Ticketmaster makes online 'CAPTCHA' puzzles easier

RYAN NAKASHIMA - AP Business Writer - Associated Press

Ticketmaster, often the target of fan anger when tickets to popular concerts get sold out in seconds, is removing an annoyance that can slow down the buying process: the jumble of letters that people need to decipher known as "CAPTCHA."

The puzzles provided by Google Inc. are meant to deter automated systems known as "bots" from purchasing large numbers of tickets the instant they go on sale. Scalpers have been known to employ bots to acquire tickets, which they resell for a profit.

CAPTCHA, an acronym that stands for "Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart," was developed by Carnegie Mellon computer scientists in 2000. Google bought the company that spun off from the university in 2009 in part to help it digitize books.

Since only humans, not computers, can decipher CAPTCHA codes, websites install the systems to keep tickets out of the hands of large-scale scalpers. In the fight against more sophisticated bot operators, CAPTCHA codes have become increasingly more difficult — so difficult that the puzzles started slowing down flesh-and-blood fans.

Take a recent CAPTCHA puzzle, which looks like a bunch of distorted letters that is meant for a buyer to interpret and type: "dsrific LCDAppr." Because of the way the letters are bent out of shape on screen, it's tough even for humans to tell if the two instances of the letter "p'' are capitalized or not.

Ticketmaster is overhauling its website to provide easier puzzles. It has run trials online, and in the next several weeks, it will replace all its online puzzles provided by Google with easier ones provided by a New York-based startup called Solve Media. On mobile devices, Ticketmaster is eliminating the need for puzzles entirely, using its own technology that verifies the user through a "push" notification to the device.

Fans using the website will now see common phrases, such as "freezing temperatures," or multiple choice questions such as "which one is a country?" followed by a drop-down menu of answers including "monster truck," ''puppy" and "Spain."

The key is that Solve Media looks for certain digital clues — which it won't divulge — to determine if the ticket-buyer is a person or a bot. The technology will dole out an easy puzzle to a person. It will give a bot a difficult one.

That has already made the fan experience better, says Kip Levin, Ticketmaster's executive vice president of eCommerce. The average time it takes to solve these puzzles has been halved from about 14 seconds to about 7 seconds, the company said.

"Anecdotally, we're starting to see an uptick in fan satisfaction," Levin said. "We're happy with what we've seen from a security standpoint as well."

Some puzzles are in the form of ads. A puzzle sponsored by Southwest Airlines Co. makes buyers enter the words "Bags Fly Free." One by TurboTax requires buyers to type "File Free."

Ari Jacoby, the CEO and cofounder of Solve Media, called advertising the "third leg of the stool" for his business after improving user experience and security. Because the sponsored puzzles use company slogans or product names as answers, they are "highly effective and memorable," Jacoby said.

Solve Media has more than 6,000 customers including magazine publisher Meredith Corp. and online portal AOL Inc., which is also an investor. Advertisers have included a range of major brands such as McDonald's, Toyota, CBS and Pizza Hut.

In February, Solve Media expects to serve up 200 million puzzles. Adding Ticketmaster will boost the number of possible ads it can send out. In 2011, Ticketmaster parent Live Nation Entertainment Inc. sold 141 million tickets, although it's unclear how many were purchased online.

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