

Water of life

Client: Thirsty Planet/
Harrogate Water Brands
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Thompson
Brand Partners



Executive summary

When a brand stalls, but its foundations remain solid, design can be the thing that makes the biggest difference. This is the story of exactly that, for ethical water brand Thirsty Planet, part of Harrogate Water Brands.

Unlike other ethical waters, Thirsty Planet guarantees a donation for every bottle sold. This all goes to UK-based, independent charity Pump Aid, who use it to install water pumps in sub-Saharan Africa, for communities to access clean, safe water. So when sales slow, donations are hit and the best-laid plans of the charity cannot be delivered.

In 2016, despite strong growth in the UK bottled water sector, Thirsty Planet sales started to slow. The owner, James Cain, was determined to do more for the charity, and was adamant that his unique donation model was still the best way to provide it. His focus was on how the brand could contribute to better performance, which is where we came in.

After listening to the customers, it was clear what their motivations were. We needed to be clear on what Thirsty Planet stands for and clear with its messaging. The design needed to be serious, but not earnest; fun, but not frivolous; so we created a friendly, campaigning message board which gave it a strong personality, and an identity that extends well beyond the packaging.

That was over a year ago, with the rebrand rolled out in early 2017. The results since have gone way beyond the client's business objectives. The top level results are as follows:

Like-for-like annual sales increased by 38% in the year after launch:

2016/17	£652,049
2017/18	£903,521

Like-for-like donations to Pump Aid increased by 64% in the year after launch:

2016/17	£70,858
2017/18	£116,358

Significantly outperformed the UK bottled water market 2017/2018:

Market growth	7%
Thirsty Planet growth	38%

Improved the % of sales value donated to Pump Aid by 19%:

2016/17	10.87%
2017/18	12.89%

Outline of project brief

Bottled waters that can be described as 'ethical' have only been around in the UK for just over a decade. Thirsty Planet was one of the first to market back in 2007. However, by 2016 when we began working with them on the rebrand project, strong competition from major players like Belu and Life had heavily dented both their sales and their brand recognition in the marketplace. By mid-2016, total annual sales were £758k.

Thirsty Planet has a strong and transparent donation model. Every single bottle sold provides a guaranteed donation to the charity, Pump Aid. Competitors like Belu have an 'all profits go to charity' message – a simpler message for the consumer, but the truth was that in the early days nothing went to charity. Thirsty Planet were way ahead with over £1.6m donated, but it was clear that Belu would be in a position to fulfil their promise, once the company achieved profit.

The market for bottled water is hugely competitive. In 2016, the total UK market sales were £2.17bn. The top five water brands in the UK – Evian, Highland Spring, Buxton, Nestlé Pure Life and Volvic – made up 30% of total sales.* This left the other waters, and of course the ethical brands, to fight for the remaining market share. Leading up to the rebrand, the UK bottled water market had maintained steady growth, reaching a peak in 2016, when sales of plain bottled water in the retail trade grew by 14% – a fourth consecutive year of double-digit growth.

However, sales of Thirsty Planet had slowed and were not keeping up with the market. The brand had suffered a few significant account losses, the most important of which was Asda. It was clear that the business had lost some of its focus and research revealed that brand recognition was low and messaging and direction were unclear.

Thirsty Planet MD James Cain knows the market very well, having received an OBE for services to impoverished communities in Africa. He was adamant that the donation model was right. He knew it was more robust than those used by other ethical waters, as it enabled the charity to count on ring-fenced, protected donations and to be able to forecast and plan efficiently. He was convinced that the future growth lay in the development of the brand and packaging, and that it was time to get serious.

He set the agency some ambitious targets:

1. Sales, volume and revenue growth to increase by 20% in two years.
2. This needed to reflect a like-for-like donations hike of 20% as a minimum.
3. Maintain a high margin and decrease production costs to ensure that maximum proceeds reached the charity.

The simple brief from the client was to investigate the Thirsty Planet brand, clarify what it stood for and to redesign the packaging of its product range to reflect a stronger, clearer market position. At this point, it was also clear we would need to conduct some consumer research to help inform the brand strategy and positioning.

Importantly, to maintain production efficiencies, we had to use exactly the same bottle model as before. There could be no changes to the size or shape of the bottle or the size, shape or position of the label. This was important to keep costs to a minimum to ensure that the charity donation could be sustained or increased.

Given the ethical water market is hugely competitive and of limited size, to maximise donations a stretch ambition was to be regarded as a mainstream water brand.

*Zenith report: <https://www.talkingretail.com/products-news/soft-drinks/bottled-water-sales-soar-uk-retailmarket-15-03-2017/>

Description of the design solution

We needed to start by understanding what the key motivators were for consumers. Was the ethical position and the donation model as important for them as it was for us? Was there a danger of being too earnest? What were the purchase triggers for bottled water consumers generally and are ethical water consumers so different to everyone else?

To find the insights, we spent time listening to our customers who quite liked the old packaging. It was seen as warm, positive and innocent. However, it was also perceived as a bit naïve and even 'childish'. Importantly though, the core customer base of 18–40 year olds with a female bias, could not identify what it really stood for.

Ethical concerns did matter to our consumers. Enough of them felt sufficiently conflicted about buying bottled water to respond positively to an ethical alternative. However, ethical considerations were not always the main buying motivator for our core audience (trust, quality and taste were). They also need to be seen to be making the right choice - they were not immune to the notion that their lifestyle choices had to be visible in products that 'look' right, and not just 'do' right. The brand needed to be more grown-up and frankly, a lot more contemporary and cool.

Could we build on Thirsty Planet's warm and accessible position whilst widening the appeal to consumers who needed a 'cooler' brand?



Before rebrand

Our solution - we built a new positioning for the brand, with a stronger strapline: 'The power of positive drinking'. It helped to give the brand an attitude it could clearly deliver on, and a clear benefit to the consumer. By drinking this product, you are actively demonstrating your commitment to providing water for people who need it and wearing your eco credentials on your sleeve. You are making positive change through small actions.

We'd had a number of conversations with Harrogate Water Brands about how vocal they should be about the overriding importance of a truly sustainable donation model. It's OK talking about 'all profits...', but if there aren't any, who's going to openly challenge it? Harrogate were happy to be transparent, open and forthright about their commitment to Pump Aid and their sustainable model. So, we knew we had to make sure the messages were super-clear.

Given how small the labels were, we knew almost immediately that a type-led solution would work, especially if we needed to put strong messages across. To retain some of Thirsty Planet's warm, accessible differentiation, we chose to hand write all the copy. Really, it was as simple as that. The simple two-colour treatment meant that we could keep production costs down and not be seen by customers as being wasteful.





The whole plan allowed the design to be serious, without being earnest. It was also fun, without being frivolous. The look-and-feel allowed us to be campaigning, without being too shouty. The whole thing added up to create a friendly, campaigning message board which meant we had a strong personality and identity that could extend well beyond the packaging. The finished packaging is simple and direct. Importantly, it is clearly not over-engineered and has visibly not had a ton of money thrown at it.

To make sure the key messages came over loud and clear, the following were included on the labels:

- We guarantee a donation with every bottle.
- We've raised £1.9m for Pump Aid so far (later increased to £2m).
- Pump Aid gets clean water to people who need it in Africa.
- We're zero to landfill and totally recyclable.



Since launch, James Cain has been campaigning hard in Westminster to recommend a more robust recycling policy as a solution to the plastics issue in the drinks sector. All Harrogate Water brands products, including Thirsty Planet, are now made from at least 50% recycled material and every component is 100% recyclable. It is vital that a perfect solution to this issue is found, and James is totally committed to leading on it.

The scope of work

The outputs of the project were a new brand positioning, strapline and key messages, a new visual identity and brand assets, and new packaging artwork for the range of 13 skus, including glass, PET, multipacks and cuplets.

Key facts

Rebrand launch date: The project ran from February to December 2016.
New packaging started appearing from April 2017 onwards

Design fee: £24,125

Basis for the results:

Before rebrand: 2016/17 financial year (ie 12 months to 31 March 2017)

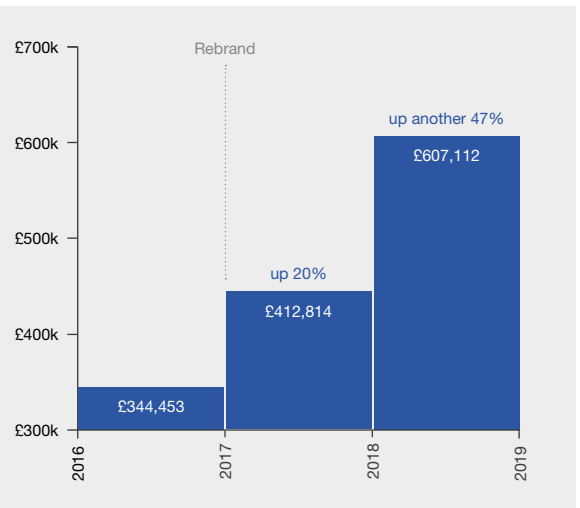
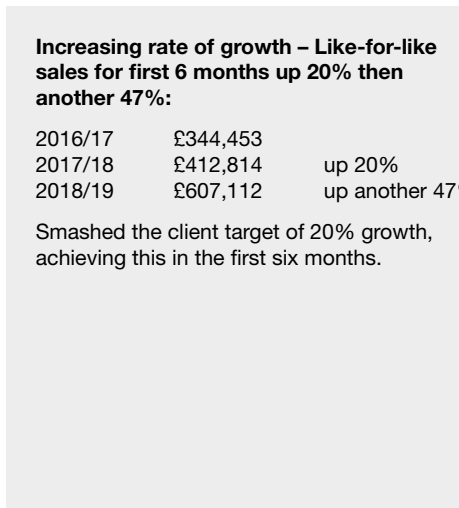
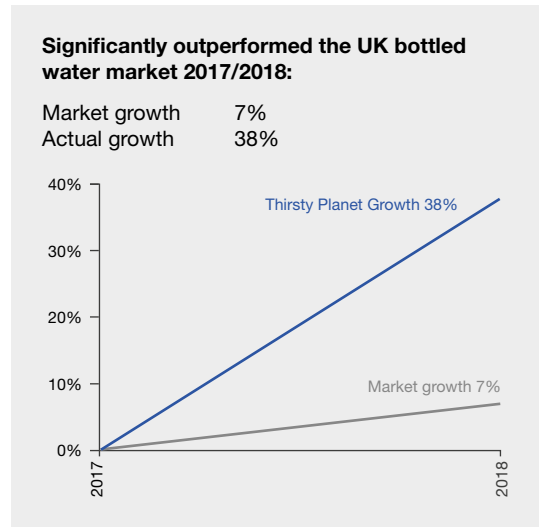
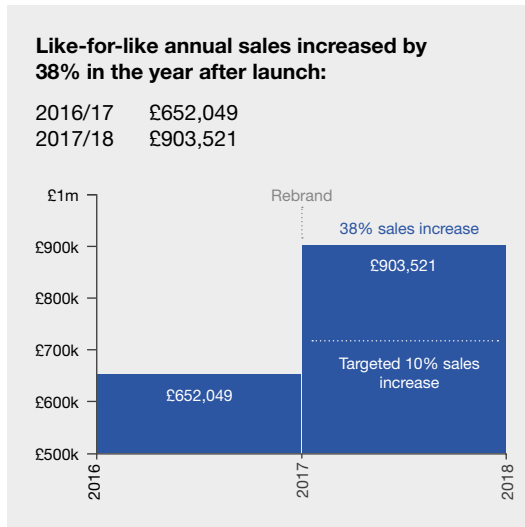
After rebrand: 2017/18 (ie 12 months to 31 March 2018)

2018/19 (ie 6 months to 30 September 2018)

Results

The rebrand has delivered the following results against the project objectives:

Sales, volume and revenue growth to increase by 20% in two years.



Significantly increased sales to key retail accounts:

- Ocado up 250%
- DDC Foods up 228%
- Vestey up 135%
- Brakes up 102%

Secured high profile listings with organisations that felt the Thirsty Planet proposition would resonate with the customers' value-set:

This included IKEA, Novotel, Sofitel, Mercure, IBIS and The Real Greek.

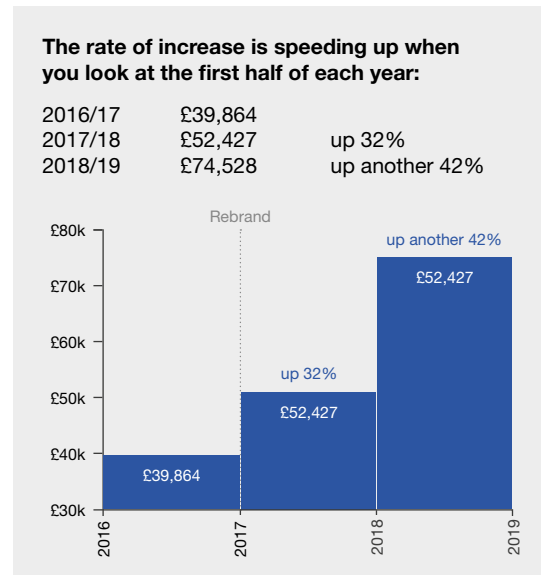
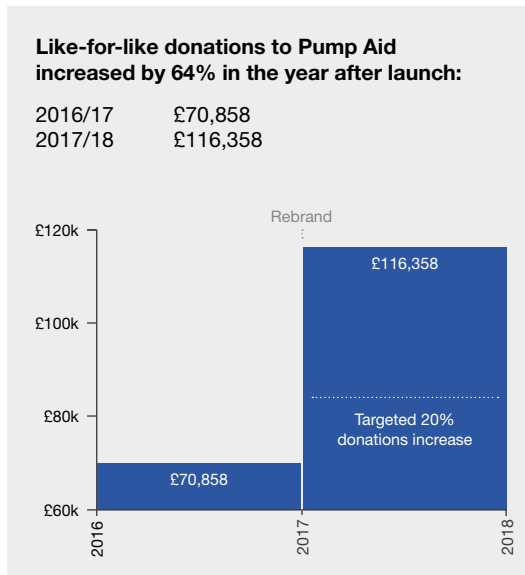
"We changed from Belu to Thirsty Planet because it was so clear what the brand stands for. We know how important transparency is to our customers, and the new Thirsty Planet packaging clearly shows that they share our value-set."

IKEA

"The water itself is British spring water, bottled at source in Harrogate, crisp and clear and so pure! Thirsty Planet believes in the power of positive drinking, and so do we. We are thrilled by the fact that we and all our guests can now be a part of making a positive difference with a global impact!"

The Real Greek owner

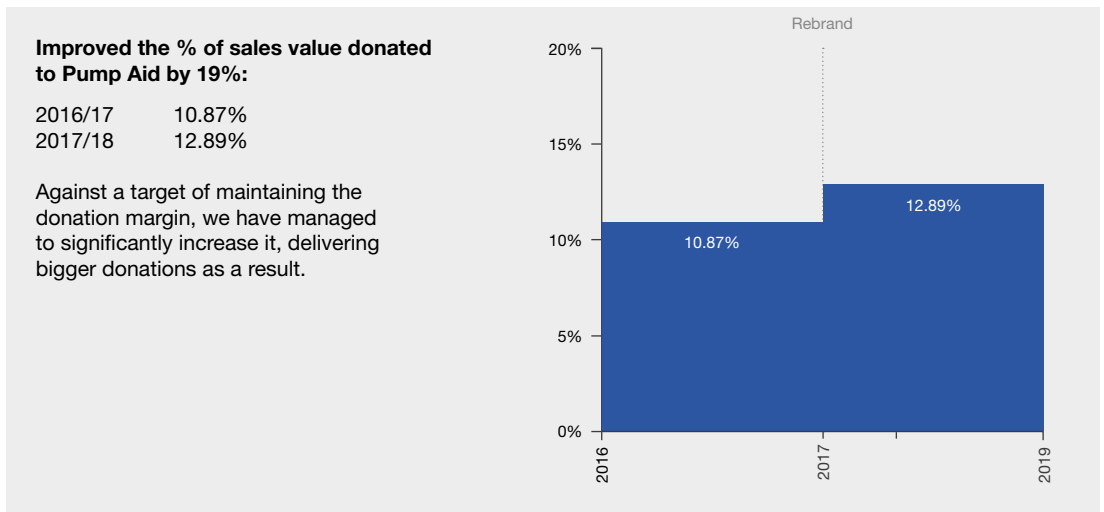
This needed to reflect a like-for-like donations hike of 20% as a minimum.



Smashed the client target of 20% growth, and achieving treble this in year one alone.

“The success and effectiveness of the recent rebrand has meant a significant increase in numbers of women, children and men in Malawi having access to clean safe water.”
Chair of Pump Aid, Professor Stefan Allesch-Taylor CBE

Maintain a high margin and decrease production costs to ensure that the maximum proceeds reached the charity.



Thirsty Planet’s donations also out-perform the market in terms of the amount actually spent on good causes:

- For every £1 donated, 90p is spent by Pump Aid on water delivery in Africa.
- This compares to the UK average for small charities of 60.7p.*

Thirsty Planet broke through the £2m donations barrier during 2017/18:

The increased sales helped achieve a total of £2m in donations, so far helping 1.3 million people to have the ability to access safe water. The donations have funded 9,500 elephant pumps, which are community-owned, simple and reliable. The first pump installed is still working after 20 years.

How have we exceeded the scope of the original project?

Our brief was to rebrand Thirsty Planet to deliver against specific business objectives. As you have read, we have substantially exceeded these objectives and the growth in donations is continuing at an increasing rate. This will continue into the future.

Beyond the packaging, we have provided the client with a new found confidence in the brand. Having celebrated its 10th birthday, the rebrand has re-invigorated the whole team and generated fresh excitement.

“Thirsty Planet didn’t really have a personality before, often feeling quite apologetic. The new brand has given us lots of confidence, to add to the guaranteed donations. Now it feels like the real deal and a brand we can have some fun with, which is definitely being reflected in the increased sales.”

Nicky Cain, Brand Manager, Harrogate Water Brands.

We have also provided brand assets and a way of behaving, that was easy to roll out onto the website and helps to influence other marketing activities, including PR. The transparency and straightforward messaging has provided a clear, effective tone of voice.

‘The Power of Positive Drinking’ goes way beyond the packaging. It has been adopted by the owners as a new philosophy of brand empowerment. Whilst the brand has a charitable focus, as the brand attributes grow, Thirsty Planet is growing into a brand in the bottled water category rather than the restricted ethical water sub-category.

Have there been other influencing factors?

During the periods detailed above, we can confirm that there were no other influencing factors that might have contributed to the results above. The client continued to spend proportionately the same budget on marketing, as it had before the rebrand, although this is extremely limited. In reality they do very little marketing, being reliant on developing customer relationships to build brand loyalty.

A new website was created following the rebrand, which launched in late 2017. However, this has not contributed significantly to sales as the site was not actively promoted.

The team at Harrogate has remained the same. The production facilities have remained the same. The donation model has not changed. The bottle and label have not changed.