

# 14099 Google buys Waze

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A map was once a sheet of paper. The information it could give – natural features, political boundaries, streets and railway lines – was limited by space and scale. Getting an update meant buying a new one. The modern map is almost a living thing. Its habitat is the personal computer or (increasingly) the Smartphone. It can carry layer upon layer of data, from traffic conditions and public-transport route to reviews of local restaurants and indoor plans of shops, museums and airports. And as the world changes, the map adapts.

On the internet such maps are valuable assets – which is why Google has paid just over \$1 billion for Waze, a five-year-old Israeli firm. Waze, the creator of a traffic and navigation app for smartphones, was much sought after. Apple was rumoured to have been interested as well as Facebook.

In maps Google is already far ahead of both its rivals. It has spent huge sums of money making the physical world as searchable as the digital realm, sending cars and airplanes to gather images and data from all over the planet. Recently Google showed off improvements to its maps. Among other things, they will be more personal: people can add their own landmarks (a favourite restaurant or museum, for example), and similar or related places will be highlighted.

Google may therefore have calculated that it is worth paying \$1 billion just to deny Facebook and Apple a chance of making up a little ground. But what else has it bought? Smartphones on which Waze's app is open are tracked automatically. They contribute to an ever-changing map that shows drivers the best way to beat the traffic on the way to work or home. Drivers can also choose to report traffic jams, as well as accidents, roadworks, speed traps and petrol prices. Thousands of people have also edited Waze's maps. Waze users' data, if eventually built into Google's maps, should give a timelier, fuller picture of conditions on the roads.

Waze has become very popular in Israel and now boasts almost 50 million users in more than one hundred countries. The average distance per user has been growing month by month, suggesting that people are using it for daily commuting rather than for unfamiliar journeys.

Last November Waze began selling local advertising where drivers may be shown special offers from petrol stations or fast-food restaurants. For better or worse, a paper map was never so distracting.