

# The New York Times

## What's It Worth: Using the Web to Appraise the Price of Everything

By Brad Stone  
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Bill Hudak wants to put the original eBay back into eBay Inc.



As the Internet auction powerhouse gradually shifts toward favoring big powersellers and facilitating the sale of ordinary, mass-produced products like iPod cases and Wii consoles, Mr. Hudak and his startup, Ztail, have returned to eBay's original mission: trying to unlock the value in people's hidden stashes of junk.

Ztail, based in Palo Alto, Calif., wants to help casual Internet users sell those one or two items currently locked and forgotten in the bowels of their basements. The company's original offering, last year, helped people list items for sale on eBay and then publish those listings on blogs or social networks.

Last week, Ztail introduced another interesting e-commerce tool: "What's It Worth," a sort of Kelley Blue Book for the era of participatory media. Users can list any item on Ztail.com and ask other members of the company's user community to offer estimates of its value. People can also post the What's It Worth widget to their blog or social networking profile and poll their readers on the item's value. Current and former eBay listings for similar products can also be dredged up and compared or combined with these other estimates.

"Our long-term goal is to be the definitive pricing guide for all products," said Mr. Hudak, a Ztail co-founder. "That is a very broad, ambitious statement, so until then, our short-term objective is to introduce more casual sellers into the eBay ecosystem by showing them they have value in their closet, and then creating an easy on-ramp for them to create a sale."

Ztail plans to make money by selling sponsorships on the site and by earning commissions from eBay for referring business.

It's unclear how much demand there will be for Ztail's pricing information, especially since eBay already makes it easy for sellers to search past listings and find the prices for which similar products recently sold.

The company also faces the challenge of any startup trying to build a brand-new participatory network — trying to get enough people to join in so that the wisdom of large crowds can be

exploited. Ztail isn't there yet: My first What's It Worth listing, for an old Kodak EasyShare camera got only three wildly divergent estimates.

To stimulate more interest, Ztail has also introduced a What's It Worth application on Facebook that draws people into an "Antique Roadshow"-like game of guessing an item's value and then comparing it with the crowd's overall appraisal.

Achieving success won't be easy, but the potential payoff for Ztail is big: According to a study eBay conducted with Nielsen last year, the average U.S. household has 52 unused items sitting around worth a total of \$3,100.

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