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Apple and Google's Covid-19 Exposure Notification
Just Got a Major Update and It Changes Everything

The tech giants are hoping Exposure Notification will increase adoption by streamlining the opt-in process.

For months, Apple and Google have been building a Covid-19 exposure notification standard into both iOS and Android, the operating systems that power nearly all smartphones. Originally launched in April, this technology is meant to provide an additional tool for public health agencies trying to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

The idea is that since most of us carry smartphones, those devices can exchange keys as we come in contact with each other, and when someone tests positive for Covid-19, all of the people they came into contact with can be notified. The advantage of a common standard is that it works across both iOS and Android devices, ensuring widespread participation.

There are, however, two problems. As a result, the adoption of the technology and the roll-out of apps that use it has been slow.

The first problem is that many state public health officials simply don't have the resources to build and deploy an app, which is expensive and takes resources away from the task of dealing with a pandemic.

The second problem is that even if a state rolls out an app, that doesn't mean anyone will use it. That could be because letting everyone know that an app is available is daunting enough. Getting them to actually go to their respective App Store or Google Play Store and add it to their device is even more so.

Never mind that many people are leery of adding anything to their device that feels like it opens them up to tracking.

Apple and Google have actually gone to great lengths to build the exposure notification system to protect user privacy. The exchange of Bluetooth keys doesn't involve sharing any personal information, and neither Apple nor Google receive any information about your use of the app.

But, none of that matters if no one trusts, or uses the system. The latest phase of the tech giants' partnership involves eliminating several of the barriers to adoption.

This version, known as Exposure Notification Express, allows public health agencies to simply submit a "configuration file" to Apple and Google. That configuration file includes information about how notifications will be triggered, what steps to advise, and information for exposed individuals about contact tracing.

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Users will then receive a notification letting them know that the system is available for their state. On iOS, since the feature is built-in, users simply walk through a process to enable exposure notifications, without having to download an app. While it's still up to the user to opt-in (meaning the notification system is off by default), the process is simpler, which will hopefully increase adoption.

On Android, users will be presented with a streamlined process for adding an app that is automatically generated from the public health agency's configuration file. Though the process is different than on iOS, it's still opt-in, meaning no one's device will have exposure notifications turned on without their consent.

iOS 13.7, which was released on Tuesday, already enables this new feature, and Android will offer it later this month for devices running Android 6.0 or later. Currently, the new system is available in Washington, DC, Maryland, Nevada, and Virginia, though Apple and Google say that 25 states have expressed interest.

There's an important lesson here, by the way: It doesn't matter how valuable or essential your product or service is if the barriers are greater than the perceived benefit.

That's often harder than you might think, even when you know you've created something that will legitimately make people's lives better. It would be hard to argue against anything that helps slow the spread of a global pandemic, and yet, that doesn't mean people will automatically sign up.

This latest move by Apple and Google is a great example of how to streamline the process for users, while still protecting their privacy and their ability to choose whether to participate. In fact, it's a model for every business on how to make it easy for your customers to say yes, or, in this case, to opt-in.

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