



October 20, 2009

Winning the water bottle waste debate

By Volume: 29, Number: 8

By Adria Vasil

My roommates buy highly packaged products and bottled water. How do I address this in a completely non-patronizing way?

Having roommates is sort of like living at the UN. It brings together all sorts of different norms under one roof, and when differences arise, it's best to talk it out. Not Moammar Ghadafi-style (ranting 'n' browbeating won't win anyone over), but through more persuasive diplomacy.

For one, you have to lead by example (just as developed countries should on greenhouse gas emissions, ahem). But honestly, this tactic will only get you so far. You sound like a stand-up green citizen, but clearly your canister-filling, bulk-buying ways haven't caught on by osmosis.

The key here is to slip info and solutions under their noses without being preachy. (Nagging is only effective on family members who are forced to love you.) It being Waste Reduction Week and all, you've got the perfect excuse to do all this stuff in the open.

If they drink bottled water, they probably believe that tap water isn't clean and don't realize that bottled H₂O is less regulated than the municipal stuff.

You could kick off a friendly chat with, "Hey, did you hear how they found traces of paint thinner and Tylenol in bottled water? Can you believe it?" (If they don't, send them to ewg.org/reports/bottledwater.) You could add, "Yeah, I also read that 1.5 million barrels of oil go into making the plastic for water bottles alone each year. Isn't that crazy?"

If telling them all this is too direct for you, just give them each a pretty stainless steel reusable water canister from Otter Bottles as gifts. You could also slip a printout of Polaris Institute's 'Inside The Bottle' flyer into their canisters ([insidethebottle.org](http://www.insidethebottle.org) [<http://www.insidethebottle.org>]). And if they still complain about the taste of tap water, buy a basic charcoal faucet filter for \$35.

The same kind of tactics could be applied to getting them into reusable bags, but you might have trouble convincing your roomies to buy in bulk or to leave packaging at the store, even though the premier, yes, Dalton McGuinty, suggested we do it earlier this year. For that, they'll need to be more emotionally invested.

One way to passively educate (and motivate) friends and family is through the power of documentaries. You could try a classic like *An Inconvenient Truth*, though in your case you'll probably want something more scintillatingly trashy, like *Garbage! The Revolution Starts At Home*. The doc follows a typical Toronto family as they reluctantly agree to stash all their garbage in their garage for three months.

There's lots of good ick factor, tons of riveting facts on how much trash we produce, as well as an eye-opening investigation into where our trash goes. Perfect for your needs, really.

Try hosting an informal screening party for a couple of friends, inviting your roommates, of course. Or if they're likely to bail on that scenario, casually pop it in when everyone's home, place fresh-baked brownies on the coffee table, and when they walk in, snag them by blurting out, "Oh my god, this film is so fascinating, you should totally watch this with me. Here, sit, have a brownie."

You could chirpily let your roommates know it's WR Week and say that you'd love, just for fun, to see how little waste your apartment can produce for seven days. Ask them if they'd be into trying it and give them a few ideas on what it would involve, e.g., avoiding takeout, bringing your lunch to work in Tupperware containers, etc.

And be sure to have realistic expectations. You're unlikely to turn them all into a team of eco warriors (at least right away), but if you play your cards right, you could very well influence them to lessen their wasteful ways. □