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Inside the black market where people pay thousands of dollars for Instagram verification

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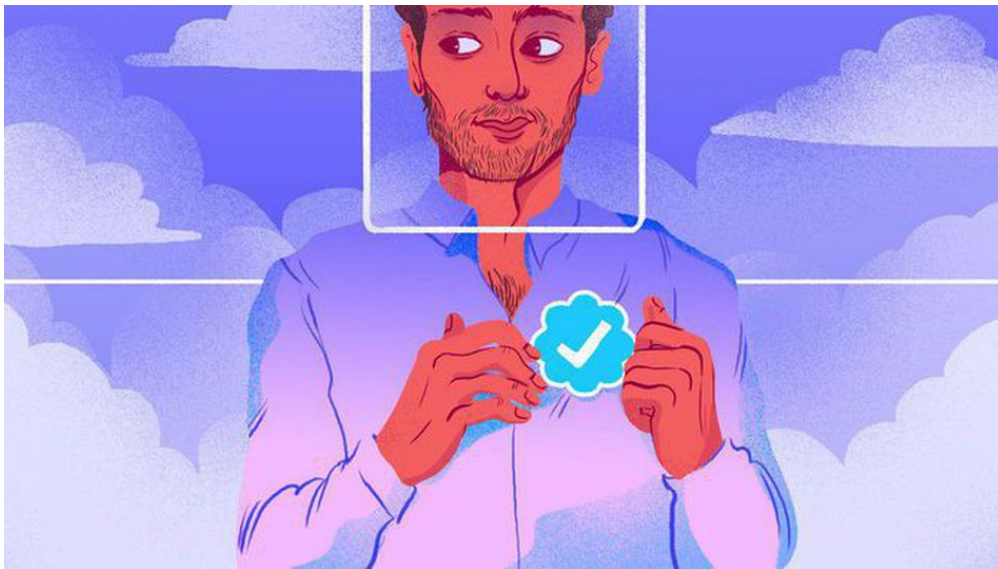


IMAGE: VICKY LETA/MASHABLE

BY KERRY FLYNN
SEP 01, 2017

"I mean if *Mashable* wants to pay for it, I can get you a blue check over night," reads a recent Twitter direct message.

This is a guy who knows a guy, a middleman in the black market for Instagram verification, where anyone from a seasoned publicist to a 22-year-old digital marketer will offer to verify an account—for a price. The fee is anywhere from a bottle of wine to \$15,000, according to a dozen sources who have sold verification, bought verification for someone else, or directly know someone who has done one or the other.

"These guys pay all their bills from one to two blue checks a month," another message from the middleman added later.

The product for sale isn't a good or a service. It's a little blue check designated for public figures, celebrities, and brands on Instagram. It grants users a prime spot in search as well as access to special features.

More importantly, it's a status symbol. The blue emblem can help people gain legitimacy in the business of influencer marketing and bestows some credibility within Instagram's community of 700 million monthly active users. It cannot be requested online or purchased, according to Instagram's policies. It is Instagram's velvet rope.

But it's clear from people who spoke on the condition of anonymity, many of whom have their own blue checkmarks, that a black market for Instagram verification is alive and well.

And it's an open secret in the influencer community.

"It all comes down to money and who you know," said one seller, who agreed to go by his first name, James. "It's sad, but it's kind of how life is, you know?"

Instagram has helped create this underground market. While anyone can apply for verification [on Facebook](#) and [on Twitter](#), Instagram has made itself exclusive and therefore rather elitist. Influencers who have press clippings and work with big brands on sponsorship deals often can't manage to get that elusive blue checkmark, according to several verified and unverified influencers and people who have sold verification.

James said he got into the market for verification via an Instagram direct message. Previously, he had been buying and selling Instagram accounts that had popular or one-word names, and he decided to message someone with an interesting handle (a.k.a. username). That someone said they were able to take over that account because he worked at Instagram.

And that was the start of a side-business. James would find people who would pay for verification, and his friend on the inside of Instagram would make it happen.

■ His contact at Instagram charges \$1,200 per blue checkmark, and then James will tack on another fee based on the user's apparent interest or other needs.

"I've sold verifications anywhere from \$1,500 to \$7,000," James said.

James, whose day job is running an internet startup, has sold five badges since he started earlier this year with the help of his friend who works at Instagram. His contact at Instagram charges \$1,200 per blue checkmark, and then James will tack on another fee based on the user's apparent interest or other needs.

Only three of his submissions have been approved, however. James and his contact at Instagram have to submit an official form, and they do not want to get caught.

Instagram is aware of this kind of thing.

"You are responsible for any activity that occurs through your account and you agree you will not sell, transfer, license or assign your account, followers, username, or any account rights," reads a section of [Instagram's terms of use](#).

James said he has heard of several employees getting fired for selling verification or accounts. When Instagram decided to [shutdown about 30 accounts related to cannabis](#) last year, a former employee tried charging people up to \$7,500 to reactivate them since he still had access to the feature. He was found out, and his access was officially terminated, according to James.

Instagram declined to comment.

A source who was directly connected to a seller said he was not comfortable with sharing the name or any other details about the person he knew in fear of ruining his side-business.

"He's actually a good friend and legit makes his income this way," he said. He personally has been pitched between \$3,000 to \$7,000 for a blue checkmark.

Getting that blue check is getting harder. Just a year ago, James said his contact at Instagram was able to do five name transfers a week. Now, it's more like two per week and "maybe one to two verifications," he said.

James isn't the only person that interested Instagram users can go to. One entrepreneur pointed us to Alejandro Rioja. According to Rioja's [personal website](#), he's an "internet entrepreneur, digital marketer, and computer geek." His website suggests to connect with him [on Facebook Messenger](#), where after the first prompt a user sees he does account verification:

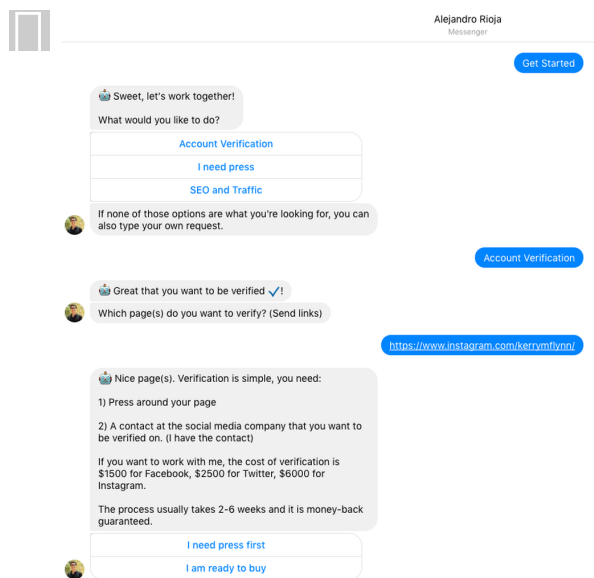


IMAGE: FACEBOOK MESSENGER SCREENSHOT

As described in the thread above with Rioja's Messenger bot, Instagram verification costs \$6,000 per account.

"I work with 2-3 people [at Instagram] depending on their availability. The price is \$5k-\$8k, which varies depending on how easy it is to verify, i.e. they already have press and are somewhat of a known figure. The Instagram employee takes most of it, 60-80%," Rioja wrote in a Twitter direct message.

The cost for verification is the highest on Instagram because it's the most coveted.

The cost for verification is the highest on Instagram because it's the most coveted. That's in part because it is the strictest, several sources told us. Business on Instagram can be big. Advertisers may be spending more than \$1 billion per year on influencer marketing on Instagram, according to a [study by Mediakix](#). An easy way to identify an influencer is via that blue checkmark. It's immediate legitimacy.

Instagram verification is granted through a form that is not publicly available, but is accessible to some people in the tech and media industries. Former employees, current employees, big media and entertainment companies have a portal where they can request name changes and verification, according to several sources.

They must submit the user's actual name and accounts along with a form of identity (like a passport) and the name of a contact at Facebook or Instagram. That's one way Instagram can hold employees accountable to not misuse their privileges for things like paid verification, according to several sources.

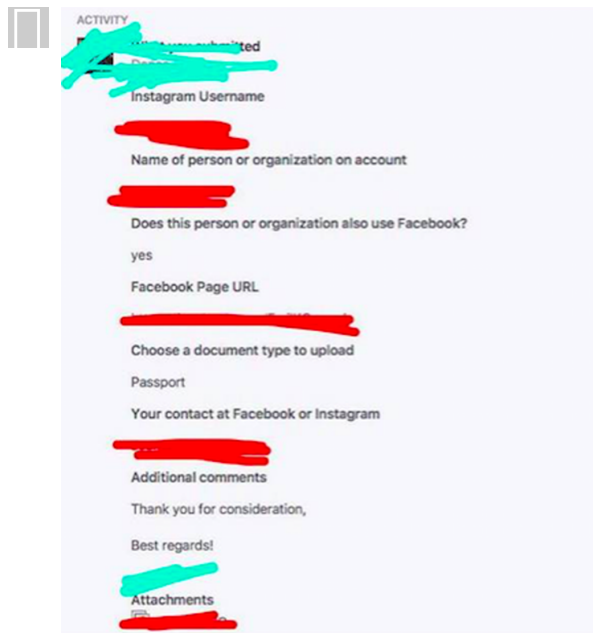


IMAGE: SCREENSHOT OF INSTAGRAM VERIFICATION FORM

Attachments can be used to show press clippings, which are an important part of getting through the process. Rioja also offers media placement in various publications that also costs thousands of dollars.

While someone like Rioja may be the seller, someone at Instagram still needs to approve the request. That's why Rioja says there's a "money-back guarantee."

"I've verified 12 accounts. I can't share the usernames as my clients don't like this," Rioja said.

Here's a step-by-step process of how it works, according to one source who has sold verification and corroborated by two other sources who have bought it:

1. There's usually an employee at Facebook/Instagram who is willing to take a bribe or just be a friend. A middleman will be the seller.
2. The middleman receives cash, which may or may not be split with the Facebook/Instagram employee.
3. The friend at Facebook/Instagram submits a verification request and crosses their fingers it gets approved.

The black market for verification is an open secret among Instagram influencers. The people who have bought verification might not want to admit it to a reporter, but people aren't afraid to share to other social media influencers.

"I had a friend that did it," a tech founder told me. He then texted his friend and asked if they wanted to comment for the story with guaranteed anonymity. The friend confirmed that they paid for verification but declined to comment further.

Once users have a blue checkmark they also join an exclusive club of people who repeatedly get asked for one, according to several sources who have been asked.

■ "It's more bragging about how they can get anything, I guess."

"You end up getting a ton of messages from people asking 'How you got that check mark, bro?'" said [Adam Rose](#), an actor who is verified on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. He got his

verifications through the formal processes, without paying any middlemen.

There are plenty of people who may not be able to help but do love chatting about their blue checkmark.

"It's more bragging about how they can get anything, I guess," said someone who runs a popular YouTube channel and is verified.

And anything has its price.

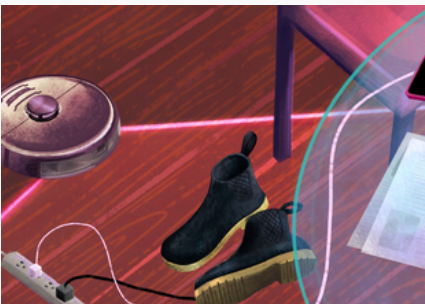
If you know more about the Instagram black market, send an email to Kerry Flynn at Kerry@Mashable.com.

WATCH: The symbolism in Taylor Swift's 'Look What You Made Me Do' music video is unreal



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Pruma Khosla

Daisy Edgar-Jones and Paul Mescal talk to Mashable about Hulu's "Normal People."

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