

How eBay is Creating Communities for Buyers and Sellers



Gene Marks

CPA, Columnist, and Host



Rebecca Michals

Director of Community Engagement
eBay

Announcer:

Welcome to THRIVE, a Paychex Business Podcast, where you'll hear timely insights to help you navigate marketplace dynamics and propel your business forward. Here's your host, Gene Marks.

Gene Marks:

Hey everybody, welcome back to another episode of THRIVE. My name is Gene Marks. Thanks so much for joining us. I am here with Rebecca Michals who is the Director of Community Engagement at eBay. Rebecca, thank you so much for joining.

Rebecca Michals:

Hi, I'm so glad to be here, Gene. Thank you for having me.

Gene Marks:

Oh yeah, I'm thrilled to have you on. So, let's talk about a community engagement. Let's first of all, talk about what you are doing at eBay. How long you been with the company and tell me what the job description is.

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah, absolutely. I have been at eBay for a little more than two years. So, I started right as the pandemic started, actually. And so I've always worked virtually for eBay, which I think actually makes me a really great fit for the role because we work with so many sellers who are out there working on their computers on their own every day. So my team's role is responsible for connecting with sellers across key channels, including seller events, the community forums that we host on eBay; our social channels under the eBay For Business brand; eBay Academy, which is our learning platform; and even our very own podcast.

Gene Marks:

That is great. And so, we have people that are on this that are listening to us that are eBay sellers and part of the eBay community. We have people that are not. And this conversation we're going to have, there are two parts to it. One is, I want to get into a little bit about some of the specifics that you're doing with your eBay

community and what sellers should know about that exists. And then, ultimately, I do want to talk about, for those of us that have our own communities of partners and customers, some of the things that you've learned that might help businesses with their own communities because you guys have your community of resellers. So let's first of all, talk about eBay. If I'm a seller, you mentioned a few of the things like leadership, engagement, some of the onsite things, how much of your job is face-to-face with your resellers and how much is, are you just talking to them, just basically online?

Rebecca Michals:

So in terms of being in person, we are having some in-person experiences; especially, some of our events and sellers host their own events as well. But there are really two parts of my role and my team's role. We do a couple of things. First of all, we help sellers know what's going on at eBay. We communicate with them. We let them know the latest news of product releases, things that are important for them to know about their business. But what we also do, which you might argue is even the more important part, is we enable sellers to be able to connect with each other. To build a community together, to learn and share, and sometimes commiserate together. Because being an entrepreneur, an SMB, a seller on eBay, sometimes it can be somewhat solitary and we want sellers to know that they have a community and a way to connect with each other.

Gene Marks:

And what have you found as the best place for your sellers to do that, Rebecca? Do you have Facebook groups, LinkedIn groups? Do you have your own communities on your site and what's been working best for you guys?

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah, not a lot of people know this, but eBay was one of the pioneers, 27 years ago, that launched a community, a hosted community, on their platform for their customers. And it still exists today. It's called: Community at eBay.com, and anyone can go there and connect with other sellers. They can connect with buyers, get questions answered, and find other sellers who not only sell in the same business, but just have an affinity for whatever their passion is that they're selling.

Gene Marks:

So when you're saying that your sellers "communicate and collaborate with each other online," as well as customers as well. I'm assuming these are moderated forums, correct? Are there people from eBay that's involved to make sure that things don't get out of control or abusive or anything like that?

Rebecca Michals:

Oh yeah, definitely. We sure do. People feel really passionately and so you got to keep an eye on things sometimes. So we have moderators who help keep things clean and friendly and civil. But we also have people from our Customer Support team who are there answering questions every single day on the forums. We have a bunch of different customer support channels, but the forums are a great place because you can get answers not only from Customer Support, but from other experienced sellers as well.

Gene Marks:

Right.

Rebecca Michals:

Customer Support will give you a particular answer. But the great thing is, hearing that first person experience, other sellers saying, "Here's how I handled that, here's how I dealt with it." That's the magic of having a community of sellers, to get to know each other.

Gene Marks:

It surprises me, you would have participation by sellers in a community like this, mainly because they're busy selling. What do they care about the success of other sellers on eBay? Some of them might even be their competitors. Why would sellers even participate in this?

Rebecca Michals:

That's a really good question. And I think it's, yes, absolutely, sellers are competitive. But our sellers know that the better that eBay is as an overall marketplace, when any buyer has a great experience, that's good for their business too. We want buyers to come back. We want them to come back to every seller. And sellers tend to cheer each other on and they're rooting for each other. Again, because they want all buyers to have a great experience. And the more experienced a seller is and the more knowledgeable and the more they feel like they have a place to get advice and support, the more successful they'll be.

Gene Marks:

Got it. Do you feel that ... Do you get any feedback from your community itself that they would prefer not to have eBay involved? They'd like to have conversations offline without eBay monitoring what they're talking about just in case they've got anything that they, I don't know, any gripes that they'd like to share or things that they'd like to get out in the open without having the company there? Do you get that kind of feedback and is there a place to go where eBay sellers could go where they're independent and can have their own community?

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah, I haven't seen that feedback stated quite that way, but I do know there are a gazillion of Facebook groups out there for eBay sellers. When I first joined eBay, I was invited to, I don't know, six, eight, 10 of them and the people who run, the sellers who run those groups know that I'm there and I engage lightly. But there are many, many, many that I'm not involved in. And I'm sure some of them are for sellers to talk just to each other, as you say, without any eBay involvement and that's fine. People should be able to connect in the way that makes the most sense for them.

Gene Marks:

Got it. All right. So tell us, let's dig in a little bit more about what eBay does face-to-face. You said that you do have events that you guys do both local and national. Can you explain a little bit more about that?

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah, absolutely. So every year we run an event called eBay Open. Most recently, it has been virtual because of circumstances.

Gene Marks:

Sure.

Rebecca Michals:

But we are looking to have more ways of sellers to connect in person. And then the other amazing thing that happens is sellers run their own groups. You can call them seller meetings like we do, meet-ups. But the idea is they are local events, totally run by and for sellers. We help the sellers with some software support, so they have a tool where they can sign up and connect and hear about the next thing that's coming. But these are totally seller-run groups. And I went to one in Denver a month ago and I think 100, maybe 120 sellers showed up from the Denver area. And it was just amazing to see how energizing that was for sellers and how much they really enjoy having a chance to connect with each other and to talk about their business.

Gene Marks:

Did you find that their conversations were just all about eBay itself or did the sellers like to talk about other things in their business? Hiring sales people, taxes, marketing, things like that that might not be necessarily eBay-related?

Rebecca Michals:

You would think that is an eBay-related, but we actually have a lot of information on the site that can help sellers with all of those pieces of their business.

Gene Marks:

Good.

Rebecca Michals:

But no, it was really interesting to watch sellers, both share advice with each other about selling on eBay and all of that other ancillary stuff that comes with running a successful business. And then people were just sharing pictures of their kids and dogs and talking about the local weather and getting to know each other as people as well.

Gene Marks:

So Rebecca, so earlier, you had mentioned about eBay also providing content related to your training and leadership, not necessarily just online forms or events. Can you expand on that?

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah, absolutely. Look, let's be honest. We're still navigating our way out of the pandemic. So sellers need as much support as they can get. And we have recently launched a tool that everyone should know about, which is called eBay Academy. It's an online learning tool and it's actually come out of a pilot that we ran over the last couple of years. 19,000 sellers went through the pilot experience last year. So now we have launched this fully-featured experience. It's called eBay Academy. First thing to know, totally free and anyone can sign up for it. But we especially encourage eBay sellers to sign up for it. And we know, you said this earlier, people could be selling, why are they engaging on the site? So we've made sure that everything is really digestible and short. All of the learning modules are 15 minutes or less.

Rebecca Michals:

And the great thing about them is there's content no matter where you are in the journey of your business. If you're just starting your eBay business, we have content that's really about those early best practices, how to make a great listing, amazing photography, those things that are really important when you're just getting started. And then as you progress in your business experience, eBay Academy can progress with you too. With more detailed information about setting policies, doing your taxes. We don't actually give tax advice, but we can talk to you about how to go find that sort of thing. Managing operations. And so it's an amazing resource. I've gone through it myself. I'm an eBay seller and it's really, really rich content that you can digest quickly and then take it straight to your business that day. It's pretty cool.

Gene Marks:

That is really cool, Rebecca. And are the people providing this advice, are they internal employees at eBay or do you have outsiders that you bring in? Who is part of the people that are the experts that you have?

Rebecca Michals:

All of the content is developed right here at eBay because we're the closest to know. We take a lot of the feedback that we see from sellers and know what their top questions are. And in eBay Academy, all that content is, drives right to what we know, those top needs and those top questions are. So we think that it's a really good use of time and really efficient.

Gene Marks:

Yeah, that's awesome. Really great support. It's funny, all the online platforms that out there, whether it's Etsy or Amazon or eBay, if you're going to be selling on those platforms, you've got to be part of that community and you got to be talking back and forth with the other resellers on your community on sharing that information. You need to get training from the platform provider. You need to have support from them. And then, of course, you've got to get information. So you had mentioned earlier that you also stay in touch with all of your community members through email as well. Email has become, Rebecca, you know how email was a thing 10 years ago, 15 years ago. And then people were saying, "Email is dead." And now, email has resurfaced as a great resource through newsletters and updates or whatever. So tell us, how do you guys use email to get information out to your community members?

Rebecca Michals:

Well look, let's be honest, along with the spreadsheet, email is totally the killer app of the internet, right?

Gene Marks:

It truly is. It really is. And I remember, it's funny because I remember my kids when they were in high school, say by either email, we just Facebook message each other, whatever. Now they're all in their twenties and working at companies and they're all emailing everywhere because it's the killer, you're right, it's the killer app.

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah, totally.

Gene Marks:

So how is that used for your community?

Rebecca Michals:

Well, what's interesting is we, of course, on any place where we have community, you can sign up for newsletters and get updates and so forth, and eBay as a company, we email sellers all the time to let them know news that they need to know. And again, new tools or features that roll out. But the really interesting thing that's launched recently and been improved recently is we're actually giving sellers tools to create their own newsletters for their own buyers.

Gene Marks:

Oh, that's great.

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah. And I truly believe ... I've talked a lot about the community of that sellers have with each other. But one of the, I think, unique things about eBay and really powerful things about eBay is we connect people who have real passions around something, whether it's sneakers or I don't know, carnival glass or trading cards or watches, whatever it is that is important to you. Hopefully, your buyers are someone who are passionate as well. And we've really been working on ways to help sellers keep in touch with their buyers, and in turn, build their own community.

Gene Marks:

All right, so Rebecca, I hope you stay at eBay for the rest of your life. I hope you love it. You make a great living. It's a great place to work. But just hypothetically, all right, let's say that you leave eBay, you have your own business. Your business has also got a community. Maybe it's distributors, maybe it's your own resellers. Maybe it's your customers. Maybe it's your suppliers and partners. So given everything that you've learned about how eBay manages its community and stays in touch with this community, what would

you do if you were running your own business, to build your own community and states, what tools have worked the best for you? What would you be doing to just make, to have as close a relationship with your community and your businesses you've got right now with your eBay, your eBay resellers?

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah, I think it's a great question. And the place where I would start is talking about the difference between marketing and community.

Gene Marks:

Okay.

Rebecca Michals:

There's a lot that is very similar about it. But community is really about building that two-way relationship. Leaning in on the feedback, flywheel, getting to know your customers and your buyers really well. And then also establishing yourself and humanizing yourself with your customers and buyers. One of the things that we know especially about later Millennials and Gen Z is they want to believe in the brands that they're engaging with, big or small, and being a part of that community with your buyers, with other sellers, is an important way to fulfill on that commitment that I think we make to our customers.

Rebecca Michals:

In terms of where and how, I do think it depends on whether you are an online or brick and mortar in your town. I think the most important thing is to do the research to understand where are your peers gathering and how can you get involved with that? Is it a business association that you can join and get those newsletters and join their Facebook groups? Is it going to conferences so that you get to know and start networking ... But networking is kind of just community, isn't it?

Gene Marks:

Yeah.

Rebecca Michals:

And you can get to know other people who are doing the same work that you are, which is again really powerful. And then I would say, even if you are working online, do. Get out into your community, find a way to volunteer that's meaningful for your business and your brand. Have conversations with people. And I think the most important thing is, and I think anyone who has run a community offline or online is you have to be willing to take that first move. Make that first post, say hello to someone. It's a little bit, it feels a little bit scary. Really, I'm going to go say hi to someone I've never met? I'm going to post a message on a forum? But when you do that, that's the way that you open the door to build community and make connections with other people.

Gene Marks:

That's great advice. So back to eBay, what are your plans for the next few years? You've got a very vibrant community now. You're using both online tools, you're doing events, you're providing training and support as well for your members of your community. So what kind of strategic plans do you have for your group and for the eBay community that you're going to plan on being implementing over the next few years?

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah, absolutely. So one of my top priorities is to continue to build on something that we have done for three years now, which is called the Up and Running Grants Program. So is everything going to start at the pandemic? Quite possibly. But anyway, so back at the early pandemic, again, we saw that sellers needed

help, especially brick-and-mortar sellers, in getting online quickly. We launched a program called Up and Running. As that moment passed, we evolved it because we realized that sellers also ... You know what? They need access to capital. And that's something that we felt like we were able to help make those connections.

Rebecca Michals:

So over the last three years, we've committed \$1.5 million to our sellers through the Up and Running Grants Program. And now in our third year, we are going to be helping 50 small business owners with \$10,000 each to help them build, grow and run their business on eBay. And unfortunately, applications for this year are already closed. But we only envision this getting bigger and having more impact. And we're very proud of the way that we are helping sellers have access to capital. We're making material change in people's lives and it's really unbelievably inspiring. So that's probably one of the things I'm most excited about for my group.

Gene Marks:

That is awesome. And what is the name of the grants program and where can people find out more about it?

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah, so it's called Up and Running. All you have to do is go to ebay.com/upandrunning.

Gene Marks:

Yeah, that's perfect. And again, closed for this year, but I'm sure this will be continuing in future years, correct?

Rebecca Michals:

Yeah, we sure hope so. We intend it. Yeah.

Gene Marks:

That's great. Before I let you go, Rebecca, anything else that I did not ask or anything else that you would like your eBay community to know about what the company is doing for them?

Rebecca Michals:

I think the only thing that I would add is whether it's eBay, whether it's a different business, do go out there, find your peers, make those connections with other sellers and other entrepreneurs because you don't have to go it alone. You don't have to figure it out on your own. And having a community is an incredibly powerful tool that really should be a part of every small business owner's toolkit.

Gene Marks:

That was great. Rebecca Michals, Director of Community Engagement at eBay. Thank you so much. Learned a lot and hopefully we can have you back on some time in the future.

Rebecca Michals:

Thanks. This was great. I was really glad to be here. Thanks.

Gene Marks:

Me too. Thanks so much. Take care. Do you have a topic or a guest that you would like to hear on Thrive? Please let us know. Visit: payx.me/thrivetopics and send us your ideas or matters of interest. Also, if your business is looking to simplify your HR, payroll, benefits, or insurance services, see how Paychex can

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