

What3words: the company revolutionising the way we talk about location

What3words has divided the globe into 57 trillion three-metre squares and labelled each with a unique three-word code. Now, they need to convince the world to adopt their unique approach to addressing. Maddyne UK spoke to founder, Chris Sheldrick, about the novel solution to a frustrating problem.

“We’re trying to affect huge, global behavioural change,” says Chris Sheldrick, founder of what3words, the company that wants to “change the way the world talks about location.”

The idea behind what3words is simple. Conventional street addresses can be extremely long, meaning that they’re inefficient, prone to mistakes, and fail to take into account the size of a building or plot of land. The solution? Divide the world in three-metre squares and code each square with three distinct words.

For example, if you wanted to find the statue of Abraham Lincoln that stands in London’s Parliament Square, you can search “gravy.hotel.snacks”, saving the need to check the twelve other statues that stand in his company.

Perhaps you want to find the perfect spot to capture an iconic image of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge? Just search "[belt.regard.cubes](#)".

Or maybe you want to meet a friend at the bus stop outside Heathrow Terminal 5, but don't want to walk around in circles trying to find them? Just type in "[hello.global.stews](#)".

Though the idea is at first quirky and enjoyable – everybody will want to know the three words that code the front door to their house, or identify their current location – what3words is a clever and novel means of rectifying a consequence of an increasingly connected world.

A catalyst for change

Chris did not follow the conventional route to becoming a startup founder. Instead of going to business school, he founded his own live music events company and travelled the world.

"It was while trying to make sure that musicians, equipment, and festival-goers all ended up at the correct locations that I first realised the challenges of poor addressing," Chris says.

"I experimented with using GPS coordinates instead, but they were unreliable and difficult to use. I decided there had to be a better solution."

That solution is what3words, an idea that Chris has grown "from a small team of innovators and creatives to a 150+ people organisation that is revolutionising the way the world communicates location."

Chris has taken the essence of musical collaboration with him into what3words, having breakfast with a different what3words employee each morning.

"I'll spend an hour or so hearing from them about what we're doing with their part of the company, and how we can improve," he says. "It is a giant ideas formulation process."

A novel idea

That what3words was born from frustration is clear. Chris Sheldrick talks like a founder who refuses to return to the inefficient processes that existed before the foundation of their startup.

“Put simply, street addressing is failing to meet the demands of how we live today, particularly when it comes to on-the-go services. Our research has found that globally, 70% of addresses will not take you to the front door, with 74% of people saying guests, services, and deliveries struggle to find them.

“These inaccuracies in addressing result in taxis arriving in neighbouring streets, food deliveries arriving cold, navigation systems taking drivers to the wrong destination and customers wasting hours on the phone to couriers. This is costly to businesses, frustrating for customers, and hampers innovation.”

What3words, then, aims to simplify the process of delivery and location. The three-word code is “far easier to remember than street addresses and postcodes, or long alphanumeric strings, or GPS coordinates, and they’re also easier to communicate accurately.”

A string of partnerships

The diverse array of commercial businesses that have partnered with what3words is testament to the strength of Chris Sheldrick’s idea.

The universality of the solution has led to £100M in capital investment from corporations and companies such as Intel, Ingka (IKEA), Mercedes-Benz, Aramex, Deutsche Bahn, Subaru, and Sony Innovation Fund.

Unsurprisingly, what3words has also impressed the automotive and logistics industries, leading to partnerships with Mitsubishi, Lamborghini, and Ford, alongside DPD, DHL, and Evri (previously Hermes).

However, the brilliance of the idea is that it is not industry or market specific; rather, it is applicable to any business, idea, or individual that requires an element of logistical planning.

For example, what3words has recently been added to Domino’s Pizza Global Online Ordering platform, having already been successfully piloted in Domino’s franchises in the UK, USA and Saudi Arabia, as a means of ensuring speedy and efficient delivery of hot Domino’s pizza across the globe.

Further, what3words is being used to empower those with sight loss, partnering

with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) to highlight how the use of simple and specific addresses can trigger positive change in the sight loss community.

Whilst specific stories show how useful what3words can be in a crisis situation. In February of this year, Ukrainian emergency services used what3words to locate and rescue a driver who had become trapped on a remote, unmarked road in Donetsk Oblast, Eastern Ukraine. The rescue was aided by the fact that what3words works offline and is available in 50 languages, including Ukrainian, Russian, and English.

A bright future

According to Chris, the future of what3words is bright.

“We are on a mission to change the way the world talks about location,” Chris explains, “and are working towards a future where people see ///word.word.word on a building, contact page, or booking confirmation and immediately recognise it as an address.”

The vision is global, and is itself informed by users across the world.

“Every day we hear about new and innovative ways that our technology is being used around the world. [...] Every single user is important as you never know where it might lead.”

What3words is currently active in 193 countries and recently launched their 50th language – Odia, the native language of the eastern Indian state Odisha – meaning that, to date, five billion people can use what3words in their native tongue. And whilst the UK remains their largest market, they have seen impressive growth in strategically important regions around the world, including Germany, the USA, Canada, Japan, India and South Korea.

Expansion into new areas and accumulating new users is certainly important to what3words.

“It’s like flicking a switch,” Chris explains. “Once we’ve engaged [people], and

shown them how the problem affects them specifically, they see the potential of our solution.”

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