

# Saving Water Partnership Focus Groups

## Executive Summary

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### I. INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

The Saving Water Partnership contracted with PRR, Inc. to conduct two focus groups. The main purpose of the focus groups was to understand the awareness of and attitudes toward replacement of toilet flappers among homeowners and to understand what it would take to get homeowners to test for leaks, and replace worn and leaking toilet flappers.

This baseline data will provide attitude, knowledge, and behavioral information needed for planning, developing, and implementing a variety of marketing, public relations, and public information initiatives designed to increase the replacement of toilet flappers by homeowners in the City of Seattle and in purveyor areas of King and Snohomish Counties.

More specifically, the focus groups were designed to explore and understand the following issues:

- Current knowledge, attitudes and behaviors regarding toilet leaks
- Barriers to toilet repair
- Toilet leak diagnosis and parts purchasing attitudes and behaviors
- Motivators to repair toilets
- Attitudes toward three messages regarding testing for leaks and toilet repair
- The experience of replacing a toilet flapper

Focus groups were conducted on December 16 and 17, 2002. One group was held in downtown Seattle at the PRR focus group facility. The other group was held at the focus group facilities of Market Trends in Bellevue. Each group was conducted from 6:30-8:30 PM and was videotaped. The first group included primarily those whose water utility was Seattle Public Utilities. The second group was comprised mostly of those from purveyor water districts. In addition, each group was comprised of a mix by zip code, gender, and age. Although an attempt was made to recruit those who were less likely to be willing to replace a toilet flapper (based on their response to such a question on a recent SoundStats survey that they had responded to<sup>1</sup>), only two of the participants fit this criterion. In fact, most participants reported they had replaced a flapper or repaired a toilet in the past. Market Trends recruited eleven participants for

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<sup>1</sup> In order to conduct recruitment in as cost-effective a manner as possible, PRR generated a list of potential participants by asking a focus group recruitment question on a recent SoundStats survey.

each group (expecting eight to show). As can be seen in the tables below, there were nine participants in one group and eight in the other.

**Monday, December 16, 2002  
6:30-8:30 PM**

	Zipcode	Utility	Likelihood to replace flapper	Age	Gender
1	98136	SPU	Somewhat	50-54	Male
2	98199	SPU	Definitely	55-59	Male
3	98126	SPU	Definitely	55-59	Male
4	98115	SPU	Definitely	45-49	Male
5	98155	Shoreline	Definitely	45-49	Female
6	98168	KCWD 125	Definitely	50-54	Male
7	98125	SPU	Definitely	50-54	Male
8	98103	SPU	Definitely	30-34	Male
9	98146	SPU	Definitely	50-54	Female

**Tuesday, December 17, 2002  
6:30-8:30 PM**

	Zipcode	Utility	Likelihood to replace flapper	Age	Gender
1	98034	Northshore UD	Definitely	55-59	Female
2	98019	City of Duvall	Definitely	60-64	Male
3	98031	Soos Creek	Definitely	45-49	Female
4	98052	City of Redmond	Definitely	30-34	Male
5	98052	City of Redmond	Definitely	60-64	Female
6	98052	City of Redmond	Definitely	50-54	Male
7	98006	City of Bellevue	Definitely	60-64	Male
8	98008	City of Bellevue	Somewhat	60-64	Male

**II. OVERALL SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

***A. Experiences With Leaking Toilets***

1. What does leaking mean?
  - Most first thought of leaking outside of the tank.
  - The term “running” more readily captures the idea of an internal leak.
  
2. Have you ever had the situation where your toilet “kept running”? How do you know that it “keeps running”? Was this a problem for you? Why or why not?
  - The focus for most is on the *continuous* noise that they see as symptomatic of a toilet that “keeps running”. Several others mentioned intermittent noise – hearing the toilet refill periodically.

- It is a problem because of a variety of reasons: for most the noise is annoying; for some it can be a problem if tank starts to fill while in the shower; a few mentioned the toilet won't flush properly if tank isn't full; one person mentioned the noise can wake you up; and another mentioned the need to turn the water supply to the toilet on and off
  - Wasting water as a result of a "running toilet" is acknowledged by some, but is not the main problem for most. The noise is more annoying than the concern for wasting water.
- 3.** What type of repair was made when your toilet "kept running"?
- Many reported going through a series of steps to correct the problem. However, since these were groups of people who had done toilet repairs most may already have in mind the possibility of having to replace the flapper. None-the-less, there was consensus that the steps included:
- First jiggling the handle
  - Then they focus on making sure the chain is not "hung up"
  - Then they adjust the float level
  - And only then do they focus on the flapper
- 4.** How long did it take from noticing the leak to repairing it?
- Most make the repair right away because the sound is so annoying
  - But some will shut off the water supply and use another toilet until they can make the repair
- 5.** Who in your home has taken or would take primary responsibility for a toilet in need of repair?
- Mostly done in terms of a traditional division of labor with males taking the primary responsibility, although three of the five women had done toilet repairs. However, this may simply be a function of the fact that the groups were comprised primarily of males (12) compared to females (5).
  - In other homes it is left up to whomever discovers the problem
  - Several mentioned that it is one of the few things that they can fix in their home

### ***B. Barriers to Toilet Repair***

- 1.** How do you feel about repairing your toilet yourself? If you wouldn't repair the toilet and it "kept running", what would you do?
- Some do not want to deal with the "yuk" factor, but most realize that the tank water is clean. In fact several people agreed that cleaning a toilet or changing a baby diaper is far worse than working in the tank.
  - Most think replacing the flapper is a very easy repair, but finding the correct replacement part can be a challenge
  - A few reported that repairing a toilet requires mechanical intuition

- One person mentioned that replacing the entire toilet or all of the guts in the tank can be a bit daunting the first time
  - "A toilet is simple enough. If you've worked on it once you know how to fix it."
  - None of the participants would consider hiring a plumber or asking a family member (other than spouse) or friend to do it. They could all handle the problems themselves.
- 2.** If you are willing to repair your toilet, where would you go for information about how to repair it? Where would you go to get parts?
- For information: instructions on packaging (most common), hardware stores, books, online,
  - For parts: most go to get parts where people know what they are doing, especially if they are unsure
  - There was a general consensus that clear instructions include diagrams, numbered steps, and list of needed tools (mentioned in the second group.)
  - Most carry the old part with them when seeking a replacement

### ***C. Simulating Diagnosis and Parts Purchase***

- 1.** When presented with a diagram of two toilet tank designs and asked to label the parts:
- Most were not sure if they used the right terms
  - Many described parts in terms of their functions, for example, "water drain pipe" and "flap that allows water into tank"
  - Most knew the correct terms for the flapper and the float
- 2.** Imagine a toilet that "kept running". What could cause this?
- Most knew that it could be the flapper leaking or the float needing adjustment, but they:
    - First jiggle the handle
    - Then they focus on making sure the chain is not "hung up"
    - Then they adjust the float level
    - And only then do they focus on the flapper
- 3.** How would you trouble-shoot to find out what the problem is if a toilet "kept running"?
- Almost none knew about dye tabs or using food coloring (only 3 have used in the past)
  - Many think you can see if the tank is leaking just by looking in the bowl without dye tabs or food coloring
  - Again, many reported going through a series of steps including:
    - First jiggling the handle
    - Then they focus on making sure the chain is not "hung up"
    - Then they adjust the float level
    - And only then do they focus on the flapper

4. Here are some parts (about 25 toilet tank parts, most of which were flappers) to use to repair toilets that you would find in a place like Home Depot, Lowes or True Value. What do you think and feel when you see these parts? What do you think and feel when you go to the toilet repair section of the hardware store?
  - Usually bring the old part with me to the store and look for a physical match
  - Uncertain
  - Overwhelmed
  - Concerned about finding the right part
  - It is even worse at the store since there are even more choices
  - Skeptical of "universal fit" flappers
  - Surprised that there are so many choices
  - Look for those parts with good instructions
  - Many look for the most inexpensive replacement – same part for the cheapest price. However, price is not the key factor. They want the part that will fit and work.
  - They are suspicious of higher price = better quality
  - Annoyed that I have to spend time fixing the toilet
  - Comforted that there are people at the store who can help, but annoyed if the store staff can't help them
  
5. When or how frequently should the flapper be replaced? When was the last time your flapper was replaced? Why did you replace it? Why not replaced?
  - Replace when it stops working – when I hear the toilet running
  - There was a wide variety of thought on how often to replace (ranging from once a year to every ten years)
  - Most would not change flapper periodically, since "if it ain't broken don't fix it"
  
6. If you replaced your flapper and the toilet still "kept running" what would you do?
  - Need to determine where the problem is
  - Could be the flapper seat
  - Could be overflow tube and float level

#### ***D. Motivators to Fix Toilet Leaks***

1. What would motivate you to check your toilet for leaks, even if it wasn't making noise?
  - Need to tell them how many gallons could be saved
  - Need to know that toilets are simple to fix
  - That you can do this yourself; you don't need a plumber
  - Need dye tabs sent to them, possibly with bill. They won't get these themselves.
  - The problem has to have an impact. Otherwise it is "not broke".

- If it's not making noise they assume it's working. Need to tell them that X% of all toilet leaks are silent
2. Participants were then shown the following messages (one at a time) and asked to evaluate each message.
- All three suffer from the problem of focusing on the term "leaks". People don't think they have leaks (unless water is on the floor or unless they can hear the toilet running) so they do not read any further.

***Check your toilet for leaks*** - Put several drops of food coloring in your toilet tank. If you can see it in the bowl, you have a leak that can add up to a lot of water.

- They again stated that if it isn't obvious (see it or hear it) it won't get tested
- Not much impact
- If they could be convinced that they may have an undetected leak they would be motivated
- Just a statement. Doesn't indicate what to do.
- Needs to specify that you can't flush the toilet before checking for leak
- Need to indicate how long they should wait before checking
- The word "running" is better than leaks since running indicates an internal leak

***Fix leaky faucets and toilets.*** Check for service line leaks between your water meter and your home. Place several drops of food coloring in your toilet tank. If you can see it in the bowl, you have a leak that can amount to a lot of water.

- Too directive. People don't like to be told they *have* to do something.
- Two different subjects. It is confusing.
- Doesn't say how to check for service line leaks.
- Need to tell them how to check for leaks in more detail.
- What's a "lot of water" over what period of time?

***Put a Stop to Leaks and Save***

*Looking for a great way to save money on your water bill? Check your toilet(s) for leaks and fix them right away. Leaking toilets can waste hundreds of gallons of water per month. To test for a leaking toilet, lift the lid off the tank and put a few drops of food coloring into the water in the tank. Don't flush the toilet. After 20 minutes look in the bowl. If the food coloring has made its way from the tank to the bowl, you have a leak. Most likely your toilet flapper needs to be replaced. To learn other great ways to save water, visit [www.savingwater.org](http://www.savingwater.org) or call (206) 684-7283 (684-SAVE).*

- Much better, but a bit wordy. Use bullets.

- Headline is still a problem since it assumes that you think you have a leak and that money is the motivator
- Need to call out the community impact of all those leaking toilets
- Need to indicate flapper replacement is easy
- Graphics would increase getting people's attention
- Alternative suggested headlines: "Less than five minutes, less than five dollars."; "Stop flushing money down your toilet."; "Check for undetected leaks."

### **III. OBSERVED CHALLENGES**

- The focus is on the *continuous* noise that they see as symptomatic of a toilet that "keeps running". If they don't hear it, "it's not broken".
- Wasting water as a result of a "running toilet" is acknowledged, but is not the main problem or motivator for them. The noise is more annoying than the concern for wasting water.
- There was some skepticism that a toilet that is leaking is wasting a lot of water
- Most think replacing the flapper is a very easy repair, but finding the correct replacement part can be a challenge.
- Almost none knew about dye tabs or using food coloring.
- Most would not change flapper periodically, since "if it ain't broken don't fix it".
- When they see all of the possible replacement parts they think/feel: uncertain, overwhelmed, and concerned about finding the right part. And it is even worse in the store since there are even more choices.
- They will not go out of their way to get test tablets (even if free)

### **IV. TOP OF MIND IMPLICATIONS**

- Use the term "running" because it more readily captures the idea of an internal leak.
- Most know the names of the flapper and the float and have a rudimentary understanding of how these parts could cause an internal leak. Need to make this clear to the larger population accompanied by the message that a flapper is very easy to replace.
- If it's not making noise they assume it's working. Need to tell them that X% of all internal toilet leaks are silent.
- Need to have trained store staff who can assist in finding the right replacement part since this is what customers expect and need if they are going to replace a flapper. Also need to tell customers to consider bringing the old flapper with them to the store to make sure they get the right replacement.
- Need to provide good instructions for cases where the parts don't come with instructions. Good instructions have step-by-step directions, diagrams and a "tools needed" list.

- Need to tell them how many gallons could be saved collectively if flappers were replaced. Individual gallon savings or dollar savings aren't big enough of a motivator.
- Need dye tabs sent to them, possibly with bill. They won't get these themselves.
- The problem has to have an impact. Otherwise it is "not broke".
- All three of the test messages suffer from the problem of focusing on the term "leaks". People don't think they have leaks (unless water is on the floor) so they do not read any further.
- The third test message was considered good, but would be better if it appeared less wordy (use bullets instead), called out the community impact of all those leaking toilets, and indicated that flapper replacement is easy.
- Since directions are not consistent ensure that useful directions are available.