

SPELLING COUNTS – on eBay

by Cecil & Dolores Munsey

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When a bottle collector wanted to sell a marbled-stoppered soda water bottle, he listed it on eBay once, and got no takers. He tried a second time, and still no interest.

Was it the price? The fuzzy picture? Maybe the description: “. . . a beautiful cobalt blue *cod bottel*.”

Such is the eBay world of misspellers, where the clueless – and sometimes just careless bottle collectors – try to sell *historical flasks*, *Tippercanoe*, *Lidia Pinkhem*, *barbara*, and *figeral* bottles.

Sometimes they do get bidders, but rarely very many. Often the buyers are collectors who troll for spelling slip-ups, buying bottles ‘on the cheap’ and selling them all over again on eBay, but with the right spelling and for the right price. Bob Merada, a pharmacist in Central Florida, is one of them.

Mr. Merada bought a “*barbara*” bottle for \$5. The amber and white candy stripe barber bottle was quite a find. He put it back on the auction block with the right spelling. It sold for \$120. “I’ve bought and sold stuff on eBay that I bought for next to nothing because of poor spelling or vague descriptions,” he said.

“My best score,” he confided, “was a ground-stoppered ruby red *apothecery* bottle with a label-under glass.” He further confided, “I bought it for \$12 and sold the red ‘apothecary’ bottle a week later for \$127.”

It’s not just bottle collectors who have figured out that great bargains can be had on eBay because of poor spelling or vague descriptions. Chris Richardson, who lives in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, also searches for misspellings. He now operates his entire business by laptop computers, having bought three Compaqs for a pittance simply by asking for *Compacts* instead.

No one knows how much misspelling is out there on eBay, where more than \$23 billion worth of goods was sold last year. The company does flag common misspellings, but wrong spellings can also turn up similar misspellings, so that buyers *and* sellers frequently read past the Web site’s slightly bashful line asking by any chance, “Did you mean . . . barber

bottle?”

An unofficial survey (a half-hour search for creative spellings) turned up dozens of items, including *antiks*, *dimonds*, *telefonos*, and loads of old *bottels*.

When contacted, the sellers were often surprised to hear that they had misspelled their wares.

Lillian Dyal, who lives in Bradenton, Florida said she knew she was on shaky ground when she set out to spell Pepsi-Cola. But instead of flipping through any of the reference books she had access to, she did an Internet search for *Pepse* Cola and came up with 26 listings.

She never guessed that results like that meant she was groping in the spelling wilderness. Pepsi Cola spelled correctly turned up 1,568 items.

Some experts say there is no evidence that people are spelling worse than they ever did. But with the growth of e-mail correspondence and instant messaging, language has grown more informal. And much as calculators did for arithmetic, spell checkers have made good spelling seem to many people an obsolete skill.

But that’s not true on eBay! Spelling **does** matter as has been shown. Spelling is important to both sellers and buyers.

Some sellers clearly bear in mind the potential for disaster when preparing their advertisements. Bob Jensen of Denver,

who was selling hunting and fishing knives on eBay recently, covered all the bases: his listing advertised every sort of alphabetic butchery, including knife and *knife*. His strategy of listing multiple spellings, he said, is based on his experience as a buyer. “I’m a bad speller myself,” he said. So his mistakes in searching for items led him to realize that he could buy up bargains. “I’d go ahead and deliberately misspell it when I searched for items,” he said.

Even some that have made money off misspellings have felt the bite of bad spelling. When one fellow (who wishes to remain anonymous) was helping his parents sell off the contents of his father’s jewelry and watch repair store, he listed “a huge lot of *earings*,” it attracted only three bids, and sold for just \$5.50.

And then there was the time he sold the family’s *flatwear* . . .

GLOSSARY

- “cod bottel” = Codd bottle
- “historical flasks” = historical flasks
- “Tippercanoe” = Tippecanoe
- “Lidia Pinkhem” = Lydia Pinkham
- “barbara” bottle = barber bottle
- “figeral” = figural
- “Compacts” = Compaqs
- “antiks” = antiques
- “dimonds” = diamonds
- “telefonos” = telephones
- “bottels” = bottles
- “Pepse” Cola = Pepsi Cola
- “knife” = knife
- “earings” = earrings
- “flatwear” = flatware

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