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Antique book dealer expands Web sales

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Times Colonist

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Victoria's Abebooks is getting a firmer, higher-profile hold on the Internet big-time.

The Web seller of used, rare, out-of-print and antique books, will announce today an alliance with EBay, the Internet's dominant auction site.

Abebooks' deal completes a triple crown of marketing partnerships; the company is already working with Amazon, and Barnes and Noble.

The alliance will give Abebooks' 10,000 affiliated booksellers yet another venue for their wares.

"This is really the missing part for us, we've now partnered with all the big players in the industry," said Hannes Blum, vice president and general manager for Abebooks.

"EBay is the biggest player in the online marketplace, they are the auction giant."

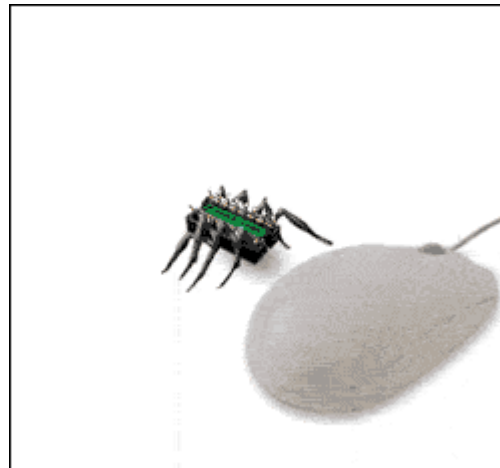
The partnership is being touted as a win-win for the companies.

"We have the supply and EBay has the demand," said Blum.



Deddeda Stemler, Times Colonist / Keith Waters, left, one of the founders of Abebooks, and Hannes Blum, general manager of the online used book database, celebrate their partnership with Web giant EBay.

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EBay boasts some 60 million customers, while Abebooks has an inventory of 42 million books and facilitates the sale of between 10,000 and 15,000 each day. That adds up to between \$75 million and \$100 million in sales each year.

Abebooks and EBay will make money with each transaction or book listed -- as an example a \$10 book sold at auction will net Abebooks about 50 cents, and EBay about 52.5 cents, with the seller taking the balance.

Booksellers are also expected to benefit from the deal. With EBay on board, sellers with valuable first editions and antique books may be able to fetch a higher price at auction rather than a fixed-price sale on the Abebooks.com site or one of its affiliates.

"Sometimes it makes sense to auction off something collectible so you want to go to an auction-based marketplace," said Abebooks's Boris Wertz, vice president of marketing and business development.

Wertz points out with this alliance the process is easier as sellers will not need to maintain separate databases for their fixed-price sales on Abebooks, and another for EBay sales.

"Now it's just one database," he said, adding Abebooks will also be the uploading agent and inventory manager on behalf of the sellers.

Today's announcement is just the latest in a stream of good news from Abebooks, which started in 1995 as the answer to a frustrated bookstore owner's prayers.

Cathy Waters wanted a better way of getting used books for her store, Timeless Books. Her husband Keith and civil servant colleague Rick Pura designed a database system to do that.

Abebooks was born and hasn't looked back.

The company says it is growing at a rate of between 40 and 50 per cent each year. Though the private company will not discuss its revenue, it is believed it hit the \$3 million mark in 1999 meaning it may be hitting \$11 million this year.

Abebooks has also set up sites in France, the United Kingdom and Germany that operate in the vernacular and currency of those countries. That international flavour is evident in the head office in Victoria.

Both Blum and Wertz have transferred to Victoria from the German office, and two other German employees are working here temporarily. At the same time, Canadians are working overseas.

"It was very difficult in the beginning and that led to frustrations on both sides," said Blum, noting it all boiled down to communication.

"You had two companies (Abebooks and Germany's JustBooks which it bought in 2001) that were fairly small and communication was informal. Suddenly we were forced to take on processes and procedures."

The problem was exacerbated with a nine-hour time difference between the offices and a two-hour window in which they could communicate live with each other.

"It was extremely difficult in the beginning to include the European office," said Blum. "But right now after being through a valley ... we are on a very good track."


"What helped is both companies had the same company culture," said Wertz. "Sometimes you have that complete clash. In our case, on every level people were getting along and that helps with integration."

It didn't hurt that the company flew in a large number of the European team for a Christmas party last year, allowing both sides to get to know each other a little better.


And with the new EBay deal, millions more may get to know Abebooks a little better as well.

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