

# Improve Your Customer Service With Skype

**Think Skype is just an internet phone service? Think again. This all-in-one service makes communicating with eBay customers a snap.**

By Mike Hogan

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Some things just go well together--peanut butter and jelly, buyers and sellers--and now we can add Skype and eBay to that list. We're well into the second generation of the internet, and it's becoming clear that e-commerce is all about values that Skype and eBay share: community, value-added services and communications.

At the end of the day, eBay's genius is to put buyers in touch with sellers so efficiently that even the smallest commercial transactions are possible. It's become such a popular medium that it has grown into a worldwide community 180 million strong. Similarly, Skype's fast-growing community demonstrates the strength of its core value proposition: cheap communications. In just two and a half years, [Skype](#) has attracted more than 69 million registered users worldwide who are saving big-time on long-distance phone calls over the net.

Additionally, more than 2 million Skype users have signed up for the value-added SkypeOut service, which enables them to easily reach traditional landline numbers outside the Skype community. SkypeOut subscribers can connect to American, Australian or European landline phone numbers for about 2 cents a minute. Calls to most other countries range from a dime to a quarter per minute.

eBay buyers and sellers can appreciate cheap long distance as well as the next consumer, of course. And another 69 million buyers and sellers would also be a nice addition to the eBay Marketplace, notes Joe Laszlo, research director at Jupitermedia Corp. The more, the merrier.

## Communications Central

Skype isn't just another bargain-rate internet phone company. Skype is also a web application born and bred, marrying voice calls with instant messaging and all the conveniences IM can offer those doing business over the internet. That union starts with a common contact list for IM and phone buddies wrapped inside a small, portable desktop applet with an easy-to-use interface.

Version 2.0 of Skype's tiny voice applet achieves better-than-landline call quality over a \$10 headset or by adding a \$10 PC microphone to your PC's built-in speakers. Additionally, a spate of new Skype phones are being released for those who just have to have that traditional phone-calling experience. They connect to one of your PC's USB ports, and many, like the \$130 (all prices street) Linksys CIT200 Skype Phone, are cordless. They automatically download your Skype contact list and generally blend the features of the Skype desktop with the size and operating characteristics of a cell phone. Skype also adds free call forwarding, so you won't miss a call if you're not logged in to your PC. Skype can be quickly configured to have incoming calls ring on another Skype-equipped PC or any combination of three landlines or mobile phones (if you have SkypeOut for off-network calls).

eBay merchants who find a preponderance of their business calls coming from one or more phone exchanges--New York's 212 area code or Los Angeles' 213, for example--can establish a SkypeIn phone number for a few dollars a month or \$35 a year. A SkypeIn phone number gives your business a local presence in any area code in the world, encouraging customer contact. Time zones being what they are, each SkypeIn phone number comes with free voice mail, too, so you can answer calls when it's convenient.

## Business Bent

Like so many technologies nowadays, Skype built momentum for its services among consumers. But almost one-third of registered Skype users report making business calls with the service on a regular basis, so many of Skype's latest initiatives address the needs of growing businesses.

Skype Groups, for example, lets an entrepreneur use a single account to provision an entire office or several offices with Skype phone and IM services. Employees who are traveling or in distant offices can get one-

click, toll-free voice access to each other as easily as with an IM message. A Skype voice or IM chat can include up to four participants, and free videoconferencing is available to anyone whose PC has an inexpensive video camera attached. An increasingly popular alternative to business meetings, videoconferencing could also be used for product demonstrations, says Laszlo.

And Skype can be used for transferring digital product photos, user manuals, FAQs or other files. To make these kinds of web interactions easier still, Skype offers free, preprogrammed HTML links that can be added to any web page, product description or Outlook e-mail.

"Anyone can add a 'SkypeMe' button to a web page just by cutting and pasting HTML code from the Skype website," explains Saul Klein, Skype's vice president of marketing. "All of a sudden, more than 69 million Skype users can make a free phone call to you, IM you or leave a voice mail. It's a great way to provide sales and tech support."

Skype is making its application program interfaces available to other software developers who might like to add this functionality to their applications. Skype especially wants to see links in search engine results and context-sensitive ads, says Klein, so that interested customers need only click to reach merchants.

Like so many internet developments that have changed our old ways of thinking, the merger of Skype and eBay can't be calculated with old math. With their emphasis on efficiency, driving down costs and self-service communities, each has a business model with something to offer the other, says Laszlo.

When two of the most successful value propositions of the internet's first epoch get together, one plus one can equal three--or more.

## Can Your Phone Do This?

Skype 2.0 is jam-packed with the following features:

- **Skype video:** See your friends and family on the full computer screen or in the Skype calling window. Skype Video also includes a window that lets you view what you look like to the person you're calling.
- **Simplified user interface:** An intuitive menu with one-click access to key features and options makes it easy for the whole world to talk for free.
- **Self-expression:** Broadcast your mood along with your online presence. Let your contacts know whether you're happy, sad, listening to your favorite music, available to talk or do not want to be disturbed.
- **Personalization:** Personalize your [Skype](#) identity with avatars or custom ring tones.
- **Your contacts' time zones:** Before you wake up your friends, family or colleagues, take a quick glance to see what time it is in their location.
- **Contact Grouping:** Organize your contacts by grouping your friends, co-workers or family members. Start conference calls, chats or file sharing with the whole group with just one click.
- **Real-time contact search:** As you type each letter of a name into the dialing field, Skype matches it up to your contact list for quick retrieval.
- **[Skype toolbar](#) for Microsoft Outlook:** Use the toolbar for one-click calling to contacts from your Microsoft Outlook address book.

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