

From McDonalds to Ebay as a Metaphor for Our Times
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One of the first things even a casual observer of eBay will notice is the sheer vastness of the thing. A quick search on eBay reveals 416,975 auctions going on simultaneously for music CDs and related items. In August 2006 eBay sold its 2 millionth car¹. In 2005 about 2,250,000 Americans sold items on eBay; and for 724,000 of them, this was a major, or even sole, source of income². Meanwhile, eBay is expanding around the world by buying out leading competitors or opening dedicated local businesses in countries such as Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, Poland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan and the United Kingdom. eBay is also making a major push into business-to-business and industrial sales, moving it far beyond its roots as a high tech garage sale. But it is eBay as a metaphor for our society, and not just a big business within our society, that interests me here.

The way a people provide for themselves will always be a central aspect of their society, and hence a central metaphor for the kind of people they are. Not surprisingly then, throughout American history, certain businesses or industries have often functioned as metonyms for the cultural zeitgeist, even if they directly represented only a small slice of reality. The cowboy is striking example of this, since this profession was only a tiny percentage of the population, yet signified a cultural ethos on an epic scale. Later on, Henry Ford's assembly line would represent rationalized work within a culture where science, rationality and centrally controlled large scale organizations typified the zeitgeist. In the 1970s, the symbolic torch of "iconic industry" was passed from Ford to McDonalds. The essence of the image was much the same -- mass production and mass consumption -- but different in some details. Middle class cultural critics can, and do, have a field day with McDonalds because it is not just mass, it's crass; providing the simple pleasures of starch, fat, sugar and salt in portions that have grown ever more capacious over the years. McDonalds is a symbol what many social critics saw as a conformist, homogenized culture. And the uniformed workers with uniformly smiling faces, also presented a depersonalized person, where homogenized friendliness was evenly dispersed regardless of the quality of the actual relationship between two people, and all conversations were limited to a simple script. Ritzer³ formalized this critique writing about the *McDonaldization of Society*, where he argued that McDonalds, with its uniformity, lack of imagination, efficiency, calculability and control; is an apt metaphor for the forces of modern capitalist globalization that he felt were sweeping the world.

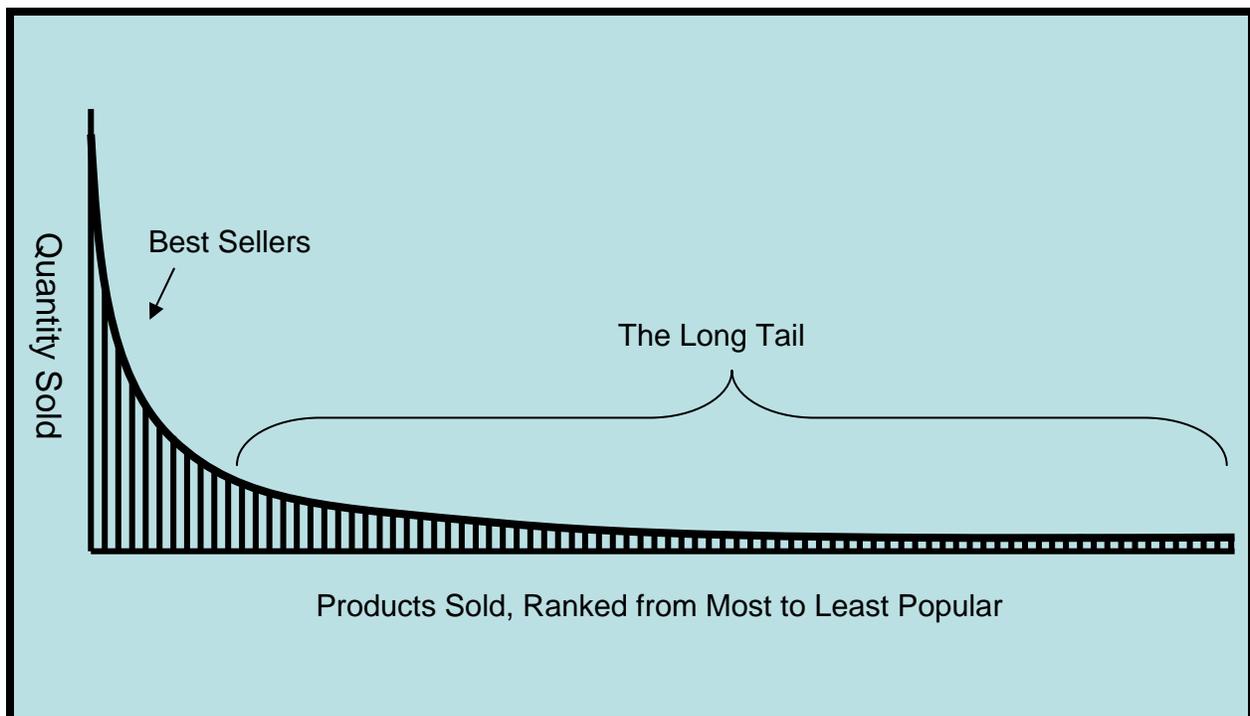
eBay is the anti-McDonalds. If McDonalds, as your local food factory, was a natural icon for modern impersonal economic rationality of an industrial economy; eBay is the postmodern icon of a diverse and socially fragmented society powered by an information economy. These contrast can be seen in four key areas: variety, predictability, control and individual personality.

¹ Data is from an eBay press release dated August 8, 2006, and titled *Two Millionth Passenger Vehicle Sold on eBay Motors*.

² Statistics are from an ACNeilson study in 2005, as quoted in an eBay press release dated July 21, 2005 and titled *New Study Reveals 724,000 Americans Rely on eBay Sales for Income*.

³ Ritzer, G. (1983), "The McDonaldization of society", *Journal of American Culture*, No. 6, pp. 100-7. And Ritzer, G. (2000), *The McDonaldization of Society*, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Variety. McDonalds sells essentially one product line through over 31,000⁴ different locations. eBay sells over 2,500,000 different product lines from essentially one location. Henry Ford is famous for saying “they can have any color car they want, as long as it is black.” Keeping all the cars the same was the secret to the efficiency of his assembly line. McDonalds shares this basic orientation, a limited menu keeps costs down and the production speed up. On the other extreme, eBay is an example of what is coming to be called a “long tail⁵” business. The long tail, refers to the idea that a few products are hits and sell in very high volume, but that a vast array of infrequently purchased products can together, become the mainstay of a business. A former Amazon employee described the Long Tail as follows: “We sold more books today that didn't sell at all yesterday than we sold today of all the books that did sell yesterday.”⁶



New technologies allow businesses like eBay to offer people a staggering variety of products without making overhead costs prohibitive, and these same technologies are providing consumers with search tools that make accessing that variety possible. At the same time, society is fragmenting from the fabled mass society of the 1950's and 60's (which was never really as homogenous as is popularly believed), to an eclectic hodge-podge of diverse lifestyle communities. And the variety of products consumers' desire can boggle even a jaded mind. When Pierre Omidyar, founder of eBay, wanted to do a test auction, he looked around his apartment for something to sell and “all he could find was a broken laser pointer. On the last of seven days, at least two bidders began bidding on the broken laser pointer. The final price was something like \$14.83. Did the winning bidder not understand the laser pointer was broken? He emailed the bidder and got an email back: “I'm a collector of broken laser pointers.”⁷

⁴ From McDonalds annual report, 2006.

⁵ Anderson, Chris (2006), *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*, Hyperion press.

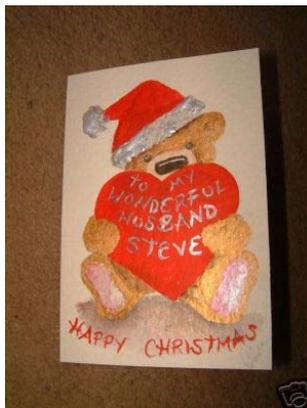
⁶ Quote is from Chris Anderson's blog on the Long Tail.

⁷ From Fast Company.com, FC NOW, *The eBay Experience* by Heath Row, April 30, 2004.

Predictability. McDonalds is nothing if not predictable. As Nancarrow, Vir and Barker⁸ write “predictability worldwide is at the hub of the whole fast food experience, namely no surprises and no risk in either the environment or food and little decision-making required.” So, when people are traveling and want something utterly familiar, there is always McDonalds. But eBay is remarkably unpredictable. Part of the pleasure of eBay is the excitement of exploration; you never know what unexpected product will pop up on your computer screen. When you decide to buy, the price is unpredictable, as most goods are sold through auction. And when the product arrives, there its exact quality and nature is also often quite unpredictable. This is not to say that consumers always like this unpredictability, but there it is, nonetheless.

Control. McDonalds controls every part of the production process. When they opened in the Soviet Union, they had to hire farmers to grow the right king of potatoes for their fries. Portion sizes are weighed and measured, and most ingredients arrive at the franchises pre-sized and shaped at a factory. Even the customers are controlled so they stand efficiently in line and bus their own tables. Chairs are comfortable enough to be inviting for a short time, but not so comfortable as to suggest a longer stay. eBay also includes a modicum of control: illegal or highly regulated products cannot be sold, profanity cannot be used, and rules exist to help ensure that eBay gets it’s cut of the proceeds. But on the whole, eBay tries to harness and ride, rather than strictly control, the cacophony of billions buyers and sellers. Indeed, this whole eBayADay project is only possible because individuals are given a large measure of control over their own listings.

Individual Personality. McDonalds in an exercise in Weberian bureaucratic efficiency. The service is implacably friendly but utterly soulless. There is hardly any sense that the person taking your order is indeed an individual person, in any way that wouldn’t be just the same if he or she were replaced by the server one isle over. To be fair, most eBay auctions are equally generic. You buy your DVD player, and that’s the end of it. But one doesn’t have to look too hard to see bits of individual personality shooting up like plants through cracks in a sidewalk. For example, Anne Evon has a little business selling hand painted Teddy Christmas Cards.



⁸ Nancarrow, Clive, Jason Vir and Andy Barker (2005), Ritzer's McDonaldization and applied qualitative marketing research," *Qualitative Market Research*. Bradford: 2005. Vol.8, Iss. 3; pg. 296, 16 pgs

You choose the message you want on the heart and the artist will paint you a card with that message – this one says “To My Wonderful Husband Steve”. The artist notes that the cards are signed, and are “suitable for framing after use!” Whether these cards are to one’s personal taste or not, there is a clear sense that a real human being stands behind each and every one.

This eBay America is not yet the public face of our nation to the larger world. For many people outside of our shores, McDonalds remains the icon of choice to represent America, at least for the time being. But as industrialization moves from the US and Europe to become more strongly associated with the developing world, an industrial style business may no longer seem to capture the American ethos. And as we make less and less new stuff here in the US, maybe selling used stuff to each other provides a pretty good picture of where we’re at. And surely, if and when we ever decide that the time is right for a new symbol to represent the essence of the American way, where else should we look for one, except where everything else is to be found?