Tech review: Waze app brings crowd-sourced road conditions

August 2 2012, By Jim Rossman

If you've been paying attention the past few years, you've seen an entire category of gadgets become almost extinct.

I'm talking about stand-alone GPS receivers.

As more and more people get smartphones, they figure out there's no need to buy that TomTom or Garmin GPS when the phone in their pocket or purse can do the same thing.

Heck, even GPS makers like TomTom and Garmin realized this early on and released their own GPS applications for the iPhone.

Those GPS apps are not cheap, costing $25 or more depending on the coverage maps included.

And now I think I've seen the next generation of GPS apps - they're free and offer some exciting new features.

I've been using Waze for the past few weeks.

Waze is a free app for iOS and Android that combines a pretty nice turn-by-turn GPS app with the social aspects of an app like Twitter.

What does that mean?

Waze is a GPS app that uses data provided by everyday users to show

problems on the map so you can choose the best way to get around them.

The first time I used Waze, I was driving on the highway when traffic began to get really heavy and finally slowed to stop-and-go.

A Waze dialogue box popped up, asking if I was stuck in traffic. I clicked the "yes" button and submitted my first traffic event.

My submission appeared on the map, which then warned other drivers what was happening at my location.

I was stuck in traffic for about 15 minutes when I noticed other alerts popping up on the route ahead. Touching them brought up more information reported from other drivers, including the fact that the right lane was closed about 0.8 miles ahead of my location.

Waze didn't need to ask if the traffic cleared because it knew from my speed what was going on.

All of this showed up on the map.

If traffic on the [freeway](#) is down to 20 mph in a few miles, you'll see that speed overlaid on the road ahead.

Users can submit all kinds of road issues for others to see. There are buttons to report police (both visible and hiding), road hazards on the road or on the shoulder, accidents and even the locations of red-light cameras.

All these issues appear on the map for other Waze users to see.

When you come up to an incident, such as a reported police presence, a dialogue box appears asking you if it's still there.

Having a GPS is fantastic, but overlaying the live information from users about what's ahead on your route makes this the best commuter app I've ever seen.

Did I mention that Waze is free?

If you use Waze to map your route, it will consider all the live road reports to get you to your destination the quickest way, which might not always be the shortest route if there's a slowdown ahead.

Wazers can also enter road information that isn't yet on their maps. If you find a street that's not on the Waze map, there's a button to click in the app to "pave" the road as you drive on it.

You can also clean up areas of the map that are incorrect.

Waze has a groups feature that allows people who have similar routes or commutes to have more direct communication with each other. Messages and incidents from the group appear on your screen no matter your location.

To keep you safe on the road, Waze only lets you provide input through preset buttons for reporting while you drive.

You can't enter text while you're moving, but passengers can disable the driver's keyboard lock and enter the data.

Entering addresses and saving favorites to a list is easy, and once you have entered your destinations, initiating navigation only takes pressing a few buttons.

Waze also has voice commands to report incidents or start navigating, but I found them clunky and not very good at recognizing what I was

saying.

In the latest version of Waze, drivers can monitor current gasoline prices on the map to help find the cheapest gas.

Once you pull into a station, you can update the gas prices if they've changed.

If you have a daily commute to work, you should be using Waze. Why wait 10 minutes for the radio station to update traffic reports?

You'll be amazed how many people are already using it. Waze just recorded its 20 millionth download.

Waze is almost everything I want in a GPS app - helpful maps, good live traffic information and pointers to the cheapest gas.

Searching for places is not perfect. I tried looking up Lockhart Smokehouse in Dallas's Oak Cliff area. I got Lockhart, Texas, which also has good barbecue, but not what I wanted.

You'll find Waze infinitely more helpful if you get a windshield or dash mount for your phone so it's handy to reach.

This app should be an immediate download for everyone who hates traffic and has to drive to work.

WAZE

-Pros: Free. Great up-to-date info on road conditions.

-Cons: Voice commands clunky. Limited database to look up businesses by name.

-Bottom line: I can see Waze as a serious player as the user base expands. This is an app that almost everyone can benefit from, and it costs nothing.

-Price: Free

-On the Web: waze.com

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