Colleges selling surplus online

eBay, online auctions expand market for unusual items

STATE COLLEGE, Pennsylvania (AP) -- Surely, there's someone out there who needs six factory-sealed, 100-pound cans of freon. Officials at Penn State University just hope that someone is on eBay.

Last year, the university's salvage and surplus department raised more than $90,000 selling used or unneeded equipment on eBay. As colleges and universities absorb budget cuts, some are turning to the online auction site to get rid of their more unusual, hard-to-price pieces.

"More and more, we're seeing that we're getting more money through eBay than we are through our traditional methods," said Jim Dunlop, director of procurement services for Penn State.

Salvage and surplus operations have long been a part of college life, especially at large, public universities. Dorm furniture, lab equipment, even office artwork needs to be replaced eventually, and university surplus warehouses end up looking like the set of "Sanford and Son," where there's one of everything and always a deal to be made.

But traditional means of dumping unwanted items -- campus surplus stores and live auctions -- only go so far. After all, once Penn State Public Broadcasting is done with it, who in central Pennsylvania needs a 15-section radio tower?

"We were having live auctions here once a month, and we were flooding the market in our area for what we had available," said Patsy Hendricks, surplus property supervisor at Oregon State University. "We sold pallets of glassware, scientific glassware, for $10, $15. We knew there was a better way to do this."

Oregon State was a pioneer in using Internet auction sites to sell some of the university's -- and the state's -- more unusual items. Hendricks said she first started using Amazon.com's auction site in the late 1990s, switching to eBay about four years ago.

The idea is catching on. It was after a visit to Oregon State that Penn State first began using eBay, said Will Gallaher, manager of Penn State Salvage and Surplus. Michigan State and Washington State universities also sell on eBay; the University of Washington, in addition to using eBay, has webcast its live auctions, allowing people to participate from around the world.

A Hammond organ here, an ice cream machine there and various and sundry nuts, bolts and gauges generated a decent revenue stream for Penn State. But it was a globe with a wooden stand sold in September 2001 that convinced Gallaher and Pam Coffman, who handles the university's eBay sales, that eBay was for real.

"Years ago, we'd sell one for $300, $400, $500, and people usually throw the globe away and put in a piece of glass or something and make a nice table out of it," Gallaher said.

Not this time. A museum in the Netherlands paid $11,600 for the globe, then paid movers to pack it up and ship it overseas.
Since then, Penn State has sold three pianos, a Moog synthesizer, a doughnut machine, an ion synthesizer and other assorted oddities on eBay.

Sometimes, they barely know what they're selling -- they only know someone could use it. A tilting chair recovered from Penn State's Milton S. Hershey College of Medicine is described on eBay as "great for a tattoo artist or doctor."

**eBay isn't for all colleges**

But for all its successes, eBay isn't for every college. Mark Ludwig, manager if Iowa State University Surplus, said he doesn't have the personnel to photograph and describe every item for an eBay sale, and that he doesn't have the space to store things while the auction takes place.

A bigger problem for many state universities are laws regulating the disbursement of state property or limiting contracts the state can enter into.

Tim Sell, business manager for SWAP, the surplus sale operation for the University of Wisconsin and the state, said he spent nearly two years trying to work out a way to sell Wisconsin's surplus items on eBay, but ended up setting up his own auction site. It generated about $280,000 in sales in its first year, but Sell said he'd still prefer to use eBay, which reaches a wider audience.

And when you're selling such a motley assortment, the wider the audience the better.

"You look at something, and you think there's no way anybody's going to pay good money for that, and then it's the first thing out the door the next sale," Ludwig said. "The saying, 'One man's junk is another man's treasure' -- it's absolutely true."