Design for Facilitating eBay Transactions Using Skype

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Abstract. eBay has integrated Skype (a public voice over IP application) chat and voice into hundreds of categories on eBay sites globally. By integrating Skype in the marketplace, eBay sellers have the option of including Skype functionality to their eBay listings. This fosters more consumer to consumer (c2c) communication, in which eBay sellers can provide better customer care and build trust with buyers by answering questions quickly. Buyers also feel more confident to ask for details and get answers using chat or call, without waiting for email responses. Challenges and design solutions regarding trust and safety, building credibility, co-branding, and designing for global eBay communities are discussed.

Keywords: VoIP, eCommerce, trust and safety, cross-cultural design, online communication, user experience.

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1 Introduction

Enabling efficient transaction and establishing integrated community are two cornerstones underlying the success of consumer-to-consumer (c2c) ecommerce. The lack of real-time communication, however, undermines the success with the two aspects. Relative to brick-and-mortar stores, the lack of real-time communication is a problem with ecommerce in general. Furthermore, it is a more prominent problem with the c2c ecommerce model than with the business-to-consumer (b2c) ecommerce model. This is primarily due to the trust and safety issue and the irregular inventory issue that are inherent in c2c. Customer service has been shown by research to be an important factor for online trust [1]. On eBay, buyers are sometimes concerned with whether the seller is trustworthy and have questions about specifications of the item that they are interested in (e.g., whether the item is brand new or used). Improving seller customer service by incorporating real-teim communication will improve buyer trust. Real-time communication is especially important for some categories that are key contributors to eBay's business, such as the used cars category and the collectibles category, where the trust and safety issue and the irregular inventory issue are particularly pronounced. Currently, eBay buyers can use the "Ask Seller a

Question" feature to email sellers questions, but are unable to communicate with sellers in a real-time manner. In addition, enabling real-time interaction allows for a greater sense of community, which leads to a consolidated customer base and is an important factor underlying eBay's success.

Globalization of ecommerce is another factor calling for the integration of real-time communication into ecommerce platforms. Some cultures (e.g., East Asian cultures) place great emphasis on substantial interpersonal interaction during transaction [2, 3, 4]. For example, the traditional Chinese way of transaction is characterized by "Tao Jia Huan Jia", which in Mandarin means bargaining. Whereas bargaining is no stranger to western consumers, it is one of the defining features of the Asian business culture. Trust and safety issues also underlie the need for real-time communication capability. In some developing countries, trust and safety issue, when coupled with the relatively immature ecommerce in those countries, becomes a more important problem relative to the United States. In addition, because many Asian cultures are not used to the "flea market" or "swap-n-meet" concepts that are familiar to Western consumers, nor are they familiar with auction, which has existed in the west for many centuries, buyers in those cultures need additional explanation and facilitation from sellers who sell used goods via online auction. Adding real-time capability to buyer-seller communication addresses these issues of global transaction.

On September 12, 2005, eBay purchased Skype, an EU-based company that developed popular VoIP software that enables people to make free voice calls over the Internet in real-time to other Skype users anywhere in the world. Skype also allows people to send instant text messages and make free video calls over the internet. Integrating Skype into eBay marketplace is a natural step for eBay in order to strengthen its c2c business model. The Skype project was developed with both eBay buyers and sellers in mind. For buyers, this helps facilitate a smooth and trustworthy transaction experience by efficiently communicating with sellers. For sellers, having the flexibility of real-time communication enhances their customer relationship management (CRM), which can in turn help reduce transaction friction. eBay also benefits from reduced friction on it's marketplaces via improved transaction velocity. The role of Skype is especially important for categories that involve a lot of interpersonal interaction, such as vehicles and other expensive items.

2 The Design

A coordinated effort of a group of eBay UI designers, product mangers, and creative designers was launched during the first half of 2006 to integrate Skype into eBay experience. The centerpiece of the project was implementing a series of buttons on eBay listings (i.e., items listed to sell), by which buyers can contact sellers using Skype. To realize this, the project involved UI changes on the buyer side as well as on the seller side. In this section, we will first describe the overall design, followed by specific design challenges and design solutions for these challenges.

2.1   Overall Design

The adoption of Skype starts with sellers. When sellers list their items, they will be prompted to specify whether they would like to offer Skype to buyers as a means to contact them. If a seller does not have Skype installed on the computer, he or she will be prompted to install Skype (see Figure 1). Once the seller has installed Skype and offered Skype as a means for buyers to contact him or her, the SkypeMe buttons will show up on the listings. On the buyer side, when the buyer visits the View Item page, the page where details of an item are presented, the buyer will be prompted to install Skype if the seller offers Skype for the listing (see Figure 2). Once Skype is installed, the buyer should go back to the listing to complete the transaction. The listing now has the SkypeMe buttons (see Figure 3), which allows the buyer to either call (using the Call button) or instant message (using the Chat button) the seller.
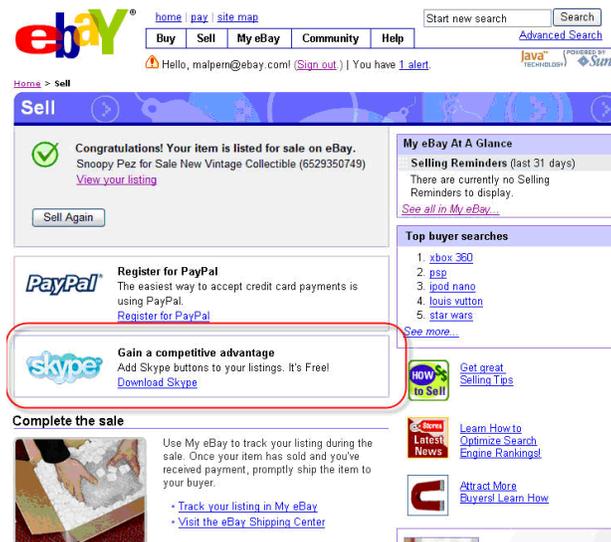
Fig. 1. The page that prompts the seller to use Skype to facilitate transaction. This page appears after the item has been listed on eBay.

Fig. 2. The View Item page for an item listed by a seller who offers Skype as a means for communication – *before* the buyer installs Skype on computer.

Fig. 3. The View Item page for an item listed by a seller who offers Skype as a means for communication – *after* the buyer has installed Skype on computer.

2.2 Preventing Frauds

Because Skype still exists as a separate service with its own registration, using the loophole created by the separation between the eBay and Skype registrations, there was concern that fraudulent acts could potentially be performed over Skype communication between buyers and sellers. For instance, a seller might use the eBay

user name of a reputable seller during a Skype call with a buyer, and therefore is able to sell more items to buyers benefiting from the borrowed eBay identity. In order to prevent such frauds, we decided to require sellers to link their Skype names to their eBay accounts. When sellers first install Skype as part of a listing, they need to complete two actions, one is to install and register on Skype, the other is to link their Skype names to their eBay accounts. For this purpose, a message reminding sellers of the necessity of linking accounts is shown to sellers when they create the listing.
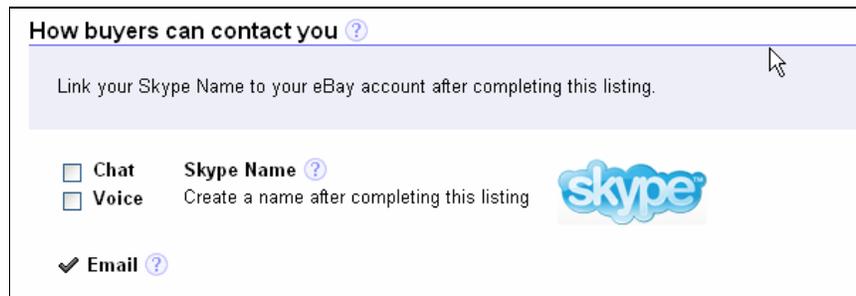

Fig. 4. This is the message reminding the seller to link his or her Skype name to eBay account.

2.3 Integrating eBay and Skype: Challenge from a Branding Perspective

The relationship between eBay and Skype, an ecommerce site and a VoIP technology, is not apparent to most eBay users. Perceived relevance of the two entities is instrumental in increasing the adoption rate of Skype on eBay and creating coherent user experience. Co-branding of eBay and Skype was therefore implemented in the UI. This effort involved two areas: the Skype download flow and the View Item page. When prompted to download Skype, eBay users might not perceive Skype as an integrated part of the eBay platform and therefore hesitate to install Skype. To address this issue, a co-branded page was created within the downloading flow (see Figure 5). On this page, the eBay brand image is placed above the content area and the Skype brand image, indicating that Skype is part of eBay rather than a separate third-party entity. On the other hand, the main content area is dominated by the Skype brand image, so that users understand that the content is specifically about Skype rather than about eBay in general. This page exists within the downloading flow for both buyers and sellers.
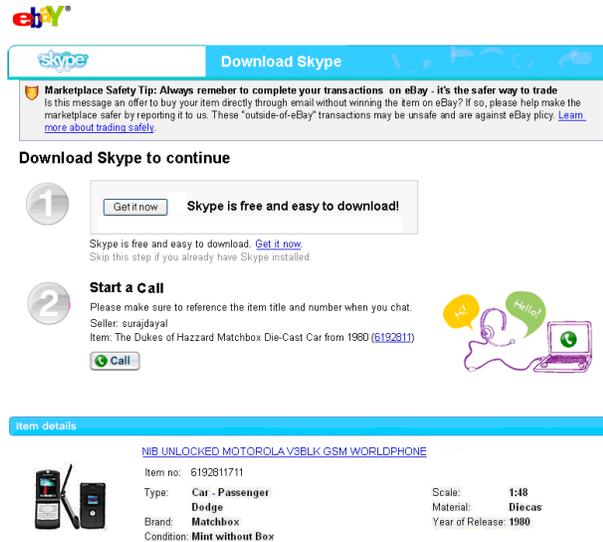
Fig. 5. This is A page within the downloading flow.

The other area related to co-branding is the View Item page (see Figure 3). To create coherent visual representation, the Skype elements (i.e., the Skype button, the Chat button, and the Call button) were designed to have consistent look and feel as the rest of the page. For instance, blue is used as the color scheme for both the Skype and PayPal elements. The Skype icon is made of similar size of the PayPal icon, suggesting that the two are equally important subsidiaries of eBay.

2.4 Preventing Possible Loss of Business

Providing efficient communication tools to buyers and sellers might inadvertently create a loophole in transaction: the buyer and the seller reach an agreement to do transaction outside eBay, so that the seller does not need to pay eBay the obligatory seller fee. To discourage this behavior, when the buyer downloads and installs Skype, a message displayed on one of the downloading pages warns the buyer potential risks involved in off-eBay transaction (see Figure 5). In addition, because the installation of Skype on the buyer's computer is completed on the Skype site rather than the eBay site, buyers might accidentally forget to come back to eBay to finish the transaction. This message reduces the chance that the buyer forgets to complete the transaction and prevents possible loss of business due to the installation process.

2.5 Designing for the International eBay Community

With a global c2c model, eBay has international sites across the world, with UI customized to local contexts. The implementation of the SkypeMe buttons, as an

integrated part of the local UI, is also localized. For instance, due to the unique look and feel of Chinese characters, the SkypeMe buttons on eBay Taiwan use different font and background color (compare Figure 6 with Figure 3) in order to enhance readability and visual appeal of the buttons. In addition, in the line below the SkypeMe buttons, number of questions and answers exchanged between the buyer and the seller is enclosed in the parentheses. By giving the buyer additional information regarding the communication, this potentially helps alleviate the relatively more severe trust and safety issue in Taiwan.

Many eBay users engage in cross-border trading. When users across two different time zones try to engage in real-time communication, both parties are not usually readily available due to misaligned schedules. Skype's off-line asynchronous communication capability addresses this issue. Skype can store the instant messages on a server, which can be read by the other party once he or she comes online.

Fig. 6. The SkypeMe buttons on eBay Taiwan site.

3 Discussion

This project is among first attempts to solve the design challenge of integrating a VoIP tool and an eCommerce platform, two very distinct online platforms. The challenge came from both user experience and business considerations. In terms of user experience, we created consistent look and feel across eBay and Skype and integrated Skype downloading flows. In terms of business, we addressed numerous trust and safety issues and attempted to prevent users from accidentally dropping out

of transaction after downloading Skype. Due to technical limitations, some issues have yet to be addressed in the design. For instance, the current platform is unable to pass item ID and description to the seller, so the seller does not know which item a Skype call is about. The buyer needs to specify which item he or she refers to during the Skype conversation with the seller. Future design effort should be made to address this issue.

Significance of this project can also be evaluated against the backdrop of the emerging trend of social networking. People increasingly look for a sense of community when engaging one another in the virtual space. This trend is impacting every aspect of online behavior, and eCommerce is no exception. Notable examples of this trend include MySpace, Craigslist, and YouTube. Primarily an auction site operating on a c2c model, community building is critical for the consolidation of eBay's customer base and expansion of business. By integrating Skype's real-time communication capacity into the eBay platform, this project showcases how effective UI design can help eCommerce benefit from a major emerging trend of the internet age.

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