

EBAY'S FEEDBACK SYSTEM AND EVALUATING FEEDBACK

eBay's feedback system is far from perfect. The summary information is cunningly designed to cast sellers in as favorable light as possible. But, even so, you can use its report to get a good idea of how knowledgeable the seller is and how he or she does business.

FEEDBACK SCORE AND POSITIVE FEEDBACK PERCENTAGE: When you click on the seller's feedback number (in parentheses next to his eBay ID) or the "Read feedback comments" (just below the seller's eBay ID) links, you get a page entitled "Member Report." At the top of the page, in addition to some seller data, you see a summary which looks like this:

Feedback Score: 81
Positive Feedback: 97.6%

Members who left a positive: 83
Members who left a negative: 2
All positive feedback received: 132

Figure A: Sample eBay feedback summary.

The "feedback score" is the number of positive feedbacks left by unique buyers/sellers (a single buyer or seller who leaves eight different feedbacks is counted as one feedback) minus the number of negative feedbacks from unique buyers/sellers. The "positive feedback" percentage is calculated by dividing the positive feedbacks by the positive feedbacks plus negative feedbacks from unique buyers/sellers. Neutral feedback does not enter into the equation.

To the right of this summary is a box showing the number of positive, neutral and negative feedbacks left during the last month, six months and twelve months.

Ignore the "feedback received by xxxxxx" number directly below the "All Feedback Received" tab: the number is almost always wrong, thanks to an eBay coding bug.

EVALUATING THESE NUMBERS: Because retaliatory feedback can be devastating to a buyer's own feedback rating, nearly all eBay buyers are reluctant to leave negative feedback for a seller. Also, It seems to me that most stamp buyers rate as clueless or worse when it comes to evaluating a stamp or cover: they simply take the seller's word that the item is as described and leave positive feedback if the transaction goes fairly smoothly.

Therefore,

ANY POSITIVE FEEDBACK LESS THAN 100% WITH ZERO NEUTRALS IS CAUSE FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

In the example above, at first glance it seems that a positive feedback of 97.2% is pretty decent. But here's

how my survey of feedback on 100 stamp and postal history sellers (done on Sunday, January 25, 2004, the United States 19th century used category only) shakes out:

| POSITIVE FEEDBACK | NUMBER OF SELLERS |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 100.0 | 51 |
| 99.9 | 9 |
| 99.8 | 7 |
| 99.7 | 4 |
| 99.6 | 7 |
| 99.5 | 5 |
| 99.4 | 4 |
| 99.3 | 5 |
| 99.2 | 1 |
| 99.1 | 1 |
| 99.0 | 4 |
| 98.9 | - |
| 98.8 | - |
| 98.7 | - |
| 98.6 | - |
| 98.5 | - |
| 98.4 | 1 |
| 98.3 | - |
| 98.2 | - |
| 98.1 | - |
| 98.0 | - |
| 97.9 | - |
| 97.8 | - |
| 97.7 | - |
| 97.6 | 1 |

Figure B: eBay feedback survey results.

That's right: a 97.6 positive feedback by far trails the pack. (There are a handful of occasional sellers on eBay who rack up somewhat lower numbers, but they get NARUed pretty quickly in response to FBI wire fraud investigations.)

When I did this survey, I also tracked the number of positive, neutral and negative feedbacks for the last year. There was a total of 79,195 feedbacks left. Of this total, only 149 were neutral and 193 were negative. By eBay's calculation method, this is a 99.6 positive feedback, a number which truly beggars belief when I consider all the misidentified stamps and items with unnoted damage which sell for much more than they're actually worth.

By contrast, the best real-life philatelic auction houses struggle mightily to keep returns to less than three percent of lots sold and most of them don't meet this goal. I've returned about 20% of my eBay purchases for refunds; in my sad experience, the likelihood of actually receiving the refund runs around 50%.

EXAMINE THE FEEDBACK REMARKS: So, when you see a less than 100% feedback with zero neutrals, investigate. eBay makes it hard to find the neutrals and negatives. You have to scroll through the feedbacks to find them. See how the seller handles each non-positive.

In some cases, the buyer has unreasonable expectations (“Paid by PayPal. Didn’t arrive next day. SLOOOOW shipping by a crook!” is an example). If there is a reply by the seller, did he screech and holler at the buyer? (For instance, “Knucklehead!! Dumkopf!! Moron!!”) Or did he reply calmly and rationally? (For instance, “Paid by PayPal 09/11; shipped 09/12; post office DC says delivered 09/15.”) Many sellers pick up some negatives from such unreasonable buyers.

In other cases, a seller gets negged for a legitimate reason, for instance, “Item not as described.” Again, see how the seller handles the situation. If the feedback reads, “Item not as described — refund was lightning fast” then you know the buyer is honorable. But if the feedback reads “Not as described — seller won’t answer emails — beware!!” then that buyer has left you good advice to follow.

As you burrow through all those positive feedbacks looking for the neutrals and negatives, scan the positives as well. The “positive-negative” has become a tool used by buyers on sellers whom they think may not refund for misdescribed items. An example of such a “positive-negative” might be “Shipped promptly. Two thins and a tear not visible in scan is NOT ‘sound’”