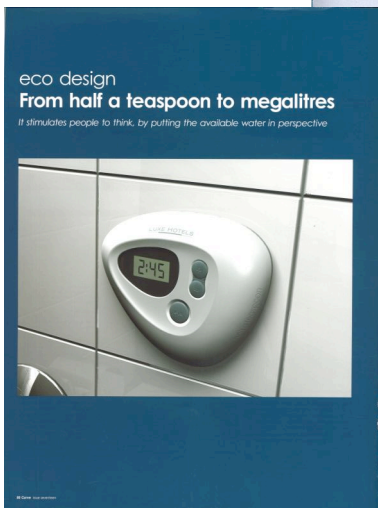




From half a teaspoon to megalitres

It stimulates people to think, by putting the available water in perspective



eco design
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Is the water-conservation message getting through with noteworthy results, or have urban Australians become hardened and indifferent to government campaigns pushing water-smart lifestyles? Can many of the water restrictions in Melbourne and Sydney generally be described as feeble and tepid, at best?

It's getting to the stage where, despite government restrictions and widespread marketeering from water-efficient product suppliers, our storages, at least in Victoria, continue to dwindle and many householders remain profligate with water. Yet, when it comes to the practical application of water conservation, it is vital to acknowledge the wonderful outcomes achieved by some agencies and product suppliers. There are many worthwhile education, rebate and advisory initiatives underway around the country.

At a very specific level, there are also entrepreneurs and innovators, outside government and water companies, who can see the potential of amplifying meaningful water-conservation messages in particular contexts, spaces and locations.

Gretha Oost, a Dutch-born, Melbourne-based innovator has managed to go beyond the "four-minute power shower" slogans with a view to targeting the hospitality sector. Oost has developed a novel program centred on the scarcity of water globally and the notion of proportions. The result is the Half a Teaspoon message.

The Half a Teaspoon concept creates awareness about the world's limited water resources by comparing one litre of water (all the world's water to half a teaspoon (the available freshwater).

Oost's thinking is based on proportions, percentages and scarcity. She notes that water covers 70% of the world; 97% is seawater (requiring treatment prior to drinking); 2% is frozen in the ice caps; thus leaving access to less than one-third of the 1% that is left.

One could argue about statistics and quantities; however, it's the sense of scarcity and proportions that is key with Half a Teaspoon, not specific megalitres.

The Half a Teaspoon ShowerWatch, a pre-programmed waterproof timer co-designed by Oost, provides the user with a four-minute time slot in which to shower and stimulates conscious water use by creating awareness of time spent in the shower.

The use of the ShowerWatch is voluntary, it is a conscious choice. The unusual, colourful message attracts people's attention; the ShowerWatch enables people to act.

The Half a Teaspoon program further aims to explore product-related environmental issues through the sustainable design of the ShowerWatch itself. Design consultancies Cobalt Niche and Charlwood Design in Melbourne have had a hand in the ShowerWatch's evolution, aesthetics and function. Sensible eco-design objectives have been applied and seem to have been executed with simplicity, including:

- minimal use of materials
- no adhesives that may contaminate end-of-life recycling
- no metal fixing screws
- elimination of gaskets
- lead-free solder
- designed for maintenance and easy battery replacement
- designed for disassembly; one twist and the ShowerWatch is completely disassembled
- single plastic type used to aid recycling efforts
- all components separate by hand.

Oost is very clear that the program is not just about telling people to take short showers. She says: "This is what we have heard enough. The program is about creating awareness about the urgency of the world's limited water resources. It stimulates people to think, by putting the available water in perspective, and it provides a tool to act. Half a Teaspoon wakes people up without using the horrible words 'world's water crisis'. That is not what people want to hear. The Half a Teaspoon message explains in a fun way what little water we have. Not just in Australia, but in the whole world. There is no pointing the finger or condescending words".

According to Oost, every day a lot of water is used in the bathroom, with showers taking eight minutes on average. Oost adopts a real-life view of the shower and its daily role: "Taking a shower is nice. It wakes you up in the morning and washes away the daily worries in the evening. It warms you up in winter and is refreshing in summer. Therefore it is easy to forget about time and as a result we waste lots of water. By simply creating awareness of time we will be using water more consciously. Half a Teaspoon believes by starting the day with a timed shower, we will be more aware of our water usage during the rest of the day".

opposite page
Half a Teaspoon ShowerWatch, Gretha Oost

background
concept sketch

The difference between the ShowerWatch and other similar timers currently on the market is that the ShowerWatch is pre-programmed. It cannot go longer than the default time of four minutes. Furthermore, a standard egg timer does not make you as time conscious; it does not tell you exactly how many minutes and seconds you have left. That is what you want to know if you only have four minutes.

The initial market for the Half a Teaspoon program is the hotel industry. As Oost notes, the hotel guest room offers a valuable opportunity to save water given the concentrated number of users in one location. It's a captured audience and potentially more receptive to the message than domestic households at this point in time. Hotel chains are also increasingly sensitive to ensuring their consumption of resources is minimised through user-friendly methods. The hospitality industry is already focused on water and energy savings, and the Half a Teaspoon program is in addition to existing towel and linen reuse programs.

The Como Melbourne has been one of the first to sign up to Half a Teaspoon. According to Paul Bidgood, general manager of the Como, and regional manager of Mirvac Hotels and Resorts, the program is part of their quest for greater sustainability within the business.

Bidgood says: "Our guests are very discerning, and addressing an environmental issue with design and an element of choice will truly appeal. The simplicity of the Half a Teaspoon awareness program and the ShowerWatch will guarantee significant guest take-up, therefore driving environmental impact reduction".

The Half a Teaspoon program is a novel product system for encouraging responsible water consumption. It's about narrowing the bigger picture down to a personal level. It also takes an uncomplicated approach, making it easy for organisations to implement – especially hotels, Oost's initial target.

A smart message combined with the eco-designed ShowerWatch demonstrates what is possible when good design is applied to environmental objectives without the usual sanctimonious overtones. In part this has been recognised with Half a Teaspoon having been shortlisted for the Premier's Design Awards under the City of Melbourne Sustainability category. ■

John Gertsakis