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Building Library Collections, the eBay Way

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Abstract

eBay provides a fresh way to find and purchase items that build a library's special collections and archives, supplement circulating collections, or replace journal issues that are missing. At Western Oregon University (WOU), we have used eBay to build our archives collections and are looking to expand our use to the general collections. This article uses some of our experiences to describe how eBay can be used to acquire library materials and includes lessons that we have learned, tips for optimizing your searches, and hints for eBay novices.

Building library collections

In library school, no one ever told me that collection development could cause my adrenaline to rush in the same way that a close game of tennis or other competitive sports do. While the prevalence and usefulness of collection development tools on the Internet was mentioned, no one uttered those two magic syllables: eBay. This is probably because eBay used to be considered solely the domain of Beanie Baby collectors and other bargain hunters. The demographic has broadened to include businesses, hobbyists, all kinds of collectors, scholars and librarians, all of whom love the thrill of tracking down that elusive item and getting it for a steal!¹ With something available for almost everyone, the “global garage sale” or “world’s online marketplace” has grown to the point that it now supports a whopping customer base of 157 million world-wide.² With millions of new items listed every day my librarian heart beats faster with curiosity and my not-so-subtle competitive streak is sparked by the idea that someone out there is bound to have books, videos, DVDs, maps, CDs, souvenirs and plenty of other items of interest to me or, more importantly, my institution.³ All I have to do is hunt down those hidden treasures. Of course, there is also a teeny bit of excitement associated with emerging victorious—I mean, winning the auction.

eBay, an online auction house, was founded in September 1995 by Pierre Omidyar.⁴ In its decade of existence, it has grown from an “at home” operation to a rapidly expanding mega-corporation in the online market.⁵ An August 2005 Nielsen/NetRatings report showed eBay as the top-ranked brand by web page views in the UK and, during July 2005, nearly 3.1 billion eBay pages were viewed, an increase of 44% over the same time period in 2004.⁶ eBay is a sales giant, with an incredible 90% share in most of its markets.⁷ During June 2005, visitors to the site spent an average of nearly 2 hours on eBay, showing more than a passing curiosity from many.⁸

Is it possible that this popular online auction, known for helping find household items and filling our personal collections, can also serve us as professionals? In a busy world eBay is convenient and (can be) less time consuming than some traditional collecting and collection development methods. eBay has presented everyone, including librarians and archivists, with a new and exciting way to identify and acquire items and add depth to their collections. Without this forum, many of these items might have disappeared into private collections or been thrown away, without interested parties ever becoming aware of their existence. Books, diplomas, collector’s plates, and pieces of buildings: if it exists, chances are, it can be found on eBay.

eBay has opened up a new world for the development of our archives, allowing staff to track down items that we would have otherwise never acquired due to geography, time or just not knowing of their existence. As rumors of memorabilia (and more) on eBay started to reach us, it became apparent that we needed to explore this new resource. With minimal planning, we grabbed the opportunity and, for the last few years, the archives and collection development staff have actively been using eBay to acquire items for the University archives. During that time, we’ve found bargains, overpaid, accidentally bid against each other, won and lost auctions and had a genuinely rewarding experience.

eBay has become a vital tool for us. Because our archives have been an “add-on” over the years, collecting has been sporadic and many items that should have been collected were not. Archives are still only one of the many responsibilities of the collection development unit and, while it might be enjoyable to spend hours perusing antique stores and flea markets to fill collection gaps, there is simply not enough time. The eBay experience has been rewarding enough in the last few years that we are exploring eBay as an option for building our general collections. And, with more than 580,000 items listed in Books, 450,000 listed in DVDs & Movies and nearly 445,000 listed in Music, why not?⁹ The global coverage provides unprecedented access to international resources, including books, maps, films and other materials which have been historically challenging to acquire.

Between July 2004 and June 2005, our eBay searches at WOU for archival materials yielded more than 300 hits (see Table 1 for examples). Of these, more than 100 were unique items (there is some redundancy in our searches) and the University has purchased almost 1/3 of these. Considering that we are a relatively small school that has been through seven name changes in our 150-year history, that's pretty amazing.

Table 1

Examples of items WOU has acquired
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Journals & ledgers• Yearbooks• Catalogs• Songbooks• Rings• Commemorative ceramics• Books about the University, faculty and area history• Postcards• Photos

If you are considering using eBay to build your collections (archives or other), very little is required to start the process. In fact, all that you really need are curiosity and a computer with access to the internet. At least that is how we got started. In hindsight, other important things to consider should have been funding and payment methods. We addressed these after we jumped into eBay purchasing, but it would have been easier if we had thought about the following questions ahead of time:

- Will these items have a special account set up for them or will they come out of the general budget?
- How will the payment be handled?
 - Does your institution have a credit card that can be used for these kinds of purchases or will employees need to be reimbursed after paying out of pocket?
 - If employees pay out of pocket, what is the institution's liability if the item does not come?

Once you have these essentials, locating items can be as simple as entering a few search terms at ebay.com.

Searching in eBay will come naturally to many librarians. While the items may be one of a kind, the eBay database is not. Like most databases, there is more than one way to search, including an advanced mode for power users—look for the link to the right of (or below) the main search box. Make sure that you select the “Search title and description” box. eBay may have some of the functionality that we are used to,

including wildcards, but, beyond some very broad category searching, there is nothing resembling a controlled vocabulary. Because of this, thinking of alternate search terms (including acronyms and common misspellings) is of particular importance. Phrase searching is also possible in eBay, both through the advanced search mode and by using quotation marks around the desired phrase. This makes searching somewhat easier, particularly if your town's name occurs in nearly every state (i.e. Springfield).

Once you've discovered an item on that you would like to bid on, you will need to register with eBay. When setting your account up, you may want to consider the following:

- Will this be an account used by several people? If so, a more general username may be more appropriate than one that includes someone's name or has other personal meaning.
- If you are bidding on behalf of your institution, will it help or hinder you to have the institution name as part of your username? The eBay environment is one in which the highest bidder wins and, though I have not heard of any instances of this, it would not be impossible that an unscrupulous future seller might identify your institutional bidding name and attempt to out-bid you on an item, with the intent of selling it back to you at a higher price later.
- Are there other members of your organization that might be contemplating bidding on the same items? If so, it is important to communicate. As we learned, a bidding war between two people from the same institution can result in higher costs than one with a casual collector.

After setting up our account, WOU librarians started regularly searching. It did not take too much time for us to realize two things that are important for archives collections: 1) when building archives or searching for a specific item, you need to search almost every day and 2) manually searching every day takes a lot of time. Conveniently, eBay has a built-in auto-search function!

Setting up an auto-search is simple and the results are emailed to you whenever your search returns new items. These "favorites" last for up to one year and can be "renewed" at any time. eBay will even send you a helpful email when your search is about to expire. To save a search, click on the "Add to favorites" link near the top of your results screen.

When you are looking to acquire a specific book, video or journal volume, your search terms and pricing criteria are fairly defined (though watch for misspellings in listings!). Comparing your maximum bid plus postage with what the cost would be from another source gives a guide as to whether you should buy on eBay or not. As in the "real world", not everything on eBay is a bargain. Indeed, the excitement of a bidding war

has lead many to bid more than anticipated and often more than he or she would have paid for the item at the local bookstore.¹⁰ When looking at a “bargain” purchase, it is important to consider whether or not the material is available through a traditional vendor. While the eBay price may be right, you could be losing added value, such as included MARC records or processing, that a traditional vendor might provide.

When collecting for archives, it becomes a bit more challenging. With a little bit of everything available, deciding what to bid on can be difficult. If you already have an archives collection development policy, you’ve got a great advantage. If not, it is easy to get carried away.

Think about:

- What is important to your institution? What is your mission?
- Do you already have this item or something similar? In other words, what value will it add?
- What purpose will it serve? Will it answer reference questions, augment exhibits, add to the historic value of your collection?

It is hard to discern at first but, eventually, you will get a feeling for how common items are. An example at our institution: when the Normal School closed in 1909, a huge campaign to re-open it was launched. Thousands of postcards featuring one of our buildings were mailed nationwide. In 2005, there is almost always at least one for sale on eBay. The back of the cards may vary and many include the address of the recipient and an original stamp but, even with these personal touches, there is a limit to the number that the archives needs to have. Starting bidding prices range usually from \$2.00 to \$10.00.¹¹

With both traditional collection materials and archives materials, an occasional item may be of interest to many different types of collectors. It might be a first edition book, a limited edition video or ephemera; there are many items that might be of interest to people other than those associated with your institution. When we lose an auction, we typically save electronic and/or paper copies of the listing, so that we have a record of its existence and the price it sold for, which is useful if a similar item becomes available later. In the case of items like books or journals, WOU librarians contacted the winning bidder using eBay’s system to inquire about obtaining photocopies of the pertinent or unique information (for example an inscription written inside the cover of a book or specific journal entry), at our expense. For less easily copied items, such as ceramics, jewelry, etc. you may inquire about digital images. Typically, individuals collecting these types of items are interested in preserving history and are glad to share information with someone representing the institution.

Sometimes though, everyone needs a vacation. If you are the only person at your institution monitoring eBay, this might mean that an item of interest is up for auction while you are away. But take heart! An amazing number of items do not sell the first time that they are up on eBay. If this is the case with an item you missed, it is possible to contact the seller to inquire if they would consider re-listing it. With an interested buyer, most will be pleased to re-list the item.

While not likely to become our main source for collection materials, eBay offers an alternate (and exciting) way to acquire materials. The “one-stop” availability of materials from around the world can be appealing to librarians and archivists collecting any type of material and, frankly, the thrill of locating an item (and then beating the competition) is just plain fun.

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