



KEEP IT SIMPLE

THE GEOSPATIAL INDUSTRY MUST STOP TELLING PEOPLE WHAT WE DO, ARGUES ALISTAIR MACLENAN

Over time, specialist business activities or technologies become mainstream. If they don't, they either stay in their niche, supported by a slowly diminishing band of zealots (are you reading this on your BlackBerry?), or disappear altogether. Either way they don't change the world.

The world's greatest guitarist, Jimi Hendrix, said: "To change the world, you have to get your head together first." Putting the irony of the juxtaposition of the speaker's life and his weighty words aside, he was right and I am delighted to see that certain parts of the geospatial industry are starting to get their heads together.

Mainstream means 'shared by most people or regarded as normal or conventional'. It is normal for people to use their mobile phones every 14 seconds. Checking emails, sending texts, buying hamster houses, checking into someone's spare room, getting someone to come and pick you up even if they don't have a taxi sign on the roof of their car – all these things are possible on mobile phones. They are mainstream activities.

And yet only a tiny minority of users know how their mobile phones work. Or how an app is created. Or how an app works on a mobile phone. But the successful suppliers of both phones and apps know a crucial piece of information that has bypassed many in the geospatial world – their users simply don't care.

No one cares how the engine of their car works. Honestly, do you know what a double overhead camshaft does? Or what a camshaft is? Or where in an engine you would find a camshaft? Have I even made up the word 'camshaft'?

What the car does for the driver and passengers is what decides purchases. Does it hold five kids and won't breakdown on the way back from swimming? Will it show the rest of the world just how successful the owner is?

The geospatial industry has rarely learnt this painful lesson: no one cares what you do, they only care what you can do for them.

Google became a verb for a reason. No one, other than a few people who will never get on the same plane together, understands how

the Google search algorithm works and yet how many times a day do you hear "I'll Google that"?

It isn't the impressiveness of the technology of the app, the preciseness of the engineering of the engine or the remarkable thinking that goes into providing online users with the information they want that makes these products successful. Users just don't care 'how' their products work, only that they are easily accessible and simple to use and provide useful outcomes.

For too long, geospatial companies have been overly impressed by what their products do and have been obsessed with telling people about it. In minute detail.

But now I see signs that certain people are getting their 'heads together', that they understand that for mapping to be mainstream, all the highbrow technical stuff needs to be hidden. Not talked about. Not listed. Show people that your mapping is simple to use, easy to access and what it can do for them, and they will use it.

Need to get from your house to Great Aunt Maude's who you see once every two years? You use the in-car navigation system – you don't care how the GPS signal gets to and from your car or how the system knows where Auntie lives just by telling it her postcode.

Want to know how long your interminable flight sat next to the heavyweight red cabbage-eating champion will last? Watch the inflight moving map. It is in the cabin for a reason – it's very popular.

These are mainstream uses of mapping but there should be so many more. One of the reasons there aren't is that the design of the user experience and the presentation of geospatial products are rarely given the money or time that they need.

The geospatial companies that value these business disciplines as highly as the technical development of products will be the ones that forge new marketplaces and find themselves in the mainstream.

SHOW PEOPLE THAT YOUR MAPPING IS SIMPLE TO USE, EASY TO ACCESS AND WHAT IT CAN DO FOR THEM, AND THEY WILL USE IT

Alistair MacLenan is founder of the geospatial B2B marketing agency Quarry One Eleven (www.quarry-one-eleven.com)