

Apple CEO on maps: 'Extremely sorry' (Update 2)

September 28 2012, by Barbara Ortutay



In this Wednesday, Sept. 12, 2012 photo, Apple CEO Tim Cook speaks during an introduction of the new iPhone 5 in San Francisco. Cook says the company is "extremely sorry" for the frustration that its maps application has caused and it's doing everything it can to make it better. Cook said in a letter posted online Friday Sept. 28, 2012 that Apple "fell short" in its commitment to make the best possible products for its customers. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

Apple CEO Tim Cook says the company is "extremely sorry" for the frustration its Maps application has caused and it's doing everything it can to make it better. In the meantime, he recommended that people use competing map applications to get around.

Cook said in a letter posted online Friday that Apple "fell short" of its commitment to make the best products for its customers.

"Everything we do at Apple is aimed at making our products the best in the world. We know that you expect that from us, and we will keep working non-stop until Maps lives up to the same incredibly high standard," Cook said.

The Cupertino, California, company released an update to its iPhone and iPad operating system last week that replaced Google Maps with Apple's own map application. But users complained that the new map software offers fewer details, lacks public transit directions and misplaces landmarks, among other problems. Users have been flocking to social media to complain and make fun of the app's glitches, which included judging landscape features by their names. The hulking Madison Square Garden arena in New York, for instance, shows up as green park space because of the word "Garden."

It's an unusual misstep for Apple, the world's most valuable company. Apple prides itself on releasing best-of-class products, but there have been mishaps—even under founder and late CEO Steve Jobs, whose dogged perfectionism is legendary. A company apology, analysts believe, would likely have happened under Jobs, too.

"I think they are clearing the air and, more importantly, clarifying why they had to do their own maps," says Tim Bajarin, a Creative Strategies analyst who's followed Apple for more than three decades. He pointed to the infamous "antennagate" issue of 2010. A problem with the iPhone 4's antenna was causing reception issues when people covered a certain spot with a bare hand. Then-CEO Jobs apologized at the time, though denied there was an antenna problem that needed fixing. Apple quickly recovered.

In his letter, Cook said Apple built a new version of its Maps product to give users what they've been asking for. The new app includes turn-by-turn directions, voice integration and a 3-D Flyover feature.

Google's map application for the iPhone did not give turn-by-turn directions or voice-guided navigation, although its version for Android devices does. Google didn't license its turn-by-turn technology to Apple.

Google, says Bjarin, simply "wouldn't give it" because the turn-by-turn feature gave devices running Google's Android software an obvious advantage over Apple. Maps and navigation are among the most-used features of smartphones.

Cook said Apple's Maps will get better as more people use the app and provide feedback. That's true for all digital maps. Google's wasn't perfect when it launched, but got better over the years as users pointed out mistakes and helped the company collect its vast trove of data used to perfect it.

"Ultimately, what (Apple) discovered early on is that Google had access to 100 million iOS users who helped them build the Google Maps database, Bjarin said. "At some point Apple had to put its foot down."

It came time, he added, for Apple to own their Maps customers—and not Google.

But now, Cook is recommending that users look at other options—including Google's map service.

"While we're improving Maps, you can try alternatives by downloading map apps from the App Store like Bing, MapQuest and Waze, or use Google or Nokia maps by going to their websites and creating an icon on your home screen to their web app," Cook wrote.

Could Apple have avoided the Maps debacle? Bjarin thinks so. After all, the company released Siri, its oft-derided virtual assistant, Siri, noting that it was still a work-in-progress and would get better over time.

Customers understood.

"Had Apple and Tim Cook and team introduced the maps as a work-in-progress, they wouldn't have the backlash," he says.

Apple released the iPhone 5 last week and on Monday it said it sold more than 5 million of them in three days. Although the number is a record for any phone, it was fewer than analysts expected.

Shares of Apple Inc. slid \$8.12 to \$673.20 late Friday morning, amid a broader market decline.

More information: www.apple.com/letter-from-tim-cook-on-maps/

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Citation: Apple CEO on maps: 'Extremely sorry' (Update 2) (2012, September 28) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-tim-cook-apple-extremely.html>

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