

Best Practices/Restoration Project Reports: Drinking Water Quality

Description

The City of Toronto is striving to change public's attitude and behaviour toward tap water by educating residents about their excellent tap water quality. Year-round, staff provides presentations and distributes information about Toronto's water source, the water treatment processes, the city's continuous testing procedures and efforts to protect our drinking water source. Public education activities include a print advertising campaign, presentations to schools and community groups, distribution of reusable water bottles, outreach activities at special events, and distribution of information reporting on water quality. This annual campaign is now in its 5th year and has a budget of approximately \$120k.

Background

Times have changed and so has the level of interest in tap water quality. About 10 years ago, most people were confident in their tap water quality and didn't really question its safety. However, since the tragedies in a nearby community, which was caused by contaminated water, coupled with periods of musty smelling water in the late summer, residents are more interested in what is in their tap water and question whether it's safe to drink. As people question the safety and 'purity' of their drinking water, they seem to be turning off their tap and turning to bottled water. According to market trends, bottled water is the fastest growing beverage market in the country. This trend is increasing because bottled water companies have done a good job in selling their water as safer, purer and better. However, independent scientists and experts have tested and compared bottled and tap water and they conclude that bottled isn't better.

The City of Toronto is very proud of its tap water quality and staff has developed a drinking water campaign to assure residents of its high quality and reliability. The drinking water quality campaign increases awareness that Toronto's tap water meets very strict standards that are designed to protect public health. The goal of the campaign is to increase residents understanding of how the water is tested and monitored, assure residents that the water is safe and increase confidence in tap water.

Strategies include:

- Using advertising to change attitudes and perceptions by increasing awareness of the frequency of water testing at different points in the system. Messaging is focused on the safety and quality of tap water, its convenience, continuous monitoring to ensure public health, and affordability. A secondary message is that tap water is just as good as bottled water and in some cases the bottled water is re-treated tap water. Print advertisements are produced in English, Chinese, Italian and Portuguese.
- Providing mobile water trailers staffed by summer students at public events to increase access to tap water and raise awareness that the tap water is just as good as bottled water. Students provide information about the water quality, conduct water taste tests, provide cold refreshing water for people on the go, and distribute free reusable water bottles with an information card that promotes the benefits of tap water
- Free presentations (to English as a second language groups and students) year-round to increase understanding of where tap water comes from. Education activities focus on the water treatment process, the city's safety standards and processes to ensure public health.

Interactive materials are used to demonstrate how the water is treated. A reusable water bottle supports the in-class activities and remind people that the tap water is safe to drink and is good for you.

- Distributing a residential newsletters (Water Watch) and bill inserts with information reporting on various water issues, the city's programs, and activities to keep the water safe.
- Maintaining a web site with information about water issues, the water treatment process, the Toronto Water division annual report, the annual water quality report, and fact sheets about various water topics.

Barriers include:

- The seasonal occurrences of musty smelling and tasting water (a natural phenomenon tied to Great Lakes water temperature).
- Media reporting of contaminated water in other municipalities.
- Large advertising budgets of bottled water companies and filtration devices companies make their products more visible to the public.

Results

- In a 2004 survey, residents said that drinking water quality is the most issue important and they are willing to pay more to invest in the water infrastructure.
- 8 out of 10 residents turned to tap water for at least some of their drinking water, with 31 percent drinking tap water exclusively, 46 percent drinking both bottled and tap water. And about 23 percent drinking bottled water only. Bottled water drinkers are most often women, younger than 35.

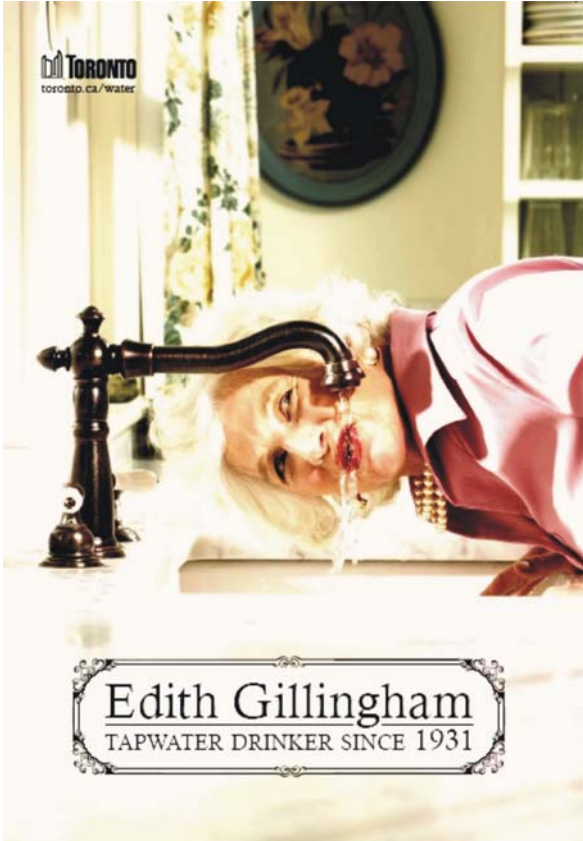
Pictures

See attached

Contacts

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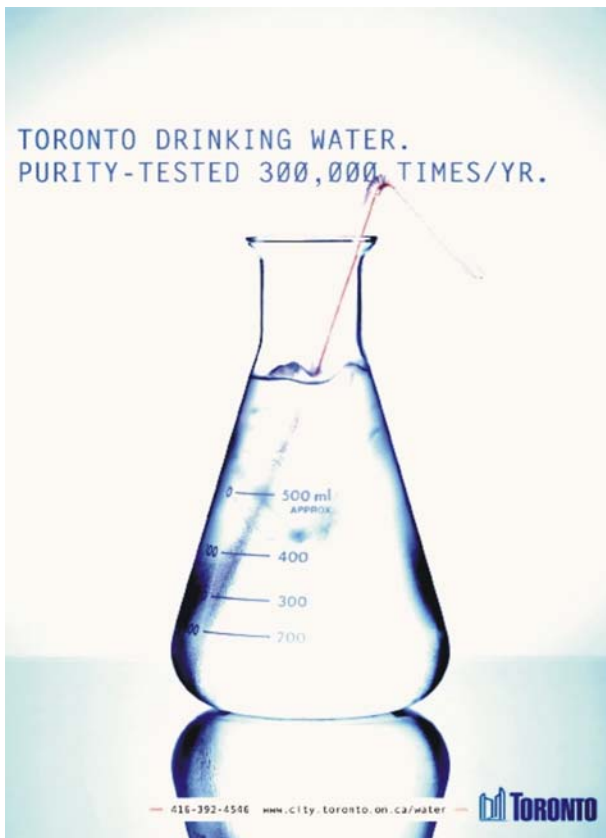
Drinking Water Quality ads



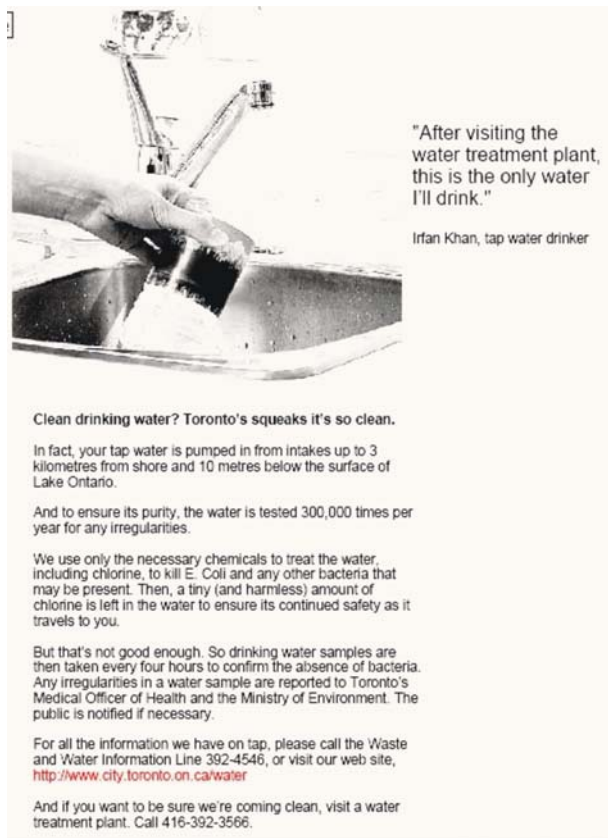
2005



2003



2002/2001



1999

“HTO to go”



The “HTO to go” water trailer is a mobile drinking water fountain that is brought to different events across the city to provide free drinking water to residents.



“HTO to go” water bottles are distributed to residents at events at which the water trailer appears.