



Leading with UX: The Cerence Tour Guide Journey

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At Cerence, we believe that great product design and development has user experience (UX) as its foundation. As part of a cross-functional, global team, I serve as the UX lead for Cerence Tour Guide, our new product that brings a personalized tour guide experience into the car. Read along for a look back at my step-by-step UX journey in bringing Cerence Tour Guide to life.

Day One: Kickoff

Let me set the stage: it's another exciting, busy week at Cerence, and I'm about to join my first meeting as the UX lead for a project I, a huge travel enthusiast, couldn't be happier to work on: Cerence Tour Guide.

Lots of bright ideas come up in the meeting, where half the attendees are UXers. We all agree that the product should be similar to the "hop-on, hop-off" tours that are famous in most beloved tourist areas, but much better, allowing for a personalized experience with additional features. It could have different modes, customizable categories to serve users' varying interests, the option to book tours and tickets for the places we tell users about as they drive by, and much more.

Then, of course, come the questions only users can answer: How will these ideas resonate with drivers and passengers? In what contexts will they find an in-car travel assistant useful? What are users' travel needs and habits, anyway, especially during a pandemic?

Learning and Meeting Drivers' Needs

Day 10: Ideas are all compiled. User studies go live one by one. I'm very curious to see which ideas in my long list of potential features will be priorities for users, as well as how they feel about the in-car tour guide concept as a whole.

Exciting news – our user test group loves it! In a study of 300 participants, 287 find the app useful or very useful; all 300 say they would like or love to have it in their car. One participant says, *"I think of that as I can be traveling through a city, and a program in the vehicle would tell us about [a landmark] while we are driving through or by or around it. 'This is the spot that Abraham Lincoln was born' or whatever. Sounds really cool! ... It's not even something I had thought of!"*

Even though the user never considered such a product, it excites them as soon as they find out about it. I find this comment particularly interesting, as I and my DRIVE Lab teammates discuss this consumer phenomenon from time to time. We strive to create not only experiences users know they want, but those they don't yet know they want, or even better, that they don't yet know they need.

In a different research study about a week later, I find out in an interview that our Cerence Tour Guide idea was indeed fulfilling a long-awaited wish by another user, who says (before I even ask!), *"We go through the mountains a lot, just because it's a beautiful drive. ... Just driving down, we're like this: 'Oh, look at that, really cool.' Tell me something about what's going on in there. If that could be added on to my [embedded in-car] navigation, that would be so cool. ... For example, I like history. So maybe the car will go, 'Hey, do you want to know about historical sites nearby?' I would love to have some sort of commentary when I'm going on long trips. ... And to learn more about the area, 'This upcoming town has a population of 5000 people,' you know, just some sort of Wikipedia page – I want to know more about this little town."*

Spot on. I'm trying to hide a big grin and stop myself from saying, "Well, you might have it very soon."

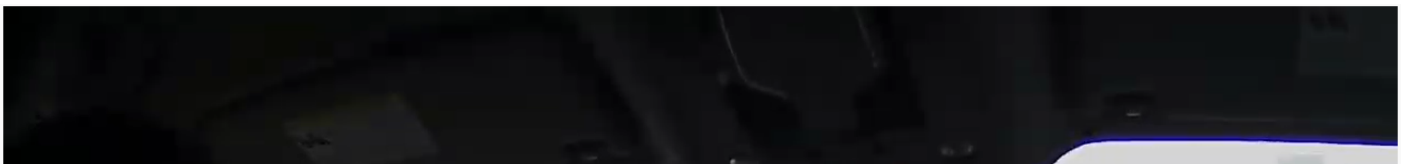
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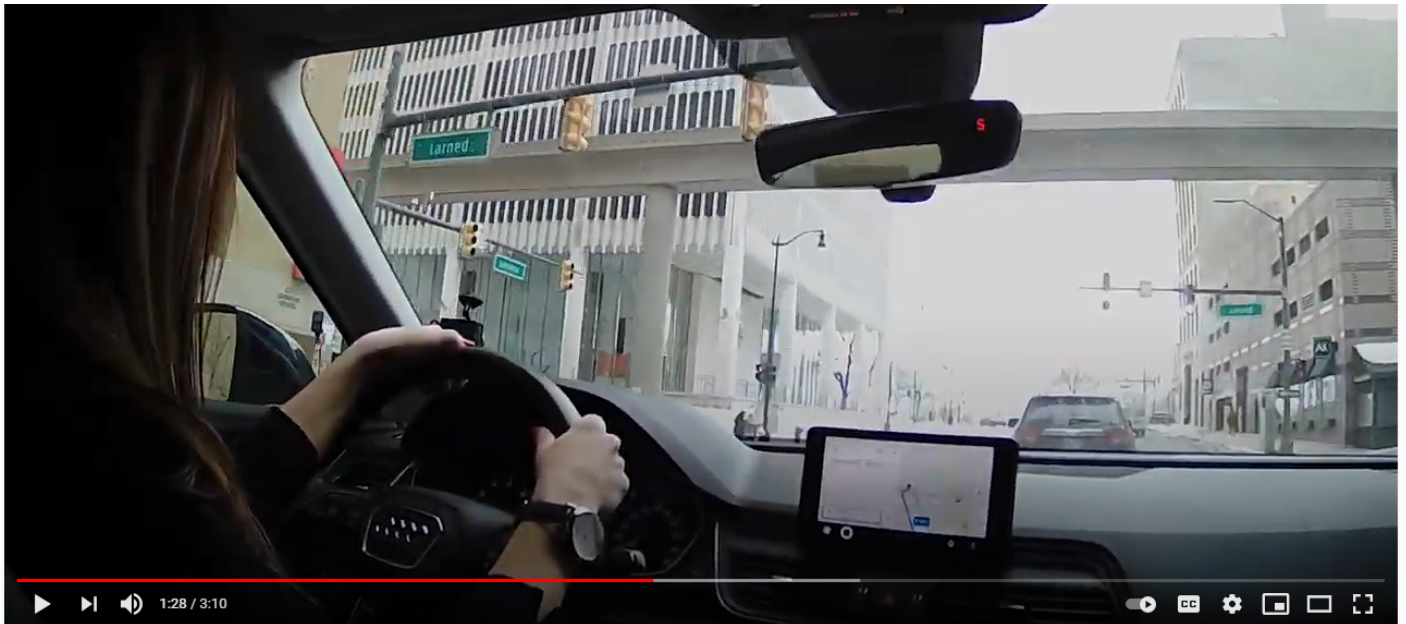
Day 70 or so: The Cerence Tour Guide team expands, business partners are identified, and the development phase begins. We know Cerence Tour Guide will have a variety of features to provide a complete travel experience to users, but one who starts building an app of this caliber from scratch might wonder where to start in the first place. Not us. With user research in the concept validation stage having revealed an important need, we know what to prioritize: Planned Tour mode.

A lot of us are planners, right? We don't just randomly pack up and start driving without thinking about where the destination is (though to be honest, this could be fun once in a while!). We search online, identify a few places worth seeing in our destination, then start our road trip knowing where we want to go. And our UX research showed us that this is what users want from the Cerence Tour Guide experience: to be able to create an itinerary ahead of time or choose a pre-planned trip to cover the places worth seeing, then conveniently access and start their tour via an embedded app in the car. So, with that user need in mind, we have a clear idea of what to build for our version 1.0: Planned Tour mode it is.

Test Drives

Test drive day one in the U.S.: This is the day I personally get to see Cerence Tour Guide's features, which were only just thoughts in our heads a few months ago, come to life. So exciting! I get in my car, launch the Cerence Tour Guide app, start my Planned Tour for Detroit, and voila... it's telling me about Comerica Park on my left, home of the Detroit Tigers baseball team, just as it becomes visible. It is fascinating even for me, someone who knows the app and all its features inside and out.





Extending the Features

And today: We've nailed Planned Tour mode as well as the Explore mode, in which the users simply get in their car, launch Cerence Tour Guide, and start exploring as they listen to point-of-interest information tailored for their interests and preferences. A modern and exciting user interface built specifically to reflect Cerence Tour Guide's travel-loving spirit adds to the user experience, and the user testing to make sure that is the case continues.

With the official launch of Cerence Tour Guide in the books, we will soon be seeing actual drivers and passengers experience this in their cars. The journey will continue even then. Cerence Tour Guide will be a product that keeps providing more and more features to make car travel a fun experience for users, and its UX-driven nature will keep making it one that manages to continue to excite and delight drivers and passengers.