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UNICEF: Tapping the Power of Water

By Karyn McCormack

Red iPods. Pink ribbons. Canary-yellow Livestrong bracelets. Newman's Own salad dressing. Now you can add New York City tap water to the list of things people can spend money on for a good cause.

UNICEF, which raises money for children's

health and education programs around the world, is implementing the Tap Project -- its first new consumer campaign in 56 years -- to help fund its clean drinking water programs worldwide.

Unlike many other money-raising campaigns, UNICEF isn't offering anything in exchange for a donation: no T-shirt, bracelet, or even a bottle of water. The Tap Project asks diners at restaurants to donate \$1 for a glass of tap water that they get for free, with the proceeds going to UNICEF's various programs to help 1.1 billion people around the world get clean drinking water.

First Stop

The Tap Project kicks off in New York City on Mar. 22 [which has been deemed World Water Day by the U.N.]. Nearly 300 city restaurants -- including New York's top-notch Le Bernardin, Craft, Alto, Vong, and the Four Seasons -- will place postcards on each table describing the NY Tap Project campaign [with images of children and water from photo agency Magnum] with a blue sticker that allows diners to write the amount of a donation. The donation can be added to the restaurant bill, or the card can be taken home and a donation can be made online or mailed directly to UNICEF.

According to UNICEF, more than 21% of children in developing countries don't have access to clean water, and 80% of all illness and infant mortality is due to waterborne disease. Lack of clean water is the second-largest killer of children under 5, according to the nonprofit. Areas that have the lowest supply of safe water are sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia.

New York, a city renowned for its clean tap water, is the first and this year's only stop for the Tap Project. Each of the participating restaurants is expected to raise \$200 that day, according to UNICEF. True, the initial goal is modest, but next year, UNICEF plans to expand the campaign to U.S. cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, and Houston -- all of which, like New York, have clean tap water. And in 2009, the organization plans to take it international, to cities such as London and Paris.

Potential Sensation

Stevan Miller, director of new business and corporate partnerships at UNICEF, believes the Tap Project will be "as big as Trick-or-Treat" -- a campaign started by a Philadelphia youth group on Halloween in 1950 that collected \$17 to help children left vulnerable by World War II. Since then, kids using UNICEF's signature Trick-or-Treat milk cartons have raised more than \$132 million to provide clean water, health care, food, and education to children in 156 countries and territories.

Though it remains to be seen how people will react to the campaign, and it takes time for behaviors to gain critical mass, the Tap Project's message is very direct and has the potential to catch fire, says Peggy Conlon, president and CEO of New York-based Ad Council, the force behind such memorable public service messages as "A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Waste" for the United Negro College Fund and "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk" for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

"It's a logical comparison to think about the fact that people in developing countries don't enjoy the same clean, wonderful water we have," she says. "It's a very genuine connection, and therefore has the opportunity to be successful."

Brainstorm in a Glass

The Tap Project was sparked by a challenge from Esquire magazine editors to David Droga, founder of New York-based advertising agency Droga5, to invent a brand out of nothing that could also be "a positive change agent."

The 38-year-old Australian, who was raised by an environmental-activist mother, says he first started thinking about how many people lack clean drinking water after seeing a documentary about post-Katrina New Orleans. And inspiration struck one night when he received the typical complimentary glass of tap water at a restaurant. "I remember thinking, we have to make people aware of the luxury we have and help others who don't have it," Droga recalls.

Tap water, Droga explains, is a "brand that no one owns" and is available in many metropolitan cities around the world. Plus, since the campaign rests on people making donations for their tap water, there are no costs for packing, bottling, and shipping the water. Marketing tap water is "a sustainable idea -- that's why I like it so much," says Droga.

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In November, Droga5 took the idea to UNICEF, which quickly agreed to adopt it as its next campaign. Esquire featured the Tap Project in its December, 2006, "Best & Brightest" issue, and is co-sponsoring a launch party along with Donna Karan's DKNY on Mar. 21 at the Hearst building in midtown New York.

Much of Droga5's 36-member staff has worked on the campaign pro bono. One of the ads the agency created features a clear wine-shaped bottle of water with a simple blue "NY Tap" label with the message: "Now with Added Karma." Another ad features a few glasses of water with labels of other cities expected to participate in coming years, and the message: "What if every glass of water you drank quenched someone else's thirst?"

The New York Times has donated a full-page ad that will appear on Mar. 21. Billboard advertiser Van Wagner has given ad space for NY Tap posters on 1,000 phone booths around the city. Reuters has agreed to give Tap a free monster screen in Times Square on Mar. 21-22, and Microsoft (NASDAQ: [MSFT](#) - [news](#)) (MSFT) has offered Tap a link on its MSN site, says Droga5 CEO Andrew Essex. The agency is also producing a viral film for Tap Project. [Droga5's first video that spread like wildfire online last year was Air Force One for graffiti artist and entrepreneur Marc Ecko.]

Ready to Travel

UNICEF recruited top New York chefs and is funding the campaign's promotion and marketing, along with the cost of creating tool kits for restaurants and a database to track donations. Restaurant owners were lured by both the simplicity of the idea -- asking patrons to donate \$1 for tap water that's taken for granted -- and the ease of implementing the program. And they didn't seem concerned about giving up profits from selling bottled water for a day.

"It's such a great opportunity," says Scott Conant, chef and owner of Alto and L'Impero. "It's not often you can make an impact like this with so little effort."

Indeed, the apparent ease of implementing Tap could help the campaign grow beyond just New York. The Ad Council's Conlon thinks New York is a smart test market, and Miller expects that the launch will help them refine best practices for other cities to follow. UNICEF has devised a simple transaction process for restaurants that won't disrupt their business, has automated the sign-up process for restaurants, and is building a database to track it, Miller says. And it will provide advertising and promotional materials that can be easily replicated in large and small markets, Miller explains.

A Moment's Reflection

Besides the challenge of expanding the campaign, UNICEF also faces competition from other charities fighting for consumers' dollars and their successful fundraising methods, especially the "paper icons" placed at checkout counters of grocery stores. Still, Miller thinks people will respond to the simple idea of giving \$1 for a glass of tap water, and that it's unique enough to give the campaign "a competitive edge."

"We're giving people at least a moment to think about a global issue -- providing clean and accessible drinking water to children in need," Miller says. "It's a non-threatening way that corresponds with their everyday life."

Says chef and owner Tom Colicchio, who expects to raise \$450 from Craft and two other participating restaurants: "Hopefully we raise money -- and more importantly we raise awareness."