

Our other drinking problem

It takes 3 liters of water to make 1 liter of bottled water, according to estimates



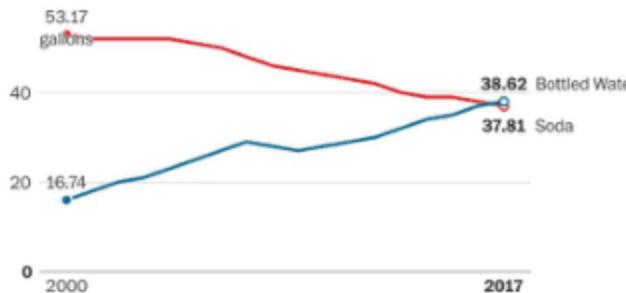
By Roberto A. Ferdman: August 28, 2015

Once an occasional indulgence, bottled water is quickly becoming America's drink of choice.

The average person in the United States now consumes more than 35 gallons of bottled water per year, according to data from market research firm Beverage Marketing Corp. That's about 270 bottles, and more than twice as many as people drank 15 years ago. And that number is only going to go up: By 2017, the average American is expected to drink almost 300 bottles annually.

The rise of bottled water—and the fall of soda

U.S. per capita consumption of bottled water and soda.



Source: Beverage Marketing Corporation
WAPO.ST/WONKBLOG

For perspective, consider that over the next two years, bottled water is expected to eclipse soda as the most consumed packaged drink in the United States.

"It's not a question of whether, but when, it will happen. We see it happening in about two years," said Gary Hemphill, who is the managing director of research at Beverage Marketing.

The growing popularity of bottled water, especially in a rich country like the United States, is a touchy subject. Sustainable water activists bemoan the billions of bottles that are consumed each year as an example of American excess. They point to the industry's carbon footprint and to the country's high-quality municipal water system in hopes that people will think better, buy a refillable container and leave the army of packaged H₂O on shelves.



But bottled-water makers take issue with the arguments against their industry. They tout their product as a healthy alternative to sugary drinks and say that it's a safer option for those who live in areas where clean tap water is unavailable. And their message seems to be getting across, because Americans love the stuff.

Why we buy bottled water

The rise of bottled water in the United States is nothing new — Americans have been drinking more of it for nearly two decades now — but its staying power says a lot about what people look for when they want something to drink. A few underlying trends stand out.

The first is the ascent of health consciousness, which has helped bottled water as much as it has hurt soda. "Consumers see it as a healthy beverage alternative," Hemphill said. "People are choosing it over sugary drinks, like soda, for that very reason."

The second is the ubiquity of options. "If you grew up in the '70s and you wanted something cold and refreshing to drink, you would have a carbonated soft drink because there really weren't very many other options," Hemphill said. "But now there are tons, and bottled water is kind of at the center."

Bottled water has also been marketed down Americans' throats. In order to distinguish a product that is often indistinguishable, the industry has bombarded consumers with a plethora of clever campaigns, which depict exotic springs, far-off mountains and fresh, untapped streams of natural water. Popular brands, like Evian, have embraced slogans like "Live Young," almost daring people not to be seen with a bottle. Others, like Smart Water, have relied on sleek design. In all, bottled-water brands spent upwards of \$80 million on advertising last year, according to the Wall Street Journal.

"Bottled water has become this healthy, sexy thing to drink," said Peter Gleick, who is the president and founder of the Pacific Institute, and author of several books about bottled water. "Certain brands, like Fiji Water, have become so chic that there's a real cachet associated with them."

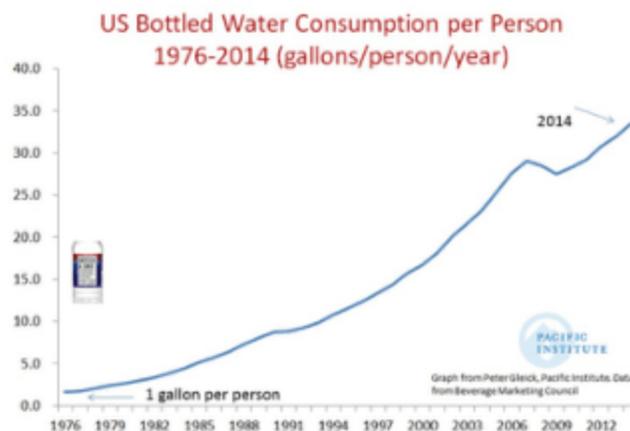
Bottled-water manufacturers have also launched a subtle but highly successful blurring of consumer choice, positioning their product as an alternative to sugary drinks, rather than an alternative to water available from the tap. Nestlé Pure Life's 2010 campaign, in which the company asks mothers to switch out a sugary drink for one of their bottled waters each day, is a perfect example. This, Gleick says, is one of their biggest triumphs, because of how the conversation affects the way in which people view their habit of drinking bottled water.

"I think it definitely makes people feel better about buying bottled water instead of drinking from the tap," he said.

But bottled water is, perhaps more than anything else, wildly convenient. It's sold at supermarkets and convenience stores, Starbucks and New York City bodegas. At any given moment, it's probably easier to locate the nearest place where a bottle of water can be had, or bought, than it is to find a water fountain. "People who buy water bottles tend to be young and active," Hemphill said. "They like that the bottles are portable, that they can be brought and had while on the go."

All of this has been great for bottled-water makers' bottom lines. Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Nestlé, which sell billions of dollars in packaged H2O each year, have profited handsomely from the beverage's ascent, and they will continue to reap the benefit as consumption grows.

A quick glance at bottled-water consumption since 1970, when the average American drank only a gallon per year, gives a sense of how much the market has ballooned over the years. The chart below comes courtesy of the sustainable-water research institute the Pacific Institute.



The true cost of convenience

All those empty water bottles aren't disappearing into thin air.

"The bottled water industry says correctly, but misleadingly, that the plastic the water comes in is recyclable," Gleick said. "It's misleading, because recyclable is not the same thing as recycled."

By Gleick's estimate, only about a third of all bottles of water consumed in the United States are recycled, meaning that about two-thirds end up in the garbage.

"There is no comparison with the environmental footprint of bottled water," he added. "Of course, the plastic footprint is the same as it is with other drinks which come in bottles. But that argument is disingenuous, because for bottled water the alternative isn't soda, it's tap water. And the environmental footprint of bottled water vastly exceeds the environmental footprint of cheap, high-quality tap water. It's not even close."

As of 2006, it took 3 liters of water to produce 1 liter of bottled water, according to the Pacific Institute. In other words, before even including the energy required to produce the actual bottles — which is significant — bottled water was already three times as inefficient as its unpackaged alternative.

To be fair, the United States isn't the only country where people are obsessed with bottled water when they needn't be. Much of Europe, including the United Kingdom, has similar problems. As does Canada, where choosing bottled water "is a matter of taste or convenience, not health."

Gleick says that it's important not to discount the existence of an irrational fear associated with municipal water systems. People, he says, are unsure, skeptical and sometimes even fearful of what comes out of their tap. They don't know how good it is, which is unfortunate, because, for the most part, it's exceptionally good. Tap water faces far more rigorous bacteria testing in cities than any water bottling company in the country faces. And a quarter of all bottled water comes from a tap anyway.

"It is remarkable to me that sales of bottled water are continuing to rise in a country where we have cheap, incredibly safe, incredibly reliable tap water that's available to basically everyone," Gleick said. "We have one of if not the most incredible municipal water system in the world."
