

success

# eBay's eBoss

How Meg Whitman turned a tiny site into the world's greatest flea market

The eBay Live! convention had the vibe of a sell-out rock concert—except the cover band in the main hall was playing “Danke Schoen.” That didn’t dampen the excitement of the 10,000-plus delegates. Aged 15 to 87, all were users of the online flea market called eBay, peddling everything from pool tables to pork chops. For three days in June they turned up at Orlando’s Orange County Convention Center to trade sales tips, go to copywriting classes—and meet their messiah, CEO Meg Whitman. As she walked onstage, the crowd chanted, “Meg! Meg! Meg!” Whitman deflected the adulation. “You’re the star,” she told the crowd. “You’re the secret to eBay’s success.”

## Going, Going, Gone . . .

**Most wanted**  
A sports item is sold on eBay every second.

**Most expensive**  
A Gulfstream II jet went for \$4.9 million in 2001.



Her biggest joy? “My boys and my husband,” says Whitman (at eBay’s San Jose, Calif., headquarters).

## SUCCESS



"The passion of our users is what keeps us going," says Whitman (at eBay Live!).

Business analysts respectfully disagree. Last year FORTUNE magazine named Whitman, 47, one of the three most powerful women in business. Since taking the helm in 1998, she has transformed eBay from a dot-com upstart with 30 staffers to a corporate juggernaut boasting 4,500 employees and operating in 27 countries. She has helped create not only the world's most profitable e-commerce site but a pop-cultural phenomenon—a meeting place for glass-eyeball experts and BMW buffs alike. And she has done it all, admirers say, in a way that earns the loyalty of colleagues as well as customers. "Anxiety in the business world runs sky-high," says ABC news anchor Diane Sawyer. "But when Meg walks into a room, tensions seem to vanish."

A lot of people are certainly breathing easier since they started selling on eBay—among them wheelchair-bound Marjorie Smith, 49, who has built an online business selling Beanie Babies and other collectibles from her Port Royal, S.C., home. "eBay is giving us little folks a level playing field with

everyone," she says, "from big companies to the guy next door."

eBay's head honcho hardly fits the image of the Silicon Valley visionary. Raised in Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y., the youngest of three children born to financial exec Hendricks and homemaker Margaret, Whitman raced through high school in three years. Her idea of teen rebellion was pursuing her economics degree at Princeton. "Most of my relatives," she explains, "had gone to Harvard." She went there later, though, for her MBA. A competitive swimmer and lacrosse player, "Meg was a dynamo as a child," recalls Margaret, 83. "She has always loved to win." Whitman's gusto still attracts her husband of 23 years, neurosurgeon Griffith Harsh, with whom she shares a big Bay Area house. "In her quiet way, Meg is as driven as anyone I know," says Harsh, 49, who began dating her at Harvard. "Nothing intimidates her."

Not even the task of remaking eBay. After stints at Procter & Gamble, Disney and Hasbro, Whitman already had a stellar CV when eBay founder

Pierre Omidyar, then 30, came courting five years ago. At the time, staffers at the San Jose headquarters used card tables for desks. "It was pretty much the kids running the operation," says Adam Cohen, author of *The Perfect Store*, a book on eBay. "She professionalized the whole company." Yet she kept its egalitarian culture, sitting in a 8 ft. by 8 ft. cubicle like everyone else. "She doesn't act like a CEO," says Jim Griffith, 49, who runs eBay's user-training program. "She's willing to get in the trenches."

Whitman reads about 150 e-mails a day from eBay users; she often trades on the site herself, recently selling the contents of her Telluride, Colo., vacation condo. But after 60 hours at the office, she tries to keep her weekends work-free, going fly-fishing or to the movies with Harsh and their two sons, ages 15 and 18. It's a tough balance. Whitman once rushed out of a directors' meeting to take a frantic call from her younger boy, then 9, who was traveling alone and stuck in Dallas after missing a flight. Board members waited patiently for an hour while she calmed him down. "You have to give up the notion," she says, "that you're going to be the perfect wife, mother and executive all the time."

With a 2.3 percent share in the company, Whitman is worth as much as \$825 million but still buys her clothes at the local department store. That nonsense attitude has served her—and eBay shareholders—extraordinarily well. "I've always tried to just put my head down," she says, "and deliver the results."

- Susan Horsburgh
- Ron Arias in San Jose and Steve Helling in Orlando



### Most popular

The biggest category is collectibles, with 1.5 million items.

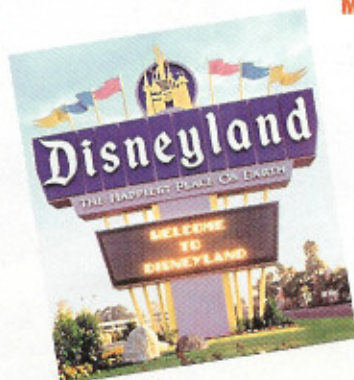
### Most personal

A woman got \$1 for her navel lint.



### Most impractical

John Stamos bought the 13.5-ft. letters from a Disneyland marquee for \$30,700.



### Most riveting

The world's oldest Levi's (c.1880) fetched \$46,532.

