

Apple's Cook apologizes for Maps flaws, recommends rivals

Poornima Gupta, Reuters

(Reuters) - Apple Inc Chief Executive Tim Cook apologized Friday to customers frustrated with glaring errors in its new Maps service, and, in an unusual move for the consumer giant, directed them to rival services instead, such as Google Inc's Maps.

The rare apology follows Apple's launch of its own mapping service earlier this month, when it began selling the iPhone 5 and rolled out iOS 6, the highly anticipated update to its mobile software platform.

Users complained that the new Maps service - based on Dutch navigation equipment and digital map maker TomTom NV's's data - contained geographical errors and gaps in information, and that it lacked features that made Google Maps so popular, including public transit directions, comprehensive traffic data or street view pictures.

"We are extremely sorry for the frustration this has caused our customers and we are doing everything we can to make Maps better," Cook said in a letter to customers released on its website, adding that the company "fell short" of its commitment to deliver "the best experience possible to our customers."

Unusually, he suggested that customers download rival mapping services available in Apple's App Store, while the company improves the product.

"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," he said in the letter.

"It is a bit unusual but at the same time, Tim is keeping Apple's commitment to provide the best user experience for customers," Sterne Agee analyst Shaw Wu said. "A key reason for Apple's success is keeping customers happy so we think this is a good move."

"People forget that Google Maps started out inferior to Mapquest and Yahoo Maps," he added.

Apple is typically loathe to tout rival services and the contrite apology by Cook is an indication of how Apple is changing under the chief executive who took over last year from co-founder Steve Jobs just before his death.

Shares of Apple were down 1.8 percent in late morning trading at \$669.22.

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NEW APPLE

The last time Apple faced such widespread criticism was in 2010, when users complained of signal reception issues on the then-new iPhone 4 model.

A defiant Jobs at the time rejected any suggestion the iPhone 4's design was flawed, but offered consumers free phone cases at a rare, 90-minute press conference called to address those complaints.

While Apple fixed the issue, Jobs had apologized to users only after he was specifically asked if he was sorry. He also said the issue was shared by all the major manufacturers, naming rivals Research In Motion, Samsung Electronics and HTC Corp specifically.

Cook's suggestion that Apple users download other map apps, particularly Google Maps, represents an about-turn for Apple, which had introduced its service as a direct challenge to the popular service offered by ally-turned-rival Google.

Apple Maps replaced the Google Maps app, which is no longer available on iOS 6. Users now have to access Google Maps through the browser.

Cook said that more than 100 million iOS devices are using the new Apple Maps and that the more people use Maps, the better it will get. He also offered some hints on why the company decided to remove Google Maps.

Apple launched the Google-powered Maps "initially with the first version of iOS" and the company created a home-grown version of the service as it wanted to provide more features, Cook said.

"As time progressed, we wanted to provide our customers with even better Maps including features such as turn-by-turn directions, voice integration, Flyover and vector-based maps," he said in the letter.

Google provides turn-by-turn navigation on Android-based devices but the popular feature was not available for Apple devices.

Google and Apple were close partners with the original iPhone in 2007 and its inclusion of YouTube and Google Maps. But ties between the two companies have been strained by the rise of Google's Android mobile operating system, now the world's leading platform for smartphones.

Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt said earlier this week that it has not submitted a new Google Maps app to Apple, but added the search giant talks to the Cupertino-based company "every day."

(Editing by Bernadette Baum)

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