

Beware of eBay deadbeats, author warns

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Imagine buying vintage Spiderman comics for \$16,000 and receiving instead, a box of printer paper or losing a whopping \$27,000 in purchasing a big rig that didn't exist in the first place. These are just many of the online auction fraud horror stories that brothers Edward and Steve Klink compiled from their eBay watchdog Web site eBayersThatSuck.com (E.T.S.).

In their book "Dawn of the eBay Deadbeats," some 70 strange-but-true stories were collected and retold with the help of illustrator Clay Butler.

The December 2005 publishing of the book comes just in time as the online auction giant has been criticized by consumer groups, most recently by the U.K. magazine "Computing Which?" for its passive and sometimes delayed approach in handling fraud reports.

At any given time, the site has 78 million listings, and 6 million new listings are added each day.

And while, eBay maintains that less than .01 percent of all listings end in a confirmed case of fraud, that could mean that of the 1.9 billion listings reported by eBay in 2005, that 190,000 cases were confirmed frauds in the last year.

Currently there are almost 900 horror stories from eBay fraud victims are on the E.T.S. site whose motto is "Winning the war on deadbeats."

And already the brothers are working on the next volume of horror stories, encouraging victims who want to get their tales to be told to get into contact with them.

United Press International spoke with Edward Klink about the recent book, their watchdog Web site, and the current state of eBay.

"We had collected hundreds of stories on the Web site and figured it was time to take these stories to a wider audience and let the victims have their say," Edward Klink said. "Plus with our combined backgrounds, Steve is a police officer and I'm a business writer, we felt we were ideally suited to get the job done."

Fraud on eBay can take on many forms including items paid for that vary from the description in the sale, unpaid items, and spoof eBay or Pay-Pal e-mails.

And like the many victims on their site, the brothers too have encountered the problem of auction fraud.

In 2003, Steve, a New Jersey police officer, won a set of "new" speakers, only to find that it looked as if they were "gnawed on by a wild animal."

"The seller said they weren't that way when mailed, and eBay said there was nothing they could do," Klink said. "Annoyed that he was stuck with the merchandise and given no recourse, Steve started www.ebayersthatfuck.com and stories began pouring in from around the world."

And the site has received a positive response since it's been up and running.

"People love it," Klink said. "On eBay, their official boards are closely monitored and talk about problems and scams and eBay's failings are not generally tolerated. So E.T.S. gives them an outlet. When it first came out Ebayersthatfuck.com was featured on Courttv.com and newspapers as far away as South Africa."

According to Klink, while eBay has what could be considered --"the ultimate business model" -- of collecting fees and delegating the marketing, selling, packaging, shipping, and customer service to eBay users, it's very easy for these same users to fall victim to fraud.

"I think consumers let their guard down when they are sitting at home and surfing the Web with their coffee," he said. "If a stranger offered them a \$1,400 antique vase on the street they'd most likely walk away, but when that same vase is on the Internet for some reason the reaction is more, 'Say, now that looks interesting.'"

And have the brothers seen any improvements in eBay's handling of the fraud issue?

"eBay says it is a tiny fraction of all auctions," Klink said, "but the hundreds of people who told us their stories hate being in that tiny group and never thought they would be. Lots of fraud is underreported, too. EBay encourages users to settle it among themselves, and if they can't,

then they are directed to pay \$20.00 to have SquareTrade, a third party, mediate the dispute. But it's not often a scammer shows up for mediation!"

Rather he says that while it appears that the company is trying to show that they are being more sensitive to fraud and trying to warn users, they don't see it being all that effective.

However, Klink does offer one suggestion on how eBay could be of help in the good fight against deadbeats by mirroring the concept of the bad language "report this post" button to moderators.

"So, it would seem it would be easy enough to put a similar button on auctions that might say 'report this auction as a scam' or something similar," he said. "But they don't. Presumably, that's because they'd rather not have users think of the auctions as being scams."

The authors also offer tips to online sellers and buyers, warning them about the next time they decide to use the online auction site: be wary if the person requests only one form of payment; read carefully, some scams depend on a lengthy description that can be deceptive; never be put off for two weeks on a deal or you risk being unable to stop the credit card transaction; and don't use Western Union or MoneyGram when paying for auction purchases.

"We'd like to see more accountability and recognition that fraud is taking place," Klink said. "eBay has amazing features and is a great flea market as people have called it, but I don't know long they can keep pushing off all the responsibility to its users. They tell users to be vigilant and yet they don't do anything. This book is virtually to foster greater awareness among users than force eBay's hands in doing something. It can happen to anyone."

A spokesperson from eBay says that the company is doing their best to educate users on fraud, by providing a "Security & Resolution Center" located on their homepage, which includes information on types of fraud, reporting problems, and giving buying/selling trust and safety tutorials.

"We want people on eBay to have a good buying and selling experience - transparent, well-lit, and safe," the spokesperson said. "Fraud on all levels is something we take seriously."

The company also has a team dedicated to working with law enforcement rather it be educating them on fraudulent cases and working proactively taking information on specific cases to them or cooperating with investigations.

"We would invite anyone to visit the site and read more," said the spokesperson, who also emphasized that the no. 1 issue for online shoppers is to pay safely using Pay-Pal or a credit card than any other form of payment.

In many cases, consumers are able to get their money back, Pay-Pal offers up to \$1,000 back with buyer protection and credit card programs usually have a pay back program in cases of fraud. In many cases, Pay-Pal offers a way for consumers to make purchases without providing personal information and at the same time protecting money.

"Dawn of the eBay Deadbeats" (\$12.95) is available on Amazon, eBay, and in select bookstores.

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