

How to Eliminate Single Use Plastic Water Bottles The Vancouver Aquarium Approach

THE PLANNING STAGE

1. Review Your Beverage Provider Contract

Many organizations are tied into multi-year beverage provider contracts with suppliers like Coca-Cola or Pepsi. Making significant changes to these contracts, and the products you buy within them, can affect the contract itself. Make sure you engage with your provider to understand the limits of your contract. At Vancouver Aquarium, we benefited from foresight and ensured our most recent contract included a clause noting that single-use water bottles may be eliminated at some point within the period of the contract. This gave us the ability to eliminate without affecting the contract.

2. Get Senior Management Buy-in

There is often significant revenue connected to selling single-use water bottles. Because of this, it is important to secure senior management's buy-in early on in the planning process. Vancouver Aquarium benefitted from a cheerleader at the senior level in the form of its Chief Financial Officer. She integrated the revenue loss into the annual budget, and worked to find funds to offset the loss. In the end, a funder is unlikely to fund this lost revenue so the organization will need to swallow the loss in the name of the environment.

3. Assign a Leader

These types of projects are true cross-organizational efforts. Having one leader/champion is key to the process being successful. This person will schedule regular group meetings, field questions, keep senior management in the loop, ensure the right stakeholders are at the table, and more. At the Vancouver Aquarium, the Sustainability Manager took on this role.

4. Build a Support Team

As previously stated this is a cross-organizational effort. It affects different stakeholders in different ways, and it helps to have all of these perspectives at the table during the planning process. At the Vancouver Aquarium once Senior Management gave the okay, it took the team eight months to plan and execute the ban. The team met every other week in the beginning, and weekly closer to the execution date.

Here are the departments represented on the Vancouver Aquarium planning team:

- In-house Food Service- involved because in the end they would be the ones to implement the change, communicate with guests, and stomach the loss in revenue.
- Retail/ Gift Shop- involved to help source a reusable bottle that would be sold in Food Service and update our selection in the Gift Shop.
- Communications- involved because they would be in charge for communicating the change outside the organization, hosting a press conference, and garnering media attention.
- Content & Design- involved because they would write the visitor facing content that explained this change to guests, and design the graphic panels that would surround the water fountains.
- Grounds and Mechanical Systems- involved because they would maintain the fountains and complete the installation.
- Visitor Experience- involved because they best understand visitors and helped the team understand how best to implement and communicate the change to guests.
- Sustainability- involved because they were able to gather the research and explain the rationale for the ban such that it could be messaged out in Content & Design work and training.

5. Build Momentum

Sometimes starting small is good. At the Vancouver Aquarium, we did not start with a full Aquarium-wide ban. Our Green Team actually implemented a lunch room-only ban a few years prior to our full-scale site-wide ban. This helped open the conversation about ocean plastic amongst staff, showed Senior Management the direction employees wanted to go, and built momentum for this bigger initiative.

6. Evaluate Infrastructure Needs

If guests can no longer buy water, they will need another source of onsite drinking water. This is where water fountains and bottle filling stations come into play. At Vancouver Aquarium, we added five new fountain and bottle filling stations (combination units) to two already existing fountains. We made sure the stations had counters too, so we could quantify the bottles saved.

We were strategic in placement. We walked around the facility looking for locations where there was plumbing and water access, but also locations where guests congregated, like near washrooms, cafe, and popular exhibits. We also mapped them out to ensure that there was an even distribution around the facility—upstairs, downstairs, inside, and outside.

7. Interpret

If you are going to make this change, it is worth giving it legs, and trying to take your message about 'why' out to a larger audience. Vancouver Aquarium is lucky enough to welcome people for 2-3 hours on an average visit, so doing interpretation in graphic panels around all of the onsite fountains was a great opportunity to share the message and inspire action.

The Vancouver Aquarium's interpretation focused on three main areas:

- Source and quality of local tap water- to increase drinking water literacy among locals, but also to ease the minds of international visitors many of whom do not have safe drinking water in their home countries.
 - Note: Many municipalities work hard to educate about their local tap water, but do not have the same access to the public as local attractions. The Vancouver Aquarium reached out to their municipality early, and the municipality ended up providing the funding for all of the fountain interpretation as well as the outdoor fountain.
- Impact of plastics on oceans- this was the Aquarium's real reason for the change. One of our senior researchers, Dr. Peter Ross, and his Ocean Pollution Lab Team are doing extensive work on the impact of plastics on oceans. Through their work, we know that plastics do not breakdown, but rather only break up into smaller and smaller pieces. These pieces are being ingested by aquatic life causing suffocation and blockage of the gut. Dr. Ross' work shows us that micro plastics (<5mm in size) are even found in zooplankton at the bottom of the food chain.

- Call to action- after educating guests, it is great to provide them with a way to act. The Vancouver Aquarium did this by including its Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup program in the interpretation.

The tone of the Aquarium messaging was light and fun (e.g. calling tap water 'Cloud Juice'), and thanked visitors while asking them to join us.

8. Extend the Message

If you have the opportunity to extend the message even further, do. The Vancouver Aquarium went beyond its fountain education and extended the message in the following ways:

- An art installation in the Ocean Wise Art Atrium that highlighted the issue of ocean plastic in a visual way.
- A gallery program led by volunteers that involves a stuffed killer whale dissection opening up the conversation on anatomy and the reality of plastic in this specie's guts.
- A Public Relations (PR) stunt during the media launch that saw 5,001 plastic water bottles formed into waves around the Aquarium's art installation to create a three-dimensional visual that stopped visitors in their tracks.

THE IMPLEMENTATION STAGE

9. Timing

Timing is important. Many attractions have high and low seasons, so it is important to think through timing. The Vancouver Aquarium chose to launch on March 8 in advance of its busy spring break time, and even busier summer season. Doing it in a slower period meant staff had the time to be trained, and any kinks could be worked through prior to the busy season.

10. Educate Employees

Employees, especially front-line employees, are your best advocates. These folks interact with visitors every day in Gift Shops, Cafes, Guest Services Desks, etc. Vancouver Aquarium's employee education began with the screening of A Plastic Ocean- a documentary about the impact of plastic on oceans that was released in January 2017. This built some initial excitement among employees, and led the way

for further training prior to launch. At Vancouver Aquarium, we took the time to train all front line staff. The training was short and primarily focused on where fountains were and what messaging they could use to explain the change. A two-page document was given out post-training, as a reference for down the road. It included points of contacts should difficult questions arise.

11. Communicate with Guests

Guest communication is key to a seamless post-water bottle world. At the Vancouver Aquarium, we put water drops on our visitor map to note where water fountains were. We also included information on our website in the 'before you arrive' section. Members were notified via an email blast to ease their minds, and allow them to feel a part of the transition. Communicate early, and often, to avoid any upset onsite.

12. Quantify Impact

Quantifying impact is a great way to provide meaningful feedback to Senior Management, donors, employees, and visitors about the change. We have also found that these numbers have acted as a motivator for future change.

We quantified impacts in the following ways:

- Counters- we added counters to each indoor fountain to count and display the number of water bottles filled (we did not monitor water fountain drinks).
- Visitor Exit Survey- we included two questions in our visitor exit survey centered on whether guests knew we did not sell water bottles, and whether or not they brought their own bottle.
- Media Impressions- from of our PR stunt, and other campaign media coverage.
- Art Installation Discussions- while this has not yet been quantified we are periodically listening to the conversations happening at our art installation. The conversations that start here are miraculous.

13. Know you are Not Alone

We are all in this together. Sustainability is not a competitive advantage. Please reach out to Vancouver Aquarium's Sustainability Manager about question before or during your campaign at alexis.scoon@ocean.org. We are here to help!