you can describe accurately (for example, if you're selling an old empty Avon bottle, you greatly increase the value if you can say "Christmas 1991")
- Plan to include a decent photo (and I hope you do – see the "Visual Appeal" section in the HOW chapter of this book), and select something photogenic. Interesting shapes, bright colors, and unusual designs catch the attention of potential buyers.
- Read over the WHEN/WHERE and HOW chapters of this book, submit your item for eBay, and enjoy your experience!

Successful sellers on eBay actively hunt for items to sell. This can be either a fun project or a royal waste of time. If you like driving around to yard sales, church rummage sales, and local auctions, you can get some very nice merchandise to stock your little online store.

What seldom happens (but notice **I did not** say never) is the Antique TV Show Miracle.

I'm sure you know what I mean. Someone brings in an old painting or dilapidated chair to an

appraiser on public television. The expert turns it upside down and says “This is 280 years old... only twelve of them ever made... exceptional condition.... I’d say worth umpteen thousand dollars.” And the owner nearly faints.

Maybe you will be the lucky merchant who picks up an oil painting at a garage sale for five bucks, and sells it on eBay for \$5,000. It’d be great, but not likely. Besides, counting on that one-in-a-thousand shot doesn’t give you a plan for long-term financial security.

The better strategy is to aim for high volume, with modest profits per piece. That’s the strategy of a large number of successful auction/online, mid-level merchants.

That’s also the strategy of most of the independent merchants who operate primarily through the internet. You’ll notice that many of them sell merchandise listing for less than \$50. That seems to be a trigger-point at which people are willing to take a risk.

Small-price, high-volume sellers are the backbone of eBay and other large auction sites. They are the same type of people who have tables set up at flea markets. eBay serves them well as an extension of their swap-meet business.

Most of them do well because they know their merchandise. One guy I know is an expert in stuffed animals (not toys, taxidermist animals). He knows where to get them, and knows how to market them. Another has Hummel figurines, and is an expert on which ones are rare enough to justify a large opening bid.

If this is your goal, you probably won’t get *really* rich but you’ll get extra money by doing something that I assume you are enjoying. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with that.

One word of caution, however. It’s the issue about *price* and *value*. Your merchandise, whatever it is, has a value to you and a value to every potential buyer. I remember a relative bragging about this lovely rare vase she bought online for “only” \$200. An antique dealer said he would have sold it for about \$500. Well, frankly, I wouldn’t have given her \$2 for it. It was just that ugly. So, in a sense, I would have cheated myself out of several hundred dollars if I had been in charge of selling it online.

If I let this worry me, I’d be out of business in a month.

Just decide what you want as a reasonable profit for what you sell. If you can’t find a buyer at the price you think is fair, try different merchandise or different ways to market it. You will hear me say, over and over again, do not be afraid to experiment. If you have ten identical items, sell them in ten different ways (see the HOW section for ideas). Figure out why one strategy worked well and another one didn’t. Notice how every sale seems easier as you start feeling comfortable with your merchandise and your marketing approach.

However, if – after several months of increasing your sales and your e-auction skills – you believe that you aren’t making enough money to justify the time you’re spending, it might be time to move up a level or so.

Suppose you have reached a point where you want to be an internet merchant specializing in new items you create yourself or that you buy wholesale. Deciding what to sell on eBay is as simple – or maybe as complicated – as deciding what to sell if you had decided to open a store. Although there are some major differences (which we'll get to in a minute) your choices of what to sell are based on some very specific factors.

1. What “gaps” are there in the marketplace?

Opening up a pizza parlor in a small town that already has too many pizza parlors isn't necessarily a bad idea. You could offer better pizza, lower prices, faster delivery, and more exotic toppings. You could – well, actually you'd HAVE TO – use clever marketing and strategic planning to come out on top. But there are other options. You could open up a Chinese take-out; you could offer pizza PLUS other fare (maybe vegetarian food if the town doesn't have one); or you could set up your pizza parlor in another town that's not quite so crowded.

Selling on eBay calls for the same kind of strategic observation. You will do well if you have a 'niche' where you are one of only a few merchants. You'll do even better if you offer better service and clever marketing strategies.

I remember a few years ago when I got an invitation in the mail from a fellow who was offering seminars on how to make money on the internet. I went out of curiosity, and here's what I found. He was offering to sell everyone who attended the workshop the same cheap jewelry and herbal remedies, and would help them (for a nice fee) set up an internet site to sell them. Well, I guess that's fine for the first couple of hundred people who went to the presentation. But once the market is saturated and there are more merchants than customers, there simply isn't much money to be made.

Working smart means paying attention to what is already selling on auction sites and web pages. Look at hits, prices and sales. Look at the number of sellers who are offering identical items. Think about the basic lessons of what the politicians call a self-regulated marketplace: when items are scarce, they cost more. When there's an overload, the prices go down. That's the law of supply and demand.

Let me share two quick stories about people who succeeded because they knew their best niche.

One was a guy who went to his father-in-law's birthday party. Someone brought an inexpensive, fun, fairly useful gift – and my friend wanted one. He went to the local stores, he searched online, and he could not find this nifty little item anywhere. He asked the relative who brought it, tracked down the little store where it was purchased, found the manufacturer....

OK, so that sounds like a lot of work? He spent maybe a total of seven or eight hours on his quest. That eight hour search has just about guaranteed him a lifetime of comfortable profits.

I heard a similar story from a woman I met recently. She told me about a little gourmet food item she had enjoyed on a trip to Asia. She discovered that it wasn't available in any of the shops in her area – not even in the Asian food markets.

As luck would have it, a family member was traveling in Mexico, found a supply, and brought them home. She shared them around, people loved the taste, and it took her practically no time to decide to add this little snack to the other items she sells on her website. Of course, she's getting even more visitors – and increasing her profits for other merchandise that people decide to order when they're searching for that one little specialty – because she knew how to recognize a gap in availability.

2. What do you know about? What do you like?

A good friend of mine has done EXTREMELY well selling jewelry on the internet. She got started about three years ago, when her husband put his foot down and said that she couldn't buy any more necklaces, bracelets or rings unless she got rid of some of the ones she already had. Presto, she set up shop on eBay. She soon realized that she did pretty well, selling the things she *didn't* particularly like. She'd do even better selling things she *did* like.

Part of her success is due to the fact that she is (and always will be) a jewelry fanatic. She's the one who watches TV awards ceremonies just to look at the diamonds and rubies the stars are wearing. She can find similar pieces at prices even us ordinary folks could afford. People love her stuff, and she has a wonderful time keeping track of what the next new 'look' might be.

Her husband learned his lesson. He now sells specialized power tools online. I won't tell you his name, but I'm sure you've seen his website. He's making nice money, and he gets to play with all the free sample merchandise his suppliers want him to sell.

Working smart means thinking about your interests, hobbies, and experiences. Remember, eBay is a world-wide mall. And that's exactly what I'm talking about when I say there are major differences between operating an internet sales site and opening up a store. A "store" is one fixed address and you have a great deal of trouble moving if there's a better location up for grabs. If you are selling in cyberspace, you can keep trying different locations (different categories on eBay, different names and search words for your own sales site) until you're satisfied that you are in the right place at the right time.

When you're thinking about your special niche, keep in mind that the internet is an electronic mall where you can sell "things", but it's also a marketplace where people can sell information and services.

3. What are the limits and regulations of what you plan to sell?

As you are well aware, there are all kinds of federal regulations that govern selling and shipping merchandise. If you are baking your triple chocolate whammy cookies for your friends, that's fine. But if you are selling them, be aware that municipalities, states, and even the federal government has certifications, inspections and licensing rules that you **MUST** comply

with.

I know, it's tempting to try to skirt around the requirements. But I have to advise you that failing to find out what the rules are, or failing to do what you are legally required to do, isn't going to result in a little slap on the wrist. I don't want anyone to wind up in jail or facing huge fines.

From time to time, you read about a merchant who was caught selling endangered species or banned drugs or recalled merchandise on the web. That's foolish. When you put out your ad, everyone – including law enforcement – can read it and check you out.

Ethics in eBusiness isn't a game. There are people – consumers, regulators and politicians among them – who look at one 'bad apple' and demand that all of us become less free to go about our own business. Every time you hear about an online seller who rips off customers, you know that his actions have reduced your customer base.

I want eBusinesses to flourish. I want people to have faith in what they buy on Internet auctions, and I want the regulators to feel comfortable with the fewest numbers of barriers. So if you are selling foodstuffs, herbal remedies, medications or other regulated products, make sure you know what's required to keep it legal.

4. Where are you going to get supplies?

Before you get in too deep, you'll need a reliable supplier for merchandise. If you're selling consumables or collectables, you will want to have an agreement with a manufacturer who can make and ship as many as you can sell.

There are several approaches. It will be up to you to figure out which one works best for you.

- You can purchase things in bulk and store them yourself. This might work well if you happen across a quantity of good new merchandise at a going-out-of-business sale. For example, a hardware store is liquidating, and is selling electric screwdrivers at \$6 each. Make an offer for the whole lot at \$4.50 each. Store them in your garage. Sell them a few at a time for \$15 each.
- You can have a merchant agreement similar to the one you would have if you have a physical store. The manufacturer sends a small quantity to you to have on hand for your immediate needs. When they're nearly done, you notify the manufacturer and you have more shipped to your home or office.
- You are the sales department. You take orders and pass them on to the manufacturer. The manufacturer (or another company) packs and mails the merchandise out directly to your customers.

Sometimes the first approach – outright ownership of the merchandise, works best. You control the quantity you have, and the quality (rather than hoping the guys at the factory don't

have an off-day) of the goods. You never have to wait and worry about delayed shipments. The downside is that you'll have to arrange for storage space, and have all the money upfront before you've sold anything out of the lot. If it turns out that it's not the hot seller you had hoped it would be, you may be stuck for a long time with unsold items sitting there gathering dust.

The second option is less risky, assuming the manufacturer is reliable (check out their reputation with other customers). You won't need to shell out for storage space. You can write any size contract you want, and if you discover the sales are beginning to slide you stop buying that product. The drawback, of course, is that shipping delays, factory strikes, transportation problems and whatever can mean that your customers won't get what they want when they want it. That reflects on YOU, and your reputation. Your business can suffer.

The third option sounds like a breeze. There are enough 'automated' systems that you can actually make good money selling without really doing anything. Of course, the more you rely on other people the more vulnerable you are to paying the consequences for someone else's mistakes. And, of course, the more partners you have in your business the less money you will personally make on each sale.

You can reduce some of the risks by becoming your own manufacturer, or at least employing people directly to custom-make your merchandise. Obviously, this isn't a good idea if you plan to sell cars. But many items including jewelry, clothing, simple toys, board games and decorative items, can be done easily and well through home-based production.

Likewise, look around your community for locally-produced items not readily available elsewhere. Regional foods, regional crafts, artwork done by neighbors you find appealing, items from your community's immigrant population – this is a great way to explore and identify things not being sold elsewhere. We'll talk later about eBooks, but perhaps you have a friend who's a great story-teller, and you think it's worth the investment to get a modest number of 'vanity press' books prepared to sell.

Of course, I assume that you'll keep track of things that are not selling well on eBay. This is where your marketing research and your personal knowledge of your products can really pay off.

Suppose you decide to specialize in toys from the 1950's. You see an item – let's say a Roy Rogers doll – listed on eBay with a modest opening bid. Keep track of the item! You might figure out that the marketing approach is wrong: the seller hasn't had some guidance, it may be offered at the wrong time, in the wrong category, without a good picture, with a very bland description.

If it's not getting bids, and time is running out, you can decide for yourself whether to buy it with the intention of reselling it right away for a nice profit. I can't stress this enough – selling at online auctions ALWAYS has some risks. But if you KNOW your merchandise, KNOW your selling strategies, and KNOW the odds, you can make a consistent, tidy profit from others' mistakes or lack of knowledge.

Look again at the listings on eBay. What could you create with just the technology you have at hand? Do you have old sheet music that's out of copyright that you could have reprinted for the nostalgia buffs of the world? Do you want to record and sell CDs of your version of scary stories to tell around the campfire? Hand-knit stocking caps? Personalized ashtrays? Let your mind run free!

As you become more experienced you might consider opportunities for consignment selling. For a fee of 15 – 20%, you can sell things for others. This approach, of course, is not without risks. You – not the owner – are liable for the authenticity of an item. If someone hands you an antique vase to sell, and it turns out to be a modern reproduction, it's your reputation that might suffer. Also, if your deal is for someone to drop off sale items at your place of business, you have to have adequate insurance in case something is damaged or lost.

Still, this is a brand-new business venture that people are just starting to appreciate. Once you've established yourself as a reputable dealer, with your experience and skill you can get much higher bids than someone who only wants to sell a few small things from time to time. They got MORE, even with your commission, you earn money for easy work, and everyone is happy. Can't beat that for easy, can you?

5. What products make good “impulse” purchases?

We have valid statistics that tell us that about a fourth of people who log on to eBay aren't looking for a specific thing. Even the ones who are searching for a cheap car for their kids or a bowl to replace the one they broke last week spend time just browsing in other categories. For the most part these people are “window-shopping”, looking for a bargain that catches their eye. It's only seconds between the time they stumble on your ad and their click to the next window. That's why I'm going to give you very specific things you can do to increase the chances they'll linger, think about it, and submit a bid.

The reality is that certain offerings make better sense if you're looking for an impulsive purchase:

- The item is timely (Christmas decorations in early November, not in February)
- The item is unusual (probably similar to what other vendors are offering but with a slightly different look or different twist)
- The item is value-priced (the higher the price, the more likely we are to want to think it over and come back and purchase it later; most of these sales are lost)
- The item and its description appeals to a very basic, usually selfish, part of human nature. That's why I focus so much on writing the description in the HOW chapter.

When you're narrowing in on what you might want to market, look around at websites that specialize in bulk purchases. Some of the better ones are www.Mobshop.com; <http://actbig>.

onlinegroupbuying.com; www.pricewatch.com; and mysimon.com. Use your search skills on Google or Yahoo and look for wholesalers in products that interest you.

Of course some of us just want to go shopping for nice things to stock. All over the country there are sales conventions aimed at linking up producers with sellers. Some charge a modest admission, but keep track of local shows (particularly if you're in a major metropolitan area or a region like Central Florida that host frequent world-wide shows) and attend whenever possible. Sign up for mailing lists, look around, check out the samples and get to know people who want YOU to market their products.

6. Think about selling things that aren't "things"

We have to be careful, of course, not to talk just about "things" for sale.

There's an increasingly open – and **prosperous** – market for "downloadables" – software, games, eBooks, puzzles, instructions and the like. Most of them meet our focus on low-price, high-volume sales. (It doesn't take a math genius to realize that it's much more profitable to sell 100 items at \$20 each rather than 3 items at \$500).

The money in downloadables is in large volume sales without a bit of increase in the production cost. The other advantage of the downloadable market is that there are no 'items' to stock and ship.

Some of the most successful new merchants sell information. It might be a downloadable guide on how to write a winning children's book, or a videotape on how to build porch furniture from hand-cut logs.

I predict that online information sources, and especially eBooks, will continue to have a major impact on how we think about writing, reading and publishing. Creating physical books to sell in bookstores will never go out of style, of course. For many of us, opening a brand-new book, turning fresh pages, and wandering around a bookstore are distinct pleasures.

But we are living in an age where the need for information is immediate. Little old ladies and tiny kids surf the internet to increase their knowledge of the world around them. eBooks, purchased electronically and downloaded immediately, can be useful and convenient to the buyer and quite profitable for the seller.

Writing a book takes time. Whether it sells twenty copies or two million, it's the same investment of your time and energy. Why not make it accessible to the largest audience possible?

This is particularly true as the cost of publishing physical books soars. The cost of paper, the expense of typesetting, press and binding, the substantial cost of advertising and shipping, all have made larger mainstream publishing companies reluctant to take on a new author. Without a track record, they might not want to buy rights to publish your book. Selling books online can give you enormous credibility if you're dreaming of being an author. See the section on eBooks at the end of this book for more complete information.

Think for a moment about your own set of skills. What kinds of things do people ask for your advice about? What have you accomplished that you could teach other people to do? Whether your special niche is how to repair a bad credit rating or how to rebuild a Studebaker engine, there's a group of people who'd be delighted to pay for your expertise.

More specific information about creating and marketing eBooks is found in Chapter Six of this book.

And what about selling services? Any number of free-lance workers, including writers, Web designers, graphic artists, researchers and consultants in every field, use online merchandising to locate new customers. Although it's technically not an "auction" there are a number of sites like moonlighter.com and sologig.com where artists and professions "bid" on assignments.

Keep this concept in mind, by the way, when we're talking about eBooks. Not only are there ghostwriters available to help you write your story, but you can also find researchers, illustrators and PR consultants to help improve the quality of your work.

If you have services to sell – restoring old photos, building one-of-a-kind kites, repairing watches – you can use the internet in several ways to draw in customers and build your business base.

The sky is the limit. Just remember that working smart means being willing to experiment, to try new products or new approaches, and to tinker with what and how you are selling to get the best long-term results.

THE WHEN AND WHERE OF SUCCESS

WHEN

Anyone with even a little eBay experience can tell you that there are definite traffic patterns to buying and selling goods. Just like TV's prime time and old-fashioned January White Sales, your understanding of what sells when can greatly increase your success.

Interestingly enough, there is some disagreement among experts about the very best timing of Internet auctions. I can't tell you what will ultimately be best for you and your products; I can just pass along the observations other people have shared with me.

Rule #1 – You want to **start** at a time when you have the attention of a maximum number of buyers.

Very early bids identify your item as "hot". It's human nature to want things you think other people also want. Items get a blowtorch icon after 30 bids; that's an honor you really ought to seek because it tells people that your item is HOT and that if they don't get in on the ac-

tion someone else will get it.

Rule #2 – You want to **end** the auction at a high-traffic time.

The final price is the final price. Many items coast along for days, then the last few minutes there's a flood of bids. It's called 'sniping'. It's absolutely legal – and a lot of buyers admit that they get a real rush from putting in that winning bid just seconds before the auction closes.

Rule #3 – You want to time it to your audience

Housewives, teens, older people and do-it-yourselfers have very specific patterns for checking out eBay. Decide who the primary target of your product will be, and schedule your auction opening and closing to the times that group is most active.

Rule #4 – Think ahead; think seasonal

As I said before, Christmas items sell much better in November than they do in February. If you have a quantity of different goods to sell, include some notes in your business plan (see Chapter 6) that will help you figure out the best marketing times for each of them.

Those are the basic concepts for when to list a given item. Here are some specifics.

Although eBay is active 24/7, the greatest audience is on weekend evenings. Saturday night and Sunday night are considered to be "prime time" for introducing merchandise and ending auctions.

Some successful e-merchants (but just a minority) prefer to aim for earlier in the day. This takes away the MAJOR ADVANTAGE of final bidding close to the end of the day. But, as one expert pointed out to me, the increasing use of automatic bidding systems – either through eBay's own, or from independent systems – means that you'll get snipe bids on popular items no matter what time the going-going-gone clock is set for.

Early bids are a good thing. It's not at all unusual for an item to sit there, with no bids at all, day after day. We know for sure that there's interest (people put them on the 'watch' list in their My eBay), but it's nice to see bids right from the start.

These first-day bids seem more likely to come when an item is introduced in mid-morning or mid-evening on weekends. This traffic includes many first-time or inexperienced buyers – precisely the people who are likely to bid on an item right away rather than waiting to see how the action develops. Business is slower for items introduced mid-afternoon but, again, the novice shoppers who are looking around at that time are a bit more likely to submit a bid than are the seasoned "pros".

Friday night is considered by many experts to be a low point. People are tired from work, going out with friends, not ready to shift into weekend mode. This might not apply to teenagers, especially those who are old enough to browse through eBay but not old enough to be dating

regularly. Very inexpensive jewelry, games, books, 'teen heart-throb' items and the like may do well starting or ending on Friday, the traditional 'allowance' day for many kids.

Tuesday is also considered a slow night for most types of merchandise. The exception is large-ticket items on three-day auctions that end on Tuesday. This seems to work well if you are, for instance, selling a car. If you list it Saturday night all the members of the family can check out your description and talk about it. They can use Monday to take stock of the finances, and make the bid Tuesday evening. Of course, you probably still have a better advantage if you decide on a ten-day auction rather than a shorter period for a big item. Ten days, when timed right, give you TWO weekends to attract bids. Some experts I interviewed said they always use 10-day bids. Others said that, given the fact that the volume of potential buyers is so huge ANY time of ANY day, they feel comfortable selling on 3-day auctions because it has that urgent 'now or never' that discourages people from thinking it over and deciding not to bid.

Beginners tip: You decide in advance whether a 3-day, 5-day 7-day or 10 day auction suits you for a particular item. Listing for ten days is probably a good first option for a beginning merchant. One week is also fairly standard, but there may be reasons to look at a longer or shorter period of time. **The time an auction ends is determined by the time it first appears on eBay.** And, of course, don't forget that there are different time zones. If you want 'prime time' throughout the United States, remind yourself that 9 pm in New York is only 6 pm in Los Angeles.

Remember to calculate a 2 or 3 hour delay from the time you submit your ad and the time it is displayed. If you want it to be listed at 7 pm Pacific Time, you'd better set it up by 4:30 or so.

There are ways to use timing to your advantage, even within these guidelines. Winter, for example, is more active than summer because weather tends to keep people at home. Winter items (sold in late fall or early winter) are snow sporting goods, warm clothing, 'cozy home' items and home remodeling materials and guides. Long weekends work well for some products, particularly high-price items that might require a family discussion.

In late winter you can tempt people who have cabin fever to start thinking about Spring. Garden tools, lawn ornaments, picnic items, lighter weight clothing will have more eye-appeal at this time.

According to some experts, products aimed at stay-at-home moms sell well mid-morning and mid-afternoon when the kids are taking naps or off at preschool. Kitchen gadgets, craft items, and children's toys and games might sell just as well Wednesday afternoon as Sunday night.

Of course, if you become a consistent seller, and plan to keep using the same ad (or versions of it) over and over, you will, in effect, have every hour covered. Start and end times, particularly if you consistently advertise your merchandise with the "Buy It Now" option, will not be as important. The more your business becomes like a store, the less important the timing of the auction will be. But when you start out, make note of when YOUR customers are most likely to be shopping and buying.

Push holidays. The necklaces that were “perfect for Christmas” are also perfect for Valentines Day, Easter, Mother’s Day, Graduation.... Remember, people love to shop for others, but often feel stumped when trying to find the right gift. Your item description in the HOW chapter will help sell any item as a wonderful gift to buy for yourself AND for someone else!

EBay encourages gift purchases and seasonal merchandising by offering icons to place next to your listing. Flags for Fourth of July, Hearts for Valentines Day, even a St. Patrick’s Day shamrock, help identify your item as being especially appropriate for specific gift-giving times. You can add a picture of a little package to let customers know that this is particularly good for gift-giving.

Let me repeat the advice I keep giving. EXPERIMENT! Keep track of whether a particular item does best when sold at a particular time on a particular day. Keep track of similar merchandise from other vendors.

WHERE

The first decision is what auction site you want as your primary marketplace. The most obvious choice is eBay, but it isn’t the only choice. Both Amazon and Yahoo have active auctions, and they may be worth checking out. Perusing these auctions may get something clicking in your mind – items available on smaller auction sites that might be nice to add to your eBay merchandise, or realizing that the competition on a non-eBay auction isn’t quite as fierce (and the selling prices are comparable) for the things you sell.

There are, in addition, hundreds of other specialty auctions and sales sites. Car sales, sports equipment, aids for physically challenges individuals, and Elvis memorabilia are some of the sites where audience-limited items are bought and sold.

If you want to look around, here are some sites that you might find interesting:

- Buyselltrades.com
- Auctionport.com
- Shabid.com
- Ubid.com
- Whybidmore.com
- Antiqueswarehouse.com
- Cheaperfinder.com

One specialty site you can use to look for more selling/buying auctions is at [www. Online-auctions.net](http://www.Online-auctions.net)

I strongly suggest, however, that you start your career as an online salesperson by using eBay. The advantages are obvious:

EBay is the most ‘user-friendly’ site. Every step, from registration to posting to what to do

after the sale is made, are all carefully handled on eBay. It is, by far, the most visited sight, so an eBay auction deal is seen by far more potential buyers than any other place on the web.

Still, over time you may discover that you have a unique source for items that are of value to just a small audience. There's absolutely nothing wrong with selling to that audience, and if it means selling on a narrow-interest auction site, that's fine. Your business plan and your experience in the trial-and-error sales experiments will give you some accurate guidance in those decisions.

Many successful merchants know how to work cross-auction. They buy inexpensively at one site when they know the item is particularly rare and therefore particularly valuable to the patrons of another site. It's risky if you really aren't really sure of the marketplace, but educating yourself about specific collectibles or obscure items can really help fill your bank account.

The next big decision is where on eBay to list the item. EBay works on categories (actually thousands of categories and sub-categories). You can browse through the category and sub-category of items – like taking a stroll through a store's clothing, hardware, or furnishings department. So if you are looking for a t-shirt with a flamingo decoration you will look at clothing – t-shirts – flamingos.

The easiest (but not necessarily fool-proof) way to choose a category is use the keyword search to find items similar to what you plan to sell. If you have ladies golf shoes, the obvious category is

All Categories > Sports> Sporting Goods> Golf> Shoes, Sandals> Women.

But what about something that might easily fall into several categories. Suppose it's a framed photo of the Masters Tournament, autographed by Arnold Palmer? That's

Art > photographic images> contemporary (1940 to now).

Or maybe its

Sports > memorabilia > autographs-reprints.

Or maybe

Sports> Fan Shop.

Or how about Sports> Fan Shop>Golf-PGA> Photos....

Kind of makes you want to scream, right?

Actually, my recommendation is fairly straightforward. Choose the category that has the most action (more items almost always means more visitors) because you want to position your item where people are likely just to stumble across it. If there's no similar item in any category,

that would be absolutely amazing because it means you are the only vendor on the planet to sell that merchandise online! In that unlikely case, just think about what active category makes sense for the items and how it fits into that general grouping.

You'll want to avoid both overcrowded categories and categories that have the fewest visitors.

EBay makes it easy by including a "sell an item here" link on every page you've called up. Look at the merchandise listed in a category you think might be a good fit.

The other way for potential customers to start looking is to use the keyword search at the top of the eBay home page. You can use "t-shirt" and "flamingo" as keywords, or you can type in "flamingo" to refine your search by using "t-shirt" as a secondary search term after the list of hundreds of flamingo items is on the screen.

It's not exactly a secret, but many sellers overlook the fact that more 'keywords' in your title the more hits you will get. EBay lets buyers search for keywords just in the title of items, or to search for those words in the text of each page. The majority of keyword searches are just by title: those two or three words can bring out hundreds or even thousands of hits. Potential customers get plenty of items to look at with the Title-only search. They aren't likely to look for keywords in the text of an ad unless they are looking for something very specific and haven't found what they're looking for using Title-only search.

We'll explore the issue of keywords in the next chapter. For now, just remember that when you submit an item for an online auction or on another auction or sales website, there's plenty of competition. You have to work smart to find ways – including WHEN AND WHERE to place your ad – that will make your sale stand out.

THE HOW OF SELLING ON THE INTERNET: YOUR STEP-BY-STEP PLAN FOR SUCCESS

So far, we've talked about WHO is most likely to succeed in internet marketing. They are people who have a dream and who are courageous enough and ambitious enough to pursue that dream.

I've shared with you some great ideas on WHAT can sell. We talked about how you find your own niche. I asked you to think about ways to take your knowledge and enthusiasm for a hobby or a success and turn it into a thriving business. I gave you some information about where to find good products.

We spent some time reviewing the WHEN and WHERE tricks to make your sales fly. I gave you some insider information about how important timing an auction can be. We talked about categories on eBay and how to category choices to make your item stand out.

All that information won't do you any good unless you just "do it".

Start your business *today*.

Beginner tip: Look again in the second chapter, the list of WHAT to sell to get started in online sales. There's a handy list for how to choose the first dozen items on eBay while you get comfortable with the experience.

Keep hearing my voice in your head. You CAN make your dreams happen. You CAN learn best by just doing it and learning along the way.

You've got your items sitting in front of you. You have cold hands? Cold feet? Take a deep breath! You'll be fine.....

First we'll look at the picture-taking hints, then we'll move on to writing headlines and descriptions.

A. THE VISUAL APPEAL.

STEP ONE - PROVIDE THE BEST POSSIBLE PICTURE OF YOUR MERCHANDISE

There's no question about it. A picture is worth a thousand words. A bad picture is worth **just one** word – and that word is **NO**.

There was a time in the not-too-distant past that only half the merchandise on eBay had a photo. Sellers included a photo if it was beautiful, rare, expensive or flashy. But “ordinary” items like a book or a pile of railroad ties were listed without the picture.

That's all changed. Very few items are listed without pictures. The reason is obvious. A picture helps items sell!

A clear, accurate picture also acts as insurance against a dissatisfied customer. If you describe an antique as having a few small chips, the photo ought to show (but not necessarily emphasize) those small chips. That way, your customer is satisfied and you are off the hook from any claims that the items you sold weren't what you promised.

More important, your photo can grab attention. Marketing research proves, over and over, that we buy items we see just because they look so darn good!

Think of any ad in a magazine. It's not a bottle of cola – it's a bottle of cola with drops of water sliding down the side. Hmmmmm. Cold... refreshing.... I WANT IT! It's the center of attention. I WANT IT! Hmmmmm. Good-looking people buy that brand of cola. I WANT IT! Pretty girls/ nice looking guys are attracted to people drinking that brand of cola I WANT IT! Etcetera!

I hope you don't think you need to set up a highly-professional photo shoot, complete with professional models, just to sell that \$20 vase. But you do need some attention to detail.

Before you start your photography, please do a dry run with your camera. Take a roll of film if it's a standard film-type camera, takes some photos of your dog or of a magazine cover or

something, and make sure everything is working properly.

If you've got a digital camera, check out the camera and your computer downloading hardware and software before you start working on your merchandise. This is especially important if you've got a new camera or a new system. Setting up the merchandising picture will take some time – and I'd hate to see it wasted because the film in the camera is old or because you haven't figured out how to download your shots.

Everything check out? Good! Now:

1. MAKE SURE THE ITEM LOOKS CLEAN!

- This is so obvious, I'm embarrassed to mention it. But when I browse through eBay and other auction sites I'm surprised at the number of items that look much shabbier than they probably are because you can see smears, dust, fingerprints and 'crud' in the picture.

2. THINK ABOUT ANGLES.

- Hold the item up (if it's too big, like maybe a car, just walk around it several times). How does it look from different sides? Many items do best with multiple pictures – top, sides, interesting details.

3. GIVE IT A BEAUTY TREATMENT.

- Did you know when they are taking pictures of food for magazines they have professionals who arrange the food (every last pea in the TV dinner picture was placed by hand) and 'enhance' it by spraying oil, shellac or glycerin on it.
- You cannot disguise flaws in items, but you can give your article a minor beauty treatment with a fresh coat of furniture polish, oil, or other non-harmful coating. If it's silver, polish it. If it's wood, use a good paste wax. If it's a car, hand-wash and dry it.

4. THINK ABOUT MOVING THE MOVING PARTS

- If the usefulness depends on moving parts (doors open and closed, handle up or down), plan to take several pictures of it 'in motion'.

5. GIVE A SIZE COMPARISON

- This may be important if it helps describe its uniqueness. For example, The World's Tiniest Sewing Machine is much more impressive if you show it sitting on a quarter..... Likewise, a Paul Bunyan statue should have a normal-size adult standing right next to it.
- Common items like coins, paperclips, or even plain-looking rulers or measuring tapes, can help make a sale if size is a 'plus' in your item category.

6. CHOOSE THE BACKGROUND.

- Probably the greatest waste of film I've seen lately was an eBay picture of a dark blue vase photographed against a black background. What were they thinking?
- An ideal background is black for a light-colored object. You can buy a yard of black velvet for a buck or two in the clearance bin. Feel free to substitute very dark blue or very dark brown if that's what's available.
- Dark-colored objects look fine against white, but black objects generally look better when the background isn't stark white. Tan, pale blue and light gray work well for black and dark objects. If you tend to be fussy, and plan to stay with your internet business, a collection of a half-dozen background cloth samples might be a good investment. Try several of them out until you have one that makes the color in your item "pop".

7. CHECK THE LIGHTING

- The best lighting for photographs is outdoor light on a sunny day. The second best choice is a well-lighted room with plenty of windows on a sunny day.
- Flash photographs are acceptable, but generally you get dots and freckles caused by the reflection of the flash.
- I have a good friend who does most of his photographs in his white-tiled, sunny bathroom. He says he aims lamps toward the mirror and gets incredible photos. To each his own, right?
- If you're using outdoor light, make sure there are no visible shadows. Stand between the sun and the object you're photographing.

8. SURROUND THE ITEM WITH BACKGROUND

- The best way to make the background 'disappear' is to spread the background cloth smoothly across the seat and back of a chair, then place the item on the seat.
- For a large item that doesn't fit neatly on a chair, thumb-tack the background cloth to the wall then drape it over a table butted against the wall.
- Items like floor lamps, chairs and TV sets should be photographed in front of neutral backgrounds. Try thumb-tacking the cloth just above the point that the camera will see, then running it across the floor under the item.
- If you're selling a car, park it where the background is either very dense (like in front of a fence) almost non-existent (like against the blankest wall of the garage) or in an open space where there aren't houses, garages and billboards to distract the eye.

9. PICTURE IT IN USE

- Sometimes a 'real life' setting is even more attractive than a plain background. Spread out those melamine plates on a picnic table, show off the throw pillows on a plain-colored couch, or fit the t-shirt on a dressmaker's dummy.
- If you're selling a tent, set it up under a nice leafy tree.
- If you are selling glassware, however, don't show it filled with libucks. A nice piece of stemware is sold as a collectible, not a drinking glass.
- If you're selling a snow-blower, it would look right at home at the end of a newly-cleaned sidewalk.

As one advertising genius has said, you're not just selling the steak, you're also selling the 'sizzle'.

10. KEEP PICTURE SIZE IN MIND

- Don't get carried away with the above advice for your primary photo. When you display a picture in a gallery view (more about that in a minute) you have a screen area about the size of a postage stamp. Too much detail means it won't register as 'whoa, maybe I want more information'.

11. GET UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

- You should know your camera well enough to know how close you can get to an object without worrying about blur. The item should be centered, and should take up most of the area in the viewfinder. If you think it won't work that close, take a series of pictures from different distances.
- Just the other day, I saw a sad little photo on eBay. Someone had heard the advice about setting up the item on a chair to give it a crisp background. The final photo (I am not kidding) was this tiny little statue sitting on a chair! At first, I had to read the description to make sure it wasn't the chair that was for sale....

12. TAKE MORE PICTURES THAN YOU NEED

- Film is relatively cheap. Shots with a digital camera are just about free. Don't count on that one picture, or even two or three, to get it right.
- Unless you are an experienced photographer, you're better off taking a dozen pictures from different angles and with different lighting. I don't know about you, but I'd rather toss some extra photos in the trash than to use a lousy picture or take the time to set the whole thing up again.

STEP 2 – MOVE THE PICTURE INTO YOUR COMPUTER

If you're using a digital camera, this step is easy. You either have a connector between the camera and the computer, or a small chip that moves from the camera to the computer. I assume you've done this before. If not, find the instructions (oh, dear! Where did we put them?) or check the manufacturer's website for downloadable versions, and give it a shot.

Beginners tip: (Easy way out: Go find a ten-year old to do it for you.)

You can also capture photos from a video camera. Camera manufacturers often provide the software for free. You can also get software and instructions for using video images from www.muvee.com. This may be a bit cumbersome, but it does give you the advantage of having a large number of individual images, not just a handful, when you are trying to identify the best angle and distance.

If you have film from a camera, you might consider having the local photo shop develop them and put them on a CD instead of just getting paper-based pictures. If not, get prints and do them the "old-fashioned way".

The old-fashioned way is to use a scanner. (My, how technology changes!) A scanner is a thin, flat piece of equipment that in essence takes a picture of whatever you put face-down on the glass, pretty much like a copy machine. Most models allow you to scan custom-sized articles like photos, newspaper articles and documents, and let you preview them before the actual scan takes place.

In the last year or so, high-quality printer/scanner combinations have been readily available and relatively inexpensive. If you don't have a printer (and how anyone survives without one is a mystery to me), or if your printer is old enough to be causing you grief, this handy piece of office equipment might fit the bill.

If not, you can find very reliable, easy-to-use scanners at office supply stores, discount stores, and (of course!) online for less than \$100.

Even if you have a digital camera, I'd encourage you to have a scanner. They double as a copy machine, with a wonderful "extra". If you use a scanner to copy your receipts and minor correspondence, you'll ALWAYS be able to find them quickly in the scanner's files in your computer. Another benefit is that scanners frequently have additional photo-editing software that can crop, lighten or darken, or otherwise adjust a photo.

If you do use a scanner, set it for 300 dpi. That gives you a high quality picture without getting so finely detailed that the picture file becomes unmanageably complex.

Next, open the picture on your computer screen. There are any number of good software programs like PhotoShop or Adobe ImageStyler that can help you fine-tune your picture. If you don't have software yet, you might want to start with free software – trial versions and share-

ware – available from places like fotofinish.com, Fxfoto.com, and xara.com.

My personal favorite is Photo-Brush from Media Chance. It's about \$40, but well worth it for those of us who want to erase every speck of dust and get everything looking as good as we can.

Once you are satisfied that the picture is as light and as clear as you want, the next step is to "crop" it. It's just like using scissors to trim off the extra on top, bottom and sides. Most programs do this by giving you a rectangle to stretch and shrink in the picture, with a command like "trim" "crop" or "final size" that will eliminate everything outside the box. Other programs give you a scissors shape or similar icon. Place it at the top right corner to trim top and right side, place it on the opposite bottom corner to complete the trimming.

The rule of thumb is to have no more than 10 % border on each side. A five inch picture should have 1 inch (10% top + 10% bottom = 20%; 20% of 5 = 1) of background surrounding the photo.

By the way, don't be afraid to play with these programs. As long as you don't save the changes you'll always be able to get the original picture back. Safest way to accomplish this: as soon as you open the picture, save it in another name. All the changes you make are saved in the new name; the original picture, just as it looked when you started, is in the original file name.

When the picture is in its final form you must save it as a GIF or JPG file. These are *Graphics Interface Format* and *Joint Photographic Group*, the most frequently-used and most reliable way that images are stored and moved around. Your editing software will allow you to do that when you save – just below the name of the file you're saving it as, it will give you the choices of what kind of file to save it as. Most important: write down the **exact** name of the file, including the extension. You'll need it in just a minute.

STEP 3 – MOVE THE PICTURE TO ANOTHER SITE SO IT CAN BE ACCESSED BY THE PUBLIC

Now for the big step. You must move your picture to a place on the internet where people can view it. After the final version is saved on your computer, you must save it on a host site.

It is possible that your ISP (Internet Service Provider, like AOL, Earthlink or CompuServe) will have some space set aside for this purpose. Check with your provider to see how to access this service (it should be in keywords or FAQ, or part of the HELP menu).

AOL users, even ones without a great deal of experience, can move photos to the space AOL provides for its members. If you have an AOL account, just follow these steps:

- Go the keyword MY PLACE. (This screen has a help menu if you're not ready to jump in feet first).

- Locate the folders in MY PLACE. In some versions of AOL you might have to click See My FTP Space. Locate the “private” folder, or create a new folder and name it ‘eBayPics’ or ‘Auction’, whatever you want.
- Click OK.
- Click UPLOAD. This will open a screen that provides a space for you to type in the file name of your photo. Make sure you do this correctly. The entire filename must be spelled correctly, including capitalization. Don’t forget the .jpg or .gif extension!
- Press CONTINUE
- Click on SELECT FILE and find the photo file you plan to use. Click the name of your photo; it will appear on the bottom of the screen where it says ‘file’
- Click SEND. This stores your picture on AOL’s server.

Your photo is now ready to type into the eBay form for sellers. It will be listed as <http://members.aol.com/yourscreenname/filename.extension>.

Beginner tip: Where it says yourscreenname above, type in the screen name you were using in AOL when you uploaded the picture. If you use several screen names, make sure to specify the name that was listed in the top bar of the AOL welcome screen when you moved the picture to the server file.

There are a number of free and low-cost sites that provide picture hosting. Check with Honesty.com or auctionwatch.com for suggestions. Another site that has information about web and picture hosting is www.webtechnology.com/geekaw/ImageHosts.htm.

When you’ve identified the target where the photo can be accessed, you simply follow the instruction for moving the picture to that hosting site and CAREFULLY type in the full directory name. Spelling counts! Capitalization counts! Completeness counts!

Take a break. See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?

Now you’re ready to make the picture’s address available to eBay users. This is done through typing it in (accurately!) in the box eBay provides when your registering an item for sale.

You can also include a picture in the description by using a HTML command: `<img scr=http://www.yoursite.com/picturename.jpg>`

Beginner Tip: I assume you understand that you substitute the URL (Uniform Resource Locator, e.g. the Website name for *yoursite*) and the picture’s actual name (RedDeSoto.jpg or MingVase.jpg) for picturename.jpg in the example.

eBay has recently made including pictures a much easier process. If you'd like to use their built-in system for a small fee, go to <http://pages.ebay.com/help/sell/ia/addingpictures.html> for a step-by step tutorial on how to get it done.

Hint: make sure the picture is just what you want by 'cutting' the address and 'pasting' it on to your browser's address box. If it comes up, you're successful. If not, repeat the steps. Either way, it's easier to correct any problems before your ad is completed and submitted.

B. TITLES MATTER

WRITING THE TITLES

I think the most talented journalists in the world are the people who write headlines.

Just think of it. You have a half-dozen words to accomplish two things:

The headline tells people what the "thing" (news story) is about

The headline has to grab the reader and make him or her want to read further

That's exactly what the title of your item needs to do: *informing* potential buyers what you are selling, and including *pop-out words* that will encourage them to click the title and read the description you've prepared.

In addition, the Title of merchandise on eBay and other competitive auction sites are the **KEYWORDS** that allow people to browse for specific items. So a Limoges bowl with a cherub design would pop up on the lists for people who are looking for Limoges, for bowls, and for cherubs.

According to research that I trust, as eBay grows larger more people will rely on keywords rather than categories to find what they want. Right now, there are 100 million buyers and 18,000 (!) categories. Less than one quarter of buyers are just looking for the fun of it – 76% go to eBay because they are looking for a specific item. They will type in the name of that item ("watch", "bike" "table"), then may be add a descriptor -- "men's" watch, "10-speed" bike "drop-leaf" table. There is a tendency to use a single keyword to start the search because bargain-hunters know that they might be able to get a sweet deal if they are flexible in what they are looking for.

Get out your paper and your thinking cap. The first word you write is the name of the object. Take a minute and really think about it. Is it a dish? Plate? Platter? What is the One Word that identifies exactly what it is?

Second word to write down: what sets it apart from the others in that long, long list. What is unique about it?

Antique.

Autographed.
Unused.
Very large.
Ornate.
Low-mileage.
Hand-crafted.
Hand-painted
Imported.

Now another word or two, this time a descriptive adjective. What picture do you have in your mind when you think about it?

Beautiful
Dazzling
Luxurious
Sturdy
Keepsake
Classic

Now another word (or two or three) that might be collectible categories.

Angels
Cherubs
Violins
Frogs
Dog
Cat
Babies
Clown
Chinese
Depression
Art Deco

You have a maximum of 50 characters (letters and spaces) for your headline on eBay (this number has changed over the years; as of this writing that's the magic number). You have to make it lean and mean.

So you have: *Antique large china platter, cherubs and violins.* Forty-nine characters.

This will give you the maximum number of hits when the search engines come looking.

I feel foolish mentioning it, but PLEASE proofread and spell-check your title before you submit it! I can give you two examples where carelessness in spelling made it much harder for collectors to find an item.

Several weeks ago I saw an eBay listing for an unusual antique cherub. It was lovely. But it

was, really, a cherub. As you probably know, there are lots of people who collect cherubs, and if they type c-h-e-r-u-b in the keyword search this item wouldn't be called up. And that's a shame. For a moment I felt like buying it just so I could re-list it with the correct spelling and make a few dollars out of it.

The other recent example was a listing for a very old *dictionary*. Of course, people interested in purchasing an old dictionary would probably miss the listing for this one. (Raise you hand if you think that misspelling dictionary when you have one right in front of you is just ridiculous!)

On the other hand, I decided to go snooping around eBay, trying to find out what items I'd see if I typed in the keyword NECKALCE instead of necklace. I got **80 items** with that misspelling – including a few that had 'matching earrings'. Hmmmm.

There are times that understanding, and taking advantage of, the tendency of people to misspell words can be an advantage (see the section on <meta> tags at the end of this book), but this is definitely one place where you'd better proofread it, again and again.

Use every good keyword you possibly can , but A WORD OF WARNING: eBay frowns deeply on people who use inaccurate words in the title in order to get listed in places where they don't really fit. Do not put yourself and your reputation in jeopardy by adding words to a title when you know they really don't belong.

There's a legitimate middle ground, however.

Suppose you think that a piece of glassware is by a particular company, like Duncan Miller or Heisey. It's perfectly legitimate to list it as Duncan Miller? if you are reasonably certain that's the manufacturer, but don't have the resources at hand to verify the absolute authenticity of it.

That option, of course, doesn't apply to "diamond? ring" or " 45 foot? boat". Potential buyers need to be reassured that they are not being taken for a ride. EBay works hard at protecting buyers from scams and shady deals; all you need is a couple of misleading ads and your eBay privileges are revoked. Period. And, believe me, people DO leave feedback when they believe that a seller is less than honest.

If you have a number of items to sell – a truckload of t-shirts for example – you should try preliminary marketing with slightly different titles to see if one is catchier than the others.

If it's just one item, ask for feedback from the friends and relatives you trust.

EBay titles are what the buyer sees when they are running down the list that opens with their keyword(s) they used for the search. Buyers decide whether the list should then be sorted by ending first, newest listed, highest price or lowest price.

No matter how the list is spread out, however, if you're not on the first page or two (maybe three) most potential buyers have gotten brain-fatigue. That's why it's important to think about how to make your title look different/better/more eye-catching.

There seems to be an increasing trend to tack on little icons near the title on the list page. There are placed by eBay (for a modest fee, currently 25 cents but it may go up soon) as an additional attention-grabber.

Basically, these little pictures of flags, wedding rings, shamrocks and the like are to direct you to items that are particularly good for one of the dozen or so holidays and occasions they've developed icons for. They may be worth the extra money, or they may not. Either way, it's not that big of an investment and it won't matter that much in the overall scheme of things.

The exception is probably the 'gift' icon. Use that to steer people to your page if you can give them a special gift-related service, like express delivery or gift wrapping. (Not that anyone has asked me, but I think that eBay merchants who offer gift wrapping are opening a tiny can of worms. If the buyer doesn't see it before he wraps it himself, how can he give you accurate feedback on how well it was described and shipped? Just wondering!)

You'll notice that about half of the titles are in all capital letters. Some sellers believe that it gives them an edge because the letters are larger and more readable on a small-size monitor. Other successful sellers say no, no, no all caps are bad because people feel like you're yelling at them. And, of course, there's a great deal of insider joshing about whether being "cute" like typing L@@@K does more harm than good. (Statistics aren't in yet on this one.)

I believe strongly that you should not include emoticons as part of your title or product descriptions. They're just dandy for daily use in your chat room chats and game sites, but winking and smirking figures in a sales domain just gives me the shivers.

Since they're divided 50-50, it's likely that all caps, no caps, it doesn't matter because neither one of them leaps out.

But you ought to be aware that very few listings are done in bold type. Those are the ones that seem to pop out at me. They cost a few cents extra, but they are worth considering if you're still in the stage of figuring out your final long-term strategy.

Admittedly, that's only a little bit of an edge. But in this business every little bit helps.

So you have your picture ready. Next step is the most accurate, most inviting ad copy you can create....

C. THE AD: LET ME TELL YOU MORE!

STEP 1 – FINDING WORDS FOR THE DESCRIPTION

We're hoping that your title gets the optimum number of hits. We're counting on that beautiful picture to catch their eye. The mouse slides around. It clicks the picture! Ta Da! We have a potential buyer.

Well, at least we have someone who's interested enough in finding out more about what you have to offer.

This is a nitty-gritty job – not for the faint-hearted.

Go back to the piece of paper. Add more words that describe the item, paint a picture of the best things about it, explain why it's a real value to the people you've lured into your site.

Beginners tip: Most word-processing programs (WordPerfect, MS Word, etc.) have a built-in Thesaurus which is sort of a dictionary that gives you synonyms. Look in the TOOLS menu at the top of your screen. In Word you need to pull down TOOLS then click LANGUAGE to open the thesaurus – in newer versions of Word you put the mouse pointer on the word and click the right button. That brings up a list of options including “synonyms”.

Type one word – *delicious*, for example – and let your computer suggest similar words like *tasty, appetizing, scrumptious, yummy and mouth-watering*.

The English language has thousands of words you can use to describe your items.

Amazing... unusual... best... authentic... sacrifice... genuine... lavish... practical... popular... superior... reliable... rare... strong... useful... precious... exclusive... quality... unique...

You can't be dishonest. If it's a bag of Tootsie Rolls it's probably not “unique”. But it can be traditional... beloved...popular... satisfying... sought-after...

This is important work. If you just dash something off quickly, or list the item without a description, you're reducing customer appeal and making it harder to make those sales.

Think of yourself as a door to door salesperson. You knocked on the door and it's opened. You have such a brief time to get the sale! You have to get their attention, entertain them, answer their questions, make them hungry for your product, start them thinking about the benefits they might get from the product, then ask for a commitment.

All that in the twinkling of an eye....

Be particularly careful that you choose language that has an appeal beyond one narrow age group. If I see something that's described as “killer” I figure it's being sold by a high school student. If it's “totally awesome”, it's probably a high school girl.

Likewise, don't describe something as “groovy” unless it's that tie-dyed poncho you stopped wearing in 1973.

There are buzzwords that auction experts look for.

- Hard to Find is vague. Use it if you think it's true, but be aware that many other sellers and buyers know the market, and they'll peg you as an amateur if you've used it improperly.

- Very Hard to Find is even tougher to support. Use this term if your item is the only one like it currently listed on eBay.
- Rare is about the same. It's often used with coins and stamps; it should mean that there are few like it listed on the auction site.
- One Of a Kind means just that. These are custom-made items, unique Barbie/fashion dolls, made-to-order clothing, or one-shot items like prototypes and craftsman-created models.
- Mint/Mint in Box/Mint in Packet/Mint with Tag.... If you describe something as mint condition the buyer expects it to be absolutely new-looking. The box may have been opened, but still looks like new (if there is a seal, it should be intact). Mint toys on cards come attached to their original cards with no visible damage, use, or wear.
- Mint with Tag (or with Mint Tag) applies to collectables like Beanie Babies, Grateful Dead-type Bears, select stuffed animals and dolls.
- Out of Print applies to books, videos and music. Hint: do a quick search through Amazon or other bookseller site to make sure this is true.
- Antique and Classic have different measurements depending on the item. Generally, they are used interchangeably to describe anything that is old; technically Classic is twenty-five or more years old, antique is fifty or more (in some categories, experts describe items as antique only after 100 years). People don't seem to care if you're observing the purest definition.
- New can include New in Box (or in packet, or on card); it is expected to be in unused condition. If it is unused but has been sitting around for awhile it's better described as "new old stock" or "unused" rather than just New.

Other than these specific terms, you're pretty free to use whatever adjectives you want to sell your items.

Think about what motivates people.

We want to be attractive. We want to be liked. We want people to envy us. We want people to think we're smart (and competent, and good).

How will your product fit in to those feelings?

Many of us want some 'higher-level' stuff as a sign that we're just as important, just as deserving as the next guy.

We want to leave our children a legacy. We want to have nice things for them to inherit

some day.

We want people to believe that we have good taste, good judgment, and a sense of style.

We want to own things that make us feel good

We want to believe that we deserve these nice things.

Spend an afternoon reading item descriptions on eBay or at other auction sites. Were there any that made you want to click the mouse and leave a bid behind? Which ones did you decide you want to keep on your watch list?

My guess is that it wasn't just a nice item at a nice price. It was an item that was described well, described in a way that tickled you to want it... to think that you need/deserve/would benefit from owning that nice thing.

Working smart means you never reinvent the wheel. Do not, repeat, DO NOT copy someone else's ads word-for word. But figure out how the vocabulary and rhythm and smoothness of the words drew you in.

Ready? Let's put all those carefully-chosen words together in a customer-friendly, effective way.

STEP 2 – CONSTRUCTING THE MOST EFFECTIVE AD

The first sentence needs to “hook” them.

This is one of the loveliest Haviland vases we've offered.

When I hold this Howdy Doody mug I feel like I'm six years old again.

This bike is looking for a child to take it on some more wonderful rides.

There's nothing like an elegant bedspread to make your room glow.

That beginning sentence should be a paragraph by itself.

The next paragraph should start with a concise physical description. The first sentence should list its strong points

The vase has a wide, flared edge and has no cracks or chips.

The mug, an exact replica of the famous puppet's head, holds 8 ounces.

This is a 20-inch bike with a brand-new seat and newer tires.

This bedspread, made of blue velvet and purple satin squares, measures 102” by 118”.

In the next sentence or two, write the ‘must know’ about damage, use and irregularities.

The vase is in excellent shape except for some minor wear to the gold rim.

The painted face is noticeably worn, and there’s a small crack near the handle.

The bike is well-used, and the paint is chipped or scratched in several places.

Some of the stitching holding the patches together appears to be a bit loose.

Then add a third, short sentence that adds to the allure.

It would look wonderful with holly on your Christmas table.

Anyone who grew up in the 50’s would be thrilled to own this piece of nostalgia.

This bike is sturdy enough for the most ‘enthusiastic’ child.

The combination of velvet and satin makes this one of the most ‘touchable’ pieces we’ve offered.

The third paragraph wraps up the sale. This is where your business, rather than the item, is on display.

- Do you guarantee the product? Do you offer extras, like a certificate of authenticity?
- What types of payment do you accept (more about that in the next few pages)?
- What are the shipping terms? Do you offer expedited service, like overnight, for an extra fee?
- What’s your policy on insurance? On returns?

The closing lines offer two things.

- Thank the browser/customer for their interest “Thanks for stopping by – we hope you like what you see!”
- Invite them to peruse more of your items through a link that says something like “Click here to see similar items we now have up for bid” or “Click here to see our home page.”

You can also use a free visitor counter on the bottom – some merchants think it’s an advantage, and some don’t. We’ll cover that in the “options” section coming up.

With few exceptions, several more photos of your item ought to be included. Different angles, close-ups, details of damage or unique qualities should be included. Don't overdo it – one picture is probably not enough, but five or six is just too many!

STEP 3 – ADS AND VISUAL APPEAL

Now, let's talk about the visual affect of seller's page.

Go to eBay. Choose a search from any keyword, and look at some items at random. You'll notice that the descriptions range from practically non-existent to elaborate, animated, wild screens.

Frankly, I don't encourage either of those two options.

The plainest, blandest page does very little to hook the customer. Even with some nice photos (worth a thousand words, remember?) it doesn't really 'implant' itself in the brain. That's why nearly every business has a logo – it's a 'non-verbal' way of being noticed and remembered.

This DOES NOT MEAN adding bells and whistles and dancing clowns. You want your ad to be:

- Professional looking
- Visually-appealing
- Grammatically correct
- Easy to read
- Informative

My nominee for worst ad I saw this week was a person whose entire ad was written like this:

THIS IS YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO BUY AN ITEM THAT WE HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO GET OUR HANDS ON FOR SEVERAL MONTHS.

Could you read that? Did you want to?

The runner-up this week was an ad with a black background, words (in small sized fonts) written in alternating hot pink and turquoise, with three different pieces of clip art. I can't tell you what they sold – I admit I wasn't willing to take the trouble to find out.

While you're writing and editing your text, remember that only rookies spend time bragging and begging. Those are the kinds of pointless lines you see on some eBay pages. I'm an honest dealer! They shout. I'm planning to keep a 100% rating! (Well, who isn't?). Something subtle like "dealing in fine collectables since 1963" is a nice touch; adding IF THE DEAL GOES BAD I'LL TRY TO WORK OUT SOMETHING (huh?) does NOT inspire confidence.

A few words about fonts. Please, I beg you, please, don't try for a lot of colors in your fonts.

Choose one and stick to it. Find something that pleases your eye – a dark color against a pale background is the most readable – and type everything in the main body of the page in the same color.

When in doubt, stick to the basics – Times New Roman and Ariel. They are the meat and potatoes of written words. Times New Roman is a typical newsletter-style font: easy to read, doesn't call any attention to itself. Ariel is the most common sans-serif (means that it doesn't have those tiny lines at the edges of letters.) But while you're trying to create the best design don't be afraid to experiment.

If you are selling antiques, for example, put your company name (and only the company name, not the address) in a fine script like Invitation, Cotillion, Lucinda Calligraphy or Snell. The rest of the text can be a slightly old looking script, but the rule is **readability is much more important than fancy**.

You should repeat the title of the object as a headline of your description. Here, you can use a unique font that "matches" the item. For example, Gaslight and Papyrus have an art-deco feel; you can evoke an image of old Europe with Sherwood or Diploma; fun stuff for kids does well with Comic Sans and Kristen.

Beginners Tip: Your word processing software and most design programs you've installed (like PaintShop) have given you a number of type faces; if that's not enough, most larger office supply places and a number of discount store will sell you a CD of fonts for about ten dollars.

There are also free fonts available online as 'gifts' from computer-related sites. Type 'free fonts' in a search engine like www.Google.com and you'll get an impressive list.

I'd advise people who aren't entirely sure of their design skills to use templates from design programs to build their first few pages. You spent enough time and energy into attracting customers to your page – don't lose them by having a page that turns them off.

Of course, if you have a few extra bucks in the budget, get a high-quality design software package. The cream of the crop right now is DreamWeaver from Macro Media. It's pricey – about 400 bucks – but comes with incredible tools and very effective support.

EBay provides upload support for you to move your text into HTML (HyperText Markup Language) format. Not everyone I talked to was pleased with this option, but it's a great way to get the project started without adding extra steps and extra chores. (More information on HTML tags and how to use them is in the next chapter)

Newer versions of word processing programs have an option of "save as a web page". Most of these programs allow you to save it with HTML tags and allow you to cut and paste it to your eBay site. Try this out if you want a quick start. Use it for one of your clean-out-the-attic items so you won't have much at stake. As I've said before, Just Do It.

Ready to start selling? Well, not yet. You still have a few options to think about when you first open your shop.

D. OPTIONS: WHAT WORKS, WHAT'S NOT WORTH IT?

1. Gallery Photo

You've probably noticed that about half of the items listed from any keyword search has a tiny picture next to the title. This is called a Gallery. The other items on the list just have an icon of a camera that indicates that there is a photo available if you click the description and open the seller's page.

Adding a Gallery picture to your listing costs a quarter as of this writing. Unless you are selling something that isn't going to net a dollar (and if you are, you're in the wrong business), then it's foolish not to choose a Gallery display.

People are scrolling down the pages at a rapid clip. They're looking at the photos. If yours isn't there, you've lost a great chance to grab their attention and draw them in.

There is a second option, the *Gallery Feature*, that may or may not be a good investment. It costs about \$20 (\$100 for cars), and it gives you a chance at the prime viewing space above the search categories. For extremely valuable, rare or tantalizing items this might be a good bet, but in general it's probably not worth the investment.

2. High and Low opening bids

When you list an item on eBay you set the bottom price – in effect, you yourself start the bidding. At this point, it takes some strategic planning.

There are sellers who start every bid at 99 cents. That way, when the keyword search is sorted by "least expensive", their item will be near the top until the bidding gets hot.

Can't argue with logic like that.

HOWEVER...there's another side to it. If you, yourself, are just bidding a buck, can you reasonably expect the next bid to be ten dollars or forty dollars or something close to what you think the item might sell for?

EBay requires increments of anywhere from a nickel to \$100, depending on the current highest bid. The lowest starting price yields the lowest next bid.

As eBay becomes more vast and overwhelming, it's harder for people to choose one item to pursue. There's a feeling that they'll be one just like it next week (almost always a true statement). Most of them might be willing to bid on an item once or twice, but frankly the thought of going back to the same item multiple times starts sounding like just too much work. If it's going to take a dozen bids to meet your minimum, reasonable price, a low bid will kill your profit.

Although in some categories and some rare items you will have bidders who go to great lengths to get an item through sniping (last-minute bids), automated bid-submitting and other strategies, standard auctions get just a few bids. It might be worth your while to announce, right at the outset, the low-ball figure you're willing to sell it for and hope your clear photo, excellent description, and outstanding reputation will carry the day.

Too high an opening bid, according to at least some experts, can dampen the bidding process by discouraging bargain-hunters from taking a closer look.

My advise is that if you are not selling with a reserve (see below), you should set the opening bid at half of what you think the item should bring **if you have sold similar items for that price or if recent listings of eBay's closed auctions show that's a realistic expectation.** If it's a high-end (over \$200 item), you might make it closer to 75% of the expected value, for a cheapie (\$20 or less), you can adjust it slightly downward. You have a fine line to walk – a temporary price that is low enough to appeal to bargain-hunters (read 'everybody') but at the same time protects you from a serious loss if the auction doesn't go as expected.

3. Reserve

A reserve is the minimum amount that a seller is willing to part with the item for. It is, in effect, an insurance policy. You can feel free to start the auction at a buck or two when you know that eBay has on file a secret amount that must be met before the auction becomes valid.

Like many other options, the reserve has supporters and detractors.

One fellow who does very well with his auction business hates them with a passion. He told me "This is an AUCTION! Buyers have to take chances, sellers should, too." And he's right, of course.

But sellers – particularly inexperienced sellers or merchants trying out new products – may not want to take too many chances. No one wants to lose sleep (not to mention profits) when that lamp they got at a yard sale for \$20 only brings in \$15, not the \$70 - \$80 they think it should have netted.

If you list your item with a reserve, make it an honest one. Don't hold out for an unreasonable price – you're not likely to get it, and that means you wasted all the time setting up the auction and you didn't make a dime out of it.

It's easy enough to calculate what the reserve price should be. What did the item cost you? (you can include a bit of time, gasoline, phone calls etc, but don't exaggerate). What other expenses are part of the final cost of the sale? (For example, are all your shipping costs, including you time waiting in that long line in the Post Office, covered?). Add 10% - 20% to that as the minimum profit margin.

If you're not a risk-taker, Reserve is a wonderful option. If you are, think it over.

Some of the sellers I interviewed think that reserves can benefit buyers as well. The use of reserves has greatly reduced the temptation for sellers to get shills (insiders like friends and relatives) to bid on their merchandise until it's up to the point of a minimum profit.

And, maybe not surprisingly, there are eBay junkies who keep going back to items on their watch list just to see at what point the 'reserve not met' notice disappears!

4. Buy It Now

This is another relatively new option that my friend, the purist, just hates. He says it's for sissies, and that no reasonable eBay junkie would ever do business like that.

That's one guy's opinion.

No doubt about it, it does turn an 'auction' into a 'store'. But, frankly that's what some buyers and sellers feel more comfortable with.

As a seller, you lose a bit of an edge by listing a BIN price rather than an undisclosed Reserve price. You don't just set the 'floor' for the price, you set the ceiling as well. If the BIN is \$50, you aren't likely to get more than that.

On the upside, you'll get interest from a slightly different class of buyers. These are more likely to be the casual visitors who are looking for a specific thing like a Kewpie doll or a Harley jacket. If you're sure of the price – getting a comfortable profit, and not much below the price it would sell for in a regular auction – then BIN does have advantages as well.

In the real world (or at least in the United States), except for auctions, real estate sales, and certain auto dealerships, there's a fixed price for everything. Haggling over the cost of an orange may be necessary in an exotic bazaar, but many people just want to know how much the thing costs, then they buy it.

If you're comfortable selling something as Buy It Now, go ahead. If you're moving toward developing your own online business you'll probably want to charge a flat fee for your primary products. Buy It Now is a good place to gauge exactly how much the non-negotiating market will bear.

5. Dutch Auctions

A Dutch auction is a single site with multiple items. It can become just like an ongoing store if you chose a Dutch Auction, with either a fixed price or a reserve that average bidders will meet.

Suppose you inherited a truckload of five hundred folding chairs. They're just like the ones in the discount store for \$10 apiece. You'd like to sell them for at least \$5 apiece.

You list them in the Dutch Auction. Suppose you decide you can sell of some of them, say twenty of them, at a time. You list it with a \$5.00 reserve. When that auction is up, you can start a new listing. It can be exactly like the previous listing, or you can tinker with pictures, titles and descriptions to see which one draws a crowd faster.

In a Dutch Auction the price for every successful bidder is based on the price the lowest successful bidder has offered. Suppose the highest bidders look like this:

Mike bids \$5.00 for 10 of them
Susie bids \$5.50 for 5 of them
Pat bids \$6.00 for 15 of them

Pat is the high bidder, but Susie is the lowest successful bidder. Both Pat and Susie buy the quantity they want at \$5.50, Susie's bid.

Since bidders are allowed to withdraw from a bid if they don't get the full quantity they want (if Susie had wanted all 20 of them she could have withdrawn her offer), it makes for some complicated math at the end of the auction time. It also requires some extra bookkeeping work on your part, since you'll be shipping items to several sellers at once and you'll need to be careful you have the quantity, payment, and addresses sorted out.

Still, a Dutch auction is an excellent choice to accomplish one of several things:

- It's an ideal way to sell large quantities of small items, like packs of flower seeds or inexpensive jewelry.
- It's a great way to market a one-shot, large quantity buy, like inventory you can purchase from a local going-out-of-business sale.
- It's a good choice for marketing local crafts or delicacies that are available in modest quantities.
- It's a great option for a 'trial balloon' as you transition into your own web-based business to sell this and/or similar items.
- It's a portal for people to click on a link to your main sales web site. If they are interested in your zinnia seeds, they may well want to browse through your bulb, fruit tree and fern collection as well.

In order to qualify as a vendor in Dutch Auctions, you have to be a member of eBay in good standing for at least ten days, and you have to have successfully completed thirty transactions

Two factors will affect your decisions on what to sell by Dutch auction.

If you don't get your minimum bid on a Dutch auction, you can't automatically re-list it like you

can for a regular list.

If you sell too many (trying to sell all 500 chairs at once, rather than 20 at a time, you'll automatically reduce that lowest winning bid. This requires more strategic thinking on your part, but it's part of the hands-on learning I absolutely believe is beneficial.

6. Payment options

I cannot for the life of me understand how sellers justify being picky about payments. Almost everyone wants to pay with a check or a credit card. Why not make it EXTREMELY easy to do just that?

Yes, it's probably good policy to hold a check until it clears, then send the merchandise the day the money is assured. That's common among merchants on eBay and elsewhere – no big deal.

Still, you do find merchants who announce, often in very bold letters WE DO NOT ACCEPT PERSONAL CHECKS!!!!!! It makes me, a customer, feel like we're not having a healthy relationship. I am sorry if you have gotten 'ripped off' at some time in your life (but waiting for a check to clear protects you from that), and the fact that you are turning down my offer to buy something seems a bit short-sighted.

The increasingly favorite option is PayPal. Once an independent money-transaction business, it's now part of the eBay empire. It's easy "click here" use gives customers the option of paying by credit card without typing it over and over. PayPal has its own built-in money-back guarantees, with assurances for both the buyer and seller that you're covered if something goes wrong.

PayPal has add-on seller options that support your bookkeeping, shipping, and notification chores. If you're at a point where your business is too brisk for you to want to handle every detail every time, this is certainly worth a look.

I must admit that the young woman who was proofreading the draft of this page made it a point to ask me if I had taken the time to look at the PayPalSucks website.

Granted, PayPal (and AOL's Web Wallet, and other comparable sites) are not perfect. Occasionally they have a crooked or incompetent employee. There is, once in a rare while, a blunder big enough to make you gasp.

But think of the millions of transactions that eBay covers every month. For my money – and this is just me talking – PayPal is a legitimate service that can increase your sales and lessen your worries.

7. Counters

There are legitimate reasons to decide on using a counter on your page. It tracks the number

of visitors you have – absolutely essential if you’re doing your marketing strategy and you are trying to track the effectiveness of a certain word, a certain photo or another marketing choice.

There are a few drawbacks as well. Suppose a visitor notices that there’s only a few hours left until an auction ends, and you’ve just had a handful of visitors. Is this giving the buyer a bit of an edge – knowledge that there aren’t a lot of people who’ll be sniping (last-minute bidding) and that it’s not going to take a lot of effort to win the item at a low price?

Or, horrors!, does that mean that the item is junk, you are a loser, and that’s your page is not a worthy place to shop, based on public opinion....

The quick compromise, of course, is to install an active counter, but keep the results hidden. That way you can keep track of how many tourists you’ve attracted, but you won’t have given them a head count of each other.

On the other hand, I know myself that when a counter on a page shows lots of activity, the item DOES look more attractive to me.

Overall, counters probably don’t have a measurable impact on any particular sale, but they do help you business keep on track. They’re free. Use them.

8. The Follow-up

Smart merchants want to get to know their customers. It helps them plan campaigns and choose merchandise. More important, they know the value of repeat business, word-of-mouth advertising, and “brand” loyalty. There are a number of ways you can make a new customer a loyal customer.

Let’s start with the box you’re preparing to ship that newly-purchased item:

- Include an invoice (marked paid/type of payment) and a HANDWRITTEN “thanks”.
- Include a business card. There are sites for free business cards like vistapoint.com, make them yourself with a PrintShop template and some Avery tear-aparts, or have some printed professionally.
- When appropriate, add this month’s ‘special sales’ sheet.
- Create and add a coupon worth money off the next purchase.
- Don’t overlook the outside of the box! You can create eye-catching shipping labels with your name, logo and unique design with any one of a number of easy software programs. It adds a professional touch, and increases your name recognition

Every purchaser gives you a “gift” – you now have the name and contact information for a person who is interested in purchasing the type of merchandise you are selling!

- Send a personal email to someone if they've purchased a higher-priced unique item when you have another one for sale. ("I hope you're enjoying your new diamond tennis bracelet. We just got a similar one in stock – the diamonds alternate with rubies in this one. We'll be listing it on eBay next week, but we also have a Buy It Now price for good customers like you...")
- Create a monthly email newsletter. YOU MUST INCLUDE A WAY FOR THEM TO OPT-OUT, but if it's **brief, attractive and useful** they might enjoy hearing from you on a regular basis. (More about email newsletters/eazines in the next few chapters)

Keep track of purchases. After a certain number (or a certain 'grand total'), send them a small free gift.

Holiday cards (non-denominational) are a nice touch. If you're creative you can design a nice postcard greeting (more likely to be seen than something in an envelope) and send it to your customers.

8. Reputation

This is the last item in this short list, but it is certainly not the least of the issues to think about as an eBay merchant.

If you've bought and sold on eBay, you know that one of the most prominent features is its ratings of members.

After every transaction, the buyer and seller each provide feedback. It's a brief statement of eighty characters (a dozen words or so) that describe your experience with this person.

The seller's eBay name and "points" is prominently displayed when you open up a sales page. The buyer sees how many comments that person has gotten (one for each transaction), the percent of positive ratings, and the length of time the person has been trading on eBay. It takes just one click to get to the list of comments made by recent buyers about their honesty, service, attitude and expertise.

Comments – negative and positive – are there for the world to see. And they can't be erased without extraordinary proof that they were unfair and done maliciously.

Many experienced buyers only buy from sellers who have purple, red, green or shooting stars. These are the folks that have successfully completed at least 500 transactions. And very few buyers will purchase from a vendor who doesn't have at least 95% positive feedback.

There are not "tricks", just common sense, in how to make sure your customers are satisfied.

- Be absolutely clear about what you are selling – its age, condition, origin, everything the buyer might need to know.

- Respond to emails promptly. If a potential buyer is asking a question, give an immediate, honest answer.
- Don't hide any costs; don't 'pad' the s&h fee.
- Pack items carefully. DO NOT USE NEWSPAPER in a way that it touches merchandise – newsprint ink can stain glassware and other surfaces! Wrap items in plastic (bubble-wrap preferred) and tape it well. Pack it in a sturdy box, add Styrofoam peanuts or shredded paper. Tape the box securely.
- Do a courtesy follow-up. Email the buyer when the package is on its way, and let them know how (FedEx, UPS, USPS) it is coming.
- Ship the item promptly. If there's a valid reason that it can't go out right now – you're in Minnesota under six feet of snow, you're in the hospital with a gall bladder attack – send the buyer a quick email and explain the problem.
- Always leave feedback on eBay. It doesn't need to be fancy – just check a box that indicates you're satisfied. If you want to leave a comment, a simple "nice doing business with you" is fine.

If you learn one thing about online selling here, I want it to be this:

We live in a world where there is suspicion, alienation and mean-spiritedness. The people who form the backbone of online auctions work toward a different world – a world where items are described accurately, prices are fair, and service is always done with a smile.

If this is the world you'd like to succeed in – WELCOME ABOARD!

DOING BUSINESS ON YOUR OWN

The first half of this book has been devoted to becoming a successful merchant through eBay and other large auction sites. I truly believe that if you follow my suggestions you have the beginnings of a strong, successful business.

There are a number of merchants who find that eBay's exposure and services are enough to provide them with the income they need. Using Dutch auctions, repeat listing and links to their other stock, they are doing just fine.

Selling on eBay – or Yahoo, or Amazon – isn't always the best option. You're a little fish in a huge pond. Selling fees (even though they are comparatively modest) eat into the profits. And you are limited by the rules of the game: time limits, listing limits, picture sizes.

Privacy is also a concern, according to some of the experts I've interviewed. With all the cook-

ies, data miners, spiders and bots peeking around the corner, there are privacy issues that ought to be considered.

eBay continues to change. There's the new Half.com that resembled Amazon's selling site for books, games, movies and the like. By teasing out large product categories, it may make scrolling through eBay's endless pages less of a chore.

The auction site is now more open to having full-time affiliated merchants who can provide ongoing, quality-consistent merchandise and services. But for some of us, it's just not a good fit in the long term.

The rest of this book is aimed at readers who want more. If your goal is to be a major player outside of eBay and other auction sites, read on.

I'm going to give you the tools that will help you go all the way.

The following sections will guide you through the foundations of a solid, profitable eBusiness. There will be some variation – dealers who sell timeshares online will have a different set of choices than people who sell knitting supplies – but I will provide broad concepts and specific tools to accommodate a wide range of enterprises.

When you started your eBay business I'll bet you didn't have a written plan. Most people don't, and they don't need one! If you're just cleaning out the attic online, or selling off the four hundred teddy bears you got at next-to-nothing, you could afford to work by the seat of your pants.

At this point we have to get serious.

On the next page I'm providing you with a fill-in-the-blank Business Plan. It's not detailed enough to run General Motors, but it's just fine if you're starting a used car lot.

Following that exercise, there's a Marketing Plan. You might not be able to complete it until you've finished reading about marketing tools in the next section. But look it over and start giving it some thought while we go from selling as a sideline to selling as a profession.

A wise professor, who taught young MBAs for many years, told me that

- Your first business plan should be written in sand
- The second business plan should be written in pencil
- The third business plan should be written in gold

Use the following pages for both WRITING and THINKING ABOUT your business. I'm including brief explanations where I think it might be helpful. (*Where you see italics like this, it's just me, whispering over your shoulder*)

Otherwise you're on your own.

MY BUSINESS PLAN

PART A: Business Description

1. Today's Date _____ *This is important to keep track of various versions of your plan*

2. Business Name

Name of your Website; name on Articles of Incorporation. List several if you haven't named it yet. Try words that describe your product (Papa's Bears, Calendar Express), variations on your name (Mitch and Louie, Granny Lou) or have a "punch" to them (Starlit Enterprise, Awe summer).

3. Statement of Purpose

What are your objectives besides "making money"? Think in terms of "providing _____ to customers through _____. Or think in terms of "Developing and increasing an online sales outlet for _____. " If you don't know what you're in business to do, you'll never know if you're doing it right!

4. History of the Business

5. Short-term goals

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____
List things that will take less than six months i.e. get dedicated web site up and running, expand from 12 in-stock items to 24, increase sales 50%)

6. Mid-range goals

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

This is your 2-year plan

7. Long-range goal

This is the ultimate goal – the distant point that you are headed for. Be brave! Tell yourself what you want!

8. Legal structure

(Are you incorporated? Do you intend to be? If so, what type?)

9. What is the current staffing structure?

(include duties – not necessarily name of – all partners, paid and unpaid help, vacancies that should be filled within six months)

10. How are financial records kept?

11. How are other records kept?

12. What business services do you have/ what do you need? *(Do you have a tax attorney? An accountant? Liability insurance? Patent attorney? Do you need one?)*

PART B: Marketing Plan

1. Who are your **most likely** customers? What are their characteristics (age, gender, income level, education level)

What do you base this on?

2. How large is your potential market?

(This can be a percent – like 95% of Americans eat bread)

3. How do you find new customers? Where did current customers hear about you?

4. What parallel products can you link to?

(think cookies and milk, bread and jam, computers and printers...)

5. How much competition is there in this market?

6. What will differentiate your product (or your method of selling or advertising this product) to make it stand out from the competition?

7. How do you arrive at price/fair market value for your product(s)

8. How will you get your message to more new consumers?

9. What percent of customers are repeat? _____ What is a standard reorder cycle?

(people will buy a new ink cartridge every two months, they will buy a new TV every four years – this is the reorder cycle)

PART C: Long-range Planning

1. What is the long-range projection of this product's use?

2. How will new technologies impact your business?

Be realistic. Will your product become obsolete? Will higher-tech, improved versions encour-

age people to buy a new model while the old one is still working?

3. What opportunities does this business offer for spin-offs, franchising, expansion?

If this is your first business plan, take your time. Fill in things as you think about them. Feel free to change your answers as you mull over your goals.

Keep the written plan where you can see it. As you work, look at your goal statement. Is that what you are doing? Is that what you want to do? What you want to do five years from now?

As a separate document, you should also draw up a **realistic** financial projection.

- How much money can you bring in the first six months?
- What business expenses will there be?
- WHAT WILL YOU BE LIVING ON while you're waiting for the ship to come in?
- Who are likely investors?
- Who can donate products... services... advice while you're setting up?

I am not trying to discourage you. On the contrary, I am helping you make sure that you'll be relatively successful from the start.

The sad fact is that there are on the market today a bunch of books called something like Get Rich Quick With Hardly Any Work. Some of them – a lot of them in fact – point to the Internet as the ideal opportunity to make solid money without a large investment, a Masters in Business Administration, or a rich wife.

I noticed, however, that a lot of them were written about the time of the Gigantic DotCom Bust. Just a few short years ago ordinary people were setting up cyberspace shops, and making a killing. Books written just before that disaster babble about “unbelievable profits” and “awesome returns” and the like.

Then the bubble burst. Those young entrepreneurs who thought they had found the gold mine just got the shaft.

Their beautiful furniture and state-of-the-art toys are now being sold by someone else on eBay.....

Notice that not every ‘dot-com’ went belly-up. A few old warhorses like Amazon and eBay are still growing strong. People ARE buying things – millions of things – online, and there’s abso-

lutely no reason why that won't continue. We like shopping online – downloading books and software, looking for just the right print to put on the wall, checking prices from a dozen stores before we buy that new monitor.

But you need to work smart. A business plan and a well-thought-out marketing plan are an **ABSOLUTE MUST** for success in online sales. You don't need to be a genius... but you **DO** need to do some planning.

You also need to be organized. I guarantee you that if the behind-the-scenes work isn't up to par, your business will grow more slowly, you will spend much more time doing (and re-doing) the tasks, and you will not be having fun!

If you only have three customers a week, you can write their names down in a little notebook, and put checkmarks next to their name when they pay and when the item is shipped.

It is not humanly possible to keep records like that when you have dozens, then hundreds, of people ordering your products or services.

Right now, while you still have time to breathe, set up a little bookkeeping system on your computer.

Use Excel, Access, Tables in Word, Lotus, or any reliable spreadsheet program you're comfortable with. You'll want at least eight columns

1. Name
2. Shipping address
3. Email address
4. Product ordered
5. Date Sent
6. Confirmation
7. Follow-up
8. Comments

You have to be disciplined, at least for now, to make sure every transaction is recorded. If you hate doing it, hire someone to update the spreadsheet at least twice a week.

If you **REALLY** hate doing it, work hard, work smart, get successful, and turn the whole job over to someone else.

MARKETING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Remember what I said before – You sell the steak by selling the sizzle?

Marketing is not magic, not blind luck. Formal advertising started centuries ago, when people first started putting notices in newspapers and magazines to let people know where their business was located, what products and services they offered, and inviting them as customers.

Nothing much has changed. The core of your marketing plan still has to be reaching people, letting them know where to find you, telling them what you have to offer, and inviting them to come to your site to shop and buy.

To simplify this discussion, let me break it down:

REACHING PEOPLE

Think of all the different ways you made your way to websites in the last month

- Search Engines
- Links on the home page of an ISP
- Links from other websites
- Links from ads
- Sites other people told you about in person
- Sites mentioned in chat rooms and newsgroups
- Emails and newsletters from friends
- Emails and newsletters from strangers

Search Engines

If you're typical, you used search engines (Yahoo, Google, AskJeeves, etc) a lot. This is an obvious, productive way to announce that your "store" is open. It is certainly worth your time, even if you start out on page 55 of a Google search...

The most direct way to become listed on a search site is to submit the information yourself.

You can begin by submitting your information to:

www.AltaVista.com

www.Excite.com

www.HotBot.com

www.Lycos.com

www.MSN.com

www.Webcrawler.com

To be included in Yahoo site searches, search for the keyword/category where you would be most likely to be listed, then click the "Suggest a Site" button.

Once you've registered, the search engine will need to index your page to get the keywords that searchers might be using. Most of these automated searchers support <meta> tags, meaning that you have an opportunity to suggest your own description and keywords. See the following section – HTML Can be Your Friend – on how to construct <meta> tags.

If you include the <meta>tag on your page, viewers cannot see it unless they have chosen to view source. A word of caution: it's very tempting to use too many keywords to increase traffic, but if the search engine thinks you're overdoing it you can be dropped from the search for it. Most experts believe that the maximum list is about 24 words.

Some successful entrepreneurs remind me that anticipating **misspelled words** by including them in a <meta>tag can increase the number of potential customers. If you are selling neckties, you might want to add nektie and nekctie to your keywords.

Another way to increase the number of searchable words on a page is to use a font color identical to the background color. They don't show up to the visitor's eye, but automated searches will "see" the coded words and include them in results.

It costs money to provide "free" search engines, and paid advertising is becoming the norm on these search sites. As more and more web pages compete for space (my secretary informs me that you get one and a quarter million 'hits' when you ask Google to find something about spinach), the discrete little paid ads on the edges start looking very attractive to a business looking for an edge. Look at your budget, install a counter, and see if it works for you.

Links on the home page of an ISP

There are VERY expensive advertising opportunities at major ISPs like AOL and CompuServe. If your own provider is a small, start-up service the cost might be affordable but the customer base is significantly smaller. My vote? Thumbs down unless you have a nice cash reserve.

Links from other websites

Most Ebusinesses use this option, particularly when they are starting out and still trying to establish a strong customer base.

There are four primary ways to use other websites to attract customers:

- Ads (such as banners) that work just like advertising space in newspapers and magazines
- Reciprocal links, meaning agreements you have with other sites where you have a link to their page on your site, and they have a link to yours on theirs
- Vendor contracts, an agreement where people clicking "BUY" on another site are linked to your sales page. In return, the other website gets a cut of the profit

- “Reviews” and recommendations from sites that regularly send out newsletters and ezines, or who have a “what’s new” section that regularly passes along information about new products, services and vendors

This is a superior way to sell, but it takes some planning.

Draw up a list of generic sites that draw in the same ‘profile’ customers you have identified in your Business Plan. (Selling Harley memorabilia just doesn’t work on the StitchandChatter web page).

Use a search engine to identify places your potential customers are likely to browse.

Take a look around websites that interest you. Is it attractive? Easy to find? Easy to Navigate? Does it feature merchandise *similar to yours*, but not identical or competitive?

Contact the sites that appeal to you the most. Email them a note that explains who you are, what your business is, why you think **they** would benefit from having access to your customers as well as how it benefits you. Give them the link to your site. Follow up in a day or two to ask if you can make a deal.

Links from ads

If you can’t get a free link from another site, ask about the cost of a paid ad. Get it in writing! Then (if it sounds like a decent deal) sign a short-term contract. Link them to a page on your site that has an independent counter so you can verify exactly how many hits come from which ad. If your operation is too new or too small to support that, have them enter with a password that is unique to the other site. As an incentive you can offer a discount, premium or free download to visitors using that password.

Don’t overlook the possibilities of printed ads in newsletters, newspapers and magazines (Yes! Paper reading material still exists!) Small-run magazines for hobbyists who purchase your products often have affordable (and automatically targeted) ads. Better yet, if you have a truly **unique item** (like something you manufacture or import), offer to write a feature article (with photos, of course!) or to be interviewed by a staff writer.

Sites other people told you about in person

This is a traditional advertising resource, and it doesn’t cost a cent! You can take advantage of it with quality products or services, unique merchandise, reasonable prices, good customer relationships, and clever marketing. You will do it better if you ask for feedback (tell us what you think), opportunities to share the information (easy-to-find button to “email this page to a friend”) and ASKING: If you like what you see, tell a friend.

Sites mentioned in chat rooms and newsgroups

This is starting to become fairly shaky ground. I personally get annoyed at so-called ‘experts’ who suggest that vendors lurk around in every conceivable chat room, hawking merchandise and interrupting the flow of information among members. It reminds me of the kid in third grade who throws spit balls all day. If you are on a site that has a ‘no commercials’ policy, I strongly recommend you pay attention to the policy, even though sites usually don’t have ways of enforcing this rule.

This does not mean you can’t visit. This does not mean you can’t inform people, when it’s appropriate, that you are a vendor for a particular item that solves one of their problems. But do not, I repeat, DO NOT, be the person that opens the door of every room and shouts “anyone here need Viagra?”

Webrings and Weblogs are a somewhat different story. Some of them (but certainly not all) are a bit more lenient when it comes to commercial chatter. Just don’t annoy others and embarrass yourself by overstepping the groups’ boundary line.

Emails and newsletters from friends

This can be a marketing jewel. And YOU can be the “friend” that sends information around! It doesn’t take much time or skill to put together a simple mailing (most experts say one every two weeks or so) to let your customers know what’s new in your “store”.

You should have an email address on a data base for everyone who has purchased something or asked a question.

You should have a Guestbook for visitors to sign.

You should have a very visible link for “sign up here for our newsletter and special values”. (DO NOT require these casual visitors to divulge a lot of personal information at this point – it’d be nice to have the home phone number and income level of every visitor, but asking for too much too soon scares most people away.)

Three things to keep in mind:

- People aren’t going to read your enews just for the commercial information. If you want people to actually open the mail – or, better yet, read it and even forward it – it must have a ‘hook’. Send them the (clean) Joke of the Week, a time-limited reduced price on a popular item, a new low-carb recipe, ANYTHING they might want to read and save.
- You MUST have – and honor – an opt-out.
- Your newsletter reflects the quality of your whole business. If it’s hard to read, full of typos, or contains questionable material, it won’t help your business grow.

By all means, take advantage of newsletters and ezines sponsored and sent by other people. This offers you an inexpensive, consumer-friendly approach to selling to a pre-determined

market. Your marketing plan should lead you to many ezine opportunities.

Emails and newsletters from strangers

This is absolutely the least favored way to market. Years ago, when people still thought that SPAM was a canned lunch meat, vendors could send any old kind of information to anyone they want.

Do what you want, of course.

But keep in mind that:

- Increasing technology means that far more unsolicited sales mail gets blocked.
- Consumers seldom open unsolicited mail. They have a mailbox full of identical subject lines, and they worry about accidentally opening a virus or worm.
- Unsolicited mail with questionable value to mainstream folks (Naked pictures of movie stars! Increase the size of your private parts!) have left everyone with a very negative opinion of bulk emailing.
- ISPs like AOL are very aggressively pursuing individuals who send spam. Even when the actual emails are created or sent from off-shore, more and more this unsolicited bulk mail is looking like a losing proposition.

TELLING CUSTOMERS WHAT YOU HAVE TO OFFER, AND INVITING THEM TO BUY

With some effort, you've gotten people to drop by your website. Now what?

Let's go over some rules.

- **Your site has to be reliable**
- **Your site has to be attractive**
- **Your site has to be easy to use**
- **Your site should be built for bookmarking**

Reliable means you must have a provider that doesn't disappear. We can all tell tales about trusting an "affordable" server that seemed to be off-line more often than not. There are good, inexpensive (even FREE) website hosts, but don't make a commitment until you've talked to other customers to make sure they're satisfied with their arrangement.

Attractive is a subjective term. We all know people who believe that sticking a picture of a teddy bear in the corner makes everything look better. But there are some basic guidelines to make a web page look smart. Let me go over some of the basics.

A page with too much going on also has some real drawbacks. Most of us wouldn't want to visit a hotel room with shiny orange walls, flashing lights, and red and green plaid drapes. And most of us don't want to visit a web page that looks too busy and too cluttered.

If all you want to do is entertain people, feel free to have as many dancing clowns and flashing “lookie here” lines as you want. But if your priority is to have people **read about** and **think about** your merchandise, you’d better take your urge to decorate elsewhere.

This is particularly true when you’re thinking about downloading times. Not everyone has broadband and a state-of-the-art processor. If your artwork is taking more than a few seconds to arrive on the screen, your potential customer is gone.

Backgrounds in a nice, light, dull color – beige and gray are favorites – make your ad more ‘eye-friendly’ without competing for attention with the text. Subtle marble, brick-looks, and clouds are ok, but keep it very understated.

Borders are fine, too. There are tons of websites that offer free downloadable borders and backgrounds. If you use Word, go looking for graphic backgrounds and frames at MS Word’s graphics on the web. If you have way too much free time, look at the number of images available at www.Google.com. Just make sure the border is small enough (6 pt or less in most cases) so it isn’t too obvious.

Laying out the page, and doing it well, is simple enough. Remember, you want it to look professional... clear... attractive.

Let me share with you some of the common mistakes that will make your page look like it was done by an amateur:

The Ransom Note These are the pages, posters and newsletters that use a different font for every line. I’m not against using unusual fonts – in fact, I encourage it – but one of the most common mistakes a rookie will make is using more than one or two fonts. It makes the page look cluttered and disorganized.

The Cemetery Everything is boxed, square, and straight. It’s difficult to make the page flow, particularly if you’re making room for a few photos or graphics. Experts will tell you to keep things from being too symmetrical. When the visual structure makes your eye move in directions other than straight up and down and side-to-side, it makes your page more appealing.

The Eye Chart Fonts change size as you move down the page. The headline is shouting, the bottom is whispering. Choose a font size that is easily readable on standard-size monitors. Don’t vary the size more than 50% (if 12 pt is your choice, don’t go less than 8, or more than 18, on the page)

The Closet I’m sure you’ve seen this one. It’s cluttered by too many colors and broken up by exclamations, interjections and smiley faces. Makes you just want to shut the door, FAST! I’m sorry if you think it looks “way awesome” or “totally cool”. The truth of the matter is that the more you distract people while they are reading, the less they read. Period.

The Cave Darn it, it's too dark in there! I'm not all that old, I shouldn't be having vision trouble. If I have to squint to read the red print and the blue logo on the black background, I'm leaving.

The Jolly Page Similar to the closet in its impact. Uses funny fonts (curlz, bazooka, eraser-dust) rainbows, smilies (emoticons) and cutesie clip art. If you're selling laughing gas or novelty items, I suppose you can get away with it, but you limit your audience every time you add something not directly related to the product and the sale.

Easy to Use does not mean bland. But it **does** mean that even people who just got their computer three weeks ago can visit you. I'm not convinced that ANY website benefits from animated openings that last more than a few seconds. Frankly, there needs to be an easy-to-find link that skips the orchestrated beginning – many of us are too busy to sit through a slide-show. And, let's face it, some of us are sneaking a peek at work, where we don't want anything that wastes time or calls attention to our activities.

Remember this easy advice: KISS. Keep it Simple, Sweetie.

Encourage that 'friendly' feel by offering an easy-to-use FAQ and an easy-to use Contact Us. And make it personable with a simple, informal About Us page.

Ask some novice friends to wander through your website while it's still under construction. Can they find things easily? Do they understand all the terminology? Can they readily find out all they need to know about your merchandise – what it does, what it costs, how soon it will be shipped, what guarantees are attached?

Built for Bookmarking uses whatever strategies you can find to encourage repeat visits. One site I visit occasionally has a rotating art gallery, and I like to check in from time to time just to see what's happening in the art world.

Some of the most successful small sites have something FREE that's useful, like a dictionary of computer terms, a user-friendly tutorial about Wall Street, or updated news in a specialized area. My local garden shop, for example, has a new tip every week for what to plant, how to fertilize, how to identify different pests. They have a very loyal customer base.

Of course, always add a link for "want to come back to this page?" so adding your site to the customer's Favorites list is done automatically.

The very best way to get customers to return to your site is to give them what they want.

They want the best quality and the most reasonable price

They want to do business with merchants they trust

They want reassurance that if something goes wrong their complaints will be heard

They want to be part of a buyer-seller relationship that is honest and respectful

You do this by highlighting endorsements at every opportunity.

You do this by using appropriate, professional language.

You do this by adding courtesy and honesty to every transaction.

AUTOMATING YOUR WORK

The best life, where you really don't have to "work" at work, can happen when you're able to hand off the most tedious tasks to someone else. That's a very real choice in Internet sales where there are 'bots' and automated programs that do much of the brainless work automatically.

Even in a new business with a tight budget, I'd consider:

- Automated email response that gives a generic, friendly reply
- Tracking software that lets you know who is visiting and what their buying patterns are
- Guestbook with filer support
- Shopping Cart
- Credit Card support

As you get more experienced and have resources to spare, you'll discover that there are all kinds of 'bots' and support services. Eventually, if you work smart your business will eventually take care of itself.

At the end of this book I've got a couple of pages of websites for products and services related to internet sales. Feel free to dream about the day when the website answers the mail... ships the package...sends the emails... deposits the money in your bank account...

In the meantime, keep experimenting with what works best right now. Decide what you do well and what you'd better hand off before you get into trouble; think about where you are today, and where do you want to be.

EBOOKS AND DOWNLOADABLES

There's an increasingly open – and prosperous – market for "downloadables" – software, games, eBooks, puzzles, instructions and the like. It doesn't take a math genius to realize that it's much more profitable to sell 100 items at \$20 each rather than 3 items at \$500. The money in downloadables is in large volume sales without a bit of increase in the production cost. The other advantage of the downloadable market is that there are no 'items' to stock and ship.

For some of us, the chance to make money is nice, but a surprising number of people look at eBooks as an ideal way for them to get in print, even if they weren't guaranteed a handsome profit.

- Many of us have a story to write – How I Survived Cancer, the Special Joys of Raising Triplets, 100 Lowfat Recipes, Trash to Treasure.... eBooks give us an opportunity to share

our knowledge.

- There are some wonderful books now out of print – books for which the copyright has expired – that should be available for new generations of readers. Reprinting them helps preserve legacies.
- Some books have such a narrow audience that publishing them in paper versions is not practical.

Another increasingly popular option is the sale of reprint rights for eBooks. When you purchase a book you can also purchase the right to sell additional copies of that book to your own customers (or even give it away free).

As I said before, bookstores and paper editions will never disappear. But in our information-hungry age, there is definitely a place for eBook sales.

You can write the book yourself and sell it on your site.

You can allow other sites to sell your downloadable book for a part of the profit or for a flat fee.

You can sell the rights to your book to an ePublisher (there are plenty of them out there). Some of the better known ePublishers are

- www.Amberquill.com – best known for horror, paranormal, romance
- www.awe-struck.net – Eclectic titles including romance, SF, New Age. Best known for carrying stories with heroes who have disabilities
- www.booksunbound.com – mostly mainstream fiction
- www.EllorasCave.com – Erotic and cutting edge stories, many from the woman's viewpoint
- www.Jacobytebooks.com – Australia-based publisher of both fiction and nonfiction
- www.LTDBooks.com – deals in both eBooks and trade paperbacks
- www.novelbooksinc.com – includes eBooks and printed works
- www.QuietStormPublishing.com – all genres, but a special interest in young adult and Sci-Fi works
- www.writers-exchange.com/epublishing – site for Livewire Publishing in Australia, mostly romance and light fiction

There are a number of places to search for more information about eBooks. You might want to start with www.EBookWeb.org and www.EBook.com. Another of my favorite sites is www.BooksWeLove.net.

HTML CAN BE YOUR FRIEND...

Internet displays are constructed by the code called HTML. It's a series of notations that establish the font, color, size and position of everything on the page.

Back in the olden days – like three or four years ago – people who wanted to create anything on the worldwide web besides a plain black-on-white text message had to learn how to code things in HTML. It's a bother, it requires EXCRUCIATING attention to details, and it takes time.

But the guys and gals who learned it had a real advantage over the competition. They left the rest of us in the dust, and they charged us a pretty penny to fancy up our web sites.

That's not particularly true these days. There are any number of software programs, ranging in price from free to pricey, that will do the job for you.

EBay even has a step for sellers that gently helps people get the vision in their head and/on their computer screen into the great realm of shoppers' cyberspace.

Still, I think everyone who has a web page or internet business ought to have a nodding acquaintance with HTML.

It's like owning a car. If you know how to change the spark plugs, check the oil and put on new wiper blades you can save yourself some money and inconvenience. It's also fairly good protection if you've hired an outside contractor to design and update your page.... you're less likely to get scammed if the provider knows (or at least thinks) you understand what he or she is talking about.

These are the bare basic facts:

When a browser sees a TAG (which looks like this <>) it is getting a display command. Letters and code are placed between sets of those symbols is treated differently. Letters and symbols between the little arrows (like this <z>) determine exactly how the text should be changed.

If I wanted something written in bold, I would type (HTML tag for 'turn on bold'), then the text that I want to darken, then follow it with the sign (the HTML tag for 'turn off bold')

If I wanted words in italics, I would surround it with <i> words I want italicized </i>
Suppose I want both bold and Italics, like this. I would use <i> words I want to have in bold and italic </i>

If I wanted my text to be underlined the obvious command is <U> words to be underlined </U>

Font colors are also controlled by HTML tags that look like this

OTHER USEFUL TAGS

Loading an Image: `http://www.yourwebaddress.com/imagefilename.extension`

Loading a Background `BACKGROUND="http://www.yourwebaddress.com/imagenam`

extension>

Link to an email address EMAIL ME

Link to another website: TEXT TO LINK

Alignments: add align="left" , align="right", align="center" i.e. <h1 align="right">big heading right aligned</h1>

Headings: <h1>Largest Heading</h1> through <h6>Smallest Heading</h6>

Horizontal Rule: <hrsize=#width=##%>. In this example, you replace the first # with the height of the line, replace the ## with the percentage of the screen you want that rule to cover

Paragraph: <p> ... </p>

Font Sizes: slightly larger font

Line break:
 Line One is here.
Line Two follows below.

Preformatted Text: <pre> ... </pre>

Regular link: text for link

Mail Link: email me
or to include a subject.

Calling up Images: (remember, use width, height, and alt tags for best performance.)

Centering text: <center> </center> (you can also use <div align="center"> </div>)

Using <meta> tags: You can improve your success with search engines if you provide a description and keywords on your page. The description line looks like this:

<meta name="description" content = "*description of page goes here*>

The line for keywords is done like this:

<meta name="keywords" content= "*your keywords go here*> Keywords do not need to be separated by commas.

By the way, HTML does not distinguish between lower-case and capital letters. Use either, that's fine.

If you'd like to learn more about HTML, most community colleges have short programs where you get hands-on training. There are always eBooks available, and you can also learn for free (more or less) on a number of websites.

There are at least two good tutorials I can recommend:

<http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/General/Internet/www/HTMLPrimer.html>

or a really friendly site

<http://www.davesite.com/webstation>

where you'll find a very useful, interactive tutorial.

AND A FINAL WORD

What we have discussed in this book are the insider's views on how to succeed in business. It's not complete by any means – we've included hundreds of strategies, but there's always one more that didn't make the list.

Remember that **it is a business**.

Internet profits are taxable. Know the rules, and keep the records. The bookkeeping system doesn't need to be fancy, it just needs to work.

Know your customers. A happy customer is a link to more sales. He'll tell a few friends about the wonderful service and the wonderful deal. That's an excellent way to win new customers.

An unhappy customer is something you can't afford. He'll tell everyone he sees *his version* (and it will be bad!) of how he thinks you ripped him off. He'll tell a lawyer, he'll tell his congressman, he'll tell everyone in his chat room. He'll "diss" you to anyone who will listen....

As Internet businesses evolve, merchants who know how to WORK SMART instead of just working HARD will continue to thrive. There will ALWAYS be room for one more winner.

I'm hoping that winner is **YOU!**

SITE SEEING

With millions of web pages related to Internet commerce, I am only listing a few of the ones I've found most helpful or that were recommended to me by people I've interviewed.

Here they are, in no particular order:

www.paypal.com Link to set up an account to purchase merchandise or pay fees through access to credit card and your bank account

www.shortkeys.com Helps you create shortcuts so you can avoid tedious retyping

www.eudora.com Email software

www.macromedia.com Internet software, tutorials, and seminars

www.clipart.com Great collection of fee-free graphics

www.webcompiler.com Software for website design; downloadable free trial available

www.bersoft.com Sets up and packs eBooks and other web documents

www.jansfreeware.com Extensive collection of trials of both older software and new releases

www.ebookwholesaler.net Good place to start if you want to publish out of another site

www.morebusiness.com Easy, interactive site for small businesses and entrepreneurs

www.mysimon.com Newsletter about Internet Stores – reviews, product searches, advice

www.pricewatch.com Buying and selling computers and components

www.volumebuy.com Source for a variety of remarketing merchandise

www.hotfiles.com Takes you to ZNET downloads – security, remote access, other software options

www.grsites.com Backgrounds, graphics, buttons, more....

www.auctionpix.com/ebay More help with auction photos

www.wordspot.com Weekly list of 100 top keywords

www.internetauctionlist.com Up-to-date list of active sites

www.liszt.com Topica email marketing and merchandising support

www.ablake.net/forum Discussion board on eBusiness

www.internic.net/whois.html Directory of Internet Domain names

www.reportsecrets.com Info-productions and special reports

www.cardservice.com merchant accounts

www.commerceconsulting.com merchant accounts

www.totalmerchantservice.com merchant accounts

www.ibill.com Credit Card setups

www.listnet.com Directory of popular ezines

www.e-zinez.com Directory of popular ezines

www.estamp.com Purchase postage online

www.yourpaysite.com “adult content” sales

www.gazoobie.com Domain names

www.domains.yahoo.com Domain, email forwarding and Website through Yahoo

www.iship.com Calculate shipping rates

www.sba.gov Answers questions on licensing and other vendor issues

www.smithfam.com Developer and vendor of Internet information products

www.shoppingcartplus.com Store-builder support and hosting

www.auctionwatch.com Huge “warehouse” of products ranging from car parts to green-card information

www.davessite.com HTML tutorial and other useful tools