

A Study of Advertisements in Toilets

Introduction

As Mr Jack Sim, President of the Restroom Association of Singapore said in an article, "It is time for the new toilet civilisation to begin..."¹ Indeed, the recent years have seen the world and our government placing increasing emphasis on the hygiene standards and designs of toilets. From the introduction of programmes like Singapore's OK and Happy Toilets to the founding of the World Toilet Organization, it is undeniable that toilet civilisation in Singapore has begun.

Clean toilets are often seen as the hallmark of a gracious society. Moreover, the hygiene conditions of toilets are important in promoting health and well being among citizens. Clean toilets will minimize the spread of infectious diseases as seen from the recent SARS issue and also help raise the standard of living in Singapore, thus allowing Singapore to attract more foreign talents and investments for development. "Though a functional instrument, social expressions, economic development, cultural character, hygiene standards and environmental factors are expressed through the toilet."²

Although 4 million dollars have been forked out by the National Environmental Agency to upgrade existing coffeeshop toilets, much still has to be said about the cleanliness of our public toilets. From our survey done on 62 teenagers and 38 adults, an alarming 77% expressed that toilets in coffeeshops and hawker centres (the 'public toilets' we are focusing on in this project) are the dirtiest (for statistics, refer to fig.1). Since toilets indirectly reflect a country's development, it is imperative that Singapore goes an extra mile to maintain and improve the hygiene standards of her toilets.

¹ When Singapore talks about toilets they mean big business! (1st July 2003)
http://www.toilet.org.sg/newsroom/media_news02.htm

² Toilet as a social space (21st Aug 2003)
http://www.worldtoilet.org/articles/articles_per_socialspace.htm

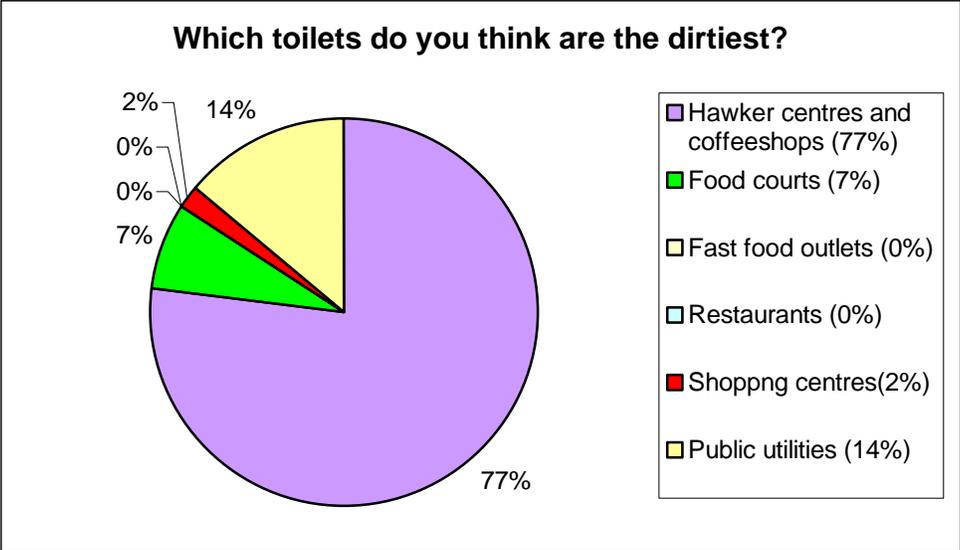


Fig.1

From our interview with Mr Steven Chin, production manager of multinational advertising company J Walter Thompson Pte Ltd, we found out that advertising in toilets is a rather new idea in Singapore and has massive potential, untapped primarily due to the lack of initiative by people. This huge inertia is probably caused by the many legal procedures and authorities the initiators would have to clear before they can finally carry out the project. Our group thus figured out that if we could find an organization which is willing to undertake this tedious task, advertising in toilets would prove a very feasible idea, since our survey results have already shown that more than 60% of those whom we surveyed were in favour of this idea (for statistics, refer to fig.2). Besides, we also found out that 70% of those surveyed spend 3 or more minutes in the toilet during each visit, thereby increasing the chances that the advertisements in the toilets will be read and will have left an impression on toilet users (for statistics, refer to fig.3).

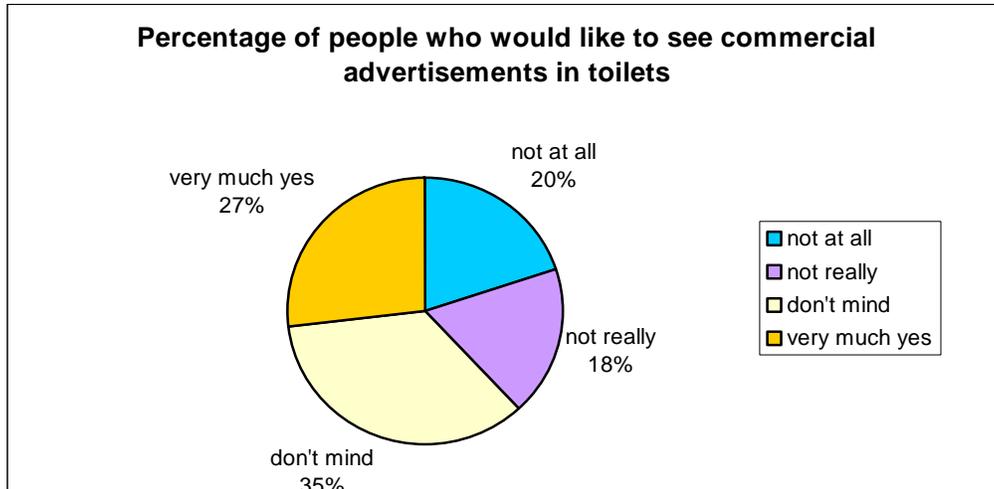


Fig. 2

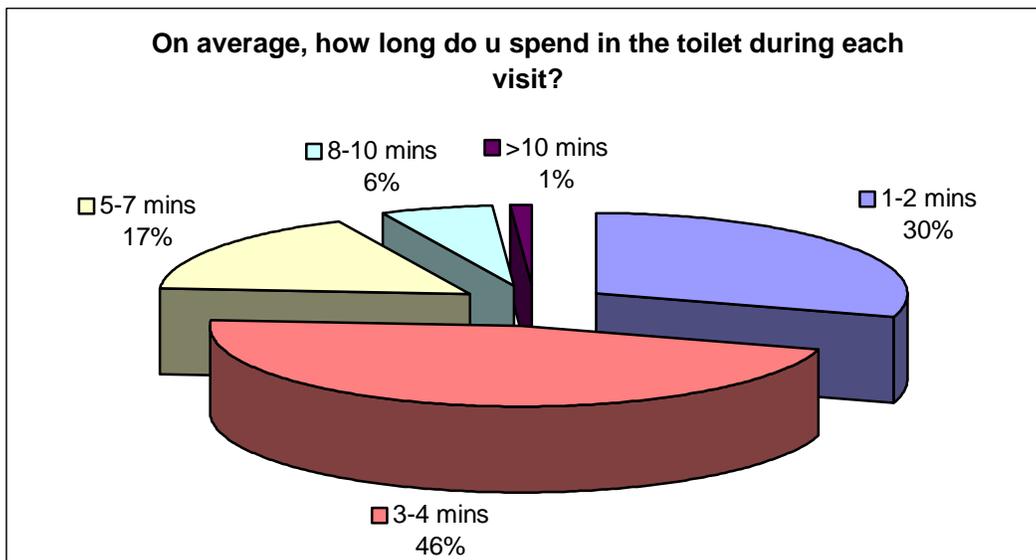


Fig. 3

As such, our group decided to explore the possibility of collaboration between the Restroom Association of Singapore (our first party) and the town councils (our second party) in the introduction of advertising into the unexploited space and time in toilets to generate funding towards the improvement and management of the toilets for the benefit of the public (our third party). RAS was chosen to be *this* organization because Mr Jack Sim and Mr Colin See, President and Executive Director of RAS respectively, expressed great interest in this project when we approached them for an interview. The Town Councils were listed as the second party as we found out from a verbal enquiry that they

were in-charge of the toilets in hawker centres, which were in need of the most improvements.

Needs of the parties involved

We learnt about the Restroom Association of Singapore (RAS) (also the founding member of the World Toilet Organization), an organization actively involved in promoting the cleanliness of toilets in Singapore, through our Straits Times news articles. Its main aims are “to establish better toilet standards and culture in Singapore”, “get Singapore on the world map as providing the very best public toilet facilities”, “generate awareness” of the importance of clean toilets in the community and “promote the development and functionality in the design of toilets”³. Being a new and independent organization, RAS is still not a familiar name in Singapore and has to raise its profile so as to boost its reputation to aid in garnering support for its cause. It also has to explore ways to use the least amount of money to improve the cleanliness of toilets, given its nature of being a non-profit organization. By embarking on this project, RAS will not only fulfill its cause, but also gain publicity for its efforts in championing toilet revamps in Singapore, thus killing two birds with one stone.

The Town Councils, on the other hand, aim to improve the living environment for the residents of the towns by carrying out improvement projects etc. Hence, since the current hygiene conditions of most public toilets are unsatisfactory, improvements in this area would be important as they concern the well being of the public. Town Councils receive limited funding from the government and with the current economic downturn, it has to source for cost-efficient ways to achieve its aims. As a government agency, it would greatly enhance the reputation of the government if the Town Councils do a good job in taking care of the welfare of the residents by addressing their basic needs. This project would provide them with a low-cost, low-effort solution to curbing the problem of dirty toilets.

³ Restroom Association of Singapore Objectives (2003)
<http://www.toilet.org.sg/aboutras.html>

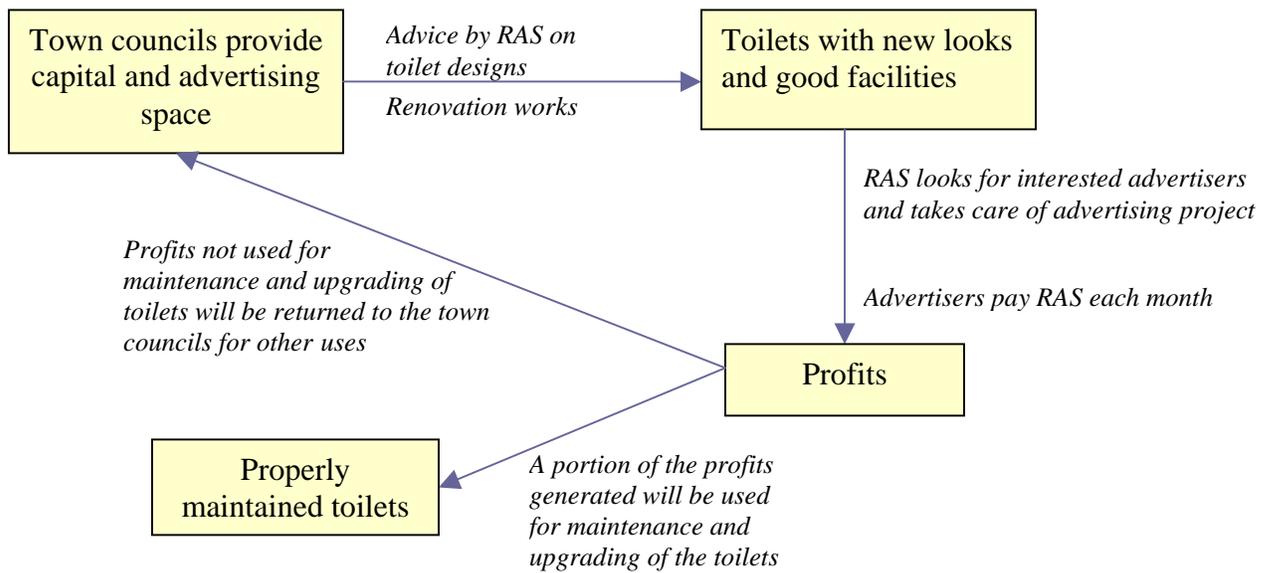
The Plan

The Town Councils will fork out an initial sum of money in addition to that allocated by the government to renovate the toilets under its management. Under this, new facilities will be bought, for example non-slip tiles (to consider the elder's safety), new water closets which do not leak etc, and the looks of the toilets will be revamped, probably through coloured tiling, wall painting etc. RAS will play a part in this process by advising the town councils on the toilet designs, such as the positions of urinals so that they do not block users, the most convenient height for the wash basins etc.

The whole advertising project would then be taken charge of by RAS. Visual (in the form of posters, pamphlets etc), audio (in the form of recordings played by speakers) and practical advertisements (in the form of dispensers for products like sanitary napkins and tissue paper), use of advertised toilet rolls in the toilet itself, spraying of the advertised air freshener in the toilet, samples of advertised hygiene products like soaps for use at the sinks etc) are some forms of advertising tactics that can be employed.

RAS would approach the interested advertisers who will pay RAS a fixed amount of money for each advertising space they occupy in the toilets every month. RAS, in turn, will use a portion of this revenue on maintenance (paying the cleaners, maintaining facilities etc.) and further upgrading of the toilets (installing new facilities e.g. air conditioners). The rest of the profits will be returned to the Town Councils to channel into other areas of improvement. All the extra work done by the RAS ensures that the revenue will be channeled for toilet improvement and maintenance works first and not be spent on other areas instead (unless there is remaining money).

To summarize, RAS will act as the middleman to settle the administrative affairs while the Town Councils provide the capital and advertising space (in the toilets). The next page shows a flow chart of our plan:



However, our group is aware that some limitations to our project do exist. Although the idea of turning toilets from cost centers to profit generators might be an incentive for the town councils to fork out the initial sum of money to carry out renovation works, ploughing money back towards toilet management later may be a problem since the town councils are free to use the profits at their own disposal. Hence, the role of RAS in persuading and convincing the town councils to channel money back into the maintenance of the toilets and as an ‘errand boy’ who takes care of all transactions and logistics is vital if the profits are to be channeled towards the improvement of toilets. By taking care of all the other details of the project and playing an important role in the project, RAS would have a greater say in how the profits should be used in the event that the town councils insist on using the money for other causes.

Also, our survey results have shown us that the locations of advertisements affect the perception of the products advertised in a considerable 40% of those surveyed (see fig.4 for statistics) and that 77% of them feel that hygiene-related products are the most suitable products to be advertised in toilets (see fig.5 for statistics). Companies might also be skeptical about advertising in toilets since results might not be apparent immediately and this is a new idea that has not been implemented before. These findings limit our

scope of potential advertisers narrowly to manufacturers of hygiene-related products and thus reduce the sources of income.

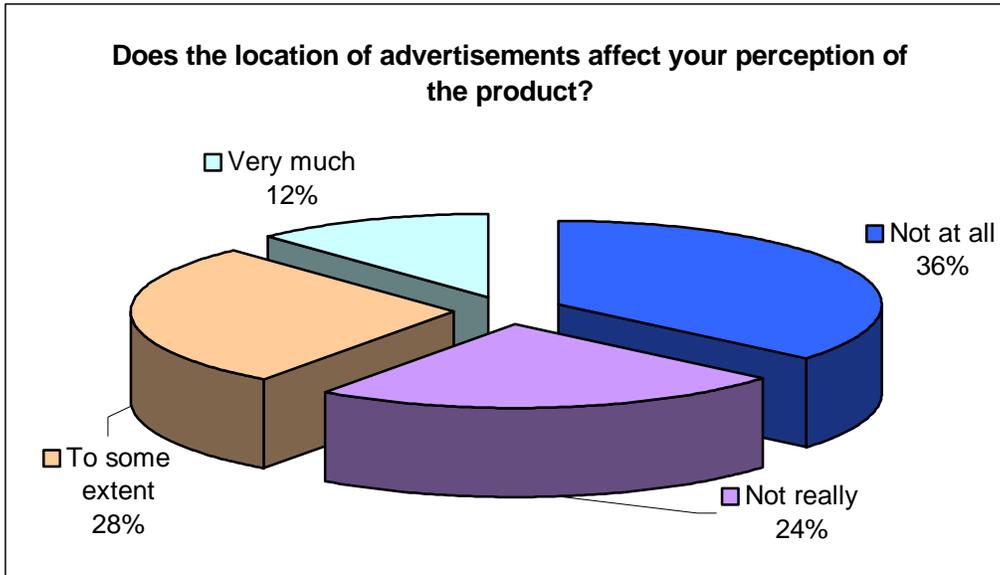


Fig. 4

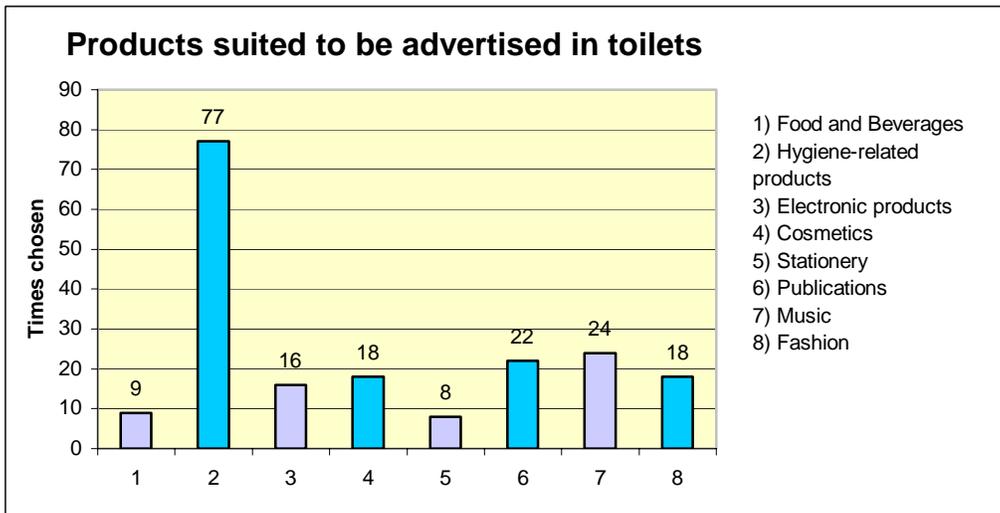


Fig. 5

In addition, the prices charged for each advertisement would have to be reasonably low since the human traffic flow in public toilets is low and the ‘viewability’ of the advertisements would hence be low too. This would reduce the profits generated by the advertisements and the town councils might not find it justifiable that they invest so much money into the upgrading of the toilets just to get back some meagre profits.

Another point would be that the fundamental issue of civility and public-mindedness necessary for a gracious society has not been fully addressed. There may be vandalism of the advertisements placed in toilets, putting off advertisers. People may also continue to dirty the toilets while improvements and maintenance are being carried out. Maintenance of the toilets would thus be hard unless the public is sufficiently educated and motivated about keeping public toilets clean. Hence, there is a need for a two pronged approach, combining education of the public and the upgrading and maintenance of toilet facilities. It is essential to allocate an area to public campaign posters regarding toilet cleanliness, to act as a constant reminder to the public to play their part in keeping the toilets clean. For instance, the RAS has a range of posters that convey the message that the user becomes a 'pest' himself if he dirties the toilet. However, this would mean that the amount of revenue would decrease due to less space dedicated to commercial posters. In addition, RAS can try to persuade the advertisers to incorporate 'subtle educational messages' in their advertisements, to play their part in helping to keep the toilets clean. For example, "XX brand air freshener can keep the air clean while you (the toilet user) can keep the toilet clean." But since it has no direct benefits for the advertisers, they might not be agreeable.

Lastly, the impact of the project would not be large, since this is only collaboration between RAS and the town councils. If RAS wants to extend this project to other parts of Singapore, they would have to take time to approach 'toilet owners' individually and convince them to participate in this project.

Impact on the 1st and 2nd parties

By providing its expertise on this project, RAS would boost its reputation and familiarity amongst the public, thus making it easier to get public support for future projects it intends to undertake. It would also achieve its aims of educating the public on toilet designs (since they would be playing an advisory role on that issue) and improving the local toilet conditions, hence attaining its cause and gaining more respect from the public. It would also be able to play a leading role in improving toilet conditions, (being the

founder of the World Toilet Organization and host of the World Toilet Summit) and gain international respect.

Through providing cleaner public toilets, the Town Councils directly improve the living conditions of its residents, hence achieving its aim. The Town Councils, and indirectly the government, would also gain respect from the residents for making good efforts in taking care of their basic needs. From an economic point of view, instead of toilets being “cost-centres”, they can be converted into “profit-generators”, which not only sustain their own management, but also generate additional money for the Town Councils that can be put into other uses. The Town Councils only has to fork out the initial sum of money for the renovation of toilets while everything else would be taken care of by RAS, hence giving it time to look into other areas for improvements. Besides, The Town Councils would get back the sum used for the initial investment in the long run plus additional profits as the toilets will generate profits each month. This implies that they would not have to rely too much on government funding and so ensures the success of more projects.

However, there are some negative impacts on the 2 parties too. For instance, this is a long-term project and would require determination to sustain. Hence it would take up a lot of time and effort from the RAS, leaving them with less time to implement other projects. Forking out the initial sum of money to upgrade toilets might also diminish the Town Councils’ ability to fund other projects.

Impacts on the 3rd party

Even though a minority view the toilets as ‘private domains’ and may feel that advertisements are an intrusion of their privacy, this cooperation will be largely advantageous to the public. Clean toilets protect the health and well being of residents by minimizing the spread of infectious diseases such as SARS. They also help to ensure the safety of users, especially the elderly, since toilets would be drier and chances of slipping would be significantly reduced. Additional to these, clean toilets would encourage increased usage since people refrain from going to dirty public toilets, hence reducing the

risks of getting bladder or kidney problems. Specifically for storeowners in the areas, clean toilets would increase human traffic, (people might be interested to view the toilets) hence bringing about more business and improve the rentability of the stores. Finally, the public would have a more pleasant time in the toilet.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we feel that the project is feasible and justifies its purpose, to benefit three parties by meeting their needs. Though this project is only based on a conceptual idea, we believe that it has the potential and ability to be carried out in reality. We propose that this idea be carried out first in the toilets of hawker centers since other toilets are being controlled by managements that have enough funding, and if the plans work out, the scope of this project may even be expanded to include other public toilets like those in coffeeshops and community centres etc.

(Word count: 2474 words)

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