California man charged by Robert Mueller ran a scheme to defraud e-commerce companies

In addition to issuing an indictment for several alleged Russian trolls today, special counsel Robert Mueller also released plea deal documents outlining a strange plan by Ricky Pinedo, a California man who sold bank accounts in order to bypass e-commerce companies' identification systems.

The scheme's ties to the Russia investigation are still unclear, although the Russian indictment did indicate that the Russian agents acquired fake identities and bank accounts. That said, Pinedo's plea deal does not mention Russia or make any other obvious reference to the investigation.

Unclear how the indictment involves the Russia investigation
According to the documents, Pinedo ran a service called "Auction Essistance." Through the company, Pinedo offered to help people evade e-commerce security features. A now-deleted Twitter account that appears linked to the service said, "Suspended by eBay? Limited by PayPal? Banned from Amazon? Follow our tips to getting back on!. Santa Paula, CA."

In addition, a search for Ricky Pinedo leads to a Santa Paula-based company called "SEO Distortion." SEO Distortion's site lists Pinedo as its CEO, and bills itself as a marketing agency that has Auction Essistance as a client. The site is largely composed of generic marketing language, and *The Verge* has been unable to identify the source of its client testimonials.

The documents say Pinedo registered bank accounts in his name or bought bank accounts online, including some that used stolen American identities. He “willfully and intentionally avoided learning about the use of stolen identities,” according to the documents. He eventually used and traded hundreds of bank accounts and, between 2014 and 2017, made tens of thousands of dollars selling them. An anonymous “company 1,” a digital payments service, was defrauded in the process.

How such a small-time scheme got wrapped up in an international cyber-operation may take some time to understand. “Digital marketing is not a passion of ours, it is our love,” an SEO Distortion about page says. “Passion can only get you so far if you do not love what you do!”

https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/16/17021388/california-robert-mueller-russia-ecommerce-pinedo