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## eBay San Dimas Marks A New Era For RIAs

Desktop RIAs Outgrow Browsers To Offer Immersive User Experiences

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The much-anticipated beta version of eBay San Dimas has arrived, ushering in a new era in rich Internet applications (RIAs). Adobe Integrated Runtime (AIR, formerly known as Apollo) applications like eBay San Dimas take RIAs out of the browser and put them on the desktop. These desktop applications enable occasionally connected use, customized content views, and a branded experience that can act as a platform for closer relationships with customers. But desktop RIAs aren't for everyone. Companies must assess whether their power users will benefit from the capabilities of AIR applications in a world in which the desktop will likely become very crowded.

### EBAY DESKTOP WRITES A NEW CHAPTER IN THE RIA STORY

On June 11, the much-anticipated eBay San Dimas application was released in beta.<sup>1</sup> San Dimas brings the power of RIAs to the desktop, reversing the trend of software moving from the desktop to browser-based RIAs.<sup>2</sup> What makes eBay San Dimas so compelling? It escapes the boundaries imposed by Web browsers in favor of a self-contained, easily accessed application that enables:

- **A fully branded experience.** eBay San Dimas is easily accessed through an icon that sits on users' desktops. Once opened, the entire experience is contained within a skin that uses eBay's color palette and menus (see Figure 1). And because the application doesn't need space for browser toolbars, there's plenty of real estate for controls that support key user activities such as searching, monitoring watch lists, and tracking bids.
- **Offline use.** eBay sellers can take their laptops out to their garage or down to the basement to visit their inventory, take photos, and update content while they're offline, then synchronize their content when they get back to the home office and plug into a high-speed connection.<sup>3</sup> eBay shoppers can view their watch lists and histories, regardless of whether they are connected or not.
- **Customization.** Users can customize their views to include watch lists or current bid status. The panels remain visible while shoppers browse eBay content, informing them when they have been outbid on a product of interest so they can immediately up their offers.



#### Headquarters

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**Figure 1** eBay San Dimas Beta Version



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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

## Desktop RIAs Have The Power To Transform User Experiences

Managing inventories and bids for eBay power users is just the beginning. Desktop RIAs have the ability to cement stronger relationships with customers by:

- **Creating a shared point of view.** Applications like eBay San Dimas are lightweight and take only a few seconds to download. This makes them portable across channels. For example, a call center agent working on complex mortgage payment configurations could send the same calculator he uses to a borrower as an email attachment. The borrower could then use it to do her own calculations.
- **Building an ongoing relationship.** Desktop applications can be used to foster stronger relationships with customers. For example, a financial services company could provide “vendor neutral” money management tools for planning budgets, tracking investments, and paying bills.

As customers come to rely on the tools, they'll regularly engage in a branded experience with the application provider and be exposed to relevant offerings.

### Should Your Web Applications Move To The Desktop?

Not every online application needs to be on the desktop. Firms should consider moving online applications to the desktop if they are:

- **Frequently used.** Applications that are a part of everyday life, such as financial account management tools, are likely to be worth a download. But applications that are used infrequently, such as auto configurators, aren't likely to gain much traction on a user's desktop.
- **Highly complex.** Web-based RIAs are perfect for making functional parts of Web-based experiences, such as shopping carts, more efficient. But for more complex interactions such as managing multiple financial accounts or tracking health histories, a desktop RIA can provide complex modeling tools and access to local files without being tethered to a single Web site.
- **Built with Flex.** One of the key benefits of AIR is that it is similar to Flex, making the development leap relatively small and inherently less risky than building an AIR application from scratch. Firms should consider repurposing existing RIAs built with Flex as their primary candidates for desktop migration.<sup>4</sup>

#### WHAT IT MEANS

#### FORWARD-THINKING FIRMS WILL STAKE CLAIMS IN THE ENSUING DESKTOP BATTLE

The drive for companies to gain a spot on their customers' desktops will appeal to marketers in their battle for mindshare online. But as companies experiment with desktop applications, they should be aware that desktops are prime real estate that will be difficult to muscle in on.

- **Current RIA leaders have an advantage.** Companies that currently invest in rich Internet technologies will be able to easily port their applications to their desktop. Look for companies like Fidelity that already offer multiple RIAs to deploy suites of these newer tools.
- **Competition for space on the desktop will heat up fast.** Look for the desktop to become a crowded place in the next 18 to 24 months. Companies that lag in current development but crave the brass ring of a spot on customer desktops will need to act fast. As crowds move in, the value proposition of a winning application will have to be significant to displace incumbents.
- **Desktop apps will have B2B appeal.** eBay San Dimas' greatest benefits are likely to be for people who make their livings — or supplement them — by selling items online. Businesses such as shippers that serve this small and medium business market will jump on the bandwagon and provide lightweight desktop RIAs to manage shipments. Expect companies such as Yahoo! Merchant Solutions that currently provide SMB eCommerce support to join in as well.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Users can sign up for the beta version of eBay San Dimas at <http://www.projectsandimas.com>.
- <sup>2</sup> RIAs provide user experience advantages over HTML by giving users control over process steps, allowing data manipulation, enabling corrective actions without losing data, providing immediate system feedback, citing errors in context, and improving overall task flows. See the September 1, 2006, "[Rich Internet Applications: Why And How](#)" report.
- <sup>3</sup> While the ranks are growing, only 9% of online consumers today have both a laptop and a wireless home network. See the September 19, 2006, "[Few Consumers Use The Net Outside The Home](#)" report.
- <sup>4</sup> To build AIR apps visually, Adobe has released a beta of its upcoming Flex Builder 3 to automate the edit-compile-debug-package cycle for Apollo apps. Flex Builder's Eclipse-based user interface is already familiar to many Java developers, and tight integration with Adobe's Creative Studio suite allows developers and designers to closely collaborate when designing an application's interface.