

Chapter 1

Building Big Profits with Little Tools

In This Chapter

- ▶ Making your auctions known
 - ▶ Turning information and service into profits and repeat business
 - ▶ Generating exposure with your Web site
 - ▶ Making the after-sale stuff move faster
 - ▶ Meeting the API
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For some people, hours spent fiddling, tweaking, and generally adjusting some gee-whiz online gizmo is just a way of life. These folks love technology for the sake of the technology, regardless of whether the technology makes money for them. Although these people serve a wonderful purpose in the online world (they often come up with the incredibly cool things that other people ultimately use to make money), their “technology for the sake of technology” perspective doesn’t put dineros in the wallet.

For busy eBay businesspeople, time *is* money. You need technology to do something useful and profitable rather than just sit in the corner and look massively cool.

With eBay, properly applied technology makes a huge difference in the following ways:

- ✓ It makes you more money by helping your auctions stand out from the crowd.
- ✓ It saves you time by helping to either simplify or actually complete the numerous little tasks that each auction requires from start to finish.
- ✓ It increases customer satisfaction from the time the person reads your auction listing all the way through to the point where the customer posts positive feedback into your eBay profile.

This chapter gives you a quick overview of the kinds of things that high tech can do for your auctions, your business, your customers, and your cramped schedule. It doesn't go into a lot of details — that's what the rest of the book does. For now, this chapter gives you a foundation, a groundwork, so you can build your own high-tech eBay dreams.

Welcome to the world of business-appropriate geeking. It's a blast in here!

Getting Noticed in the Vast eBay Marketplace

On eBay, image is everything. (Granted, the product and price thing comes into play too, but humor me on this for a moment.) When your prospective customers open up your auction for the first time, they see your product. They *also* get their first glimpse of your company. And based on what they see, they make some snap judgments about the whole package.

Like it or not, those customers make their initial decisions about your firm, your reputation, the quality of your product, and the level of your customer service based on what they see in your auction listing. If they take the time to go into your About Me page, you get a second shot at impressing them with your customer service skills, but that's an iffy proposition. Many buyers never dig that far. If your auction page doesn't convince them right then, they simply move on to the next auction on their search list.

Nope, the best thing you can do is to impress the living daylights out of customers during their first glance at your auction page. Sell them on the benefits of your product. Project your image as a valuable member of the eBay community. Convince them that you're a trustworthy seller who takes good care of buyers in the long run.

Your customers' first stop: The auction page

Shooting good pictures, writing solid text, and including the myriad little details that answer your customers' questions go a long way toward your initial success. But if you apply some technology in the right ways and places, you can build those simple techniques into unstoppable powerhouses of online sales. Your first technical steps toward all of that rest in the formatting and layout of your auction page.



If you need a quick run-through of the basic content of a good online auction (stuff like describing your product, getting a decent digital image of it, and establishing your selling policies), grab a copy of *Starting an eBay Business For Dummies* by the Queen of eBay, Marsha Collier (Wiley). Marsha covers those basics and a lot more. (Plus, she's just fun to read.)

eBay offers several built-in options for dressing up your auctions. On the plus side, these options require no programming on your part, so they make a great place to begin. (Better still, you can use them to *inspire* your own template designs.)

To add these options to your auction, just make a few selections from a handy menu. Suddenly, your auction looks awesome (at least from a layout perspective). What's the downside? All this convenience comes with a monetary price. Although the price stays low for just about everything, even those little amounts add up over time. Still, for a quick-and-dirty solution, it's tough to beat the built-in options that eBay provides.

Simple sprucing with Listing Designer

Chief among these options are the *themes* you can attach to your auctions with the Listing Designer. Each theme incorporates a full frame of graphics around your auction text as well as several options for photo layouts. Using the Listing Designer adds an extra dime to your auction listing fee. Although it isn't a lot on a per-auction basis, those dimes add up over time.

By itself, the Listing Designer reworks your auction with some really slick graphics. Figure 1-1 shows a rather bland and normal-looking auction. You see hundreds (if not thousands) of these every day on eBay. Figure 1-2 shows that same auction with an added boost from the Listing Designer. That's a nice bit of sprucing up for less than a minute's work!

Do a little sprucing of your own

Then again, why bother paying for those nifty dress-ups when, with a little bit of ingenuity, you can achieve most of the same effects on your own? eBay relies on HTML (short for *Hypertext Markup Language*, a term you never again need to read or remember) for all of its formatting. Luckily, you don't need any special degree (or even bizarre programming tools) to add your own HTML to the auction.



Figure 1-1:
Basic
auctions
look so . . .
so . . . basic.

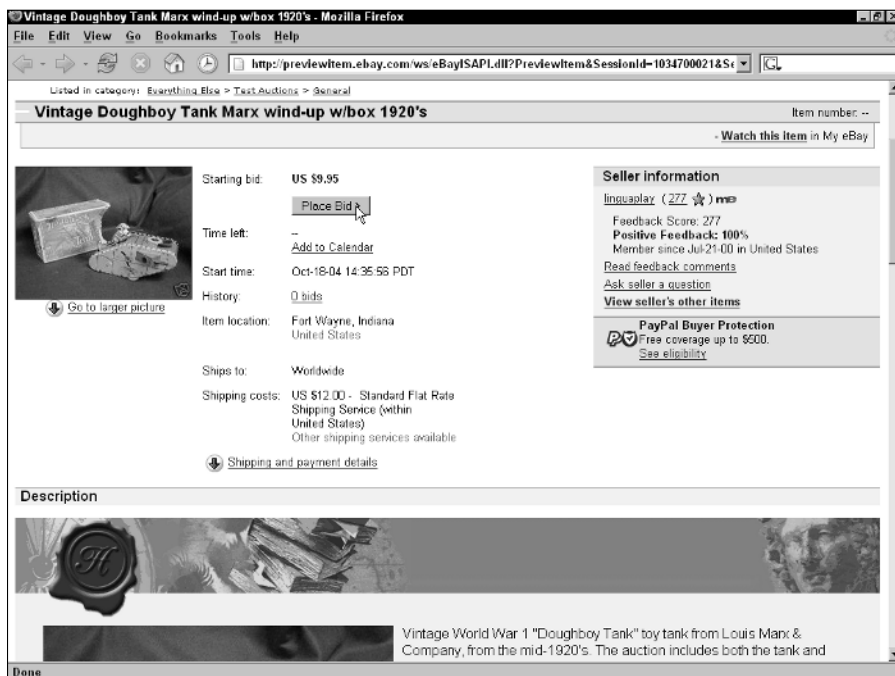


Figure 1-2:
By using
a Listing
Designer
template,
eBay auto-
matically
adds extra
graphics
and product
photo
positions.

Start with some basic HTML codes that change the size of your auction headline or add color for the things you want to really jump out at the customer. Thanks to eBay's built-in text editor (shown in Figure 1-3), you can flip among fonts, sizes, colors, and settings like bold, italic, and underlined text. The standard text editor even helps you with alignment, bulleted lists, and indentions.



Like any do-it-yourself project, it's easy to get in further than you expected and spend a lot more time than you initially planned to invest. When building your auction layout, keep things simple. (Chapter 4 explains more about your first serious steps in adding HTML to an auction listing.)

To really stir things up with your formatting, fire up your own HTML program (such as Microsoft FrontPage) and design your auction page in that. Figure 1-4 shows my homegrown auction design, nearly ready for its trip into eBay.

By using a dedicated HTML editor, you gain access to all the special coding tricks available through HTML instead of limiting yourself to the basic set of tools built into the eBay system. Moving your sweetly designed auction page from one window to another involves merely copying and pasting. Because eBay understands HTML code, it handles all the important stuff on its own. Figure 1-5 shows the finished project, looking good and ready to start pulling in those bids.

Figure 1-3:
You can add
HTML tags
directly to
your auction
in the text
editor.

Sell Your Item: Describe Your Item

1. Category 2. **Title & Description** 3. Pictures & Details 4. Payment & Shipping 5. Review & Submit

Item title * Required
Vintage Doughboy Tank Maxwind-up w/box 1920's
55 character limit; no HTML, asterisks, or quotes.
Include specific details about your item. Get tips on writing a good title. [Learn More.](#)

Subtitle (\$0.50)
Add a subtitle (searchable by item description only) to give buyers more information. [See example.](#)

Item description *
Describe your item's features, benefits, and condition. Be sure to include in your description: Condition (new, used, etc.), original price, and dimensions or size. You may also want to include notable markings or signatures, or its background history. See more tips for [General](#).

```
<h1><center>Vintage World War 1 "Doughboy Tank"
toy tank<br>from Louis Marx &
company</center></h1>
```

<p>You're bidding on a vintage World War 1
"Doughboy Tank" toy tank from Louis Marx
& Company, from the mid-1920's. The auction includes
both the tank and box. </p>

<p>The tank is in good condition, with no rust.
Unbelievably, the tank still works! If you wind up >

Enter <p> to start a new paragraph. Get more [HTML tips](#).

[Spell check](#) | [Preview description](#)

Note: After you click **Continue**, you may be asked to download a small file. This file will help you add pictures to your listing. If the next page does not appear, change your picture selection method.

< Back Continue >

Done

Figure 1-4:
Raw HTML
code looks
a little
daunting
sometimes.

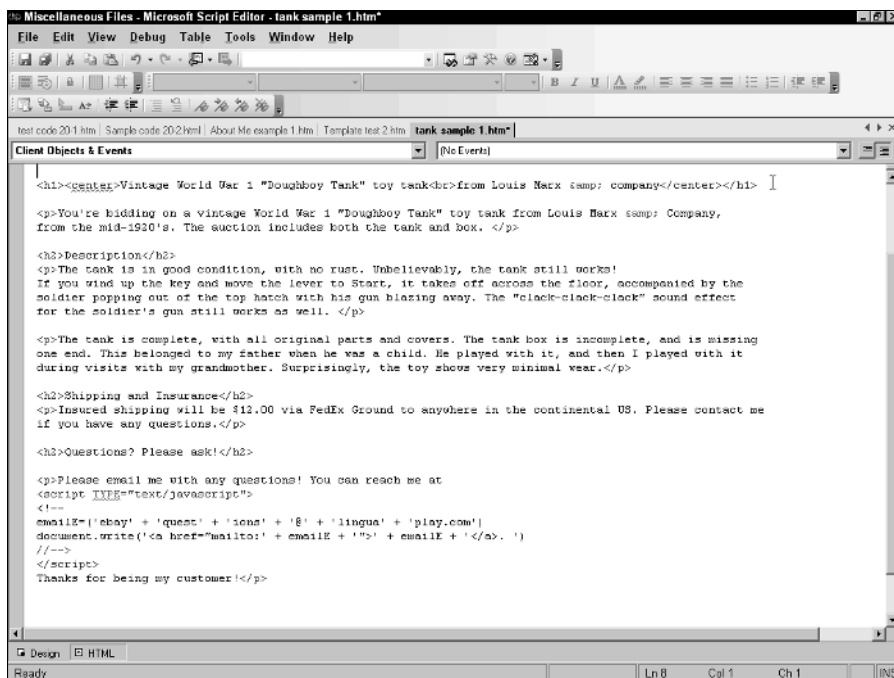
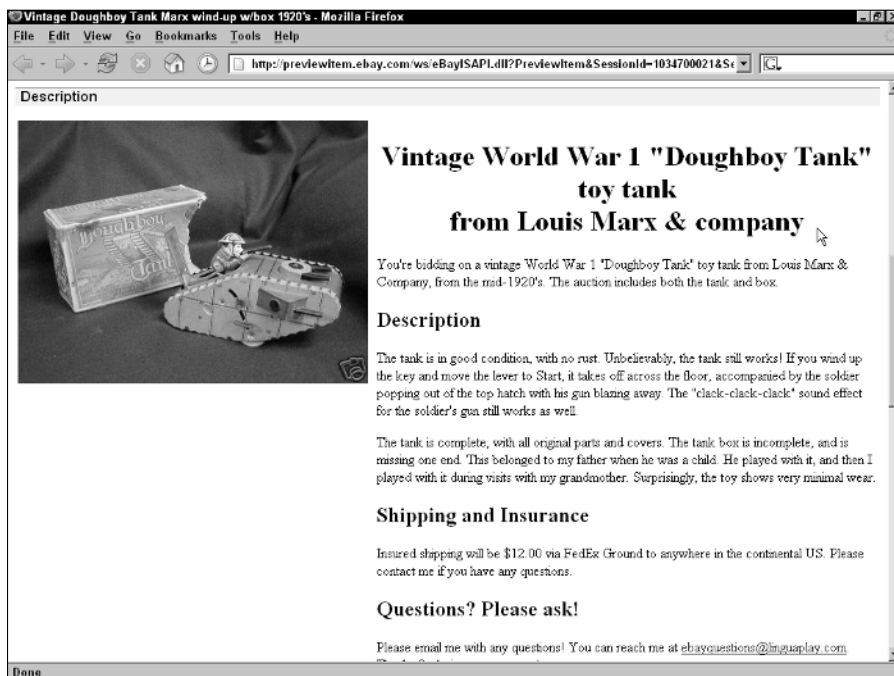


Figure 1-5:
When you
see the
same code
interpreted
and dis-
played in
your Web
browser, it
looks like
you knew
it would.



Don't underestimate the About Me page

The same HTML tricks work in your About Me page, although customizing everything takes a little more effort. As a starting point, eBay helps you build a basic About Me page that includes a title, a couple of paragraphs about your eBay world, a photo (complete with caption), some of your favorite Web links, plus optional listings of your auction items and most recent feedback. eBay also offers three basic layout templates (cleverly named Layout A, Layout B, and Layout C) that organize your information on-screen:

- ✓ **Layout A** puts your text, photo, and Web links at the top of the page, with your current auction list and feedback scores filling in the full width of the bottom section. It focuses customers on your business information first and makes them scroll down to your auctions.
- ✓ **Layout B** creates a more vertical look, with your photo centered, descriptive text on the left, and auctions and feedback in a narrow column on the right. This works great if you included a *lot* of text in your paragraphs but still want to point people to your auctions.
- ✓ **Layout C** looks just like Layout A, except that your Web links shift to the right of the page, directly under the graphic, and your second paragraph of information fills in the space opposite the links. It's okay — a bit odd, but still okay.

Those ready-to-use layouts offer a good place to begin. Still, the most useful About Me pages go far beyond the limitations of those templates.

Creating a killer About Me page means spending some time with your HTML editor, working with everything from font sizes to tables. Thanks to its flexibility, the About Me page makes a great place to sharpen your budding HTML skills. eBay gives you plenty of online storage space to try new approaches, and (unlike auctions) the system never complains if you update the page once, twice, or even 20 times.



If you just started selling on eBay (leaving you with a feedback rating in the single or double digits), your About Me page might well make the difference between getting sales and getting ignored. People *implicitly* want to trust you and buy from you. Give them a reason to by telling your story. Why did you start this eBay business? How did you come by your expertise? What's special about you? Simple things like that soothe customer worries and entice them into buying from you, and that translates into more sales.

Simple tips on attracting customers

Okay, so HTML lets you do amazing things in both your auction text and About Me page, but what *exactly* qualifies as an “amazing thing?” What can

you really do with HTML that enhances your money-making prospects? I'm glad you asked:

- ✓ **Use different-sized fonts to draw the customer's attention to headlines and other key selling text.** When you get right down to it, auctions work just like advertisements. You promote a product in hopes that a seller reacts favorably to your ad. Advertising folks discovered the value behind steering a customer's eye around the page years ago. HTML font size commands give you the same power in your auctions.
- ✓ **Add color to your text to help the reader find the key benefits of your product or service.** Your text sells the product, but color grabs attention. Adding the right colors in the right spots enhances your auction by highlighting important features, benefits, and other information.
- ✓ **Place photos wherever you want without paying extra for the enhanced photo gallery settings.** Putting multiple pictures into an eBay auction means either grouping all your photos in one big block near the bottom of the page or paying for one of the prebuilt templates. Either way, you get very little real choice over where your pictures appear. By using some HTML and your own photo-hosting space, you gain complete control over where and how your auction photos land on the page. It's liberating!
- ✓ **Make your text and graphics stay where you put them by embedding everything inside tables.** All of this organization needs some kind of behind-the-scenes framework to support it. That's where HTML tables come onto the scene. Tables go way beyond the classic image of neatly arrayed rows and columns (although that's what they do best). By making cells of varying heights and widths, you build the digital cubbyholes to store text, graphics, links, and more. After you master the art of building tables, you can accomplish just about any on-screen appearance you desire.



The first few of the preceding techniques work straight from the eBay formatting window when you enter your auction text. Start there to get a good feeling for how the formatting options work and how best to apply them. After that, get comfy with your HTML-editing program and dive into the deeper stuff, like image alignment and the wild world of tables.

HTML makes the perfect place for you to discover and develop your nascent technical skills. Chapter 4 walks you through the details of everything mentioned here. If you're ready, flip ahead and dive straight in.



Better still, all the skills you develop by enhancing your auction pages translate directly into your efforts to build add-on sales and enhance customer service by creating your own Web site. See Chapter 6 for more about that.

Spoiling Your Customers with Information and Service

We live in an information-driven world. People want everything at their fingertips, whether they really need it or not. Worse yet, if people *don't* get all the information they think they need right up front, they sometimes assume that you're hiding something because you didn't offer it!

Even the smallest omission spawns little feelings of doubt and distrust in the online economy. It's one thing to walk into a retail store where you can look around, get a feel for the place, and ask questions of someone standing right there. The online world demands a completely different level of trust based on information. Fulfilling your customers' informational needs and answering their questions in a complete and proactive way helps you earn their trust.

Trust through presentation

Your presentation says a lot about your professionalism. Your product might look great, with all the bells and whistles imaginable, but if your auction text says "I slapped this puppy together in ten minutes," the buyer might wonder about both you *and* the product. A more professional-looking auction automatically bestows a professional image onto your online business. That image translates into trust, which turns lookers into buyers.

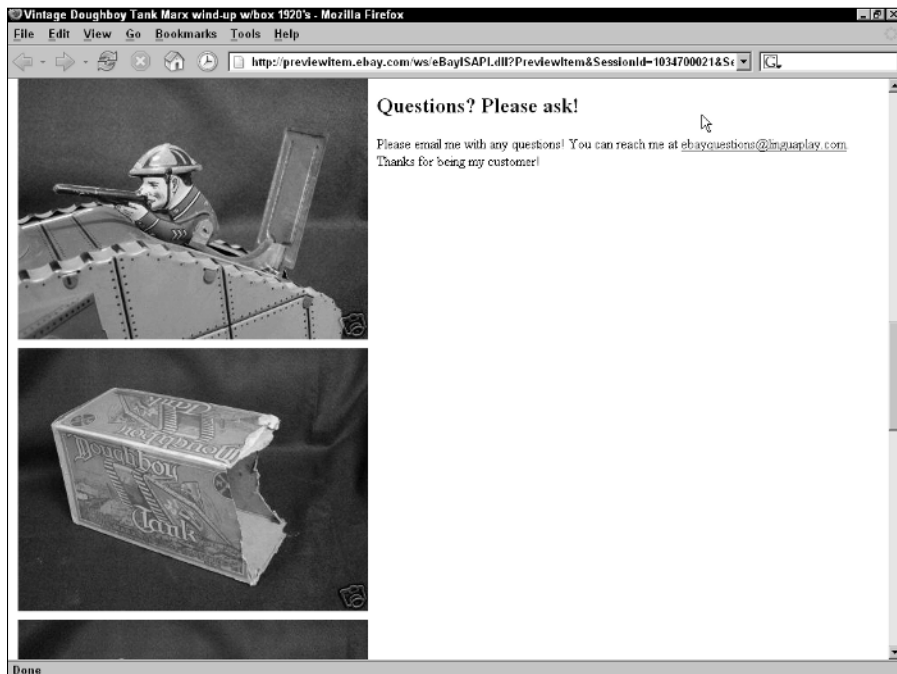
Because establishing trust starts with providing information, give customers everything they could possibly want. Some easy HTML coding lets you go from providing ground-level information (typing everything into a big block of text somewhere in the auction) to easy-to-navigate pages with headings and menus, plus gizmos like shipping calculators and automated reminders. Although some of these might seem like toys or window dressing, from the customers' perspective they say that you care, that you're a pro, and that customers can place their trust in you to deliver a product and experience worthy of their time and money.

Figures 1-6 and 1-7 demonstrate what I mean. In addition to the product information, this auction listing addresses the kinds of things that turn lookers into buyers. How's the condition of the item? This listing not only tells you but also *shows* you. What kind of policies does the seller use? Big headings direct the buyer to everything from shipping information to return policies. The seller doesn't try to slip anything by, but instead makes all the information big, bold, and available.

Figure 1-6:
Headings
help the
buyer find
specific
information
in the listing.



Figure 1-7:
Lots of
pictures —
especially
close-ups —
let the buyer
evaluate the
product
intimately.



Incidentally, your About Me page also is a great place to build your reputation as a solid eBay seller. The more customer-related information you put there — such as your policies, your feedback profile, your knowledge of the product line, and so on — the more comfort you add to your prospective client's decision. When I buy something from sellers who've been “in the business” for years, I feel more comfortable with the idea of buying. Even though I can't see them or haven't met them, the information they provide helps me judge their expertise and experience. But if the seller doesn't tell me those things in either the auction or the About Me page, then I probably won't ever find out. And the less I know about the seller, the less likely I am to buy from him. It's that simple.

When it comes to buying, people don't like surprises. When you flood your prospects with solid information that answers their questions and overcomes their built-in objections, you win their minds along with their hearts.

Communicating with the customer

A little bit of technology helps you with after-the-sale follow-up, too. How many times have you bought from someone who then seemed to disappear off the face of the earth? Every time it happens to me, I worry and fret and finish the transaction with a generally bad taste in my mouth. After-sale communication is almost as important — if not *more* important — than your product presentation when it comes to turning buyers into happy repeat customers.

Use your e-mail program's built-in rules (sometimes called *filters*) to keep a steady flow of communication going with your customer. Depending on the e-mail application, you can build automatic replies, make templates prefilled with standard information that your customers need to know, and manage simple mailing lists that turn a one-time purchase into an ongoing customer relationship.

If you want to get more technical, adding some custom programming to your Web server gives your technology the ability to actually open messages and process them, giving you the ability to automatically generate “thanks for your payment” messages and other customer communications. That level of technology opens entire new vistas of customer service and office automation, which make your company look like a seriously professional enterprise.



Get started with your e-mail application's built-in powers by turning to Chapter 7. For more about in-depth e-mail programming, flip ahead to Chapter 12.

Expanding Sales with Broader Exposure

Happy customers buy more stuff. That's the first rule of selling. (Well, actually the first rule is more like *make a consistent profit*, but I digress.) If you want to build your eBay sales into something terrific, start by delighting your customers. The experience you create through your auction pages and your About Me information lays the groundwork for the process, and your service as you close the sale and deliver the goods puts on the capstone. By delighting your customer, you generate the goodwill to easily get that customer buying from you again.

Every completed transaction gives you not only a happy customer but also that happy customer's contact information, most commonly in the form of an e-mail address. Offer your customers the opportunity to join a mailing list about your products. You can keep in communication with them, tell them about eBay auctions that might interest them, and generally polish your image as *the* expert in your field. Yes, all this stuff takes some time on your part, but it goes with the whole "business for yourself" thing.

On the technology side of life, a mailing list database helps you track who bought what and when they bought it. You can use that information to promote your future auctions or to look for add-on sales that naturally accompany what you already sell. Ask your customers what else they need to go with the items they bought and then consider offering those things. Sometimes, customers just want someone to ask for their business. What started as a good experience with the auction turns into an ongoing business relationship.

If your business has a Web site (and it really, *really* should), promote your business and your eBay sales there as well. List your auctions, complete with links to take your customers directly to pages where they can bid. Add auction links to related information pages on your site. That way, when a customer reads about the wonders of binocular microscopes (for example) on your Web page, they can quickly hop into eBay and buy one from your current selection.



Don't put a link on your eBay auctions that leads to a page where you *sell* the same product outside of eBay. That's a *big* no-no in eBay's world. It's okay to inform customers and give them plenty of information. It's not okay to redirect them to buying opportunities outside of eBay.



A Web page builds professionalism and trust just like a well-designed auction or an informative About Me page. The more that customers learn about your company, the more comfortable they feel buying from you. Your Web page forms another step toward closing today's sale and, at the same time, starting the process on tomorrow's sale.

Saving Time with Office Automation

eBay sure brings customers to your door. That's what it's good at! And those customers turn into buyers, which means money in your pocket. But then there's that last step in the process, where you close the sale with a small flurry of e-mails between you and your buyer and when you actually ship the goods that your customer bought. Those niggling little details can suck the life out of your time, which in turn costs you money because of the time you had to spend. It's a vicious cycle but one that you can break with some smart technology.

Start your timesaving efforts with auction templates, mentioned earlier in the "Do a little sprucing of your own" section. These ready-to-use frameworks ensure that you put a consistent face in front of the customer and that you don't accidentally forget any important information such as the shipping cost or your return policies. Consistency translates into professionalism in the customer's eye and saves time on your end. Life just doesn't get better than that!

Because you spend a lot of time interacting with your customer after the sale, make those exchanges go as smoothly as possible by creating prewritten e-mail messages that you can send at the click of a button. Most transactions require the same basic messages (I received your payment, I posted feedback for you, I will ship your product, I shipped your product, and such). If you still write all those messages by hand, that's a huge time sink.

Instead, automate that process with your e-mail program. Almost every e-mail application on the market includes some kind of boilerplate text option, although they almost never call it that. Eudora refers to it as "stationery," while my AOL client thinks of it as an extra-large signature block. No matter what program you use, it offers a way to implement these pretyped messages. You might need to poke around in the software a bit to find it, but it's there — I promise.

The automated e-mail processing programs described in Chapter 12 take this to a whole new level. Because those programs can easily recognize consistent messages like end-of-auction announcements and PayPal payment notices, you can tell the application to fire off replies to multiple people without touching a single button. When the program receives a PayPal notice, for example, it might send a thank-you note to the customer and a shipping reminder to you, and shove a record into your online auction database noting that the payment for that particular auction came through. When you get into large quantities of online sales, that type of automation significantly expands profits by smoothing out the entire sale process.

Building Serious Business with the eBay API

As you follow conversations on the eBay seller discussion boards (pages.ebay.com/community/boards/index.html) or the developer discussion boards (using your Developer Zone ID, sign into developer.ebay.com and then follow the Member Forums link), you sometimes get a whiff of something vaguely secret-sounding and just a little mysterious. Someone types something like, “Yeah, we did that, but we used the API.” No real explanation, no serious detail, just a note that they expect you to understand. Of course, if you don’t know anything about the eBay API, the note means nothing to you. Darn those technical people!

The eBay API isn’t anything weird, strange, or mysterious. It’s a tool mostly geared toward businesses that move a high volume of products or that have lots of resources available for development. It’s also a great way for a budding entrepreneur to develop the Next Big Thing for eBay members around the world.



So just what *is* an API? The term stands for *application program interface*. In short, it’s a set of communication tools that helps your program talk directly to eBay. It lists the kinds of questions your program can ask eBay and how eBay sends back the answers. The API doesn’t tell you how to use the information, just how to communicate with eBay in order to *get* the information.

For an entrepreneur, the API provides an opportunity to create a program for others to use. If someone comes up with a better way to list and track auctions, for instance, that person can connect the program to the eBay API and talk directly to the eBay computers. Before the API arrived on the scene, programs like this relied on a technique known as *scraping*, where developers anticipated how eBay’s screen looked, crossed their fingers, and started pushing information into on-screen fields. Unfortunately, every time eBay redesigned its screens in even the slightest way (which happened about every other week), it broke the program, leaving the programmer to make the requisite changes.

For a big company, access to the eBay API means the ability to do some amazing sales tricks. One company in the eBay Developers Program told about a customer application it created that ties its customer inquiry people directly to eBay. When a customer contacts the company looking to buy a particular item, the inquiry department can launch an auction for that item immediately (complete with all the product information) and then direct the customer to that auction by e-mailing him a link. It’s pretty amazing stuff that opens up new realms of selling opportunities.

Small businesses can benefit from the API as well, although they need some reasonable auction volume before it makes sense. Sure, it might *sound* cool to say that your company created a custom application based on the eBay API, but is “cool” worth all the money and development time? (I don’t think so, either.)

The eBay Developers Program Web site at developer.ebay.com (shown in Figure 1-8) explains all the details about the API, tools for making use of the API, and some inspirational success stories of companies that put the API to work for them. The site also helps you sign up for access to the API and leads you through the rather monstrous licensing agreement you need to sign before gaining access to it. (Think of the agreement like the defenses surrounding a castle — ya know, like a fire-breathing dragon, a moat filled with lava, and gigantic swarms of grumpy killer bees. The agreement is a piece of cake.)

If all this talk about the API piqued your entrepreneurial interest, check out Part IV of this book. It walks you through the basics of working with an API, explores the eBay Developers Program in more detail (and there’s plenty of detail to discuss), and then takes you into the eBay API itself. It even introduces you to other related APIs in the world, like the ever-popular PayPal and shipping companies like UPS, FedEx, and even the U.S. Postal Service.

Figure 1-8: eBay thinks so highly of its developers that it built an entire Web site dedicated to the gentle art of building eBay-connected applications.



