

PATH's Safe Water Project in Vietnam

Household Water Treatment and Storage: Findings From a Qualitative Consumer Research Study

Safe drinking water is essential to good health and quality of life. In resource-poor settings such as Vietnam, however, water often comes from unsafe sources and carries dangerous pathogens.

The World Health Organization estimates that 1.8 million people die each year from diarrheal diseases. Unsafe water is one leading cause of these deaths. Despite significant progress, more than 25 million people in Vietnam, including approximately 80 percent of the country's poorest residents, still have no access to safe water. Severe diarrhea continues to be highly prevalent, with more than a million cases treated by local health workers in 2007.

To understand how consumers in Vietnam think about the water they drink, PATH conducted a study in 2008 among low- and middle-income households in four provinces: Son La, Binh Dinh, Vinh Long, and An Giang. Here is some of what was learned.

Water quality: clear water is good water

For many of the study's participants, clear water means clean and safe water—it has no smell or particles and tastes good. Water that is turbid, contains particles or lime, and smells foul is considered unsafe.

Water sources: quality first

The variety of water sources participants used reflects both access and availability. People in all four provinces reported using more than one water source, and sometimes their

principal water source changed according to the season. Water for drinking, however, always came from the source they perceived to have the best quality.

Water treatment: building toward consistency

In general, participants used four water treatment methods: boiling, filtering, treatment with powders, and flocculating and settling with alum. However, their understanding of the association between waterborne diseases and safe water was not strong enough to ensure that they would consistently treat water.

Product appeal: what consumers want

Participants named several aspects of durable water treatment products, particularly water filters or mineral pots, which they found appealing:

- Convenience and cost savings in fuel used for boiling water.
- Good clarity and flavor of treated water.
- Attractive design of products.
- High aspirational value of products; that is, the products are a social status symbol.

Potential drawbacks: what consumers dislike

Although participants indicated that affordability is a perceived barrier rather than an actual one, the initial cost

Fast moving consumer goods: chlorine powder, tablet, and liquid



Durable water treatment: a mineral pot



of a durable water treatment product can be a hurdle for some lower-income consumers. Participants also expressed unwillingness to use credit to buy a filter or other product.

Other potential drawbacks include:

- Consumer confusion due to the number of existing filter brands, and fear of imitation products.
- Improper use and maintenance of treatment products.
- Low capacity for use in extended family households.

Fast moving consumer goods: easy and portable

Rural areas in particular hold potential for the introduction of an approved fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) household water treatment product, such as water treatment tablets and powders. The products are seen as easy to use and portable, as well as affordable. At the same time, they have potential drawbacks:

- Little awareness of the category
- Lack of knowledge about the proper use of FMCG products, often prohibiting purchase.
- No trust in quality unless promoted by health authorities.
- Fear of imitation products.
- Not easy for children to use.
- Chlorine taste is not always acceptable.

Market findings: generating demand and creating distribution

PATH's study found reasons for optimism about the growth of the market for water treatment products. Consumers are aware that the quality of their drinking water is important. They place a high value on convenience and product design and rely on the recommendations of trusted sources for assurance of product quality.

At the same time, significant challenges remain. Because the use of credit for personal products is rare, consumers are highly sensitive to price. Distributors and retailers are not ready to create and offer new products, and distribution has been very limited in rural areas. Finally, demand generation is a significant challenge. Branding, promotion, and price are essential components of a market strategy in rural and lower-income markets.

In the coming year, PATH will continue to work with potential private-sector partners and consumers to understand more about potential solutions that build on the promise of the 2008 study and address the challenges it uncovered.

About PATH

PATH is an international, nonprofit organization that creates sustainable, culturally relevant solutions, enabling communities worldwide to break longstanding cycles of poor health. By collaborating with diverse public- and private-sector partners, PATH helps provide appropriate health technologies and vital strategies that change the way people think and act. PATH's work improves global health and well-being.



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