



# A Case Study on Aquapax

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For a product concept that began amidst a culture of religious fervour, as seventeenth century pilgrims bottled water from religious wells to take home as holy relics, the public perception of bottled water has undergone a dramatic transformation since its origin. It sits now in an increasingly politicised context, as ingrained cultural assumptions battle with environmental and ethical concerns. Aquapax, the product of entrepreneur Neil Tomlinson's frustration at disaster relief after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, positions itself as a constructive compromise in this particularly divisive market. In this case study I will explore the forces at play in the bottled water industry, and the means by which Tomlinson is able to negotiate them, often using them to Aquapax's advantage.

Tomlinson describes his motivation to create his water storage innovation, and the necessity of becoming a lone entrepreneur rather than working within his previous corporate structure:

*I was on holiday with my wife and family when the 'first' Asian tsunami footage appeared on our TV back on 26 December 2004. The powerful images made me feel both guilty and helpless when my considered plans to lend a hand to this 'water based' humanitarian crisis were vetoed within the corporate structure of my then employer.*

In order to see his product through, Tomlinson realised that he required an environment that gave him both autonomy and creative freedom. He left his employer, and began working with the Sussex Innovation Centre, who were able to provide him with resources, connections and a creative environment that allowed him to develop his concept:

*This led me to work on a disposable portable water container suitable for long-term storage, with comprehensive integrity in terms of function and carbon footprint. This became a near obsession and developed ultimately into my mission of launching a premium consumer brand called AQUAPAX.*

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Bottled water is an integral part of disaster relief, as other water sources can be easily contaminated or their structural integrity compromised. There is an unpleasant irony in this; natural disaster relief requires the use of a product that is in itself severely damaging to the environment. As Tomlinson describes, 'It takes more water to produce a plastic water bottle than that bottle is physically capable of holding'. Further, significant levels of non-renewable oil are required to produce the plastic. The water inside a plastic water bottle might have been sourced from within the same country that it is being distributed, but the oil and water needed to produce the plastic will almost certainly have been sourced at a high ecological (and potentially ethical) cost, most likely from the Middle East. Tomlinson recognized an opportunity to create an alternative that would be of value to both disaster relief providers and bottled water consumers. Aquapax cartons are made from majority paper, sourced from sustainably managed forests in Northern Europe. The other elements are detailed on Aquapax's website:

*c.22% LLDPE (that's low low density polyethylene) which is a very very thin food grade non-leaching plastic polymer, extruded at a relatively low temperature to ensure it's as safe as anything made from oil can be. One day we'll be able to make this from a plant based polymer, but we're not there yet.*

*The other c.5.5% of the carton is an oxygen impermeable barrier film made from very, very thin aluminium (6/1000th of 1mm thin) which protects Aquapax water from any smells or external aggressions it might be exposed to between us safely packing it and you drinking it.*

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Aquapax is marketed as a product for ethical consumers, with the narrative of Neil's personal entrepreneurial journey taking precedence. On both these fronts, Aquapax is jostling for a niche within the bottled water industry. These factors can be clearly seen on Aquapax's packaging. Rather than the generic simple branding over visible water, Aquapax's packaging is graphic and detailed, (and obviously, opaque). Details of Tomlinson's story are included throughout, and this is reiterated by much of the press on Aquapax, and indeed, by their own website (you can read this explanation in full [here](#)). At the base of the carton is one of Aquapax's registered trademarks, 'A PURE THIRST FOR THE ENVIRONMENT', positioning Aquapax consumers as environmentally conscious. Above this message are illustrations of waves, representative of Tomlinson's upbringing in Durban, South Africa, and Tomlinson's signature, placing Tomlinson's own personal story as central to the Aquapax value proposition. Above this is a seagull, representative of Jonathan Livingstone Seagull, the story by Richard Bach which as Tomlinson describes, 'has inspired me from when I was young to live the life I've chosen and to try not to take too many short cuts'. Above these are various pictorial and verbal messages of hope and change, sun shining through the tree of life, migratory birds and such. When described as it is on the website, these marketing choices exude a palpable air of the sentimental. However, in a market as saturated with big business (think Coca-cola and Nestle), there is something to be said for the conspicuous audacity of a company prepared to put their ethics on the table.

Their position is an interesting one. Tomlinson accepts that his alternative to plastic bottled water, Aquapax, is not the best option, rather, it is a good alternative. In his own words, 'there's nothing wrong with tap water, but all the while demand for bottled water was going mad. If you can't beat the market, then you can change it.' Aquapax is positioned as your environmentalist friend, who understands that you won't always make the best decision, but encourages you to make better ones. Aquapax has even offered [tips on the most beneficial ways to buy water](#), thereby re-negotiating their partisanship of the bottled water industry, and positioning themselves as an authoritative outsider 'on a mission to educate the public by sharing some handy tips on how to select mineral water'.

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The issue here is that bottled water of any kind is in itself ethically dubious. As Sussex University's *The Badger* notes, 'tap water remains the most sustainable form of the commodity, and studies in America and Canada have linked the decrease in available tap water to a continuation of the commercialisation of our education provision'. Tomlinson worked with Sussex University students on the design of Aquapax's packaging, and Aquapax is on sale across the Sussex campus. University newspaper's comments on the unusual environmental standard of Aquapax belies the novelty of their value proposition. Aquapax offers value to ethical consumers forced to make occasional distress water purchases, and to regular bottled water drinkers intrigued by the marketing and the sense of satisfaction attributed to feeling that they are being ethical without the need to change their habits. In this sense, Aquapax is an innovation much like kerb side recycling schemes; offering a positive change in behaviours with very little actual impact on the consumer's lifestyle.

Aquapax are also extending their marketing to appeal to a wider segment, with focus on the integrity of the water quality itself. Tomlinson describes 'I know Aquapax is not yet perfect and we have bio-polymer caps and liners on trial as I type. Our water source is impeccable – which was my number one priority'. Aquapax water has a neutral ph, meaning it is safe for babies to drink, a value proposition that can be particularly targeted towards parents.

Neil Tomlinson is an entrepreneur inspired by frustration at a design fault. Aquapax's subsequent success can be attributed to Tomlinson's ability to then see a particular market segment and exploit it. A core part of developing Aquapax has been the collection and analysis of knowledge regarding what value it offers, and to whom. By creating a product that offers a compromise between environmentally destructive plastic, and the inconvenience of finding available tap water, Tomlinson may be able to nudge social behaviours in a more ethical direction, whilst also growing a financially profitable enterprise.

You can learn more about Aquapax through their website [here](#).