

Locator Maps: helping customers find businesses

Ian W. Byrne ^{a,*}

^a Canterbury Christ Church University

i.w.byrne154@canterbury.ac.uk

* Corresponding author

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Abstract:

Maps serve many purposes – they can help users find where they want to go, or they can steer users where the map creator wants them to go. Sometimes these purposes are hidden from users, but on other occasions they are visible in plain sight. Into this category we see “locator maps” – those that were created primarily for customers, or potential customers, of a business. Often made freely available, and sometimes created by advertising agencies not cartographers, these maps are rarely considered as a distinct class but can reveal hidden sophistication or complexity. Moreover, even as the number of paid-for consumer maps plummeted, locator maps continued to be created in paper formats (and online).

This paper will review the development of locator maps mainly drawing on selected examples principally from the USA and Europe. Surviving early maps are scarce; by their very nature they were designed to be freely available, produced at low cost and often with low perceived value. Only a hoarder would want to keep last year’s map once an updated edition had become available – with more up to date features such as roads, as well as new locations for the sponsor’s business – although occasionally they might have been kept as a souvenir of a vacation trip.

Firstly, a “locator map” needs to be defined. For the purpose of this paper, it must have been issued by or on behalf of a single organization (or closely related group of businesses), and not by a commercial cartographer selling advertising space to the businesses. It is possible that the map might carry some third-party advertising (Amoco/Standard Indiana maps in the USA often did this), but the primary organization has to be clear. Maps from trade or tourist associations would generally fall outside this classification, although those from franchisors of a specific chain of businesses (such as a petrol or hotel brand) count. Commercial map products, such as a road atlas, that carried detailed cartographic information and only incidentally mark the sponsor’s locations would also fall outside the scope. Conversely, quite crude or incomplete maps – perhaps just marking a few main highways and towns with the sponsor’s locations – can be considered as locator maps. City maps, marking a single hotel or department store location, are a grey area – although they might enable the user to return to the place where they had been given the map – as are maps found in franchised hotel directories.

Those maps that survive come from a variety of businesses, but with a bias towards those serving the traveller or holidaymaker. Providers of locator maps include camping, hotel, restaurant and pub chains; petrol stations, car dealerships, car rental companies and car parks; banks, supermarkets and other retail trades; but isolated examples can be found from a wide range of businesses.

Apart from an early flourish in the USA when oil companies were first opening roadside service station chains, these maps appeared most frequently from the 1950s onwards. Printing costs had fallen, and independent travellers began to be more numerous, often looking for assurance that they would be able to find familiar brands away from home. The advent of GIS and the ability to create good quality maps on computers gave a fillip to their production in some markets in the 1990s. However, technology has decimated the numbers available on paper today: websites and downloadable apps can be produced much more cheaply than printed products, adding to pressure on marketing budgets to show measurable returns. The COVID pandemic, with a reduction of discretionary travel and financial losses in travel-related businesses, has seen some of the remaining issuers of paper locator maps cease publication.

Prior to electronic maps, there were a wide range of formats, ranging from the ephemeral to good quality maps. Common formats identified in research to date include:

Flyers	Typically A5 or A4 in Europe; often low quality cartography
Tear off sheets	Typically larger (A3 or equivalent), widely used by car rental companies
Credit card sized	Often using a patent fold such Z-Card®

Folding sheet maps	Most common format, ranging from basic to complex cartography
Booklet maps	Produced as printing smaller sheets cost less than folding maps
Small atlases	A more sophisticated (and expensive) form of booklet

Table 1: Common formats for locator maps

Similar maps can also appear on various ephemeral items such as bags or restaurant place mats.

Locator maps are a rarely studied cartographic product existing on the border between ephemera and mainstream maps despite their near ubiquity. The author has become aware of the variety of such maps as part of his research into the wider range of maps issued by, or for, oil companies. This paper seeks to redress this omission, showing that they are an integral part of the maps that have been available on a day-to-day basis to the public for much of the past century.