

# DENVERPOST

## **I cons or con job? \$1 virtual gifts popular**

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CHICAGO — You don't wrap these presents in a box. You can't wear them, play with them or show them off, at least not in the real world.

Even so, virtual gifts — computer-generated items given and displayed online — are quickly becoming must-haves. And increasingly, people are willing to pay cold, hard, real-life cash to purchase them for friends, family and co-workers.

"For the person who gets the gift, it is like a badge of honor," says Dave Coffey, who tracks online trends for Sapiient, a Florida-based marketing company.

Coffey has gotten into the act, buying a few \$1 gifts on Face book, a social networking website.

He purchased a pair of virtual shoes for his wife for her birthday and a virtual beer to pay a bet he lost to his boss.

They are nothing more than cutesy icons — the smiley faces of the 21st century — posted in a "gifts" section on a person's profile page.

Since they were introduced in February, Facebook says its users have purchased more than 24 million of these dollar items, sold in limited editions to generate more interest.

The ease of giving a virtual gift is definitely part of the attraction, observers say.

Kel Kelly, a businesswoman in suburban Boston, figures she has spent just under \$100 on virtual gifts on Facebook.

The presents are hip — things such as icons of champagne bottles that clients post on their pages.

"It's just a really cool way to stand out," says Kelly, a marketing executive and college lecturer.

Even so, Robbie Blinkoff, an anthropologist who studies online trends, predicts that the limitations of virtual gifts also will become more apparent. Simply put, he says, "giving takes work."

"If you're sending virtual gifts and the person is two blocks away, it's kind of like e-mailing the person in the cubicle next to you," he adds.

Others call virtual gifts a waste of money — a way of "pouring millions down the virtual drain," says Michael Bugeja, the director of Iowa State University's journalism school.