

Consumer Reports WebWatch's 'Look Before You Click' Campaign eBay Survey Sheds Light on Buyers And Sellers

In April 2007, Consumer Reports National Survey Research Center compiled the results of an extensive online survey concerning Web auctions. In all, 4,176 subscribers to Consumer Reports Online reported on their transactions and experiences with the largest and best-known Internet auction site, eBay.

Below are the numbers of respondents that fell into specific sub-categories:

- Purchased within past year: 2,519
- Last purchased more than a year ago: 540
- Shopped but never purchased: 607
- Never shopped nor purchased: 494

Collectively, those who bought goods on eBay within the previous year reported on a total of 5,885 purchases. In addition, 712 respondents reported on their experiences as sellers on eBay within the same time frame.

In considering their experiences during the previous year, 70% of buyers said they were highly satisfied with eBay. Consumer Reports National Survey Research Center noted this was on par with most other services evaluated by the organization. However, specific problems with the online auction giant were cited by respondents as well.

What follows are some key findings from this extensive survey. Detailed responses to questions about scams and deceptive practices are provided in the [fraud section](#) of this report.

Precautionary Steps Taken by Buyers

Buyers were asked about steps they typically take before bidding on an item. The most common responses (with the percentages of those responding "always") were:

- Check seller's percentage of positive feedback: 76%
- Determine shipping costs before deciding how much to bid: 71%
- Carefully read and understand the seller's auction terms and return policy: 59%

When buyers were segregated by experience, one other precaution was cited twice as often by frequent buyers:

- Check to see if seller changed identities or User IDs recently: 13%

Quality of Products Bought

Overall, buyers were satisfied with their auction experiences. Our researchers said: "Almost all purchases appeared satisfactory." Key observations from buyers were as follows:

- Product arrived within a reasonable time of purchases: 94%
- Product as described by the seller: 92%
- Product considered a good deal by the buyer: 95%

The Consumer Reports National Survey Research Center noted: "A good portion of purchases on eBay suggest that the image of an online garage sale where private individuals dispose of their unwanted belongings is outdated." Even so, more than half of all purchases—56%—cost \$50 or less. Here are further details:

- Items described as new: 59%
- Items bought from "store" or professional seller: 43%
- Items bought with "Buy It Now" or fixed-price option: 36%

Overwhelmingly, PayPal was the most popular mode of payment, used in 89% of purchases.

The Auction Experience

Among respondents who purchased via eBay within the previous year, respondents noted these experiences in auctions they did not win:

- Others bid higher than my maximum bid: 84%
- Other bidders drove up price; dropped out: 69%
- Outbid at the last minute: 66%
- Lost track of closing time and forgot to check bid: 41%
- Auction ended without winner due reserve not met: 31%
- Auction ended because seller pulled item: 12%
- Lost to buyer using "Buy It Now" option: 8%
- Auction ended because eBay shut it down: 6%

In addition, 4% of these respondents claimed they won every auction they joined.

Satisfaction Among Buyers

The following were among the higher-rated features of eBay:

- Selection of products: 64% rated this "excellent"
- Tools for tracking bids: 51%
- Tools for managing purchases and payments: 49%

Tellingly, eBay scored low marks in two key areas:

- Help and customer support: only 14% said "excellent"
- Protection from deceptive practices: 16%

Problems for Buyers

Among buyers, communication topped the list of difficulties encountered on eBay. The problems cited:

- Seller not responding to inquiries: 22%
- Waiting an unreasonably long time to receive purchases: 18%
- Unhappy with purchase but no exchange or return: 10%
- Engaged in "bidding war" and overpaid: 8%
- Seller sent wrong item: 7%
- Seller retaliated after negative feedback: 6%

As for privacy or identity concerns, just 3% of buyers said their privacy or identity was compromised.

Advice from Buyers

When asked for the most important advice for other shoppers on eBay, buyers responded as follows:

- Always check the seller's profile/feedback: 28%
- Don't overbid: 15%
- Research the product's value: 15%
- Pay only with PayPal: 11%
- Never complete transactions outside eBay: 7%
- Don't be afraid to ask the seller for more information: 6%
- Always read the return policy: 5%
- Delay bidding until the last minute: 5%
- Don't deal with overseas sellers: 3%
- Be wary of purchasing collectibles without appraisal or authentication: 1%

Interestingly, much of this advice was borne out in the experiences described in the [case studies](#) described in this report, as well as the descriptions of WebWatch's own [purchases](#).

Problems for Sellers

Considering all their selling experiences during the previous year, 64% of sellers were highly satisfied with eBay. It's interesting to note this was a lower percentage than the 70% of shoppers who said they were highly satisfied.

Among those who listed an item for sale in the previous year, the biggest complaints were related to costs associated with the auction. The problems cited:

- Listing cost more than expected; options drove up cost: 27%
- Commission charged by eBay was too high: 25%
- Payment not received from buyer in expected time: 12%
- Actual shipping costs exceeded eBay calculator: 10%
- Overall appearance of listing wasn't as attractive: 9%
- Difficult to create or design listing: 8%
- Buyer did not use accepted payment method listed: 6%
- Buyer had unreasonable expectations: 5%

Advice from Sellers

When asked for the most important advice they would give to other sellers on eBay, sellers responded:

- Include sufficient information to show value: 23%
- Go out of your way to please buyers: 14%
- Accept only PayPal for payment: 14%
- The more pictures in the listing, the better: 11%
- Respond promptly to inquiries: 10%
- Screen out buyers with questionable histories: 9%
- List product in the most appropriate category: 5%
- Become ID Verified to show extra credibility: 3%
- List product in multiple categories: 3%
- Do not accept PayPal for payment: 1%
- Pay for options to make listing more appealing: 1%

Former Buyers' Experiences on eBay

Among respondents who had made purchases on eBay in the past but had not bought any items within the previous year, the reasons cited for their lack of patronage were as follows:

- Haven't found anything to buy: 39%
- Concerned about unscrupulous sellers: 29%
- Auction process takes too much time: 28%
- Auction process no longer appealing: 24%
- Concerned about security of personal information: 17%
- Auction process too complicated: 13%
- Haven't found any good deals: 13%
- Bid on items but haven't won in previous year: 11%
- Dissatisfied with previous purchases: 9%
- Experienced a scam or deceptive practice on eBay: 9%
- Spending too much on shipping costs: 8%

Shoppers Who Don't Buy on eBay

Among those who shopped or browsed but did not buy on eBay, fraud was cited as their primary concern. Their specific reasons for avoiding purchases were as follows:

- Concerned about unscrupulous sellers: 52%

- Concerned about security of personal information: 33%
- Auction process is not appealing: 33%
- Never found anything to buy: 23%
- Auction process takes too much time: 23%
- Auction process is too complicated: 16%
- Bid on items but never won: 13%
- Never found any good deals: 9%

Respondents Who Have Never Visited eBay

Those respondents who said they had never shopped on eBay also cited fraud as their primary concern. Their responses to why they avoided eBay were as follows:

- Concerned about unscrupulous sellers: 54%
- Auction process is not appealing: 51%
- No interest in shopping on eBay: 40%
- Concerned about security of personal information: 35%
- Auction process seems too complicated: 25%
- Auction process takes too much time: 21%
- Generally do not shop online: 11%

Consumer Reports National Survey Research Center notes the following caveats for these results:

- The survey findings are historical.
- These findings may not reflect changes made by eBay since the survey data was collected.
- These findings report the experiences of Consumer Reports Online subscribers, who may not be representative of the general U.S. population.