

The eBay evangelist takes brands battle to Brussels



Alasdair McGowan

FACTFILE

BORN: 5 January 1971 in Glasgow

EDUCATION: Lenzie Academy, near Glasgow; University College, Oxford University (MA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics); Washington and Lee University (US)

LIVES: Putney, South-West London, with wife and son

HOBBIES: Spending time with family, films, skiing, following Celtic FC, “occasional” games of chess

CV HIGHLIGHTS:

2005: eBay UK, Head of public affairs

2000-2005: Joins Number 10 political office, then in 2001 becomes senior policy adviser in the Number 10 policy directorate under PM Tony Blair

1997: Special adviser at the Ministry of Defence for George Robertson and then Geoff Hoon

1993: Works with George Robertson on Labour’s shadow defence brief

1992: Works with Martin O’Neill on Labour’s shadow energy brief

Alasdair McGowan, eBay UK’s head of public affairs, tells Sam Macrory what he learned in his years at Number 10 – and why his company has sent a petition with 750,000 signatures to European policymakers

‘Practically anyone can trade practically anything’: so says the mantra of eBay, the world’s largest online marketplace. Today it is a mission statement that finds itself under threat from a gathering of powerful forces.

The case for the defence is being marshalled by Alasdair McGowan, head of public affairs for eBay’s UK business for the past four-and-a-half years.

The 38-year-old Scot’s top priority at the moment is to persuade the European Commission to change EU competition law – specifically, technical-sounding ‘vertical restraints’ rules – to make it harder for brands and manufacturers to block the sale of their products across Europe on the internet, and on eBay in particular.

Petition presented

Companies that have been at war with eBay include luxury brands L’Oréal and Louis Vuitton, but McGowan insists that eBay is determined to avoid “the business of naming or shaming individual brands”.

He says this unsmilingly, and you get the impression that he can be a tough character to do business with if the need arises. His Glaswegian accent betrays a hint of frustration with the issue when he adds: “Some brands tell sellers to refrain from selling their goods at a discounted price, and if they refuse then the supplies mysteriously dry up or they get cut off completely. This is the sort of activity we want to try and stop or discourage. Clearly there is a problem that needs to be addressed and we hope that the Commission will listen to that.”

PAN approached McGowan about an interview a few months ago but he was keen to delay until October, because that is when his Brussels lobbying offensive’s main PR tool – an EU-wide petition calling for changes to competition law – would have been safely presented to policymakers.

The company launched this petition in July and McGowan latterly worked on it with (among others) Stefan Krawczyk, who joined eBay as its top Brussels-based lobbyist in the summer. Targeting people who use eBay in the EU, including in Sweden where eBay-owned Tradera operates a similar business, the company managed to get 750,000 people to sign.

The petition was presented to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in September, with Mary Honeyball, the Labour MEP for London and a fan of eBay since snapping up some wedding hats on the site, acting as the company’s most vocal MEP advocate. The EC must declare its ruling by the time the current law expires in 2010.

Put into context, the total number of signatures for the top five petitions on the Downing Street website still falls short of eBay’s petition tally.

McGowan describes the petition as “a pretty compelling example of the popular support that there is for online commerce and the internet as a whole”, but admits that there is no guarantee that this form of populist lobbying will work.

“I honestly don’t know. I think this is relatively new,” he replies, when asked his thoughts on the Commission’s likely reaction. “Some companies are getting more in-

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Ian Hall

volved in grassroots activity of this sort, but I am not aware of petitions that have got as many signatures as this. We're talking about what is, for some people, a relatively obscure piece of EU competition law, so it's remarkable that 750,000 signed the petition."

Celtic fanatic

The headquarters of eBay UK comprise various buildings that surround a Georgian square next to the river in affluent Richmond-upon-Thames: interviewing him in the office's trendy environs – with eBay's 'primary colours' scheme very much to the fore – it certainly seems a long way from stuffy old Westminster.

So it is fortunate that McGowan talks about his employer with the passion of someone who is an eager user of the site, rattling through its origins in the US in the 1990s to its globe-straddling present.

He says he first delved into the cybermarket to search for a CD by "obscure" Glasgow band The Blue Nile, and is currently in the process of selling baby equipment his young son has outgrown. His enthusiasm seems genuine and is persuasive. Perhaps that shouldn't be a surprise, as McGowan honed his art of political persuasion at the most sought-after finishing school around: 10 Downing Street.

Tony Blair, who McGowan worked with for five years, had a knack of getting what he wanted by turning on the charm when required. McGowan, softly spoken and straight-talking, comes across as business-like first and foremost. But that arguably makes his enthusiasm more convincing, and when PAN's interview is over he talks about his love for Celtic Football Club with a fanaticism that his old boss struggled to convey when he talked about Newcastle United.

'Credible arguments' needed

McGowan describes eBay as "a big business powered by small business", with a balancing act of seeking to boost trust in its brand by enforcing strong consumer protection while also seeking to cut red tape to help smaller traders. McGowan says this makes eBay "a useful interlocutor for the Department of Business when it is considering laws in consumer protection."

As well as Lord Mandelson's fiefdom, McGowan is also a regular visitor to the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) to discuss issues such as the online resale of tickets, and the Home Office, where issues include tackling cyber-crime.

At a ministerial level, the PA sector seems likely to have a new cast to deal with after

Alasdair McGowan

WHAT OTHERS SAY

FORMER MINISTER: Lord Robertson (Labour defence secretary 1997-1998): "In opposition, Alasdair – leading a staff of three – did the work of a thousand civil servants. In government, he was invaluable in helping me deal with a staff of 300,000. He was a formidable talent."

FORMER MINISTER: Geoff Hoon (Labour defence secretary, 1999-2005): "Alasdair was already working in the MoD when I arrived there. He was obviously a brilliant political adviser in defence – George Robertson went on to be the secretary-general of NATO and I spent almost six years as secretary of state for defence."

DIRECTOR AT EBAY UK'S PREVIOUS PUBLIC AFFAIRS AGENCY: Liam McCloy (director at Bell Pottinger Public Affairs, with which eBay worked until last year): "Alasdair has a good eye for the regulatory details as well as a keen sense of the bigger political picture and the forces at play in the public policy debate affecting eBay's business."

the upcoming general election, but McGowan chooses his words carefully when discussing a possible incoming Conservative government.

He says: "Clearly we want to make sure we are both abreast of current Conservative thinking and in touch with key Conservative spokesmen. Whatever political party is in power, what matters is whether you have a good story to tell and credible arguments in favour of your public-policy positions."

From the MoD to Number 10

While eBay's neutral ethos has no doubt ironed out the creases of a decade working at the heart of New Labour, a change of government will surely be a cause of some personal sadness for McGowan.

The son of a "pragmatic" Labour-voting father, McGowan headed south after school to study PPE at Oxford University before moving to Westminster to work as a researcher for Martin O'Neill, Labour's shadow energy minister, then George Robertson, who held the shadow Scotland brief.

Following Labour's 1997 election landslide Robertson was appointed defence minister and McGowan became his special adviser. McGowan remained at the MoD when Robertson moved to Nato – he failed to convince McGowan to join him – and was succeeded by Geoff Hoon.

In 2000 he joined the Downing Street political office before moving across to the policy directorate the following year. He recalls Number 10 as a "hugely exciting place to work – like the House of Commons itself, you never, ever got blasé about it", and speaks fondly of former colleagues including Sally Morgan (who hired him), Anji Hunter, Alastair Campbell, Jeremy Heywood, and, naturally, Blair himself.

Overall, Downing Street gave him a "pretty good grounding" for what he does today, McGowan says with more than a little suggestion of understatement.

"You learn about policy, government and communications," McGowan explains. "It leaves you with an understanding of how government works and thinks. Government relations professionals who focus on access get it wrong – what really counts is the strength of your arguments. You always have to think in terms of the public-policy impact rather than narrow commercial impact."

While the likes of David Miliband have graduated from backroom Downing Street jobs to centre-stage political careers, McGowan insists that he has no interest in a parliamentary career.

"People have often asked if I would ever consider it, but the answer is a pretty much unequivocal 'no'," he says. "Politicians often have to make difficult compromises, and you can see the impact it can have on families, particularly in a remote constituency. I have a 13-month-old son and the notion of spending large amounts of time away from him does not sound terribly appealing."

For now, McGowan wants to remain at eBay, "for as long as they want me." By May, when he finds out whether his petition has knocked down a few more barriers in the world of online trading, McGowan could find himself one of eBay's most valued commodities. Before he does, he must convince Europe's lawmakers that the answer is to buy rather than not to buy. The hard sell is very much under way. **PAN**

Government relations professionals who focus on access get it wrong

eBay in the UK **FACTFILE**



- Launched in the UK in 1999, eBay.co.uk is the UK's largest online marketplace and the UK's number one e-commerce site (source: Nielsen/NetRatings, June 2009)
- eBay UK has five employees in comms, two of whom have European responsibilities; UK-based head of corporate comms for Europe is Vanessa Canzini, who reports to Switzerland-based director of corporate comms for Europe, Steve Milton
- eBay UK has just one PA person – Alasdair McGowan – although the company has nine PA people in the EU; the company's director of government relations for Europe is Switzerland-based Dr Anja Bundschuh
- eBay UK retains the consultancy Blue Rubicon for both PA and PR