

Message
in a

Bottle

How Dasani used an
eco-conscious sampling tour
to connect—and convert—
college kids

For the beverage category, a bottle of water is *always* more than just a bottle of water.

It's a promise of refreshment. A vessel filled with good health and hydration. Sometimes it's a momentary escape to a mountain spring or an exotic island. Or a reflection of a lifestyle you live, or aspire to, in your everyday life.

But even with the packaging and promises, a bottle of water still presents one of the largest marketing challenges across the consumer packaged goods category. As carbonated soda loses a bit of its sales fizz, the water category is being positioned as the sales savior for the nation's beverage giants. As a result, grocery store aisles, vending machines and gas station coolers are becoming ever more crowded with large and small brands promising a new hook on H₂O-to-go. Marketers must work harder than ever to differentiate their bottles—and their brands—from the rest. It's a perception challenge that's unique to almost every other consumer product made even more challenging by an inherent propensity towards waste. Case in point: many cities across the country have banned bottled water in an effort to cut down on their inevitable journey to a landfill, affecting sales and consumer consumption patterns along the way.

By Sandra O'Loughlin



And so, in an effort to boost awareness and connect with younger consumers, Coca-Cola's Dasani brand has shifted face-to-face marketing into overdrive. The brand's experiential program not only differentiates its water from the rest as part of its strategy to win the hearts and thirsts of college students across the country (Dasani now comes in a 100 percent recyclable bottle), it is transforming a perception of waste into an eco-friendly, feel-good purchasing experience.

The just-wrapped Designed to Make a Difference Tour brought Dasani's sustainability message to where students live, work and drink lots of bottled water—on campus, music festivals and theme parks. The tour was housed in bright blue inflatable "X-gloo" dome tents imported from Europe. A high-tech camera on a platform with a rotating chair and lights gave the area the look and feel of a movie set. Passersby soon got the idea that this was no ordinary sampling event. Besides the video op, attendees got to shoot targets with an air gun, win stuff and down some Dasani. What's not to love about an experience that is educational, but serves up fun, too?

"For us, it was all about building brand love and a much deeper engagement with a very important consumer group," says Geoff Henry, brand director at Dasani. "Sustainability is very much an important aspect of the brand, and we wanted to make sure we were showcasing to college students and universities what the brand stands for, what we bring to the marketplace and what is unique and different."

Sustainability is a priority for Dasani's corporate owner, Coca-Cola, which two years ago hired a chief sustainability officer and, according to its ninth sustainability report, published last November, the company is working to "embed" sustainability-minded innovations into every aspect of its business. The bottled water category in general has been challenged with negative

perception around environmental and sustainability issues, and those challenges have become more acute in the past two to three years as consumers have become more aware of the impact plastic has on the environment.

Coca-Cola's answer, in part, is its new PlantBottle, which is made from up to 30 percent with plant material sourced from sugarcane byproduct harvested in Brazil and is 100 percent recyclable. PlantBottle packaging allows Coke's brands to reduce their carbon footprint compared to traditional plastic bottles, which are made from petroleum and other non-renewable fossil fuels. Dasani rolled out PlantBottle in the spring of 2011 and has since sold more than 13 billion units.

"When we launched PlantBottle, we saw an opportunity to address some of the challenges the category has been dealing with, and college campuses and universities is one of the channels that is more challenged than others," says John Roddey, vp-strategy, innovation and planning for North American brands at Coca-Cola. "No other manufacturer is coming close to having that kind of impact in terms of the carbon footprint that we would have otherwise had."

THE FOOTPRINT WITH NO FOOTPRINT

Dasani launched the first leg of the tour last April and May, took a break during the summer months, then ramped back up from August through October. The activation encompassed three areas, each housed in those cool-looking X-gloo tents, and incorporated sampling for its new Dasani Drops product.

A Designed to Make a Difference Gallery located in a large central tent showcased recycled plastic bottles that had been reinvented into everyday items such as New Balance's newSKY shoes, which are designed with an upper made from 95 percent recycled PET bottles; CaseMate cell phone cases made from recycled PET bottles and a Simon Lee "Cyclotron" guitar, a high-quality, hand-made sustainable guitar built using recycled plastic bottles as the body material. Attendees who "liked" Dasani's Facebook

page were entered into a sweepstakes to win the guitar.

Two additional tents, one on either side of the gallery, added fun and creativity to the message. In the Xtreme Recycling tent, attendees shot cannons loaded with empty Dasani bottles through a target with different size holes and into a recycling bin. People lined up to play against their friends and, based on their skill level, won blankets made from recycled PET, pens, t-shirts and other prizes. Those who made it through the smallest hole received a voucher for a pair of newSKY shoes. But perhaps the most innovative, and fun, side of the experience took place in the H2 Motion tent, a video op that captured attendees interacting (read: getting soaked, splashed and plastered) with water in slow motion. The photos were posted on Dasani's Facebook and YouTube pages for sharing.

"We were looking to do the photo op that you see all the time in experiential marketing, but we wanted to do something more compelling, and make sure it was brand relevant as well," says Ian Lawrow, vp-program development at CPC Intersect, which handled the tour.

The agency got its hands on a super high-definition, slow motion video camera (the Phantom Miro M Series) before it was released in the U.S., one that captured the students' reactions in visually compelling images as water balloons exploded in their faces. "When you slow that down to 1,000 frames a second, it looks incredible with little droplets sparkling in the air and their hair moving," Lawrow says. Attendees chose the music to accompany their video, which was timed to hit a crescendo the moment the balloon exploded.

On cold days the students could opt to hold the balloon in their hands and then squeeze it, revealing their faces as the water dropped to the ground instead of soaking them, and they could put on protective raincoats and jackets. "But as the weather got warmer, and we were at music festivals, it was, yes, soak me, this is great," Lawrow adds.

All told, the tour visited 18 college



campuses over 42 days of activation, including 11 special or sporting events such as freshman orientation, back-to-school events or football games, spending a few days on each campus. It spent four days at two Six Flags theme parks and eight days at three music festivals, including Bamboozle in New Jersey and Music Midtown in Atlanta, which are Live Nation-based, and Musikfest, in Bethlehem, PA.

The activation's 100-foot by 100-foot footprint, along with water and power requirements, met with occasional resistance from college officials who weren't accustomed to its large size. "But when we sent them images of it, and the video, their apprehension turned to excitement,"

Lawrow says. "People were clamoring to have us come back."

The modular tents could be scaled up or down based on space available on the campuses and festivals, and the smaller side tents could even be nested under the larger one when necessary. "That really helped us get around some of these issues where the campuses were apprehensive because of the large footprint," says Melissa Schwartz, associate brand manager at Dasani. Colorful blue posters in high-profile locations such as cafes, student commons and near vending machines drew awareness of the upcoming tour two weeks prior to the activation. A-Frame signage promoting the super slow-mo video generated excitement the day of the tour.

A primary activation manager oversaw the overall footprint, along with an assistant manager and a technical expert in charge of the video camera. Additional staffers were trained in understanding the brand's attributes and sustainability. The set-up, which traveled in two vehicles,

TEAM DASANI: Top row, L-to-R: Allison Goldberg, Marketing Activation Consultant, Dasani; Nicole Tilzer, Brand Manager, Dasani. Middle row, L-to-R: Chris Lopez, Group Director, Category Commercialization for Water, Tea & Coffee; Casey Blackwood, Integrated Marketing Communications Manager, Dasani. Bottom row, L-to-R: Melissa Schwartz, Associate Brand Manager, Dasani; John Roddey, Vice President, Strategy, Innovation and Planning for North America Brands; Geoff Henry, Brand Director, Dasani







remained in place overnight, guarded by security after key value pieces were safely stowed off-site.

A DROP BY THE BEACH

The fall campus swing included all that as well as an additional tent to promote Dasani Drops, a zero-calorie flavor enhancer that hit the market in October. The concentrated liquid comes in four flavors—strawberry kiwi, pink lemonade, pineapple coconut and mixed berry—that people can use to “flavorfy,” as the brand calls it, their water. They just flip the cap, squeeze the bottle and mix in a little or a lot, depending on their preference.

“It was a natural fit to layer on Dasani Drops because not only can it be used with bottled water, and we obviously prefer people to use it with Dasani bottled water, but you can use it with tap water,” Roddey says.

But before it packed up and joined the college tour with the Dasani brand, Dasani Drops hit the Jersey shore for a Labor Day weekend bash. “We knew that as a brand we wanted to launch Drops in a big way, and at that time the tagline we were using was Drop Into Delicious, so we thought wouldn’t it be awesome to literally drop into an iconic, large-scale event and ‘flavorfy’ the experience,” says Schwartz.

So, to build buzz for the Saturday activation at Seaside Heights, NJ, two teams of two brand ambassadors on Friday night engaged consumers along the boardwalk and in local bars and restaurants. Wearing custom-branded dresses and carrying trays filled with cups of Dasani, the brand

ambassadors invited consumers to “flavorfy” the water with Dasani Drops and to the next day’s beach zone activation. On-premise locations offered Dasani Drops drink specials and displayed branded table tent cards.

The Drops zone featured a five-foot wide, seven-foot tall branded structure where a dj and an emcee rocked the crowd with music, announcements and games such as Flavor War (tug-of-war), Flavor Toss (with water balloons), Drops Brigade (holey buckets) and Name That Flavor (name that tune). A custom sampling bar and signage was the hub of the 100-foot by 100-foot destination. From 9 to 11 a.m., brand ambassadors in retro-inspired swimwear that corresponded to Drops flavors distributed 10.1-ounce Dasani Water bottles for consumers to flavorfy. Those who engaged in social media received full-sized bottles of Drops. Until 1 p.m., the brand ambassadors distributed 2,000 Flavorfy wristbands (500 of each Dasani Drops color/flavor), telling people to keep their eye on the sky for a chance to win prizes.

But just as the Designed to Make a Difference Tour was no ordinary sampling campaign, this was not your typical day at the beach. From 12:30 to 1 p.m., two performers wearing water-propelled jet packs and Dasani Drops flags generated awareness and buzz with stunts up to 30 feet above the water in front of the Drops zone and along the entire beach. And, at 1:45 p.m., Dasani Drops skydivers with apparel and parachutes that corresponded to the Flavorfy wristbands dropped through the sky above, aiming for a target in the Drops zone and to be the flavor that wins prizes for those wearing that color wristband. Pineapple Coconut was the winner.

“We were trying to create these dramatic moments that people would want to take pictures of and share in their social networks, and also give them prizes for doing so,” Schwartz says.

Dasani also was trying to prompt the use of the hashtag Flavorfy. “That is our larger campaign, where we are trying to rally around that word and Drops,” Schwartz adds. “The way we look at it,

Drops is the delicious drop that enlivens the moment, it takes already fun, happy times and kicks it up a notch into that amped up, spontaneous experience. So we are coining that ‘Flavorfy.’”

The strategy worked. Drops and Flavorfy garnered more than 26,000 Twitter impressions and 174 Instagram engagements, as well as 131 user-generated photos from #flavorfy. The Drops beach zone area drew more than 23,000 in estimated attendance; nearly 5,000 Dasani Drops pours and full-size samples were distributed; 5,000 Dasani 10.1 ounce bottles were poured or distributed and 2,350 Dasani Drops premiums were handed out.

Then it was off to campus as Drops in September and October joined the fall leg of the Designed to Make a Difference Tour with an additional branded tent that was up and running within 30 minutes while the larger tour set up. “The Drops team could guerrilla around campus or go to outside events to get more time under their belt and maximize their opportunity,” says Lawrow. Dasani Drops was part of the spring break scene on South Padre Island. (See pg. 50 where the intrepid Ken Briodagh checked it out.)

It all came down to educating people about the brand in a fun way and having them take away something they could use or share with friends on their social networks. The Designed to Make a Difference Tour reached more than 67,000 participants, and more than 33,000 recycling games were played. The H2 Motion video op resulted in 1,280 videos uploaded from 1,428 participants and more than 50,000 views.

Consumer reach was staggering, achieving nearly five million overall impressions coming from the events (which accounted for 282,370 impressions), mobile billboards from the customized trucks (2,405,176 impressions) and social media (2,180,132 impressions.)

“Experiential marketing is very impactful and engaging, and it certainly is not inexpensive on a per interaction basis, so you have to make sure that what you are delivering is a high-quality product that is memorable and also shared,” says Henry. 📱

BOTTLE ROCKETS: Dasani’s Designed to Make a Difference program targeted Millennials through sampling activities that took place on the ground and in the air. Top) XTreme Recycling reinforced the brand’s eco-friendly message at tour stops; (middle, left) Dasani Drops skydivers land on the Jersey Shore; (middle, right) Drops Girls unleash the sampling power; (bottom, left) Sampling, where else, but at the beach; (bottom, right) The tour’s signature blue “X-Gloo” tents drew crowds of college students at Georgia Tech.