

GLOBAL HEALTH

Innovation Insight Series



From left to right: Jeremy Farkas, Steve Mumbwani, and Freddy Omondi

Photo by Tobin Jones, © Life Force Kiosks

LIFE FORCE KIOSKS II: Engaging Local Talent

NAIROBI, KENYA, EAST AFRICA

ESTABLISHED 2010

JEREMY FARKAS, FOUNDER

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 through unsafe treatment and storage practices.

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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. After extensive on-the-ground research, Farkas established Life Force Kiosks as a nonprofit entity. Its 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 shillings 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 test and adjust their chlorine levels. The water vendors sell these services to their customers for an additional two–five Kenyan shillings (2 Ksh for water purification and 3 Ksh 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.

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ONE CHALLENGE: ENGAGING LOCAL TALENT

Given the long-standing presence of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in some of the poorest communities in Kenya, Farkas noted, "A white face is sometimes seen as an ATM."⁴ He continued, "People are so used to 'rich white people' coming in with giveaways, subsidies,

and other forms of charity that they often expect a handout. So for me to go in on my own would not have been as effective." He knew he would need to engage local talent in order to get the Life Force Kiosks model off the ground.

THE SOLUTION: HIRING STRONG LOCAL MANAGERS

As soon as he had defined and vetted his approach, Farkas set out to hire a general manager. To do so, he tapped into his on-the-ground network. "I approached someone who had been one of my translators when I worked on a six-week market research project in Kenya. I met him towards the beginning of that trip, and it was clear to me that he was a natural leader. He had a great work ethic, was very charismatic and an excellent salesperson, worked really well in the community. He would also push back on my ideas, which is rare. A lot of times Kenyans won't push back on Americans, whether we're wrong or not. So, when I had this opportunity, he was the guy I called." Steve Mumbwani did not live in Nairobi but was willing to relocate to work with Farkas. He became Life Force Kiosks' general manager.

The local Life Force Kiosks team when it launched its service in May 2011



Photo © Life Force Kiosks

Farkas had also met a local man, Freddy Omondi, who was born and raised in Kibera. Omondi made money giving tours of Kibera to representatives from NGOs and other visitors who wanted to learn more about the community. Farkas hired Omondi to show him around the area when he was first trying to understand its water and sanitation challenges, and he discovered that he had many valuable insights about Kibera and its residents. “So I stayed in touch with him,” Farkas recalled. “He did a lot of work as a volunteer for us when we didn’t have any budget, and then eventually we were able to raise some money to put him on payroll as our assistant manager, which was great.”

Mumbwani and Omondi were able to guide Farkas on important stakeholder issues. For example, when it came to getting key opinion leaders aligned with the Life Force Kiosk approach, they were able to help him determine which community leaders to target. They also played a key role in screening and selecting water vendors to involve in the program. For its initial launch, the organization wanted to target a cluster of vendors in an area where the water was known to be contaminated. Farkas also knew they needed vendors with the right attitude to help make the program a success. He leaned on Mumbwani and Omondi for guidance in this respect. Often, water vendors felt threatened by NGOs in the clean water sector when they introduced new programs into the slums.⁵ The presence of the local managers helped Life Force Kiosks earn the vendors’ trust and convince them of the benefits associated with offering its additional services.

In addition, the local managers helped Life Force Kiosks avoid being taken advantage of as they navigate certain local customs, said Farkas. “When you have a focus group and ask community members to come, it’s expected that you’ll pay them and provide refreshments even if it’s a very casual meeting. But there’s a way to do it right, and to make sure you’re not overpaying or underpaying anyone.” Mumbwani and Omondi also added value by overcoming language barriers between Farkas and his target audience. “A lot of folks speak some English, but maybe they aren’t perfect in English, and some don’t want to or can’t speak it at all,” Farkas said. “So at a community meeting I might go in and make a two-minute presentation. Then, I’d sit down and let my general manag-

er take over. He would maybe repeat what I said in Swahili, and then go on to the rest of the presentation because people are going to be a lot more comfortable if they're hearing our messages in a local language.”

In the case of Life Force Kiosks, taking into account the nature of the basic health-related services the organization provides, Farkas fundamentally believed that “the more people associate the organization with Kenyans, the more credibility and respect it's going to have.” Community members in Kibera were used to seeing representatives from NGOs come and go—sometimes abandoning programs on which people had come to depend. But with Mumbwani and Omondi, Farkas pointed out, “These folks live there. It's their home and community. And it's also their long-term job. They're hoping to be in this job for years and years, so they've got a lot of incentive to do a good job and to keep things going well, especially compared to some intern from the States that swoops in for a few months looking for a resume bullet.” ♦

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/index.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/2009/9789241598415_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.
- 5 Jeremy Farkas, “The Team Is Complete!” Clean Water For All, April 28, 2011, <http://cleanwaterforall.net/2011/04/28/the-team-is-complete/> (February 8, 2012).