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Amazon, GMU to tackle e-commerce counterfeiting with hackathon

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Amazon.com Inc. (NASDAQ: AMZN) is sponsoring a hackathon at George Mason University to address a problem the e-commerce giant itself could use help solving: counterfeiting in the online marketplace.

The company is partnering with Mason's Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center, a research center within the Fairfax university's Schar School of Policy and Government, to host the 2022 Bring Down Counterfeiting Public Policy Hackathon.

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

Louise Shelley is the director of the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center at George Mason University.

Counterfeit and pirated products make up 2.5% of global trade, according to a 2021 study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. It sounds incremental, until you do the math — that's $464 billion a year.

Amazon has a vested interest in counterfeiting prevention. The company has its own Counterfeit Crimes Unit, which works with law enforcement, brands and customers to identify counterfeiters at every link in their supply chain and stop their operations. In 2021, the company sued more than 170 alleged counterfeiters in U.S. courts and seized more than 3 million counterfeit products.

"We will not stop until we drive counterfeits to zero in our store, and we will continue to invest and innovate until we get there," Mary Beth Westmoreland, Amazon's vice president of brand protection, said in a statement to the Washington Business Journal. "We also appreciate the growing industry-wide partnership and collaboration in the fight against counterfeit. We are excited about what we can do together to hold bad actors accountable and ensure the entire industry is rid of counterfeits."

Mason is no stranger to hackathons — competitive, usually tech-focused events in which participants collaborate on a project they're tasked with completing or a problem they're tasked with solving in a short period of time. But this one, geared toward policy solutions with an emphasis on data sharing, is the first event of its kind, said Louise Shelley, the director of the center and an endowed chair and professor at the Schar School.

Blue Clarity, a Tysons-based information technology consultant, is administering the event, which launches virtually on Aug. 27.

While Amazon is the lead sponsor, though it declined to say for how much, others are pitching in, too: the National Crime Prevention Council; the Department of Homeland Security's Criminal Investigations and Network Analysis Center, which is led by Mason; the D.C.-based International Coalition Against Illicit Economies; Michigan State University's Center for Anti-Counterfeiting and Product Protection; the Center for Data Innovation, a nonprofit based in D.C. and Brussels, Belgium; and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Global Innovation Policy Center.

Amazon is also lending out some employees as mentors for the hackathon participants. They'll be available via a Slack channel during the event, Shelley said.

"We are still working with GMU to onboard Amazon mentors and will be looking to draw on our Public Policy team, the Counterfeit Crimes Unit, and other brand protection experts that can share perspectives and ideas with hackers as they develop their ideas," an Amazon spokesperson said in an email. "We are also working with GMU to ensure that the mentor pool includes an array of public, private, and academic experts and practitioners."

Nearly 40 participants have signed up since registration opened earlier this month, Shelley said. Anyone can register to participate. More than a dozen mentors, including Amazon executives, counterfeiting experts and Mason professors, have signed up as well.

Christa Brzozowski, Amazon's senior manager of public policy, and her team approached Mason months ago, and the idea for the hackathon bloomed, Shelley said.

"I just think it's a very innovative problem and a very innovative way to go after it," Shelley said. "Amazon has embraced it."

Typically, hackathons take place over mere days, Shelley said. But the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center, which has partnered with Blue Clarity on two previous hackathons related to human trafficking, wanted to do something with potentially more impact.

Participants will engage virtually across 10 weeks, competing for $22,000 in prizes. A panel of judges, including Amazon's Westmoreland as well as Paul DelPonte, executive director of the National Crime Prevention Council, will make the final calls during an in-person finale on Nov. 5.

The Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center is located on the university's Mason Square campus in Arlington, next to the construction site where the 345,000-square-foot Fuse building — designed to attract top tech employers like Amazon and to funnel computer science graduates into employment — is scheduled to open in 2025.

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