

RISING TIDE

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Added by
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Misguided Debate Continues to Shape Sanitation Crisis: Part Two

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A taxi passes in Chicago with an advertisement from US Cellular that reads: **Get free incoming calls. Anytime. From anyone.** Later in the evening I see an advertisement from T-Mobile for free phones if you sign up for a long term plan. Any phone in the store – it does not matter which. Verizon is giving away a Droid phone if you buy another one.

The outrage over the fact that there are more cell phones in India than toilets continues amongst water and sanitation advocates. The responses are louder calls for more money, better spending priorities, and more support for sanitation.

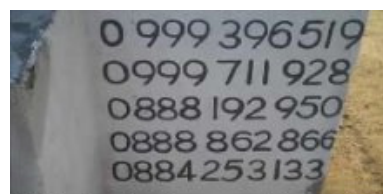
The sanitation sector could learn a great deal from cell phones if we thought a bit more broadly. What US Cellular, Verizon and T-Mobile, and almost any other service provider in this space (AT&T, Vodacom, Zain, etc.) will tell you is that the key to their success is not actually the cell phone itself – although having lots of options and price points is important. No, what matters is that customers buy into the service, and for a long time.

The phone is simply a means to an end. Verizon could care less what phone you choose – they want you to sign up for the 2-year service contract that charges at least \$69/month/user. Getting out of the contract is costly so users are hooked.

What can sanitation learn from this? What if toilets matter less than we may think, just as phones matter less than the service provision? What if we started to shift our eyes from toilets to service provision, and spent less time bemoaning the lack of donor funds, poor government commitment and the secondary status sanitation takes to water provision? What if we instead tried to make the business case for sanitation service by trying to figure out the value that can be generated from the movement, transformation or sale of feces and urine? What would that look like?

It might look like the following:

- A sanitation service provider offers families a toilet in peri-urban Blantyre, Malawi. Choices are offered – various types of shallow pit latrines with different superstructures, inside the house or outside the house, tiled or not, squatting or seated – depending on what the family wants. The service provider will offer choices because she/he understands that choices matter. By taking the toilet, the family signs a service agreement that allows the service provider to return at designated times (say every 3-6 months) and clean the toilet –so the family has a permanent sanitation solution (instead of a pit that fills up and is quickly abandoned) and the service provider has a regular paying client. End result – families have their sanitation needs met and a business thrives because they have a regular client who will pay them to keep the toilet functional. The service provider also has incentive to seek out more clients to make more profit, which not only increases their business but simultaneously increases the number of people with access to - and using - working toilets.
- A sanitation service provider knows that a large scale commercial farm needs fertilizer. She/he can beat commercial fertilizer prices, and make a profit, if she/he can collect enough human compost, process it properly, add value, package and sell it. The key is to get enough compost. To do that, she/he must get enough people using toilets, collect the compost, transport it and have the volume needed to meet the commercial farmer's needs. The service provider might even bring the participating families into the action by allowing them to make a bit of money for their processed compost, so families would



In Malawi, subscribers can call any of these numbers to have their toilets emptied.



Valentin is a service provider in Rwanda who collects compost from latrines and resells to agricultural interests.

actually sell their latrine contents back to the service provider.

The key to both models is simple (and we are working on plenty more). The incentives have changed. Instead of trying to figure out ways to convince every family to get a toilet because it's good for them (health, status, permanence, etc.), we change the game a bit. Instead of trying to figure out how to get government to take sanitation seriously, or how to pry a few extra million or billion out of USAID, we try to figure out how to get local businesses interested in sanitation. We get businesses to realize that every person who needs a toilet is a potential source of revenue, and that the best way for businesses to make money is to offer families a range of sanitation options, build a service relationship that lasts over time, and reinvest profits into new toilets and new relationships. Sanitation businesses thrive by providing great service over time and by getting more people demanding and using toilets.

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This creates a sanitation service model just like the one cell phone providers use. Or Schick, who are giving away their newest shaving "hydro – system" because they want you to buy razors from them forever. Or Hewlett-Packard, who will practically throw their printers at you because they want you to buy their ink. If we can shift the conversation away from focusing on the toilet infrastructure and toward an ongoing, profitable service, we could actually see a sustainable solution emerge.

I do not believe that sanitation is going to be "addressed" globally if the focus remains toilet construction, or the training of masons who offer a latrine to a family once and then have no further relationship with that family. Or if concerned organizations and activists continue to make vague calls for greater action and more aid money to presumably build more toilets without rethinking what we are doing in terms of ongoing service and trying new solutions.

More on actual case studies later – but the outcome will have to be a combination of sanitation coverage without donor dollars, high user satisfaction with the service, and a price point that does not prohibit the poor from participating but is still profitable for the service provider.

[Read Part One](#)

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Comments (13)



Ned Breslin 3 months ago

Dale - all fair points to be sure. I completely agree with your first point, that our market differentiation is not deep enough. We are working on making this stronger. And your comments about regional issues, gender and power are also spot on! Our team in India - led by an Indian woman - makes this case all the time. We did a pretty interesting program called "girl engineers" that had girls design their school toilets instead of male engineers. They did a marvelous job - and added touches that were never thought of/considered to say the least. Two examples - taps at knee levels and full length mirrors so they can see whether their clothes had been stained and would lead to humiliation. This allowed them to clean their saris...

Great comments and thanks! We still have quite a way to go Ned



Dale Bishop 3 months ago

Your points on market differentiation are well taken but perhaps not yet deep enough.

I find it a difficult field in which to work successfully without first addressing gender differences (male head of household will often define "need" without real reference to or understanding of gender inequalities) ... that which is safe or tolerable to an Indian male (e.g. open defecation fields at night) is NOT to a second class female (read wife or daughter). They, the women and adolescent females, are simply offered no other choice. The statement is not meant to be pejorative... it is simply fact.

It is also a field that is impacted profoundly by personal health and hygiene knowledge particularly amongst women and teen girls. A basic program such as WASH can have a material impact on personal preference and choice. A broader program focused on women and addressing family and personal health and hygiene that also addresses the taboo of adolescent menstruation can have an even greater effect, especially when women are made the "health authority" within the family.

I am a great supporter of American marketing and ingenuity. I simply believe that it needs to be combined with regional specific cultural awareness in order to achieve the greatest impact/benefit.

We fail to do so at our own peril and, more to the point, theirs.



Ned Breslin 4 months ago

Well Kate - you are the pioneer here in many ways. Keep showing us how to pull this off in Malawi! You teach me a ton!



Ned Breslin 4 months ago

James - sorry for the slow response! Love the H2O network - I was at a speech by Sandra Day O'Connor and she spoke of the word and emaning of water in different cultures - really insightful. Love that you all look at these spiritual issues as well! I bet your kids are the best!!

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Kate Harawa 4 months ago

Good thinking, it is of no use to invest in a nice expensive cell phone, when there are is no net work (service provider), the 2 go together - people will only invest in good pit latrines when there is continued good emptying services in place.



James O'Connor 4 months ago

Ned,
I so appreciate your message on the "misguided debate," and the solution-based ideas that bring true long-term sustainable sanitation to those who lack.

I know many people with good intentions, that point their charitable dollars towards "worthy" causes. Yet, the gesture to help the less fortunate ends there; awareness of how those \$\$ are utilized is assumed to be positive. Good marketing by the non-profit covers that curiosity, as you so well describe.

I did a radio show last night titled. "Dying Waters, Dying Humanity." The objective was to raise awareness; we are a species facing dire hydration realities. This affects all humans, and no longer simply those in distant, far away places. And of equal importance, our future generations need action from current possibilities and new approaches.

Efforts like yours are well appreciated by me; I will certainly spread the word. If you are able, please check the archives of my BTR show: H2O Network. The link:

<http://www.blogtalkradio.com/omoyemaya>

And finally, my young adult children, thankfully, have a solid level of wakefulness. Therein lies great hope!!!

All best,
James



Ned Breslin 4 months ago

James:

My thanks for the comments and I have marvelled at how active kids are here in the US on issues like this. Keep me posted on your kids endeavors as I bet the are inspiring all themselves.

My best
Ned



James O'Connor 5 months ago

Hello, Ned, and good day.
I just came across your interview of 8 July:

Circle of Blue Radio's Series 5 in 15

Thank you very much for your honest appraisal of the myriad challenges of safe and consistent access to water and sanitation. I especially appreciate your message regarding your daughters, whose life experience to date has ignited a passion for change, elevating lives of the less fortunate, and participating in solutions-based endeavors.

Maybe, just maybe, their story will inspire my 3 young-adult children.
Raising awareness is always the first step.

All best,
James



Ned Breslin 5 months ago

Thanks for the support Isaac! We are trying some new things and will keep you posted.

J Cisneros - one of the business models we are looking at is small scale/neighbourhood wastewater treatment systems, and will keep you posted on that. Idea is to find ways to make money from urine and feces, and do so in a way that allows the poor to participate - delicate to be sure, but we are trying. Thanks!



Isaac 5 months ago

<http://www.runningwaterinternational.org>

This is a brilliant idea. I luv the integration of entrepreneurship and hygiene & sanitation issue.