

Hands Off! Catalyzing the market for sanitation in Cambodia

REBRANDING SANITATION

A group of people gathers in the center of a small Cambodian village. They have been invited by the village chief and expect a customary village meeting, but today is different. A young woman from the local commune council greets them with a smile. She has unfurled a brightly colored banner in the center of the meeting area. As she passes out a simple brochure and glossy photos, low murmurs build to animated discussion. She begins to speak to the crowd. The topic: toilets.

The images speak for themselves. Displaying an attractive modern-looking toilet, the banner and brochure advertise the basics: the cost, simple do-it-yourself installation instructions, home delivery details. Just then a truck from the local concrete manufacturer rumbles up the dirt road towards the meeting place. As it approaches, the crowd begins to make out its cargo: toilet components - concrete rings, pvc piping, tiled slabs with ceramic squat pans - stacked up neatly on the flatbed. The group gathers around, perhaps for the first time 'talking toilets' in public - and getting excited about it.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

People in rural Cambodia aren't just talking toilets; they are buying them. At a retail price of around 35 U.S. dollars, the new product is a fraction of the cost of previous models. And by packaging it as a single self-installable 'toilet kit' delivered to your doorstep, toilet enterprises are 'one-stop shops' that take the complexity out of the purchase.



In just 5 months, program-supported enterprises sold over 10,000 toilets.

Using the simple logic of supply and demand, the Water Sanitation and Hygiene Marketing (WASH-M) Program markets the toilet as a sexy consumer item and helps local enterprises to profitably deliver them. The WASH-M Hands-Off program, implemented by WaterSHED-Cambodia, is proving that rural households are willing and able to invest in a toilet that meets their expectations of durability, affordability and attractiveness. In the 20 months since the launch of the marketing campaign, program-supported enterprises have sold over 23,000 toilets to rural consumers – that's more than 100,000 people now defecating with dignity.

CONSUMERS, NOT BENEFICIARIES

The Hands-Off program's goal is to make toilet ownership an aspiration and a social norm. This means treating people as discerning consumers, not beneficiaries of project activities. Drawing on extensive market research, the program uses simple messages targeted at different groups, from female factory workers to male rice farmers. In the 6 provinces where the program operates, toilet banners can be seen strung up across shop fronts and hung outside local commune council offices. They bear a simple slogan:

"The program is addressing a major public health crisis by changing the paradigm: using markets – not subsidies - to improve rural health and livelihoods."

"You can afford a toilet for your family". Representatives from nearly 160 enterprises engaged in the project, drive trucks full of toilets across the dirt roads, spreading the word about the products while on delivery. But the real impact is made by over 600 promotional agents, commissioned by the toilet enterprises, conducting village-level sales events and 'selling sanitation' household by household and door-to-door.

HANDS OFF! BUILDING SELF-SUSTAINING SANITATION ENTERPRISES

As the name suggests, the program takes an explicitly 'hands-off' approach to market facilitation. Through in-depth studies of local supply chains, the program team found that local businesses already had significant capacity, they just needed some help rethinking their business models. Hands-Off program staff convinced enterprises to reduce their prices and helped them to think long-term; lowering profit margins but increasing sales volumes. The program supports enterprises with basic tools to improve business management. To keep up-front investment and barriers to market entry low, enterprises use existing equipment and production methods where possible. The concept: help enterprises do more of what they already do, just faster, cheaper and better. With a market of hundreds of thousands of rural toilet-less, the sanitation industry means big business for local Cambodian enterprises. But that isn't the biggest draw: enterprises see toilets as an entry point for the sale of complementary products and services, and aim to build their reputations and market reach through toilet sales.



In the first three months after establishing his new toilet business, Mr. Cheang Pros of Kampong Cham province sold over 150 latrines in his commune alone. He is now expanding to new areas and increasing his production to meet growing demand.

GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT FOR LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

The Hands-Off program recognizes the critical role of local government in building a strong enabling environment for market activities. The program requires local government commitment and investment of funds and resources to reach sanitation goals. The Hands-Off sanitation marketing concept of working with businesses to increase sanitation access can seem unusual to some government officials at first. But once bought in to the concept, local officials are some of the most influential champions and promoters. A key strategy of the program is to encourage every village and commune chief to invest in his or her own latrine. Most importantly, the program has fostered effective public-private partnerships between enterprises and local government - the latter acting as an 'honest broker' between enterprises and consumers - and has found incentives for businesses and government to work together.

ADDRESSING THE POOREST

Although the program is proving that a great number of households are willing and able to invest in sanitation, it is also clear that not every household will be able to afford a 35-dollar toilet. The program has piloted a number of innovative financing mechanisms, from group savings to microfinance, to ease the burden of full up-front payment. The program also links with the Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) efforts of local government and other NGOs. Through broad based social marketing messages, the program equips local sales representatives to promote the concept of 'open defecation free' communities and the notion that any hygienic toilet – even the most basic – is better than no toilet.

DELIVERING RESULTS AT SCALE

The early work of the Hands-Off program has shown that with relatively small up-front donor investment, a self-sustaining sanitation industry can be developed at scale. With over 75% of rural Cambodians currently lacking access to even basic sanitation, the program is addressing a major public health crisis by changing the paradigm: using markets – not subsidies - to improve rural health and livelihoods. This is good news for Cambodian businesses and great news for thousands of new rural Cambodian toilet owners.



The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Enterprise Development (WaterSHED) Program is led by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and supported by the United States Agency for International Development. Lien Aid implemented the first phase of the WASH-M program and the World Toilet Organization provided technical support in the pilot stages of the program.

For more information:
www.watershedasia.org/sanitation-marketing

