

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/sns-ap-google-maps,0,3647342...>

Google Turns to Users for Online Maps

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE
AP Business Writer

April 5, 2007, 9:06 AM CDT

Advertisement



SAN FRANCISCO -- Google Inc. is calling upon its millions of users to chart a new direction for its online maps.

As part of an initiative being launched Thursday, the Internet search leader will provide free tools designed to make it easy for people to share their knowledge about their neighborhoods and other favorite places by creating customized maps that can assemble information from a variety of sources.

The map creators will be given the option to make the content public or keep it private.

Thousands of hybrid maps, often called "mashups," are already available on the Web, documenting everything from local housing markets to active volcanos.

But cobbling together an online map typically requires some computer coding skills.

Google has tailored its tools for a mass audience, making map mashups as easy to produce as pointing and clicking a computer mouse. The Mountain View-based company is hoping the simplicity will generate millions of highly specialized maps that can be stored in its search index.

Until now, Google's two-year-old maps had primarily been used for driving directions and finding local businesses. The more personal maps should open up new avenues as users share insights about their favorite vacation spots or a wide range of academic subjects, said Jessica Lee, product manager of Google maps.

"This is a big change," Lee said. "Even if we cut loose all our developers, we could never create maps with the same depth and quality as our users can."

While testing the new tools, Google's own engineers created maps focused on U.S. Route 66, the Hawaiian island of Kauai, Major League Baseball stadiums and voting patterns in the 2004 presidential election.

If Google succeeds in its effort to build a vast storehouse of customized maps, its Web site could become an even more popular Internet destination. Achieving that goal would give Google even more opportunities to display the online ads that accounted for most of its \$3.1 billion profit last year.

The feature also could drive more traffic to Google's YouTube because the new toolkit also includes an option to embed video into the customized maps.

Google's maps already are a big draw, with 22.2 million U.S. visitors during February, according to the most recent data available from comScore Media Metrix. That ranked Google maps third in its category, trailing AOL's Mapquest (45.1 million visitors) and Yahoo (29.1 million visitors).

The concept of mapping mashups was popularized by a computer animation engineer, Paul Rademacher, who charted apartment listings from Craigslist. Google has since hired Rademacher to work in its mapping department.

Copyright © 2007, The Associated Press