

How Marco Polo botched its app upgrade and ended up with 1 star reviews

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Want a lesson in how not to launch a premium version of a free app?

Take a look at how the company behind the app Marco Polo did it this

week. Not being totally straight with the public about its plan to get free users to become paying subscribers isn't exactly great for business.

An app update began rolling out to users that, once installed, it removed many of the most popular features Marco Polo users had come to love—unless they agreed to pay a \$5 monthly subscription.

But that's not how Marco Polo co-founder and CEO Vlada Bortnik presented it on a company blog.

"Plus is a membership plan that unlocks premium features (like HD!), an elevated experience that includes more functionality, unlimited versions of free features and new, fun ways to use the app, all designed to help you stay connected more effortlessly and joyously."

Longtime Marco Polo user Jarek Khan's take: he saw an app update that removed many of the features he had come to love.

"If you take away the features that I like to use instead of adding new ones and try to force me to pay, I'll just stop using the app," says the Los Angeles area personal trainer.

Marco Polo is a different kind of video chat app. Unlike real-time chat like on FaceTime, Skype and Zoom, users of Marco Polo send video messages to each other on their time. Replies are called "Polos," and the app is aimed at helping people communicate without having to worry about schedules being in sync.

The app has seen a dramatic rise in usage since the pandemic hit in February, up 16 times normal, according to Bortnik. The app received over 900,000 downloads in March, per market tracker Sensor Tower, on top of its previous 10 million downloads.

And for a company that has refused to run ads or sell users personal information to third parties, finding a "sustainable" way to make money has been a challenge. Bortnik, who founded the company with her husband Michal, felt they had finally found the answer, with the Plus version she touted this week.

One reviewer on iTunes gave Marco Polo a two-star review for the change, noting that at a time when other companies are opening up normally paid features during the crisis, Marco Polo went the other way, which makes it look like the founders are capitalizing on the situation.

The headlines to other reviews were not exactly friendly. "Upgrade degrades." "Loved app until." "Once great, ruined." "Stay away." "Horrible update." "You can't be serious."

Peter Pham, the president of Science, Inc., which incubates startups and launched free versions of apps that went on to offer premium subscriptions, says there's an art to getting people to pay, and that begins by announcing it to them ahead of time.

"Generally there's a lead up to it, a blog post (or) a notification in the app that change is coming. It all comes down to communication."

Normally, he says, app makers don't take away features that had been free, but offer new ones.

That said, users generally complain loudly about change, as has happened in the past with Netflix rate hikes or Facebook altering features in the News Feed.

"You'll always get a significant numbers of people who are mad, especially when they have to pay for something," says Pham. "They eventually forget about it and move on."

In a series of video replies to questions posed by U.S. TODAY, Bortnik insisted that free users wouldn't see a dramatic change.

"The thing people love about Marco Polo is that they can talk for free, unlimited, with no time limit," she said. "That's the biggest value, and we're not taking that away."

She insisted that none of the changes were set into stone. She originally told U.S. TODAY the premium version would be available to the entire user base by mid-May, but this week began rolling out the update to a select group of users. From there, Marco Polo tests reaction and refines, she says. What users see today may look different in a few weeks.

She admits that her messaging wasn't totally clear. "Many people got what we were trying to do, but not everybody."

Bortnik says Marco Polo is responding to all the people who left 1 star reviews in the App Store, and on social media, "to let them know nothing has been taken away from them."

What she means by that is that the old version is still available. If users upgrade and don't like what they say, they can revert back to the original, from within the app, something most app makers don't allow. However, it's only "for a limited time."

As an example, replies to the Twitterverse began appearing late Friday, two days after the app updates went live.

As for the [negative comments](#) about profiting from a pandemic, Bortnik gets teary. "It goes everything this company stands for," she says. The coronavirus crisis and the rise in app usage shows "more urgency than ever before that ... our business has to be sustainable so that Marco Polo will be there for millions of people."

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