

'Hamilton' fans burned by fake tickets

And it's not just on Broadway where buyers must beware

Laura Petrecca
@LauraPetrecca
USA TODAY

NEW YORK CITY Christopher Plant felt uneasy.

The ticket seller he contacted via Craigslist arrived late. And it was odd that the man, who claimed to have seen the hit musical *Hamilton*, couldn't answer many questions about the show.

Yet the four *Hamilton* tickets "looked fantastic," says Plant. They had the theater location, performance date, a bar code and the word "ticketmaster" emblazoned on them. The tickets and a printed receipt were tucked in an envelope bearing the Ticketmaster name.

Face value for regular *Hamilton* seats, sold out through January, are \$139 to \$177 — but priced hundreds, even thousands, higher on secondary markets. Plant thought he was getting a good deal when he handed over \$1,000 for four tickets.

That evening, while trying to enter the Richard Rodgers Theatre with his family, he was told they were phony.

"I asked my wife to take the kids to get a cup of coffee so they wouldn't see a grown man cry," he says. "I got duped."

The Philadelphia real estate agent is among the many who have bought *Hamilton* tickets only to discover they were counterfeit or duplicates of legitimate tickets already in use. It's not only the lost money — it's also the lost opportunity. For fans, the disappointment of not getting into the musical is equivalent to a football fanatic being turned away at the entrance to the Super Bowl.

Bogus Broadway tickets are rare, says Charlotte St. Martin, president of The Broadway League, a national trade association for the Broadway industry. When crooks strike, they target popular performances such as *Hamilton*, *The Book of Mormon* and *The Lion King*.

Hamilton is the hottest theater ticket in town. It dominated the Tony Awards on Sunday, winning 11 honors, including best musical.

The contract for the original cast members is up July 9, with few details yet on who is going and who is staying. Creator and star Lin-Manuel Miranda says he plans to leave this summer.

"I can see the scammers and counterfeiters just licking their chops," says Tom Bartholomy, a fraud expert and CEO of the Better Business Bureau in Charlotte.

To be sure, warnings about fake tickets appear to be paying off. *Hamilton* publicist Sam Rudy didn't provide statistics but says the box office has reported a drop in invalid tickets in recent months. Still, scammers have a lot of motivation.

On StubHub, tickets have sold for an average of \$687 and a maximum of \$5,018 since *Hamilton*'s



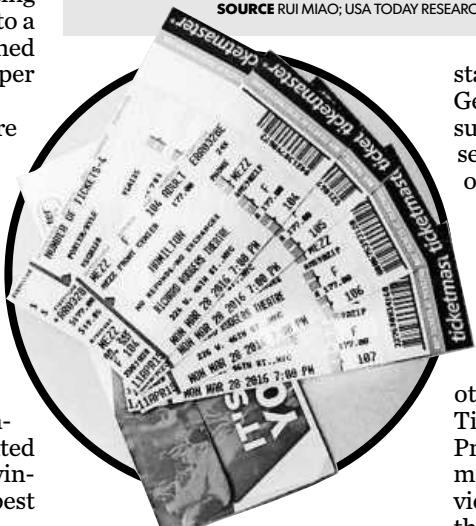
Daveed Diggs, from left, Okieriete Onaodowan, Anthony Ramos and Lin-Manuel Miranda perform in the hot hit *Hamilton*.

PSYCHED TO SEE A SHOW, CONCERT OR GAME?

Before buying tickets, "do some due diligence," says the Better Business Bureau's Tom Bartholomy. Researching sellers can save cash and avoid headaches. Sales of invalid tickets are rare at reputable sites, but when they happen, not all companies may react the same way. And for the best deals, compare competitor prices and factor in fees.

	Razorgator	Ticketmaster	TicketsNow	SeatGeek	StubHub	Vivid Seats
If a buyer's ticket is invalid:	Tries to find replacement. If unable, offers full refund.	Guarantees all tickets on Ticketmaster site, including primary and secondary sales, are valid for entry.	Will find replacement ticket or offer refund.	Will help facilitate a replacement. If none, buyer receives a minimum 100% refund.	Handled case-by-case. First looks for replacement. If none, tickets offered to future event or refund or credit.	Offers full refund.
Price for two July 8 "Hamilton" tickets:	\$5,542 each. "Connection" fee each of \$1,025.27. Shipping fee: \$16.95. Total: \$13,151.49	\$5,787 each for resale tickets. Service fee each of \$983.79. Total: \$13,541.58	\$5,787 each, plus a service fee each of \$1,157.40. Total: \$13,888.80	From ScoreBig (a seller): \$6,526.48 each. Total: \$13,052.96	\$5,300 each. Fees: \$1,918.50. Total: \$12,518.50	\$5,413 each, plus a service fee each of \$1,352.45. Shipping fee: \$14.95. Total: \$13,545.85
BBB rating:	A+	N/A	A+	B+	A	A+

NOTE TICKET PRICE SEARCH DONE ON JUNE 14 FROM 3 TO 4 P.M. SPECIFIC SEATS ARE VARIED, BUT ALL ARE IN ROW A IN THE CENTER AREA OF THE FRONT MEZZANINE. TICKETSNOW IS A SEPARATE TICKETMASTER UNIT. SOURCE RUI MIAO; USA TODAY RESEARCH



CHRISTOPHER PLANT

Christopher Plant spent \$1,000 on these *Hamilton* tickets after he saw them advertised on Craigslist. They were phony.

Broadway opening.

The face value for regular tickets recently increased to \$179-\$199 and premium tickets to \$849.

"It's the most valuable ticket, therefore the most profitable crime to commit," says Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance.

The swindle goes beyond Times Square. The hip-hop-infused tale of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton's life launches a national tour next year, and a separate production in Chicago

starts Sept. 27. Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan already issued a warning about websites selling tickets that have not gone on sale to the general public.

Counterfeit tickets aren't the only scam. Theatergoers are also derailed when a legitimate e-ticket is distributed to more than one person.

"Whoever shows up first will get into the seat and the others are out of luck," says Ticketmaster North America President Jared Smith. Ticketmaster, an official ticketing provider for *Hamilton*, guarantees that all primary and resale tickets on its Ticketmaster site are valid for entry.

Smith says the swindlers are incredibly sophisticated, using "thousands of credit cards," which makes it hard to detect and penalize them.

Tech investor and *Shark Tank* guest judge Chris Sacca and his wife, Crystal, got bitten by a bad StubHub ticket sale in May. Sacca says Crystal spent thousands of dollars to buy *Hamilton* seats as a birthday gift for him. When they arrived, the tickets came up as already checked in. On May 18, Uber board member and senior vice president of operations Ryan Graves tweeted: "Showed up at *Hamilton* and was sold a fake ticket," tagging @StubHub.

"It's devastating" for those who

"I asked my wife to take the kids to get a cup of coffee so they wouldn't see a grown man cry. I got duped."

Christopher Plant, potential "Hamilton" patron

can't get in, says Sally Greenberg, executive director at the National Consumers League advocacy group. "Buyers may have organized their entire trip to New York City over these tickets."

StubHub, an eBay unit, says invalid sales happen less than 1% of the time, and sometimes they aren't scams but a seller's mistake.

Because *Hamilton* is such a high-profile show, StubHub is re-vamping some of its processes around the musical. Instead of reacting on the off-chance a ticket is invalid, it buys extra tickets in advance in case people are denied entry.

If a thwarted ticket buyer calls customer service, and StubHub has the extra ticket, it will send a representative with a new ticket to meet the purchaser outside the theater that night. If StubHub doesn't have a ticket for that night, it will offer up a ticket for other dates.

StubHub is paying "extra at-

tention and care in a proactive way," says StubHub spokeswoman Jessica Erskine. For most other events that it sells tickets for, StubHub doesn't buy tickets in advance. Instead it will seek to buy a replacement ticket only after any troubles with entry have occurred.

Ticketing scams reach beyond the Great White Way to sporting events and concerts across the country. Swindlers not only list tickets on legitimate websites, they set up phony websites that resemble authentic ticket seller sites, says the Better Business Bureau's Bartholomy.

His advice: "Do some research" before buying, and check out the seller's grade on the BBB site bbb.org.

Vivid Seats and Razorgator and Ticketsnow all have A+ ratings. StubHub has an A. SeatGeek has a B+.

Craigslist has an F. "Sure, there are some tickets that are valid on Craigslist, but if you want to defraud someone, Craigslist is a great way to do that," says National Consumers League's Greenberg.

Craigslist, which didn't reply to requests for comment, has a page with advice on how to avoid fraudulent schemes, as well as an online form to report a scam.

Contributing: Rui Miao

App gives you more power over power usage

Utilities is a sector where innovation had been lagging

Bill Loveless
@bill_loveless
Special for USA TODAY



Should managing your energy needs at home be as easy as booking a flight or monitoring your bank accounts with a mobile app?

For most consumers and electric utilities, the answer is probably "yes." But despite all of the advances in information technology over the years, and the proliferation of mobile apps, utilities is seen as one sector where such innovation is still lacking.

And to be fair to utility companies, do their customers really care how much electricity they're using at a time when those bills account for only a fraction of their overall personal expenses?

Well aware of that challenge, a Boulder, Colo.-based company is teaming up with Duke Energy, one of the largest utilities in the

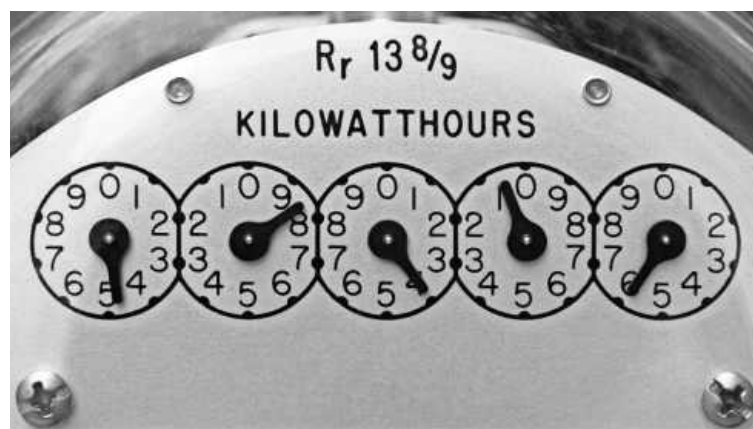
U.S., to provide a mobile app that they say goes well beyond any similar attempt in the industry to engage consumers.

"Today when you download an airline app, you can do almost anything through that app," said Adrian Tuck, the chief executive of Tendril. "That's not true in the utility space where billing and outage notifications and so on are separate experiences. This is an attempt to unify things."

Tendril announced its new product, called MyHome, on Monday, during the annual meeting of the Edison Electric Institute, the trade association for investor-owned electric utilities, in Chicago.

The company, which develops energy-reporting and other software for the utility industry, said MyHome will enable Duke and eventually other power providers to establish an "energy identify" for their customers by collecting data on the size and energy consumption of their dwellings, local weather conditions and personal preferences.

For example, the software will organize customers into specific groups based on whether cost, comfort or environment moti-



JOSEPH BINDER, THINKSTOCK

The MyHome mobile app could make managing your energy needs as easy as booking a flight or banking online.

vates their energy choices. The profiles help a utility personalize communications with customers and offer information and products that match their interests.

That said, one of the biggest challenges for Tendril and utilities is stirring up interest in homeowners regarding their electricity consumption.

The trade publication *Public Utilities Fortnightly* reported in February that electric bills represented just 1.4% of personal-consumption expenses, despite the

saturation of electronic gadgets in our homes.

Tuck and his colleagues at Tendril saw this consumer apathy as they studied the potential impact of new "smart" energy devices, such as Google's Nest, the programmable thermostat, on home energy patterns. For many consumers, "there was no reason to get these things," he said. "People didn't think about energy a lot."

But those attitudes appear to be changing, especially as the technology-savvy Millennial gen-

eration takes on a larger share of the utilities' markets.

"We're hearing from vendors of other products, like refrigerators and windows and things that energy now consistently rates as one of the top three buying criteria that customers look at, after price and features," he said. "That's changed over the last three years."

Tuck said the MyHome program will cost Duke \$3 to \$5 a year per customer, an expense he maintained can be offset by improved efficiencies in dealing with the utility's customers.

In addition to Duke, Indiana Power and Michigan Power, two subsidiaries of the utility giant American Electric Power, will test parts of the MyHome application, Tendril said.

The Arlington, Va.-based Opower, which was recently acquired by Oracle, is another pioneer in the field, helping utilities manage shifting demand and collect payments, and enabling their customers to compare their energy use with their neighbors.

Loveless is a veteran energy journalist and podcaster host in Washington and former anchor of *Platts Energy Week*.