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## Business

# Three words that say 'I know just where you are'

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INTERVIEW



Every three-metre square spot on Earth has been given a three-word identifier by a London company with inter-planetary ambitions

**L**oving.buns.luxury is a grassy spot measuring three metres by three metres in the middle of Kensington Gardens, somewhere between the Peter Pan statue (pinks.pines.minute) and the entrance to the Serpentine Gallery (prime.trendy.water).

All these three-word combinations identify places in the London royal park that would otherwise be much trickier, if not impossible, to locate. They are where your friend has laid out the picnic blanket, or where your partner proposed, or where you've stumbled upon a person who needs urgent medical assistance.

What3Words, a three-year-old company based at index.home.raft in Westbourne Park, has divided the entire planet into 57 trillion 3-metre squares and named them with a combination of three random words.

Almost random, that is. Homophones such as "hear" and "here" are excluded, as are potential insults and words that are spelt differently in the US and the UK. Busy, built-up places are given short, common words and trickier words are used for more remote locations.

"In London and New York, you'll find words like 'table', in the northern forest of Russia you'll find words like 'hypochondriac' and in the sea you'll find even more obscure words," says Chris Sheldrick, co-founder and chief executive of What3Words. "Go to the Namibian desert and you'll find some pretty interesting stuff."

Indeed, a randomly selected spot in south Namibia comes up as tuxedos. accruing.realtor.

There's a What3Words app and a website with an explorable map that will give you the three-word address for where you are, where you want to go and everywhere in between.

For an entrepreneur who has built a company out of three-word combinations, Sheldrick's ambitions



**Line manager:** Chris Sheldrick, the co-founder of What3Words, busy dividing the world into three-metre squares

are far from simple. "We're giving people in all of the countries in the world ways to talk about everywhere," he says.

Sheldrick, who previously ran a live music events business, started What3Words after one too many roadies went to the wrong place. He would give drivers GPS co-ordinates instead of street addresses, but that often left him with undelivered equipment. One truck driver supposed to travel an hour south of Rome found himself an hour north of Rome – just because he mixed up a four and a five.

"You realise that GPS co-ordinates are great if you're a computer or a robot, but they're not good for human beings," he says.

"You also realise that not every address points to the right place when you type it into an app on your phone. Big buildings have multiple entrances and addresses in the countryside can

be two miles away from where they actually are."

So Sheldrick – who met co-founder Jack Waley-Cohen at the school chess team at Eton – decided to "devise a system where you can name every couple of metres on the earth's surface with something really easy, way easier than 16 numbers".

Every three-metre square has a name in almost a dozen languages and the immediate benefits for deliveries and travellers are obvious.

"If we go to Moscow, it would be much easier for us to meet at table, chair-spoon than trying to work out what the Cyrillic characters are," Sheldrick says. "And similarly, [Russians] don't want to work out how to spell Worcester Terrace in the UK – instead of that street address, they could use three Russian words."

But Sheldrick says that from the start he was "incredibly aware of the

### CV Chris Sheldrick

- ◆ Age: 34
- ◆ Lives: Queen's Park, London
- ◆ Education: music scholarship at Eton and studied music at King's College London
- ◆ Hobbies: photography and squash
- ◆ Little-known fact: At 23, severed eight tendons and an artery in his left arm in a sleepwalking incident

simplicity of what we'd come up with and that it had so many potential applications – we immediately thought this helps so many people in so many countries."

What3Words is helping the US Agency for International Development collect data for its various health and development missions in Rwanda, while a team led by the Red Cross used its technology to mark contaminated water locations during a cholera outbreak in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The United Nations has incorporated the technology into UN-ASIGN, its app for crowdsourcing information such as the location of damaged buildings and other hazards during a humanitarian crisis.

What3Words is also used to deliver mail to 11.5m people in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and to courier medication to hundreds of patients in the township of Khayelitsha, Cape

Town – all of whom live without official street addresses.

Here in the UK, each postcode contains an average of 15 delivery points – so even when you give a delivery company, a taxi driver or an emergency responder your full postcode, a combination of up to seven letters and numbers, you've narrowed the destination to more than a dozen locations. In a bustling city this might be limited to half a street, but the largest postcode region in the UK – HD7 5UZ in West Yorkshire – covers seven roads.

What3Words' technology is being trialled by several first responder services around the world. It has been used by Festival Medical Services, which looks after Glastonbury and Reading among others, and BlueLight, the emergency response location finder, on ski slopes and college campuses – large, crowded areas that are primed for accidents and crime.

"College campuses and ski resorts only have one main address and then a lot of landmarks," says Preet Anand, the chief executive of BlueLight. "If you can't describe a location specifically, it's tough for a responder to get there on time. Location is one of the biggest factors in response time, and response time is its most important factor in outcome."

Even when it's not potentially saving lives, What3Words has been used in a number of innovative ways.

The British Museum has tagged more than a million artefacts with the three-word addresses of where they were found, while Geoflyer, a navigation and tracking app for hikers and climbers, allows users to mark routes and points of interest using this technology.

Sheldrick says the company is pushing for international recognition by the end of this year and is talking to "all of the big global logistics firms" – think UPS, Royal Mail, Amazon – after raising \$3.5m in November from Intel's investment arm and Li Ka-shing's Horizons Ventures.

He says logistics and navigation will be what drives the company's growth at this stage.

As indoor mapping and drone deliveries become mainstream, Sheldrick envisions the company adding an optional additional parameter for height – perhaps a number tacked on the end of the three word combination – so you could have your lunch delivered to your office window or straight to your desk.

The possibilities seem endless when every spot on Earth has its own easily memorable identifier. What next, outer space?

"There is a lady who got in touch with us about a project – she's realised that Mars is not yet addressed," Sheldrick says. "So, yeah, we're thinking about it."