

Each issue, we ask members of the *On Tap* Editorial Advisory Board to answer a drinking water-related question. We then print as many responses as space permits. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of NESCA.



Q: *Bottled water sales have leveled off or even dropped. Do you think consumers have lost their fascination with bottled water? Do you think the public now has more confidence in tap water?*

Editorial Advisory Board

Jerry Biberstine

Senior Environmental Engineer
National Rural Water Association

Jenny Bielanski

Drinking Water Utilities Team Leader
EPA Office of Ground Water and
Drinking Water

Rodney Coker

Tribal Utility Consultant (Retired)
Indian Health Service

Mark Coyne

Associate Professor
University of Kentucky

Frank DeOrio

Director of Municipal Utilities
Auburn, NY

Kevin Kundert

President and Chief Instructional
Systems Mechanic
eTRAIN ONLINE, Inc.

Z. Michael Lahlou, Ph.D.

Civil and Environmental Engineer
Huntington Beach, CA

Lori B. Libby

Senior Project Manager
Center for Public Management
and Regional Affairs
Miami University of Ohio

Babu Madabhushi, Ph.D.

Project Engineer
URS Corporation
Miami Springs, FL

Dale Ralston

President
Ralston Hydrologic Services
Moscow, ID

Lisa Raysby Hardcastle, P.E.

USACHPPM-West
Fort Lewis, WA

Jay Rutherford, P.E.

Water Supply Division Director
Vermont Department of
Environmental Conservation

Marketing Tap Water Can Help

Consumer fascination with bottled water is not over. We live in a busy, mobile society and people want safe water that tastes good. Bottled water meets that need.

Bottled water manufacturers employ very effective advertising techniques. But the same media that helped the bottled water industry achieve phenomenal success is also educating the public about its cost on our environment, not to mention our wallets. Millions of plastic containers are created (and discarded) on a daily basis. These litter our countryside and bloat our landfills. Each of the containers requires far more water to produce than what is stored in the container. Then, we burn fossil fuels to transport bottled water throughout the country. So, many negative side effects of the bottled water boom are becoming apparent. The educated public is reacting to this issue by consuming less bottled water. Is the "convenience" of bottled water worth its true cost?



Consumer marketing and education are the answer to restoring public confidence in tap water. Public water systems need to continue providing a high quality product and let the public know about it by using effective marketing techniques. I see that happening in consumer confidence reports and flyers added to monthly bills. If a quality product is available at a lower price and it provides advantages to the consumer (e.g., fire protection, fluoride, etc.), then they need to know about it. Use effective marketing to make the consumer your customer again.



Kevin Kundert

President and Chief
Instructional Systems
Mechanic

eTRAIN ONLINE, Inc.



Convenience Is a Big Factor

I believe that most consumers in the U.S. are confident that both tap water and bottled water are safe to drink, despite negative media reports to the contrary for both sources. Whether or not tap water or bottle water is better will continue to be debated, based on convenience, personal preference, and taste and odor of local tap water.

From a working parent's point of view, I have purchased bottled water (and sports drinks) for convenience. I often have a stash in my vehicle for when I am pressed for time or just too lazy to wash and re-fill reusable containers. When I travel, I tend to drink less tap water, especially if the chlorine taste of the local tap water is too strong for my taste.

However, with the current economy and associated high gas and food prices (as well as higher unemployment rates), I suspect many consumers are looking to scale back on purchases that are more for convenience or personal preference. When you take into account that tap water cost pennies on the gallon compared to dollars per gallon for bottled water, the former represents a much better value. If bottled water sales are leveling off or have even dropped, I suspect it is more for economic reasons, than any other.



Bottled Water Demand Isn't Going Away

I think there are three primary reasons that sales of bottled water have not continued to grow.

1. Bottled water has a limited market. It is a major convenience as consumers switch from soft drinks to a healthier source of liquids in their diet. People who are going to switch already have, so there is no longer a major move to bottled water from other options.
2. Bottled water is a luxury. In these times of economic downturn, people have less money for luxuries. As people have to make sacrifices in their budgets, they are turning from expensive bottled water back to tap water.
3. People are finding that the benefits of bottled water, touted for so long by the bottled water industry, are not evident. After drinking and using bottled water, they see no noticeable changes in their health, nor do they notice any difference between their health and those who drink regular tap water. Also, better outreach by water systems, such as improved consumer confidence reports and fewer compliance issues, have allowed the public to revive confidence in the water that they get from their tap.

The demand for bottled water is not going to go away. It is a great convenience and a healthier diet item than other bottled products. However, the expense and lack of proven benefits of using bottled water has curbed the growth of the industry to a limited segment of water users.