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THE WATER COOLER ; THE WORKING STIFF

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Nearly everyone has a wild eBay miracle story. Back in the Pre- PayPal Era, I once sold a Barry Manilow concert video (inexplicably abandoned by a vacating officemate) for more than \$100. I almost felt guilty for cashing the check. Almost.

Intrigued by last weekend's influx of 10,000 zealous eBayers, I poked my head into the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center floor to experience a few hours of eBay Live!

No doubt, countless tales of garage sale conquest were swapped during seminars scheduled throughout the event. The exhibition hall, however, initially seemed no different than a boring computer trade show.

So how does a software booth lure me within comfortable badge- scanning range? Some offered freshly microwaved chocolate chip cookies; others tried Hershey's Kisses or Starburst Fruit Chews. Many went with the traditional huddle of fashion models hovering around the sales guys.

By the time I caught up with software developer Mathew Keister, he had already given away 3,000 red cheerleading megaphones. I had to have number 3,001, being totally mesmerized by how the plastic traffic cone has been repurposed as an office novelty item.

Keister, of New Jersey-based Seamless Development, quickly launched into his pitch about using "100 percent American programming labor."

But I wanted to know more about the blonde cheerleader 'programmers' behind him - and the giant widescreen video game looming above my head.

Anya Kondratyeva, a Boston model who emigrated from Russia in 1999, ironically noted that she grew up in a land without cheerleaders (the profession is slowly catching on there today). She also has a part-time gig as an "Orbit Girl," handing out free chewing gum samples at Fenway Park.

Her boss, meanwhile, bragged to me that eBay CEO Meg Whitman had stopped by earlier to play with their Nintendo Wii.

I felt sorry for several nearby booths that only had stick pens to give away - pathetic little stick pens that didn't even light up or make any noise. The guys looked lonely back there, desperately wishing their products were cheerleader-worthy, too.

Wrapping software with sex appeal is a proven formula, but it is not the only way to ensnare more customers. Vendio, an auction management software company, boosted foot traffic with two plastic ships and a bucket of tea bags.

Their Boston Tea Party game invited prospective clients to toss tea into a barrel-top diorama for 30 seconds. Each bag that landed in the cellophane ocean earned five points, with five points subtracted for each bag in the boat. The highest scorer during the conference was awarded an iPod.

Kudos to the tea bag guys, but the saviest marketing prowess belongs to eBay itself. At random times throughout the afternoon, pop music would stream into the convention hall, causing all commerce to freeze.

This was the secret signal. To the sweet sounds of "Kool & The Gang," I watched mobs of adults trample the nearest eBay staffer for a freebie commemorative pin. Pavlovian? Sure, but the passion for the brand is genuine.

Later, while standing in line to see the real Kool & The Gang, a trade show attendee asked me if I had ever been to eBay Live.

Nope, I replied.

"Then I won't tell you what happens right when you walk in the door," he said. "I don't want to ruin it for you, because it is just not the same the second or third time around. It will give you goosebumps!"

With a previous social engagement forcing me to forfeit my goosebumps, I convinced a woman in the parking lot to reveal the surprise of the Closing Gala.

I was missing out on the "Clapping Tunnel," a dual receiving line of hundreds of eBay employees applauding incoming auctioneers and giving them high fives. My parking lot friend thought I was a fool for voluntarily giving up the love. "It will give you the chills," she promised, without the slightest touch of sarcasm.

Darren Garnick's "Working Stiff" column runs every Wednesday in the Boston Herald. For an extra helping of "The Working Stiff," visit <http://news.bostonherald.com/blogs/workingStiff/>

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