eBay Enhances Customer Loyalty with Software-Plus-Services Shopping Solution

"With this [solution] … we are giving customers an engaging and compelling way to keep track of their eBay activity and our great deals."

Jonathan Gabbai, Global Innovations Manager, Internet Marketing, eBay

Overview

Country or Region: United States
Industry: Telecommunications

Customer Profile

Headquartered in San Jose, California, eBay has grown since its founding in 1995 to be a world leader in online shopping. It employs about 16,200 people.

Business Situation

To address an increasingly competitive environment, eBay needed enhanced solutions that would simplify the shopping experience for its customers and engage them in a compelling way.

Solution

Using Microsoft® Silverlight™, eBay built the eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer®, which provides real-time, event-based information to customers, and lightweight plug-ins to Windows® Internet Explorer 8.

Benefits

- Maintains close customer engagement
- Boosts site traffic and enhances customer loyalty
- Cultivates stronger relationships with OEMs and retailers
- Enhances the company's reputation among third-party developers

With a presence in 39 countries and an active customer base of more than 80 million people, eBay is the world's largest online marketplace. To maintain its leadership position, eBay is constantly creating new solutions for engaging with customers. One such solution is the eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer®, based on Microsoft® Silverlight™. Through this sidebar, eBay provides a wealth of customer-specific information about buying and selling activity, the most exciting "daily deals," and desktop alerts when the customer is "outbid"—even when the browser window is closed. With this solution, eBay is delivering on its brand promise of maintaining close customer engagement, enhancing customer loyalty, and strengthening relationships with retailers. The company also is inspiring third-party developers to use its Web services for building their own tools.

Microsoft®

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Jonathan Gabbai, Senior Global Innovations Manager, Internet Marketing, eBay

Figure 1. The eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer
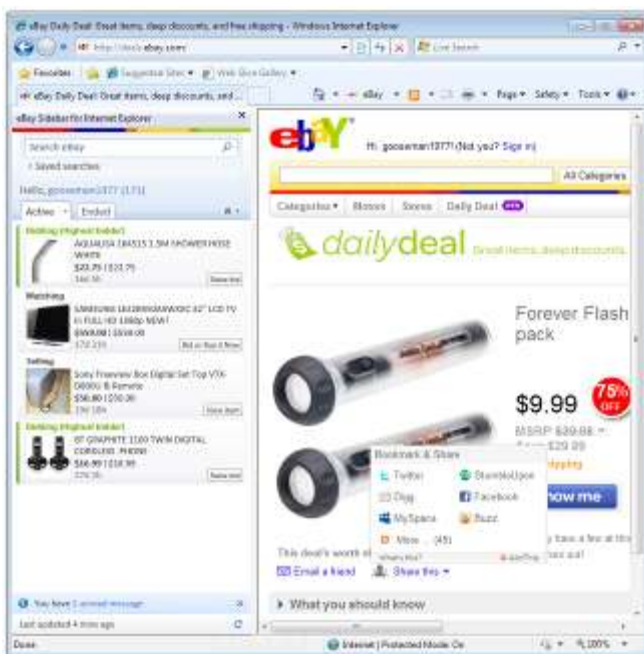
Situation

Founded as a one-person startup in 1995, eBay has changed the face of e-commerce. Today, the online-shopping site serves more than 80 million active customers, and in 2007, it handled transactions for more than U.S.$60 billion worth of goods. The company also owns other widely known Internet businesses and sites, among them PayPal, Skype, Shopping.com, Rent.com, and a number of online classified ad sites.

One reason for eBay's enduring popularity with customers is its ongoing commitment to providing them with ever-more convenient ways to access its site and services. Two highly successful examples of this are My eBay, which gives customers extensive information on active and ended items, saved searches, and more; and the eBay Toolbar, which provides desktop alerts, a built-in search box, and shortcut links to useful site features.

Recently, eBay decided it was time to build on the success of these solutions by introducing innovations in functionality and form factor alike.

"Across e-commerce, companies have been vying to 'conquer the desktop' with preinstalled shortcut links, desktop gadgets, in-browser search capabilities, and other customer touch points," explains Jonathan Gabbai, Global Innovations Manager, Internet Marketing for eBay. "We wanted to create an entirely new approach for staying in contact with customers and for providing real-time snapshots of their eBay activity. And we wanted to do it in a way that would give those customers quick, unobtrusive access to their eBay information without taking up too much browser real estate."

Solution

Gabbai and his team decided to create a solution that would provide information on customers' eBay activity through a sidebar displayed within the Windows® Internet Explorer® 8 browser. As team members envisioned it, the sidebar would provide convenient access to details on watched, buying, and selling items, as well as on saved searches, saved sellers, and popular "daily deals"—regardless of the site the customer happened to be visiting at the time (Figure 1). The sidebar also would inform the customer of important events, such as being outbid on a product, through alert messages on the desktop.

To tackle such an ambitious project, Gabbai's team sought a development platform with powerful and flexible visual-presentation capabilities and a small customer-download footprint—and found it in the Microsoft® Silverlight™ 2 browser plug-in.

"Because of its highly dynamic nature, we figured that Silverlight could help us make

transitions easily, present highly contextual information without having to worry about AJAX [Asynchronous JavaScript and XML] workarounds, and pack a lot of information into a very small space," Gabbai says. "We also figured that with Silverlight, if we could imagine it, we could do it, without the technical limitations of working in HTML."
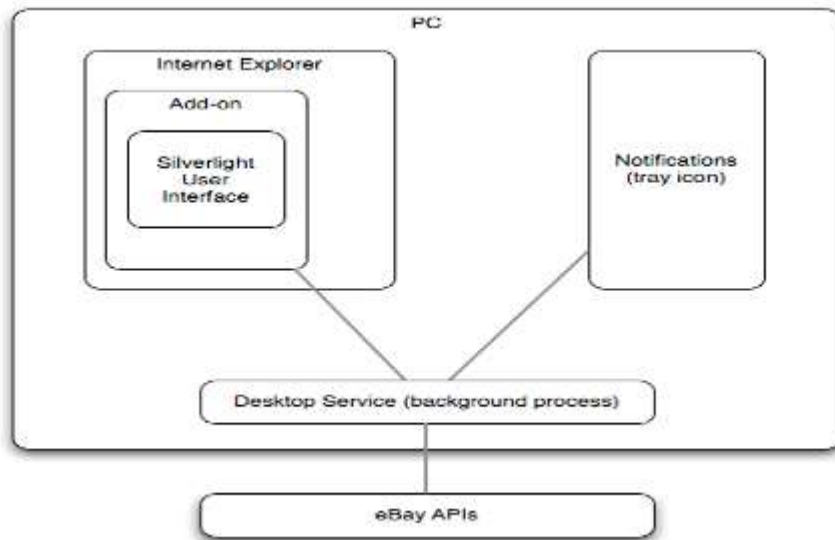
Team members balanced their excitement about the technical possibilities of the project with a very measured approach to the development process. First, they spent about 10 weeks on their proof of concept, demonstrating how Silverlight could run in a sidebar, as well as how customers could open and interact with Web pages from the sidebar and drag links into it. In the proof of concept, the team also determined how to make both the sidebar and desktop alert interact with a background service that controls communication with the eBay Web service, or Application Programming Interface (API) (Figure 2).

Next, the team enlisted the help of user-experience experts from How Splendid and software engineers from Glaxstar. The How Splendid professionals, who fleshed out the concept and developed detailed interaction and visual design, spoke highly of the role played by Silverlight in pre-beta development. "Silverlight afforded us a broad canvas for creating a rich and engaging customer experience," says Daniel Morris, Managing Partner for How Splendid.

The Glaxstar professionals, who worked on architecture, coding, testing, and deployment of the solution, also spoke highly of Silverlight. Erik van Eykelen, Vice President of Engineering and Technology at Glaxstar, says that, coupled with the Microsoft Visual Studio® 2008 development system, Silverlight provided an ideal development platform for creating the rich and innovative graphical environment that his team had envisioned at the outset.

"Because it's based on XML, Silverlight was familiar to us from the start," van Eykelen explains. "Using Silverlight, one engineer working just half-time on the project released a rudimentary version of the user interface in just a week. We also were impressed by the wealth of built-in customizable user interface elements in Silverlight, and we found animations and storyboards easy to implement as compared with other languages and platforms."

Known as the eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer, the solution is being released alongside three separate add-ins for Internet Explorer 8: eBay Visual Search, which enables rapid searching for eBay items directly from the browser search box, with enhanced search suggestions and images of popular products; eBay Search Accelerator, which enables a customer to instantly access eBay pricing and availability of a given product by selecting the product name as it

Figure 2. In keeping with the Microsoft software-plus-services scenario, the eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer resides on the client and accesses services exposed by the eBay Web services, or APIs.

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Figure 3. With the eBay Product Web Slices, eBay enables customers to add a product of interest to their Favorites bar for easy access to its current pricing and availability status.

might appear on any Web site; and eBay Product Web Slices, which enables the addition of a product to the Favorites bar for easy access to its changing pricing and availability status on eBay (Figure 3).

Benefits

Through the development and deployment of the eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer, eBay Visual Search, eBay Search Accelerator, and eBay Product Web Slices, eBay is providing customers with a compelling, rich, and portable experience that can drive business benefits in three primary areas.

First, the company is delivering on its brand promise of maintaining close customer engagement, giving individuals new ways to interact with the site and enhancing customer loyalty by being front of mind. Second, the company is cultivating stronger relationships among large retail customers and among PC manufacturers and vendors. Third, the company is enhancing its reputation not only as an online-shopping site, but also as a platform for use by developers of other sites, which can also serve to drive more customer traffic to eBay.

Builds Customer Loyalty

As Gabbai explains, by providing timely and comprehensive functionality and information through a space-saving sidebar, the eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer helps keep eBay foremost in mind when individuals think about online shopping.

"Now, our most active customers can access the information they have traditionally accessed through My eBay, but in a far more convenient way," Gabbai says. "They no longer need to maintain a separate browser window or even have the browser open, yet they have all the real-time information they need for effectively managing their online buying or selling activity, while being confident that any important events are messaged in the desktop through alerts. This makes them more loyal to eBay when they are deciding to list, bid, buy, and sell items."

The eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer also makes eBay more attractive to retailers that use the site for their sales, which may include clearance offers and high-volume, low-priced deals. "Retailers appreciate that we are using cutting-edge resources to showcase the kind of deals that help attract buyers and keep them coming back," Gabbai says. "The retailers understand that this translates into more sales opportunities for them."

Creates a "Win-Win-Win" Situation

Similarly, the eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer makes eBay more attractive to PC manufacturers and vendors that might consider distributing the sidebar with their products. "These businesses are always seeking new ways to give their customers an engaging experience," Gabbai says. "By including the eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer, they can give those customers who are looking for good deals or a way to make money by selling on the site the same functionality in a preinstalled add-in while maintaining a clean desktop environment. It's
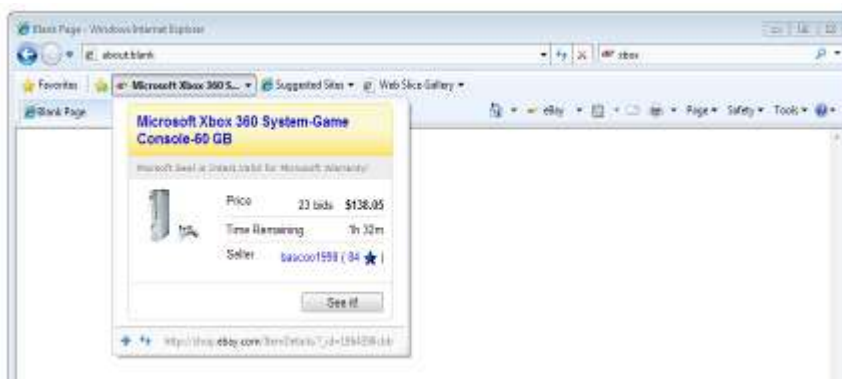
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eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer:
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a win-win-win—for the manufacturer or vendor, its customers, and eBay."

Third-party developers of online-shopping applications and services for eBay are another audience that Gabbai believes will be intrigued by the way eBay has used its publicly available Web services, or APIs. "Through the eBay Sidebar for Internet Explorer, we are showing developers how our APIs can help to drive powerful, customer-engaging solutions," Gabbai says. "We hope developers will be inspired to use the eBay APIs for building other inventive applications and online services that ultimately drive more traffic to eBay."

Achieves Another First in Its Field

Whether Gabbai is talking about individual eBay customers, large retailers, PC manu-facturers and vendors, or third-party developers, he is confident that the solutions his team has created with Silverlight will make a powerful difference. "At eBay, we have achieved a lot of 'firsts' in our journey of becoming a leader in online shopping," he explains. "With this, the first Silverlight-based Internet Explorer 8 sidebar solution for online shopping, we are giving customers an engaging and compelling way to keep track of their eBay activity and our great deals."

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