

GPS-overlay boosts efficiency in deliveries and pick-ups

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What3words chief marketing officer Giles Rhys Jones.

Sending a pizza to a home address is generally an easy task but what if a group of friends are at the beach and start to get hungry?

In some markets around the globe, Domino's and Pizza Hut are using a system to get any pizza within a 3m x 3m zone while still arriving hot. Their solution is US-based GPS technology What3words.

It uses a random string of three words to substitute for numerical GPS coordinates, which no one can really remember at the best of times.

Chief marketing officer Giles Jones says this story behind What3words starts in the music industry. Co-founder Chris Sheldrick, who organised music events, needed to find a better way for people to find locations because street addressing isn't accurate. He began using GPS coordinates.

“It turns out band members aren’t particularly predisposed to remembering 18 digits and certainly not good at noting them down or passing them to each other,” Mr Jones says.

The company co-founder was bemoaning this fact to a trained cartographer friend from Cambridge University and they took inspiration from a dictionary on the table.

“They worked out from a bit of mathematics that if you divide the world into 3m x 3m squares, this gives you 57 trillion locations that required 40,000 words to give each of those squares a unique three-word address.

“They quickly realized this could have great implications for many other industries and sectors, from pizza deliveries to humanitarian efforts. And it was a much better system than strict GPS.”

They chose 3m x 3m because any space smaller would require many more words – and some languages don’t have many words. It’s also small enough so that satellites work well at that dimension, and “three words and 3x3 seemed to flow better together,” Mr Jones says.

It’s not a replacement for GPS, he says, but is an extra layer to give that 30-year-old positioning system better accuracy and boost its usability among people.

“Basically, we are a version of GPS. If you have an incredibly accurate street address and people can easily find your front door, then you probably don’t need us. But if you live in rural parts without highly accurate street addresses, you might need something more accurate,” he says.

Cost savings

Mr Jones doesn’t want to disclose the company’s financials but says it is adding clients regularly.

For instance, aside from pizza delivery, the system is also being used by hotel groups, listing guides for travel companies and inside modern cars. The system isn’t widely used yet in New Zealand but Mr Jones says some small luxury hotel guides are using it along with a couple of fleet management services.

US-based supply chain software company BluJay last month integrated the system into its Global Trade Network service – which helps more than 40,000 logistics companies enhance their trade velocity and supply chains – to specify delivery and pick-up locations with unique the three-word address rather than traditional addressing or GPS coordinates.

Blujay chief product strategist Doug Surrett says the world is moving to more geolocation-based addressing, which not only solves many limitations inherent in traditional street-level addressing but also opens new opportunities and applications for more exact, practical pick-up and drop-off points.

“Its most intriguing use is to create specific locations for deliveries in places without a robust, traditional address. A classic example is an oil operation with a drilling site in the middle of a desert.

“The implication is that e-commerce operations built around the notion of a physical address will have to change to accommodate this concept. But once they do, it becomes much simpler for everyday users to identify locations,” he says.

Mr Surrett says cost savings will be an important factor with this technology for logistics companies like those in Blujay’s network.

“If a delivery company is 100m out each time it makes a delivery, then that can cost a lot of cash. And it can be dangerous if a person can’t be found by emergency services. So we hope a better addressing system can fix those issues.”

Use cases

Mr Jones says automotive companies are ideal companies for What3words. It has a partnership with Mercedes and expects to announce new car companies using the service soon.

“The driver can ask the car to take them to ‘table.chair.lamp’ and the car knows exactly where that is. That’s better than asking a car to go to Church Rd because, in London, there are 14 roads with that name.”

Although the system was initially built for English words, the company now has 27 languages and Mr Jones expects more languages to be added in the coming months.

He says every word in these algorithms is checked by language experts for rude words, hyphenated words, homophones (for instance, “here” and “hear” are too similar) and other potential stumbling blocks. But there remain some funny combinations.

“We also put similar words very far apart. For instance, ‘table.chair.lamp’ is somewhere in the US but ‘table.chair.damp’ is in Australia. That means a tiny error is immediately obvious to users, which is another reason emergency services are using the system to coordinate their forces.”

They haven’t had any brand conflicts yet – where the random word combination is identical to a trademarked phrase – but another automotive partner of What3words, Audi, noticed a marketing opportunity when it saw its tagline “Vorsprung durch Technik” (progress through technology in English) was an address in the middle of the Brazilian rainforest. Audi had been using that phrase in its marketing for many years.

For the record, NBR is located at approximately “[dawn.hotels.email](https://map.what3words.com/dawn.hotels.email?utm_source=w3w&utm_medium=owned&utm_campaign=B2C_4561_W3_Pt_Map-Site_Org_WO_en_Main-Site-Explore-Map) (https://map.what3words.com/dawn.hotels.email?utm_source=w3w&utm_medium=owned&utm_campaign=B2C_4561_W3_Pt_Map-Site_Org_WO_en_Main-Site-Explore-Map).