



The Gigaphone

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The Shouting Ground Newsletter

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Caveat Emptor

One of the pleasures of a live country-style auction is watching people who have more money than sense bid. Sometimes they bid against themselves, encouraging the auctioneer to keep raising the price until they're tired of waving. People who focus on a particular item are frequently willing to buy it at any price. Some jump on the opening bid even if it's way too high. Most auction merchandise is as-is, where-is, with no warranty or buyer's remorse considered.

Online auctions run in a similar style drastically increase the size of the marketplace, both in terms of merchandise offered, and the number of potential buyers and bidders. The process is different; you can't examine the merchandise, or watch other bidders. How can we improve our chances for success in online auctions? We'll focus on eBay, since it's by far the largest online auction site, but the same advice is applicable to most online auctions.

- Avoid bidding on impulse, seconds before the auction is due to end. You won't have an opportunity to evaluate the merchandise or seller, and you might miss terms of the sale that you would rather avoid (like cash payment only, or ships only COD).
- Evaluate the entire deal. Be sure to add stated amounts for shipping, insurance, and "handling." Excessive handling charges can negate an otherwise good deal.
- Check the seller's feedback record. Don't just look at the percentage of favorable comments, take the time to read them. eBay's feedback system doesn't prevent retaliation, so some people are reluctant to label their feedback as "negative" or "neutral." They may express their real feelings in the comment itself. Comments like, "I guess I got what I paid for" or "Not what I expected." are clues to look very closely at the merchandise or seller.



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Protect Your Investment

I recently received a call from my daughter regarding a problem she was having getting online. Her complaint was that when she tried to go on the Internet, she got a message that said, "No dial tone." I asked her if her computer was plugged into a surge suppressor and her answer was, "Yes." When I asked her if the telephone line was also protected from power surges, the answer was, "No." The end result was that a power surge, through the phone lines, had destroyed the modem in her computer.

Protecting your computer and other equipment from dangerous power line surges is as critical as wearing your seatbelt when

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Application Beat

How about some quick notes regarding the more recent versions of popular Internet software? No? Okay, then skip this article. Still here? Well, okay then. First up, Opera 7.11 is out, and version 7 (which has been available for a few months) sports some major tune ups from version 6, most notably better DOM (Document Object Model) support. For those of you that appreciate the nerdy stuff, read more about DOM here: <http://www.w3.org/DOM/>. What it means for the rest of us is that most of the web pages that didn't work right in version 6 now render correctly. Users of Netscape 4.7 may notice similar problems disappeared after upgrading to Netscape 7.

The other nice thing the folks at Opera added to the version 7 release was support for IMAP mailboxes, which makes their E-mail client a viable alternative to the more popular ones. Speaking of IMAP and Netscape 7, my impression is stay away from this combo - there's a bug in NS7 - copying mail to the sent-mail folder is excruciatingly slow. Reports are that the Mozilla version of the browser (Netscape engine, no AOL stuff - <http://www.mozilla.org>) doesn't have this slowness, but to tell the truth I haven't tried it to make sure.

While we're talking about E-mail, the beta version of Eudora 6.0 is available from their web site, <http://www.eudora.com/betas/>, which has a great new feature: Bayesian spam filtering. Unfortunately this only works for the POP protocol, IMAP support is apparently in the works, but the fact that they're incorporating this is great news. Bayesian filtering is a process that learns what you consider spam. You have to 'train' the filter, which takes from a day or two to a week depending on how much mail you get, then let 'er rip, and occasionally check your spam folder for any false positives before you trash the messages. You can read some more about this filtering algorithm at this site: <http://www.paulgraham.com/spam.html>

Jim Creason

Director of Support Services



Four O' Four

One of the most common messages displayed when surfing the web is the "404 - File not found" error. This rather vague error page may be displayed due to a number of reasons, from the user typing in the incorrect site in the address bar, to the web developer creating a non-working link to the requested page. In any case, this problem is easily lessened by creating your own customized 404 page to display when the web server is unable to find a page on your site that a user has requested. To get started you'll only need to know some basic HTML, and how to connect

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Caveat Emptor, *continued from front*

- Don't take anything for granted. Ask questions. If you think something should include an instruction manual or power cord, check before you bid. Adjectives that describe the condition of the merchandise are subjective (and frequently just plain misused). Your notation of "very good" condition may not be the same as the seller's, so ask detailed questions.
- Set a limit before you place a bid and avoid the temptation to exceed your limit. EBay may show somebody beating your bid by only a dollar, but it is probably a proxy bid that's far more.
- By not escalating the bid past your limit, you allow for the possibility that the seller may have another identical item you can buy at the same price, and maintain a reasonable price history in case another one comes up later.
- EBay encourages you to place a "proxy bid," for the highest amount you're willing to pay. It automatically raises your bid as needed, when other people bid. That ensures high prices for sellers. We recommend that you not bid on the item at all, or bid a token amount (so you can look over your list of pending bids and get a daily status update from eBay) until the last few minutes of the auction. Bids usually rise substantially, often in just the last few seconds, on popular items. Showing more interest will encourage higher last minute bids.
- Pay for your purchase by credit card if possible. Be careful – some services that ostensibly accept credit cards for auction payments treat it as a cash advance, which doesn't offer the same protection, and may include substantial additional fees. You can dispute the charge with the credit card company if there's a problem. Alternately, use a U.S. Postal Service money order. In case of fraud, that puts the power of the USPS behind you.
- Avoid escrow services that take your payment and hold it until you have received the merchandise. Some are fraudulent, most are not bonded, and are no more trustworthy than the seller. It also adds a hefty fee.

Above all, keep the following things in mind. Almost nothing on eBay is unique. If you miss out on an item, another will come along eventually (and probably soon). Be patient, and let the people who want it most spend their money. The next one may be cheaper.

If you like libraries, flea markets, resale shops, dollar stores, garage sales, or auctions, or you have a hobby or interest of any kind that's not well served by your local community, you'll probably find something on eBay. Follow our tips, and your eBay experience could be as much fun as a country auction.

Mike Berger,
Director of Engineering



Protect..., *continued from front*

driving. Many users, however, forget about protecting the telephone line running to their computers. A voltage surge on the phone line will be felt immediately at your modem unless there is some kind of protective circuit upstream, toward the source of the surge. This can occur whether the computer is turned on or off.

Investing in a good surge suppressor that also protects the phone line is cheap insurance. This type of equipment can be found in most discount or computer stores for under \$20.00, and many come with a lightning insurance guarantee. When looking for a surge suppressor, be sure that it protects all three wires of the

electrical circuit. This is sometimes referred to as "tri-mode" or "triple mode" protection. Another important factor to look for is the maximum energy dissipation, which should not be less than 240 joules, although the higher this number is, the better.

If you need a little better protection, a UPS, or Uninterruptible Power Supply (also known as a battery backup) would be the choice. A UPS generally provides better protection than a surge suppressor, as well as providing standby power to run your computer long enough to save all of your work and shut down your computer in the event of a power outage. UPS's can also be found in computer stores for under \$100. When shopping for a UPS, look for one that has at least two backup protected power outlets, telephone line surge protection, and has a capacity of at least 500 VA/300 Watts. When using a UPS, plug the computer and monitor into the backup protected outlets. The more devices that are hooked into the backup battery, the less backup time you will have. By plugging in just the required items, the computer and monitor, you will have the maximum time available to save and shut down without losing any data.

Steve Dyson,
Technical Support Associate



Four O' Four, *continued from front*

to our server, duracef.shout.net, via SSH or FTP. If you follow the instructions below, it should be a snap.

The first step is to create the web page you wish to display when someone attempts to visit an invalid page on your site. On this page it is helpful to explain that the requested page could not be found, and also to place links to the popular pages of your site. This will ensure that the visitor knows they have clicked on a bad link or typed in the wrong address, as well as give them some options as to where on your site they can navigate. You can name this file whatever you fancy, but for this example we will use *error404.html* for simplicity. Just don't forget to upload this file into the *public_html* folder of your web site's shell account.

Now you are ready to instruct our Apache web server that you want the file, *error404.html*, to be displayed whenever an invalid page is requested from your site. To do this you will need to log into your shell via SSH, so if you are unsure about this step please visit <http://www.shout.net/help/#ssh> for instructions. Once you have logged in to duracef.shout.net, you will need to go to your *public_html* folder and create (or edit, if it already exists) a file named *.htaccess* by typing the following at the duracef command prompt:

```
username@duracef:~> cd public_html
username@duracef:~/public_html> pico .htaccess
```

Now type the following on a new line, replacing *mydomain.com* with your own domain name:

```
ErrorDocument 404 http://www.mydomain.com /error404.html
```

Press Ctrl+X to save the file, be sure it is named *.htaccess*. (You could skip the SSH and just create the file in a text editor and upload it via FTP or SFTP, but where's the fun in that?)

Now you are finished and can check to make sure it works by trying to go to a page you know does not exist on your site. It should redirect your browser to the *error404.html*, instead of the usual inane page. This not only looks much more professional, but also will enable better navigation of your web site!

Bill Cline,
Technical Assistant