

Marketing 'juggernaut' creating flood of bottled water: author

ABC News, July 3, 2008

It is one of the most remarkable marketing coups of the last quarter of a century—the explosion in bottled water sales in a country where a safer, better tasting alternative is available for a fraction of the cost on tap.

In her book *Bottlemania*, New York investigative journalist Elizabeth Royte details just how some of the biggest companies in the world managed to build a market in the United States and its impact on the environment.

She says three major food companies used clever and aggressive marketing to create what she calls a bottled water "juggernaut".

"Coke, Pepsi and Nestle spent hundreds of millions of dollars telling us that their water was healthful and natural and that it would make us feel better and look better and they used athletes to link their water with wellness and they used celebrities and models and the advertising worked," she said.

"But while they were pushing all these ads on us, there was a total lack of criticism of the bottled water industry until quite recently and there was also no marketing competition from tap water.

"Utilities don't have a lot of extra money in PR budgets to tell us that we should drink a lot of tap water and it will help us do our yoga poses better."

It is an extraordinary marketing coup considering the explosion in bottled water continued, even after Perrier, which began the trend, was discovered to have some cancer causing chemicals in it.

"That was in 1990, there was a benzine scare and that crisis for Perrier was an opportunity for Evian, which really took off then," Ms Royte said.

"There was another big change. It was sort of a technological thing but in 1989 it became possible to put the bottled water into very inexpensive clear plastic bottles made of PET plaster whereas before they had been in the glass and they had been in PVC plastic.

"So now it was very much cheaper for these companies to get their beverages out there.

"Then as I said before, Coke and Pepsi got into the game with their millions of dollars in marketing muscle and their very complex distribution network."

Ms Royte says it was quite easy for the likes of Pepsi and Coke to get their new water product out there given their control and shelf space across supermarkets, corner stores, petrol stations and vending machines.

She also says tap water in terms of quality and taste is fairly similar to bottled water in the US, the biggest bottled water market in the world.

Little testing

"The big difference is in how often bottled water is inspected," Ms Royte said. "Tap water is tested tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of times a year and bottled water which is regulated by the FDA (Food and Drug Authority) as a food product gets an inspector less than one time a year.

"In some cases a plant can go unvisited for five years by an FDA inspector." Ms Royte says bottled water is still safe, despite some evidence showing that some chemicals can leach from the plastic into the water.

But her major concern relates to the environmental footprint left by the industry in a country such as the US where 50 billion bottles of water are drunk a year. "It takes about 17 million barrels of oil to make the bottles just used in [the US] and that is not counting the oil it takes to transport it around across the country or import it by plane or on ship," she said.

"Then to keep the water cold and then to collect all those empty bottles and send them either to recycling centres or to the dumps, it has a significant carbon impact."

In terms of water itself, the bottled water industry only uses 0.02 per cent of ground water supply. But Ms Royte argues that the targeting of certain areas for bottled water supplies has damaged the environment.

"That .02 per cent comes from only a very few places and some places where they're pumping spring water for bottling complain that there has been environmental impact," she said.

"They are also moving that water around. When farmers use water, it goes back into the same water-shed but the water being used for bottling is moving away from the water-shed, it is not returning to that ecosystem there and that is what people are complaining about.

"I don't think bottled water is the worst thing in the world but if more people and more and more people drink bottled water, they are not supporting tap water and our political leaders need to know that we care about tap water and protecting water-sheds and taking care of our infrastructure."

And she warns of a kind of vicious water cycle.

"The more bottled water we drink, the more bottled water we are going to have to drink as municipal water supplies decline in quality," she said.

Elizabeth Royte was talking to Eleanor Hall on The World Today.