

# Bicycle model yields rich learning despite limited results

Microentrepreneurs try to sell new water treatment product in rural India

## RATIONALE AND GOALS

- PATH is investigating the extent to which commercial markets can be stimulated to increase access and sustained use of household water treatment and safe storage (HWTS) products among low-income households.
- HWTS options, such as chlorine disinfection, have been proven cost-effective means of preventing diarrhea and other waterborne diseases, which are associated with 400,000 deaths each year among children in India alone.
- The bicycle entrepreneur distribution and sales pilot in India was designed to address distribution and marketing barriers that make it difficult for HWTS manufacturers and marketers to penetrate lower-income, rural markets.
- This pilot was conducted in partnership with Medentech, the marketer of Aquatabs® water purification tablets, and MART, a specialized rural marketing agency based in India.
- Pilot partners sought to understand the extent to which a promising sales and distribution model impacted uptake and sustained use of a proven but unknown (in the pilot area) brand of disinfection treatment tablet, Aquatabs, and to also understand the commercial viability of the model and potential for scale-up.

## DESCRIPTION OF PILOT PROSPECT

- Eight local entrepreneurs were recruited to serve as a mobile sales and marketing force serving 20 to 30 villages each in Pratapgarh, Uttar Pradesh (population 410,000) for a period of 12 months.
- Bicycle entrepreneurs were expected to sell product at weekly markets (haats) and solicit the assistance of local leaders to reach households directly and indirectly



Bicycle entrepreneurs were provided product and sales training and given a bike and branded promotional items to generate brand awareness.

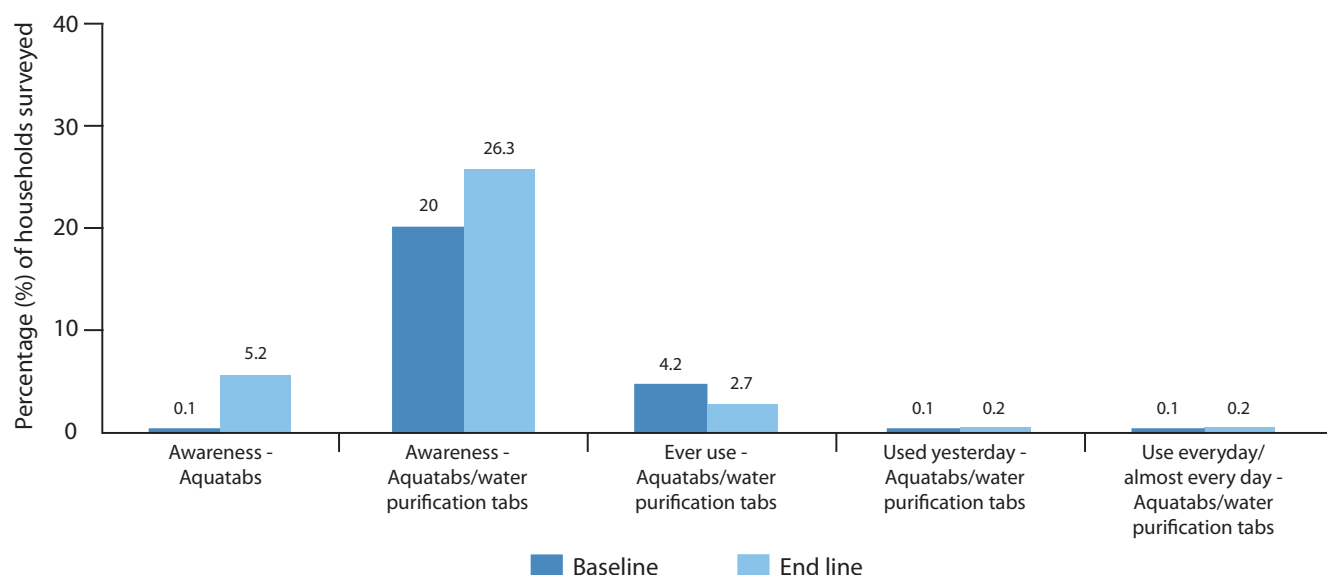
through community groups, eventually selling to retail kiosks when the market became large enough.

- Direct sales by bicycle entrepreneurs was supplemented by additional marketing and promotion efforts, including radio ads, video-on-wheels promotional campaigns, free giveaways, and street theater.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Levels of use remained negligibly small over the course of the pilot, indicating that while the intervention increased trial of Aquatabs, it had no effect on long-term uptake or regular use.

Figure 1. Awareness, ever use, current use, and regular use of Aquatabs and water purification tablets at baseline (February 2009) and end line (April 2010).



- The primary reasons people cited for not trying the product related to a perceived lack of need for water treatment or a lack of awareness of or access to the product.
- Projections based on current sales and expenses indicated that the model would be financially unsustainable, as Medentech would be unable to recoup investment in operational expenses within five years.

## RELEVANT LEARNING

**Pilot studies require constant iteration and real-time adjustment.** A more hands-on approach with real-time monitoring is critical for partners to make better decisions more quickly about necessary adjustments or iterations to the model.

**Key opinion leaders have strong influence.** Salesmen were most efficient when selling in a group environment organized by a local opinion leader. Combined with the video-on-wheels campaign, group sales explained 68 percent of repeat customers, thus contributing significantly to consistent use.

**Ongoing training and sales support are critical.** Since direct sales were key to this approach, additional training, guidance, monitoring tools, and mentoring support would have gone a long way toward increasing the productivity and morale of bicycle entrepreneurs.

**What works for market leaders may not work for market newcomers.** When market leaders use the bicycle entrepreneur model in rural India, they come with a familiar brand and often a range of product offerings. With no brand recognition in India and only one product, Aquatabs bicycle entrepreneurs were at a distinct disadvantage.

**Water storage habits can impact product relevance.** A midline qualitative survey revealed that many households in this part of India do not store their drinking water for daily use, as they are able to easily collect water for immediate use. This meant that the practice of collecting water for treatment was out of the norm. Stored water was also negatively perceived in terms of freshness, temperature, and taste.



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.

**MAILING ADDRESS**  
PO Box 900922  
Seattle, WA 98109 USA

info@path.org  
www.path.org

**STREET ADDRESS**  
2201 Westlake Avenue  
Suite 200  
Seattle, WA 98121 USA

July 2011