



Ina Steiner AuctionBytes

4

“The best blogs are ones where bloggers use their own voice, their own style.”

—Ina Steiner

AuctionBytes (www.auctionbytes.com) is where serious online sellers go in search of news, tips, opinions, and products geared to support their online businesses. Founded in 1999 by Ina and David Steiner, the site hosts an ever-growing sheaf of services for sellers. The Steiners are authorities on the companies and products that are used in in online auctions and marketing; publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Smart Money Magazine*, and *Fortune Small Business* frequently consult with the Steiners.

The screenshot shows the AuctionBytes website interface. At the top, it features the site logo and the tagline "The Independent Trade Publication for Online Merchants." Below this is a search bar with "Google" and "Web" options, and a "Search" button. A date indicator shows "June 25, 2007". A promotional banner for "eBay 2007 in Boston!" includes a "CLICK HERE!" link. A large banner below advertises "Over 1 million products in 32 industries!" with an "Alibaba.com" logo. The main content area is divided into several sections: "eBay Live 2007" with links to News, Pictures, Videos, Podcasts, and Blog; "AuctionBytes NewsFlash Headlines - June 22, 2007" listing several news items; a "Check out the Current Issue of AB-Update Below!" section with a "NEW! From the Editor" notice; and a "Click for More News" section featuring a photo of a person and the text "Pictures from eBay Live 2007! Nearly 600 Pix! Click Here!". At the bottom right, there is a section for "On the AuctionBytes HOTLINE!" and a link to the "AuctionBytes Blog". A "NEW! eBay Live 2007 Recap: 'Passionate' Users Turn Serious" notice is also visible at the bottom.

Ina Steiner, who serves as editor for the site, has written a number of articles about online auction research and technology, and her research has been published by International Data Corporation (IDC) in Framingham, Massachusetts. She holds an MBA with highest honors from Simmons School of Management.

Steiner is the technical editor of the book *eBay: Top 100 Simplified Tips & Tricks* (Wiley Publishing, 2004) and is the editor of *Snappy Auction Photos: The Online Auction Seller's Guide to Digital Photography* (AuctionBytes, 2003). Her credits also include numerous radio and podcast guest appearances, and the book *Turn eBay Data into Dollars* (McGraw-Hill, 2006). She is a member of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) and the Online News Association (ONA).

Blogging, Bidders, and Sellers

In addition to providing daily news coverage of the online auction world, AuctionBytes provides its readers with the latest information on online tools and other resources, regular columns by auction experts, and online discussion forums. In 2005, Ina Steiner added blogging to AuctionBytes' collection of services.

When did you start blogging?

I started a personal blog in 2001. I've always been interested in trying new things, and that was a big motivation for creating the blog. At that time, as I recall, blogs really were diaries for the most part. Not to get too introspective, but I never kept a diary as a child because I had three older siblings who would have teased the molasses out of me if they had ever gotten their hands on such a thing, which might explain why I'm self-conscious about diary-style jottings. So I found I really wasn't interested in writing about my life and my thoughts for any and all to see.

"I've always been interested in trying new things, and that was a big motivation for creating the blog."

Besides, I did so much writing for AuctionBytes, I could never motivate myself to write much on my personal blog. It lacked direction—who would read it? Did I even want anyone to read it? I had no clear-cut mission.

Then, in June 2002, I wrote a posting specifically to record my thoughts on

the first eBay Live conference held in Anaheim, California. The words flowed very easily, and it was so much fun bringing the experience to people who couldn't attend in person. That gave me a necessary focus.

Still, I didn't think of the blog as a business opportunity. I created it separately from AuctionBytes, but I used my name and the tagline, "Ramblings from Ina Steiner, editor of AuctionBytes newsletter." I created an entry and rarely went back, although in the spring of 2004, I started blogging about matters relating to journalism. That too was short-lived because of time constraints and the question of whether I was really creating value for anyone.

**When did you begin considering a blog connected with business?
What was your motivation?**

When I blogged on AuctionBytes about the 2002 eBay conference, I was highly motivated. I knew I had an audience, and I wanted them to see what I was seeing. Blogging about doing something for the first time is also much more interesting than writing about the daily grind. The excitement of the event and sharing it with others was the main source of motivation. In thinking about it, I realized the importance of having a mission, to sustain both the blog and my interest in it.

By 2005, I was pushing for a regular blog on AuctionBytes.com. In this way, I could leverage my time by writing about the industry I was already writing about. I could push out content that wasn't quite "article-worthy." Readers would have a forum to respond, *and* we could burn more page views, increasing our ad revenue through our banner advertising program. In order to do that, we developed a custom blogging program, and by 2006, I was off and running.

"The best thing about the blog is the instant feedback from readers, and the fact that the blog can spark conversations."

**Did the custom blogging program give you any advantages?
Several other bloggers in this book have found custom programs to be less utilitarian than they had expected.**

The advantage was that if we could put it on our site, it would be integrated with our site and run out ads from the site. The bad thing is that it really doesn't take advantage of some of the Web 2.0 features.

Are you achieving what you set out to do with your blog?

Yes. It provides a place where I express my opinions about things going on in the industry and is another way to publish compelling content, in addition to our newsletters and columns. We have a good base of readers, and the blog posts are picked up by the search engines on their news channels, such as Google News. And, of course, the additional page views help AuctionBytes because we generate revenue through advertising.

What are the benefits of the AuctionBytes blog?

The best thing about the blog is the instant feedback from readers, and the fact that the blog can spark conversations. It puts more power in readers' hands, because their comments—just like the posts themselves—are read by eBay executives, analysts, and other online sellers. This is an age of user-generated content, and I like that people's opinions can be heard.

“I get to write things in the blog I couldn't write anyplace else.”

The blog is also a way for me to communicate in a less formal, more timely way with readers than I can with the newsletter articles. It gives me the freedom to speculate and editorialize

more. Plus, there's a lot of information that comes my way that isn't very article-worthy, but is a perfect fit for the blog. I get to write things in the blog I couldn't write anyplace else. So in that sense, I hope it also serves readers.

We're also finding that the blog's RSS feeds can be a better way to deliver content than newsletters.

In what way?

The challenges to e-mail delivery are getting greater. Spam filters mean that legitimate mailings are sometimes mistaken for spam and get deleted or greatly delayed. People who subscribe to the RSS feed don't have to contend with any filters like they do to get their regular e-mail.

It sounds as if the blog is pretty much a necessary component of AuctionBytes. Does keeping up with it take a lot of time?

It definitely varies. I probably average around three hours a week, which is just as well, because maintaining the site and producing newsletters and columns takes a lot of time.

I do at least two postings a week. If there's a rush of news or something like eBay Live is happening, I'll blog more often.

Is twice a week enough to keep people coming back?

It works for us. A lot of people get the blog through RSS feeds. We use our newsletter to let people know when there are new blog postings. This lets people who don't get the RSS feeds keep up with the blog. [AuctionBytes publishes two newsletters—one goes out twice a month, the other three times a week.]

Keeping up with the site and its newsletters would seem to leave little time for reading. Do you spend much time reading other blogs?

I read tons of other blogs, and some very useful ones have sprung up in the online auction industry in the last year or so that keep me on my toes. They are excellent sources of information, too.

I also read “geek” blogs. Here are some of the folders I have set up in Bloglines [www.bloglines.com]:

- Auction Blogs
- Blog Blogs & Geek Blogs
- Ecommerce (These are actually product searches I have set up to alert me to new items.)
- IP Patents Trademark Etc.
- Media
- Miscellaneous
- News
- Travel

It is interesting to note that, in the course of reading blogs for several years, you can get a sense of who people are. This is especially true for the A-listers: who has the big egos, who's a little kooky, who brown-noses the A-listers, etcetera. And in the course of exploring, I've discovered communities of blogs. For example, there is this echo chamber of Silicon Valley bloggers who would all link to each other and post on each other's blogs. This started out as a community and a way to share information and have a dialog, but then turned into a way [for the bloggers] to promote themselves and get visibility.

Of course, all this takes time, and I try to manage my time carefully. Sadly, if someone posts too much, I tend not to read them, because I just can't keep up with all their posts. Once a day, good. Ten posts a day, forget it!

Yours is a rather specialized community. In reading all those blogs, what sorts of contrasts do you note between the AuctionBytes blog and other business blogs?

I would say the biggest difference between our blog and other business blogs is the prevalence of anonymity. Sellers are afraid to speak out using their own names. Online auctions are a very monopoly-like industry, and the sellers fear there will be retaliation if they speak out. Whether this is true or not doesn't matter—the fear is enough. I recently had a seller post a comment on my blog, and then send an e-mail an hour later saying, “Would you please remove my eBay user ID off my comment?” He was afraid eBay was stalking him.

“I'd rather people at least have a voice, even if it's anonymous.”

When I read the mainstream blogs, I get the impression that everyone wants to be known, to get links and increase traffic. But in our case, it's unique in the sense that sellers in this industry rely on their eBay revenue for part or all of their income.

If they want to post anonymously, I think it's great. No one really comes to my blog to cause trouble. They're usually saying, “Here's what's happening to me,” and explaining a challenge they've had. I think it's different if you're making a political statement—sure that's fine, use your name. But if you're criticizing a company on which you depend for revenue, you really have to be careful. I know it's unusual, but I don't think it's a bad thing. I'd rather people at least have a voice, even if it's anonymous.

Do you post on other blogs?

No. I know that I could get more visibility by posting comments in other blogs, but it doesn't come naturally to me.

What has been your most gratifying experience with this blog?

Although eBay is a young company, it has a corporate mindset, particularly when it comes to public relations. And it's old-fashioned for a technology

company. But it tries to be innovative in communicating in ways other than just making announcements. A blog called The Chatter (www.ebaychatter.com) is one conduit for this.

www.ebaychatter.com

eBay recently started using the blog to react to other bloggers, including me, to clarify and publish their own viewpoint. And that's a very good thing—eBay should be using its blog to talk to users beyond the press releases and announcements they make.

I feel my own blog has contributed to eBay's decision to push the envelope in its communications strategy, and that is very gratifying. The day an eBay spokesperson or executive makes a direct comment on my blog will be a banner day, but I don't expect it will happen any day soon.

What's the most difficult aspect of blogging for you?

Finding the time to do it, because I have to push out so much content for AuctionBytes' two newsletters. I also have a problem with writing short items. I take everything I write very seriously, which means I can't always just dash off a posting. So it's difficult for me to write short, quick pieces of the kind that fit the blog format so well.

“I feel my own blog has contributed to eBay's decision to push the envelope in its communications strategy, and that is very gratifying.”

The reason I take my writing so seriously is that people in the online auction industry look to my writing as authoritative. So I have a responsibility

to be careful about the facts and how I present them. I've always been aware that news and information can have an impact on people's decisions about their lives and businesses. And because eBay is a public company, some Wall Street analysts read my blog, which is another reason I want to take time with my blog posts. Equally important is the need to always get the facts right, so as not to lose credibility with my readers.

Was there a time when you almost packed it in, quit?

Never. I have experimented with other projects and quit. The personal blog didn't work out, and my idea for video blogging [vlogging] hasn't really panned out. I find video works best for events like the eBay Live conference. But the AuctionBytes blog is definitely in for the long run.

Is there more experimentation in your future?

Right now I'm podcasting, and that is going much smoother than the video. I think it's all good content, just delivered in different ways—hopefully ways people can digest at their convenience and on their terms.

Do you have any favorite blog tools or widgets?

“The reason I take my writing so seriously is that people in the online auction industry look to my writing as authoritative.”

I am a huge fan of Bloglines, and I don't understand why 100 percent of online users don't use it. It's a web-hosted feed reader, and it's a lifesaver for keeping up with all the blogs and news sites I track.

By the way, I don't think people understand that feeds can also be used to track product listings on ecommerce

sites. I have a search set up on some marketplaces and classifieds sites for a rare China pattern I collect, and as I'm scrolling through my Bloglines feeds, it tells me if there are any new listings. I can't say enough good things about Bloglines!

What do you see other bloggers doing “right” or doing “wrong”?

It's hard to call blogging “right” or “wrong,” because it is a unique publishing platform. The best blogs are those where bloggers use their own voice and their own style.

Do you have any advice to share with other bloggers?

Be very careful! Use your blog to share your expertise and show your professionalism (which is different from being formal—something not necessarily required in a blog). That applies to online sellers, too. Think about a potential shopper and how they will feel about buying from you after reading your blog.

In my field, business bloggers mean online sellers, who already publish content—in their auction descriptions and letters to customers answering questions. Many have also written [content for] eBay Wiki and eBay Reviews & Guides on a variety of topics. They are turning to blogs not only to share information, but to help them gain visibility with potential shoppers.

One eBay seller I know writes a blog devoted to mugs, and he includes pictures, descriptions, and advice on the interesting mugs he finds. This is a great way to serve his customers by providing content that's of interest to them. In addition, he builds up a following of people who are more likely to buy from him in the future, and shoppers doing searches for those types of products will find his blog—and his listings.

Show potential shoppers that you are a professional who knows the ins and outs of the products you sell, and they will feel more comfortable shopping [on your site and buying] from you. But if you're publishing for clients or customers, avoid politics and religion—save that for your personal blog.

I've seen companies announce new blogs, but then end up abandoning them. Rather than try to build up a lot of expectation and excitement in advance, launch your blog and then start getting the word out. Don't announce it until you are sure you're going to stick with it.

If you are blogging as a company representative or authoritative figure, keep the ranting and sarcasm to a minimum. No one likes a whiner.

And yes, it's good to post on other blogs to get visibility. Just don't look needy or be obnoxious about it!

“Use your blog to share your expertise and show your professionalism.”

Points to Review

In making the transition from a directionless and sporadic blog to an effective, professional blog that supports a major website, Ina Steiner has become an expert on key aspects of successful blogging. Here are some of the most important lessons from Steiner:

- A specific focus or mission is necessary to sustain a blog.
- Be mindful that people in your industry may be using your blog to help make business decisions. Before you post, think about how a typical buyer will view what you have to say, and its potential effects on buying decisions.
- For online merchants, blogs can be a way to increase your visibility with potential buyers. You can use your blog to showcase your product or industry expertise so shoppers will feel comfortable buying from you.
- Wait until after your blog is established to promote it.
- RSS feeds can be more efficient in delivering content than e-mail newsletters.
- If you have a website in addition to your blog, cross-promote whenever possible. Consider ways that you can keep those who don't use RSS feeds advised on blog postings.
- Although it's impossible to read everything, keeping up with competitors' blogs is a necessary part of business blogging.