5 Questions to... Chris Sheldrick

Chris Sheldrick is director of what3words, a company which pinpoints any location on the globe (to the nearest 2 metres) with a unique 3 word combination. The technology comprises a giant grid of the world made up of 57 trillion squares of 3 metres x 3 metres. GIM International invited Chris Sheldrick to answer 5 questions in order to learn more about this innovative precise location service.

What does your company do?
The company what3words provides a human, friendly alternative to long coordinate pairs, whilst still retaining a 3m accuracy appropriate to most everyday needs. Instead of 51.611647, -0.343852 or 51° 36' 41.929" N, 0° 20' 37.867" W, you can simply use latest.laptop.pitch; all 57 trillion 3m x 3m squares in the world have been given a unique 3-word label.

How do you intend to achieve your objective of becoming an international standard for addressing?
We aim to build up a network of partners who support and use w3w alongside our growing customer base. To expand our partner network we need consumers creating demand, and partners for consumers to use their w3w with.

Your company seems to have an idealistic vision. What drives you?
What3words was spawned as a response to problems that I and others faced in the everyday communication of location. It frustrated me that there was no reference system for precise location that one could hold in short-term memory, and easily communicate by voice and other 'non-device-to-device' means – so we built a system that works well over speaking, hearing, print, text, machines and memory. What3words is an incredibly efficient communication method for long digits of numbers (lat/longs). Our biggest challenge is resistance to change from the normal substitute for lat/longs in everyday life, such as when people use common landmarks like bus shelters and lampposts. We are driven by the fact that our technology is more efficient than any alternative.

What are the main applications of the what3words technology?
Our technology can be used for most day-to-day location communication needs which require an accuracy of less than 3m. A w3w can always be supplemented with a flat number for large buildings, and street address information if the user needs more context. Just some examples include: people calling each other to communicate a location, navigation, couriers, taxis, small-business addresses, food delivery, email signatures, tourist guides, printed location information, hotel booking correspondence, events, concerts, festivals…

Many developing countries lack an adequate address system. What role do you expect your solution to play in such countries?
We are always going to have a more dramatic effect in places where other forms of location referencing are worse. A recent Pitney Bowes report stated that less than 25% of the world has an adequate addressing system. Whilst we are not a street addressing system in that we do not provide contextual location information, we do enable a lot of services which are either hindered or impossible due to an inadequate address system by bypassing this and using the equivalent of a lat/long. Our 3-word system can also work offline for areas with poor data connectivity, meaning that real-time navigation services are enabled for anyone with a GPS-compatible device. Functionality ranges from compass-style operation for areas with little or no street data to integration with third-party offline mapping and navigation services.

Chris Sheldrick is director of what3words, for more info see www.what3words.com.