

GLOBAL HEALTH

Innovation Insight Series



A water vendor who adopted the Life Force Kiosks model in Kibera

Photo © Life Force Kiosks

LIFE FORCE KIOSKS I: Reporting and Accountability

NAIROBI, KENYA, EAST AFRICA

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THE PROBLEM/SOLUTION SPACE

Globally, 884 million people—approximately one in eight—lack access to a safe supply of water.¹ As a result, more than 3.5 million people die every year from water-related diseases.² Diarrhea, which is commonly caused by contaminated water, remains the second leading cause of death among children under five, accounting for nearly one in five child deaths per year. It kills more young children than AIDS, malaria, and measles combined.³

In the slums that surround Nairobi in Kenya, Africa, residents buy water from public taps that are monitored by local water vendors. Although this water is chemically treated at the source, it often becomes recontaminated before consumption:

- As it travels through leaky pipes that pass through sewage.
- As it is transported from the public tap to homes in dirty containers.
- When it is stored in dirty and/or uncovered containers in homes.
- When people dip their hands into the water to fill cups for drinking.

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ABOUT LIFE FORCE KIOSKS

Jeremy Farkas conceived of the idea for Life Force Kiosks as he observed conditions in the slum of Kibera, just outside Nairobi. “It became clear to me that in a densely-populated urban area—where people are already paying for water but the water is dirty—some sort of a community model could work,” he recalled. “People are already used to leaving their homes to go out and buy water from a central location. So I thought why couldn’t we offer some sort of purification services at that central spot?”⁴

After extensive on-the-ground research, Farkas established Life Force Kiosks as a nonprofit entity. The model was designed to leverage the hundreds of independent water vendors who monitor local water taps on behalf of the private water company, Nairobi Water and Sewage, which pipes water into Kibera. On behalf of the water company, the water vendors unlock the taps each morning and supervise them throughout the day, collecting payments (usually about three Kenyan schillings for 20 liters of water) from the people in the neighborhood who bring their containers to be filled. Usually, the vendors retain about 50 percent of the payments with the other half going to the water company.

Life Force Kiosks layers additional services on to this established model by equipping and training the water vendors to clean storage containers and purify the water at the tap. At no charge, Life Force Kiosks provides the water vendors with a table, signage, educational materials, cleaning supplies, and water purification drops. The water vendors are then able to clean customers’ water containers and, as Farkas explained, “We’ll

‘top off’ their chlorine levels.” He continued: “When the Nairobi Water and Sewage Company gets the water from the lake, they add chlorine at that point but, unfortunately, it’s not enough to keep the water safe as it travels through certain conditions. So what we do is add the minimum dosage of chlorine that’s required to improve the quality of the water for drinking. Hitting the minimum is important

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because, the more chlorine you add the worse the taste is, and once the taste is bad then people won’t accept it.” Life Force Kiosks works with Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) and the U.S. Center for Disease Control to establish and maintain the minimum acceptable chlorine dosage for safe water in Kibera. The water vendors sell these services to their customers for an additional two–five Kenyan schillings (2 Ksh for water purification and 3Ksh for container cleaning), which gives them an additional revenue stream. Again, half of the payment is retained by the vendor and half is returned to Life Force Kiosks to help underwrite the cost of supplies.

ONE CHALLENGE: REPORTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In establishing its model, one of the challenges Life Force Kiosks faced was how to track the payments made to the water vendors for cleaning and purification services. According to Farkas, “This was a huge problem, to the point where it almost was a deal-breaker. Corruption at the water vendor level is rampant. There’s just no way we could have relied on an honor system for reporting sales. And the problem is that it’s not like we’re selling basic inventory, like bars of soap that we can just count at the end of the day. We’re dealing with a milliliter of chlorine or soap solution for cleaning the

containers. So what I realized is that we needed some way for the consumers to demand a receipt for this to work.”

Farkas looked at other models in Kenya to see what was working. For example, everyone who rode the bus system expected and was given a receipt. But this seemed to be based on a longstanding tradition rather than a model that could be replicated in another market area.

THE SOLUTION: RECEIPT AS RAFFLE TICKET

After a great deal of brainstorming, Farkas came up with the idea to create customer demand for a receipt by linking it to a weekly raffle. Life Force Kiosks had custom receipt books printed that could be divided into two sections. For each service the customer purchased, s/he was given a receipt that looked similar to a raffle ticket. The customer retained one half of the receipt and watched the water vendor deposit the other half into a lockbox. Once a week, a representative from the Life Force Kiosks manage-



Local residents gather for one of Life Force Kiosks' weekly raffles

Photo © Life Force Kiosks

ment team would visit the water vendor's site, open the lockbox, and draw winning customers from among the receipts. "On all of our signs and on all of our marketing materials, we promote the weekly raffle," noted Farkas. "What we've found is that people absolutely insist on getting their receipt because they want to be eligible for the raffle. And that lets us know exactly how many sales we have." When the manager is on site, s/he also tallies up the sales data and collects the corresponding payments from the vendor.

Not only did this program address concerns about reporting and accountability, but it turned out to be one of the Life Force Kiosks most effective marketing strategies. "When we do the raffles, we bring a PA system, and we have music, and it turns into a

big, upbeat event. Sales absolutely spiked when we introduced the program,” said Farkas. In fact, he added, “A lot of people only use our services for the raffle, and I’m fine with that. I don’t really care what their motivation is, as long as they’re engaging in healthier behavior.”

Interestingly, Farkas initially planned to give away cell phone minutes as raffle prizes. However, the local Kenyans on his team suggested a different approach. “They told me, ‘Listen, it’s generally the women who are collecting the water from the taps, and they’re the ones who do the cooking 99.9 percent of the time. So, what’s really going to appeal to them is kitchen products,’” he recalled. “So we give away things like mixing bowls and little luxury items for the kitchen that a wife or a daughter would want but can’t necessarily afford. And people just eat them up!” ♦

NOTES

- 1 “Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: Special Focus on Sanitation,” UNICEF and the World Health Organization, 2008, http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/monitoring/jmp_report_7_10_lores.pdf (February 2, 2012).
- 2 “Safer Water, Better Health: Costs, Benefits, and Sustainability of Interventions to Protect and Promote Health,” World Health Organization, 2008, http://www.who.int/quantifying_ehimpacts/publications/saferwater/en/indec.html (February 2, 2012).
- 3 “Diarrhoea: Why Children Are Still Dying and What Can Be Done,” UNICEF and the World Health Organization, 2009, http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/97892415_eng.pdf (February 2, 2012).
- 4 All quotations are from an interview with Jeremy Farkas conducted by the authors in January 2012 unless otherwise cited.