

# Nominated: Hydros Bottle

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## Summary

Hydros Bottle, a young social enterprise located in West Philadelphia, is poised to fight the global water crisis. The business: selling innovative eco-friendly water bottles with integrated filters to reduce disposable bottle waste. Bottle sales finance Hydros Bottle's water infrastructure project, Operation Hydros, and raise awareness of the global water challenge. The founders, Aakash Mathur and Jay Parekh, address this social problem through a for-profit business model and envision developing a standardized project evaluation framework so that their model can be replicated within the water infrastructure industry.

## The Problem: Demand for Clean Drinking Water

Global water demand for drinking, sanitation, agriculture, and industry is increasing. Water shortages and poor water quality leave nearly one billion people without access to safe drinking water (USAID 2009). Unsafe water leads to illnesses such as malaria, trachoma, and diarrhea, as well as malnutrition and sanitation difficulties, creating a serious public health problem (Prüss-Üstün et al. 2008). Limited access to water also hinders economic development; in places that lack water infrastructure,

people spend time hauling water instead of tending to more constructive tasks. Clearly, access to clean water is a pressing issue.

## **The Solution: Hydros Bottle**

Two University of Pennsylvania alumni are working to provide clean water to those in need through a for-profit social venture that promotes environmental sustainability and supports water infrastructure projects in developing countries. Founders Aakash Mathur and Jay Parekh met at the University of Pennsylvania. Mathur graduated from the Wharton School of Business, where he was active in Wharton's social entrepreneurship program. Parekh holds a degree in biomedical engineering and as head of Penn's Engineers without Borders chapter worked on water infrastructure projects in Africa. Both sought to solve a social problem with an entrepreneurial approach.

Created to address the water problem from several angles, Hydros Bottle, located in West Philadelphia, reduces plastic water bottle waste, contributes to water infrastructure development, and promotes awareness of the global water crisis.

Only 10 to 20 percent of plastic water bottles are recycled, so the majority goes to landfills (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation n.d.). Hydros Bottle decreases waste by reducing the need to purchase bottled water when one wants filtered water on the run. In

addition to minimizing the landfill burden, Hydros Bottle limits its carbon footprint by collaborating only with manufacturers in the Philadelphia, Delaware, and New Jersey area for the filter production and bottle assembly.

Domestically, Hydros Bottle provides a convenient, great-tasting way to be environmentally friendly, and abroad, its impact extends further. Through Operation Hydros, Hydros Bottle partners with NGOs to carry out water infrastructure projects in rural areas of developing countries. For its current project, Hydros Bottle has partnered with Engineers Without Borders USA to build a spring water delivery system in Gundom, Cameroon. This system will bring potable water to every Gundom household. As Operation Hydros' involvement in these projects deepens, Mathur and Parekh will identify other small-scale, sustainable projects. Project evaluation criteria include the use of local labor and materials, which contributes to local economic development and ensures infrastructure sustainability (Wells and Hawkins 2008: 7).

Hydros Bottle also closely assesses potential NGO partners. For example, Engineers Without Borders is a desirable partner because its lack of overhead means that funds support the Gundom project itself, rather than NGO administrative costs. One hundred percent of the Hydros Bottle contribution benefits the local economy through building supply purchases and local labor wages. Hydros Bottle plans to consolidate these economic, sustainability, and NGO criteria into a standardized project evaluation

framework to aid internal project evaluation and enable other in the broader water infrastructure industry to replicate their work.

Hydro Bottle reinforces its concrete environmental and infrastructure efforts by building awareness of the water crisis. The branded water bottle and Operation Hydros wristbands that accompany each purchase provide visibility for the cause. The website serves as a portal, providing information about the global water crisis, including water quality and access facts, and links to comprehensive resources such as the World Health Organization's website. Hydros Bottle also extends its reach through social media like Facebook and Twitter, sending newsfeeds to a younger audience.

With the long-term goal of bringing clean water to more people, Hydros Bottle is reinvesting profits into development of more robust filters for urban markets that have water infrastructure, but lack safe drinking water.

## **Why Hydros Bottle Is Unique**

Hydros Bottle's social and environmental goals are integrated in every aspect of the business: the product itself, the manufacturing processes, and Operation Hydros. Rather than follow a classic corporate social responsibility model, in which a company donates a percentage of profit while its business operations may be unrelated to social good, Hydros Bottle created a product

that promotes its social goal. A company with a similar approach is Frogtek, a for-profit social enterprise that created a product to address economic development in emerging markets. Frogtek has developed affordable mobile phone accounting software so that small business owners can optimize their business operations. However, Hydros Bottle is the only company of its nature in the water space.

The water bottles can be purchased on Hydros Bottle's website and at Whole Foods stores in Philadelphia and Washington, DC. Hydros Bottle shows consumers the direct impact of their bottle purchases. For each bottle sold, Hydros Bottle contributes part of the revenue towards Operation Hydros. In the Gandom project, each bottle sold creates 2,000 gallons of clean water per bottle. This clear impact makes it easy for bottle owners to see the results of their purchases. Impact metrics will evolve with the individual projects Operation Hydros undertakes. Currently, Hydros Bottle is evaluating a water infrastructure project that would provide water to an entire school, rather than to individual households. For this project, a relevant measure of impact could be number of people helped per bottle. In any case, the link between the bottle purchase and measurable development impact would remain.

Other companies, such as TOMS shoes, have found this "one for one" impact demonstration to be an effective way to raise awareness. For each pair of shoes purchased,

TOMS Shoes gives another pair of shoes to a child in need.

For those who are inspired by nonprofits' commitment to social missions, Hydros Bottle and similar for-profit social ventures demonstrate an innovative approach to pursuing social change through a business model that is independent of donations and grants.

## References

## References

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