How the brands we love use data now to actually be better

By Laurette Coetzee , issued by AfriGIS   8 Jun 2022

We're so accustomed to using apps like Waze, Google Maps, and Maps in our everyday lives by now that we barely even notice them anymore. What we may not realise is that they're also having a profound impact on the way we do business and changing the way we interact with our favourite brands.

Laurette Coetzee, business development manager of AfriGIS

Health and medical services like ER24 and couriers like DSV are much more connected to us than ever before. They may not touch our lives every single day. But, because they do things better, they have a huge impact on our daily lives. Helping them get it right is what gets me out of bed every day because it has a profound ability to make people's lives so much better.

The past was difficult

Before GPS and map apps there was the mark 1 map. The user experience was difficult, you had to cross reference data by running your finger up and down grids, flipping back and forth between pages. It was impossible to do while actually driving.

These days, if you need to get somewhere you've never been before, in a hurry, it's no sweat. Drop in the address, which you don't even need to type out in full, and away you go. You even get route optimisation and ETAs. Prefer highways to byways? No problem. You even have a choice of voice to read directions if that helps.

It's the kind of thing that used to be expensive and technically challenging. Only big companies had it to manage armadas of vehicles, fleets of stores, and networks of ATMs or branches. Smaller companies never stood a chance, let alone ordinary people like me and you.

But these days we can even drop a GPX file into an app on our phone and ride a mountain bike trail in the sticks we've never seen in our life before. Then still get back for a cappuccino and on-the-go breakfast (596 calories at one of South Africa's favourite post-ride breakfast haunts).

The new challenge

Nowadays everyone can access this type of data and a lot of businesses use it to make more money than ever. Not in the dodgy Facebook kind of way. Not everyone's giving suspect psychologists free rein to mine continental swathes of people's private data to swing a national election in ways that alter relations between international superpowers.

A lot of companies, many of them South African, are run by good people who use the data to give other people, like you and me, genuinely better services and products that we actually want. Discovery's the go-to example but there are many others.

Banks use deeds data to see where bonds are registered to determine their under and over exposure in markets, by understanding where people are buying and selling. It not only helps the bank, it also helps the bond customers, because they get access to better rates as a result, for example.

Courier, logistics and e-commerce firms use geocoded data to track where their vehicles are. It helps them be more efficient, which means lower costs, which is good for customers, and they can keep us informed of where our parcels are at every stage of the process. Plus, they can actually find us, even though there's so much opportunity to get addresses

messed up when you think about it.

Retailers use this data to understand where to put their stores. That helps them improve profitability by a few percentage points over years, which is a huge benefit to their gross profit (GP). But it's also good for us because it means the stores are where we need them to be. They stock the stuff we want to buy. And they're open when we're typically passing by, because the retailers can link in the traffic patterns now.

Making a difference

The big difference between what the businesses are doing now versus what we as ordinary people do, is use data they know is accurate and that's been enriched.

We may not realise it but the consumer-grade phone-based map apps type data is actually a best-guess scenario. Ever put an address in but when you get there you can't quite find the entrance, or the street numbers don't seem to go that high, maybe it gets your own address wrong even though you know you live there? Because a lot of what's going on is guesswork.

That sort of inaccuracy is fine when we're looking for a friend's place. Get within a few hundred metres and a call or WhatsApp sorts out the last stretch. It's even pretty good for a plumber who needs it a couple of times a day to find a customer.

But it's no good for a bank's branch managers to figure out what services to offer private and commercial customers in an area. Nor for their development teams to understand what financial services products to bring to market.

Retailers can't be "sort of in the ballpark" when they're working out where to invest millions in stores to best serve communities for win-win outcomes.

And couriers can't have their drivers consuming thousands of litres of increasingly expensive petrol wasting hours of their lives looking for a street number or gate that isn't there just because the map uses cheap crowd-sourced data rather than proper enriched, verified and validated business class information.

It's just too expensive to be that unreliable and inaccurate.

Imagining new scenarios is key to success

To give you an idea, ER 24 says by improving the accuracy of locating addresses, its call centre agents spend an average of 45 seconds on a call instead of six minutes. Imagine how much it used to cost the industry for all their emergency people to waste that much time every day of every year.

The courier company, DSV, improved its first-time delivery success rate by 93%. That's hundreds of hours of time and thousands of litres of petrol that bakkies would otherwise have to waste going back a second time to try again.

Sure, it's incredibly beneficial for the companies to be faster and get it right the first time. But it's as good, if not better, for the customers. People like you and me.

Imagine you spend just 45 seconds on the phone in an emergency, considerably more comforting than wasting six minutes figuring out street addresses while there's a medical emergency happening right in front of you.

Parcels arrive first time, when the company said they would deliver. It's reliability we're no longer accustomed to from state providers, but we just assume the private guys are going to get right. If they don't? We use someone else.

Almost every larger business can use this, particularly when they're bigger than the local plumber. And that's what I love

about my job. I get to help them get it right, every single time.

About AfriGIS

AfriGIS is the leading geospatial information science company in southern Africa that specialises in location-sensitive data and solutions. It provides customers across the board with a suite of cloud tools and APIs to connect to, enhance, and enrich their own data with verified and validated location intelligence and insights. The organisation was founded in 1997. It is a level 1-certified broad-based black economic empowerment (B-BBEE) business, with more than 100 employees, in Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town in South Africa, Dublin in Ireland, and Dhaka in Bangladesh.

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