

Fair Prices

I feel we need to discuss a principle that seems to have taken hold in recent years: that everything on the internet is for free. Consumers – professional or otherwise – have become used to obtaining all manner of free-of-charge information online, from news and music to geoinformation in the form of maps. Over the last 20 years, paid information has come under increasing pressure; publishers of newspapers and atlases, and even libraries, have been steadily losing customers as people discover that almost everything can be found on the internet for 'free'. (The use of inverted commas is deliberate, because it's not really for free. As the popular saying goes, "There's no such thing as a free lunch"!)

In January this year, Google Maps introduced a new policy requiring companies, societies, non-profit organisations and individuals to pay for using its maps on their websites. True, this currently only applies to websites or apps with over 25,000 map-loads per day, but limits can be adjusted any time, and the underlying message is clear: maps are no longer for free. This development is not unique. Google's strategy has always been to attract large numbers of users by initially providing free services which it later charges people for – perhaps not everybody, but certainly the top band of heavy users, as with its Google Enterprise Professional programme, for instance. For now, the payment policy has simply resulted in many customers shunning Google Maps in favour of other providers such as OpenStreetMap who are still offering similar services for free. But perhaps the tide has started to turn...

No-one would expect to walk down their local High Street and help themselves to products – except samples – for free, yet this has become accepted practice on the internet. I believe that this model is ultimately unsustainable. Companies cannot survive without revenue, and individuals have to realise that there's always somebody who needs to be paid for the service they are consuming. It will be interesting to see how Google Maps fares in convincing people to pay for maps, especially after having been ditched by Apple, who will now be sourcing its maps from TomTom. It will also be very interesting to monitor OpenStreetMap's next move. Having recently paid a billion dollars for old patents and licenses of MapQuest, who has been working with OpenStreetMap for a long time, Microsoft is not likely to sit back and watch MapQuest hand out everything for free. Will OpenStreetMap consequently try to charge a small fee, perhaps to non-contributors or companies who are using the free data to make a lot of money for themselves? I am not pretending I know what will happen, but mindset shifts are definitely necessary to keep the model sustainable – not only for the producers, but also for the users. There are indeed no free lunches and, in the new economy, providers will eventually be forced to charge fair prices. And users need to be prepared to pay them.