

Hey,

By Lisa Gschwandtner

How a PR campaign turned into an unexpected sales phenomenon



What's Tappening?

Eric Yaverbaum (left) and Mark DiMassimo, Tappening cofounders



When lifelong PR guru Eric Yaverbaum decided to take on the bottled-water industry, he unleashed a juggernaut that took everyone by surprise. Merging his considerable publicity and marketing expertise with the advertising prowess of his friend and colleague, Mark DiMassimo, founding partner of DiMassimo Goldstein (www.dimassimogoldstein.com), the two invested \$100,000 to buy 40,000 reusable water bottles to sell on their Website, Tappingen.com. They set aside 1,000 of those bottles to send to press agents and celebrities. Their goal was to sell the whole lot of them in a year, and they figured they would at least break even on the deal.

ANYONE WHO knew Yaverbaum would probably have predicted some degree of success in his philanthropic venture. After all, this was not his first foray into the business of promotions. Before founding his current company, Ericho Communications, he owned another PR firm (Jericho), and his client list included Domino's Pizza and IKEA. He also launched the Vitamin Water campaign. But even he was staggered when they sold every last Tappingen bottle in just two days.

"I mean, I was on radio shows from the second the press release went out," Yaverbaum marvels. "We were on national television, the morning newspapers wrote about it, bloggers wrote about it. Celebrities started carrying the bottles. *Good Morning America* called us the hottest eco-product of 2008. Sales have been phenomenal. All of it is just not something we expected at all."

Myth Busters

Ironically, Yaverbaum has never considered himself a tree hugger. "I mean, my resume as an environmentalist before this is that I got rid of my SUV because my 16-year-old daughter wouldn't set foot in it," he says. Another irony? Selling reusable water bottles wasn't even the initial idea.

Conceived after watching *Garbage! The Revolution Starts at Home*, a documentary about where garbage goes, Yaverbaum's original intent was to collect one million messages, stuff them into one million bottles, and truck the load to Atlanta to dump on the front lawn of Coca-Cola, which produces Dasani bottled water. The empty bottles would represent all those languishing in landfills, but Yaverbaum also had a particular reason for going after Dasani.

"If you look on a bottle of Dasani, it

A small idea with a modest goal can achieve big results when the word gets out. And the word on tap water versus bottled water really hit the big time when lifelong PR guru Eric Yaverbaum decided to take on the bottled-water industry. Here's the story of one PR campaign that netted big results.

doesn't say that what's in the bottle is actually tap water," he explains. "Now, if you call Coca-Cola, they will tell you, 'Yes, the source is municipal tap water.' If you ask, 'Well, why don't you put it on your label?' they say, 'Everybody knows.'"

The Tappingen campaign is a quintessential example of how the new media cycle can affect sales.

No, Yaverbaum said, everybody doesn't know. So he made it his business to educate consumers. "When people know the facts, they can make an educated decision," he says. "You can drink bottled water if you want. It's a free country. But I think you would find it very enlightening to know that when you buy that bottle of water, all you're buying is the label, with those glaciers and cascading falls. It's just the label. Because what's in the bottle is the same thing that comes out of your tap at home."

The New Media Circuit

One of the key takeaways from the experience for Yaverbaum was the understanding that online media has become a precious resource for marketing and

advertising campaigns. Yaverbaum, a self-proclaimed newspaper junkie who grew up in the age of Walter Cronkite, finds it fascinating that his 16-year-old daughter gets all her news online.

"[My daughter and I] have very similar interests and politics, but very different ways of getting our news. I've been in communications for twenty-five years, and guys like me grew up in a brick-and-mortar world. That world is always going to have credibility. But the way we communicate is so different now. The magic to me is in those gray zones in the middle."

The Tappingen campaign is a quintessential example of how the new media cycle can affect sales. When a mainstream newspaper writes about a phenomenon like Tappingen, the story gets picked up

on the Internet. In fact, bloggers were directly responsible for most of Tappingen's sales.

"Because of analytics you can track this stuff, as you know," Yaverbaum says. "And I tell the story to every one of my clients, because what they should all be trying to figure out is, what's affecting your cash register."

As an example, he points to the flood of Internet attention he received after appearing on *Good Morning America*. It wasn't his appearance on the show per se that made the register ring, he says. It was the amount of Internet traffic in response to the appearance.

"Take Josh Spear's blog [joshspears.com]," Yaverbaum says. "The traffic and the sales that I made off that kid mentioning us in



Numbers by the Bottle

>> Americans buy 28 billion bottles of water a year.

>> Bottled water costs as much as \$10 per gallon, compared to less than a penny per gallon for tap water.

>> Making bottles to meet Americans' demand for bottled water in 2006 required energy equivalent to more than 17 million barrels of oil – enough fuel to power more than 1 million cars in the United States for a year – and generated more than 2.5 million tons of carbon dioxide.

>> Drinking eight glasses of bottled water a day could cost up to \$1,400 annually. The same amount of tap water would cost around 49 cents.

>> Worldwide, 2.7 million tons of plastic are used each year to make water bottles, and in the United States, less than 20 percent of these bottles are recycled.

>> Ninety-six percent of bottled water is sold in single-size polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic bottles, which end up in city trash cans rather than recycling bins. The national recycling rate for all PET bottles, including soda bottles, is 23.1 percent.

>> About 4 billion PET bottles end up in the waste stream, costing cities around \$70 million a year in clean-up and landfill costs.

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his blog absolutely dwarfed [the attention we received as a result of the appearance on] *Good Morning America*."

"I'd Take Online"

The power of the two media streams is intermixed, of course. But, given the choice between old and new media, Yaverbaum is in with the new. "In the old days, I wanted the magazine, I wanted the glossy cover. But if today a journalist would say to me, 'Hey, which do you want?' I'd take online. What I want is for it to be really easy to link from your article to my site, because that goes to my cash register. That's sales."

All the profits from Tappingen have been reinvested to support the campaign; neither Yaverbaum nor DiMassimo have personally seen a penny's profit. So far they've made enough to float a staff, a

warehouse, customer service, and three major ad campaigns. But what matters to him most is the message.

"I didn't know we would do so well, but when my kids or my grandchildren read about Tappingen, that's what I'll be most proud of. If corporate America isn't engaged in making the planet greener, we're going to be in trouble. If corporate America gets engaged, the planet gets saved. That's the way I look at it."

Eric Yaverbaum is the founder of Ericho and author of six books, including the best-selling *I'll Get Back to You: 156 Ways to Get People to Return Your Calls and Other Helpful Sales Tips* (McGraw-Hill, 1996) and the forthcoming *How to Get Heard: What the World's Most Successful Bloggers Can Teach the Rest of Us*. Visit Ericho at www.erichopr.com, and check out the Tappingen Website at www.tappingen.com.

The Cut-and-Paste Best Seller

- In the late 1970s, a rather unlikely book appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Called *Getting Yours: The Complete Guide to Government Domestic Assistance*, the book – essentially a cut and paste of a federal document – was written by Matthew Lesko, a guy who appeared on late-night television and around Washington, DC, wearing a trademark suit dotted with cut-out question marks. The success of the book surprised everyone, including Lesko's fresh-faced intern, Eric Yaverbaum.

- "I had been looking for a paid internship, and Matthew was the only one willing to pay. He gave me \$100 a week to promote that book. I had no idea how to promote it. He said, 'Neither do I, but we'll learn together.' He ended up hiring me full-time, and I did my junior and senior years of college at night so I could work for him."

- By the early 1980s, Yaverbaum had landed Lesko's third book, *Information USA*, a spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list. It was the first \$20 trade paperback to make the list.

- "In the early eighties, books that were \$20 were way too expensive to sell on volume," Yaverbaum explains. "They never made the best-seller list. So there was a lot of press about this kid, the creative guy doing all this stuff for Matthew. They said I was out of the box. I didn't even have a clue where the box was."

- "I think that's a great asset in this business, being different from everybody else, but I'm not being different on purpose. I just don't know how to be the same."