
Apple, directionless?

By [Niraj Dawar](#)

The Apple Maps App fiasco is having an interesting effect on the company's brand and its loyal fan following.

The inevitable “this would not have happened had Steve still been here” conclusion is all over the internet.

Of course, that conclusion ignores the antenna problems with the iPhone 4 when it was launched, and it ignores the fact that Siri was launched under Steve's watch even though it was (and still is) not ready for prime time.

What is more interesting at this stage is how the company handles the mess. Here's how Tim Cook has responded, with his [apology](#) on Friday.

The “To our customers” letter starts with “At Apple, we strive to make world-class products that deliver the best experience possible to our customers.” It ends with “Everything we do at Apple is aimed at making our products the best in the world.” In the middle he suggests customers use map apps from other companies such as Bing, MapQuest, and Waze. Interestingly, the best maps app, Google Maps, is still unavailable at the App Store.

The launch of a defective product could have been devastating for a lesser company. Apple has been able to withstand several defective product launches, and will likely come out okay from this one, thanks to the depth and breadth of its customer loyalty. Its customers are willing to forgive the company almost anything. (As in [Samsung's brutal parody](#) of Apple fans, one fan says “...yeah, yeah, but they make the coolest adaptors.”)

But what is disconcerting in his letter is that Tim Cook views Apple through the lens of its products, that he sees the company as product-centered: “Everything we do at Apple is aimed at making our products the best in the world.” He spends a good chunk of his letter explaining and excusing the product problems, instead of allaying customer risks and rebuilding trust.

These are signs of misplaced strategic emphasis. Products should be a means, not an end. The end should be to make more customers more loyal to the Apple brand. That is what will build an enduring company and leave competitors behind. His statement should have read: “Everything we do at Apple is aimed at providing the utmost value to our customers and winning their lasting trust.

Customers are the key source of competitive advantage in the 21st century. Products are merely a means of creating value for customers so they will stick around. Yes, defective products erode that trust, but a company at the cutting edge of bringing hi-tech to mass markets will have an inevitable occasional glitch. It is the existing stock of customer trust that allows the company to weather these glitches.

If the company obsesses about its products rather than its customers, Tim Cook’s job should be to turn it around so that it is facing its customers. Despite occasional product and pricing problems, Steve Jobs seemed to intuitively know where Apple’s customers were at, and steered the company in their direction. Tim Cook, on the other hand, looks like he will need a good map to guide him. Oops.

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