

# Touch-free water dispensers

## A hygiene revolution



**As the Covid-19 virus swept across the world, offices, workplaces and restaurants closed their doors, drastically impacting the use of water dispensers. It is clear that Covid-19 represents a significant challenge to the industry, but touch-free water dispensers could represent a pivotal innovation which addresses hygiene concerns heightened by the pandemic.**

### Hygienic hydration

Hygiene has always been a key driver of innovation in the water industry, and the risk of Covid transmission has accelerated the development of touch-free solutions which address the present situation and provide safe, hygienic hydration.

In simple terms, touch-free (or hands-free) water dispensers are dispensers which can be operated by users without touching buttons, taps, touchscreens etc. This is particularly vital in the

current climate, as there are concerns that the Covid-19 virus could be transmitted if someone were to touch a surface where the virus is present and then touch their face.

While the virus is predominantly spread through contaminated droplets produced by others as they talk, cough, sneeze and breathe, research from the US National Institutes of Health claims that the Sars-CoV-2 virus can survive for two to three days on plastic and stainless steel surfaces.

According to Gemma Tuxford, UK business and account manager at Italian water dispenser manufacturer Zerica, this is a principal concern for many workers and businesses: "As people start to return to work and to working in shared spaces, there are worries that water dispensers could become virus transmission points. There is clearly a burning imperative for companies to think of innovative solutions and fast.

"Hydration needs will certainly not reduce and the need for freshly dispensed water may, in fact, increase as people are more likely to bring a refillable bottle from home to avoid the potential contagion risks in buying a takeout hot drink or bottle of water or juice."

According to Tuxford, there are three main solutions which are being pioneered by manufacturers in the industry: "One is the use of foot-operated pedals for hands-free dispensing.



Manufacturers who are doing this are also providing retro-fit pedal kits to convert existing water units into hands-free units.

"Another way is via the use of the contactless 'hover' buttons. Users simply hover a finger over the button corresponding to their drink of choice. The third and more 'technological' approach is the use of a mobile app whereby users access the machine's touchscreen via an app on their phone. All three approaches are focused on providing hydration in the safest way possible and each different approach will be more or less suited to a different set of circumstances and user profiles."

To meet the current situation, Zerica has utilised all three methods, developing a smartphone app and touch-free buttons for its Kolumna water dispenser, as well as a pedal kit for its Futura dispenser. These touch-free solutions are also available for several other Zerica dispensers, according to Tuxford.

Fellow Italian manufacturer Blupura has also moved to address the need for touch-free solutions by introducing two dispensers which feature touch-free buttons: Blusoda Touch-Free and Hydrazon Touch-Free. "During these uncertain times, everyone in the water cooler industry has been working with new technologies that can make their dispensers as hygienic and safe as possible", said Debora Screpanti, marketing manager at Blupura.

Screpanti explained how the company's touch-free buttons can be operated: "By positioning your finger at 1.5cm distance from the keyboard, it is possible to activate the water cooler avoiding direct surface contact; dispensing cold, still or cold sparkling water and reducing the risk of contact with bacteria that might be on the surface to zero."

### Ensuring consumer confidence

With the pandemic is front-of-mind for many consumers around the world, it is clear that solutions like these could mitigate the transmission risks associated with the virus, ensuring that water dispensers remain a safe source of hydration.

Spanish water dispenser and drinking fountain manufacturer Canaletas is a company that has been manufacturing hands-free water fountains operated by pedal or proximity sensor for many years, mainly for the food and pharmaceutical industries. Now, the company has developed a water dispenser with a proximity sensor which detects when a bottle or a cup – even transparent – is placed at the point of dispense, activating the dispenser and filling the bottle/cup automatically,

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as well as a vandal-resistant foot-operated water fountain for filling bottles. The company also provides a foot-operated kit for existing dispensers and fountains.

Paz Ausin, export manager at Canaletas claimed that, in the immediate term, touch-free units are contributing to this greater sense of safety, and this has led to increased demand for these solutions: "It is very important to achieve confidence in the safety of the water coolers among consumers and businesses, and they will thereby contribute to the new normal. It is clear that having hands-free dispensers available will increase this perception of safety."

According to Ausin: "There is no doubt that there has been a significant increase in the demand for hands-free dispensers, and due to this interest we have been contacted by countries from around the world. It is difficult to predict whether the demand will further increase, as it largely depends on the evolution of the pandemic, but we are sure that the trend will continue during the coming months."

Another manufacturer which has pioneered several touch-free solutions – including a foot-operated pedal kit and a smartphone app – is UK-based dispenser manufacturer Borg and Overström. Both solutions can be retrofitted to



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any existing B3.2 or B4.2 dispensers by a qualified technician. Dan Lyon, managing director at Borg and Overström told *Refreshment*: "There was immediate demand for both the footswitch and app. In fact, demand was so high for the app on launch day it temporarily took the website offline. Businesses are looking for ways to get people back to work so we fully expect interest and demand to increase."

According to Lyon, the adoption of touch-free units has clearly been accelerated by Covid-19, but the desire for hygienic solutions forms part of a long-term consumer trend: "Even before the pandemic, people were concerned about using public touchscreens due to possible exposure to contamination. Recent small studies in the UK and US suggest more people now believe touchscreens in public spaces to be unhygienic."

"It's about giving people options and providing reassurance. That's why we developed both foot-operated and app-operated retrofit kits. We also recommend customers use an antimicrobial touchscreen shield alongside the hands-free options. Touchless or hands-free appliances

give people the option to avoid touch if they prefer, but the reassurance that if they do use the touchscreen there is additional protection provided by the shield", he added.

### Here to stay?

It is clear that mitigating user concerns about what could be lurking on the surface of water dispenser buttons, taps and touchscreens is a major benefit of touch-free units, and it could be a benefit which is vital to the immediate future of the sector. But as asserted by Lyon, concerns about surface hygiene were present before the outbreak, so could touch-free dispensers become the norm across the sector?

Lyon continued: "It's difficult to predict if these are lasting trends. I do however think that for some years people are going to be more cautious about touch and that may lead to longer term usage of technology like hands-free water dispensers."

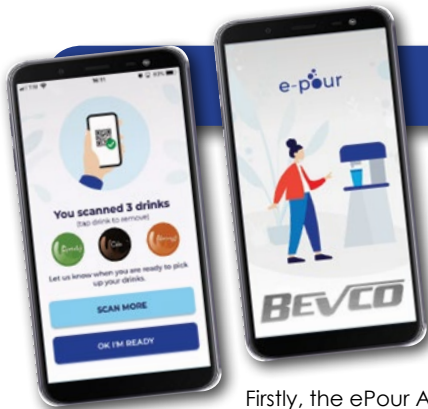
"We are currently looking into bringing in touchless options as standard on all new water dispensers, rather than it being just a retrofit option."



Ausin also claimed that after Covid-19, "it is clear that some changes to society will remain, above all regarding hygiene precautions, where hands-free devices of all kinds will be valued more than before the pandemic."

However, while Ausin thinks that demand for touch-free solutions will increase in future, she is sceptical that touch-free units will 'become the norm' once the pandemic subsides: "Personally, I believe that there will be greater demand for hands-free water dispensers in the future, especially in sectors which have been more exposed or which have suffered greater repercussions, but I do not think that they will become the norm. This greater demand for hands-free dispensers will be accompanied by demand for greater safety and hygiene, which will be reflected in different ways."

In any case, it is encouraging to see that in the face of adversity, the industry is pioneering solutions which will help workplaces adapt to the new normal. Promoting these new solutions will surely be paramount in the months to come. ●



## PARTNER CONTENT FOR WATERLINE BEVCO

### Bevco unveils touchless dispensing feature for its dispensing systems

Italian beverage dispensing systems manufacturer Bevco has unveiled several new touchless dispensing features, which allow consumers to interact and dispense drinks from the firm's beverage dispensers without coming into physical contact with the dispensing equipment.

Firstly, the ePour App – which will be available in the autumn – will allow users to control the entire process of purchase of their favourite soft drink using their smartphone. According to Bevco, the ePour App will allow users to choose their favourite beverage, pay for it, be notified about wait time and, once in front of the soft drink dispensing tower, to control the dispensing of the beverage, cutting back on the direct tactile contact. With this innovation, Bevco can give users peace of mind by removing the need to touch the dispenser or to touch a refrigerator door to grab a bottle of cola.

Moreover, Bevco's R&D department has also pioneered touchless features based on the "Time-of-flight" technology that will be able to recognise the presence of the glass and automatically activate or stop the dispensing, thus making post-mix valves contactless. This technology can be retrofitted to existing water and soda dispensers (eg. Infinity, Petit Ice).

Bevco also applied a new contactless optical sensor-based technology directly on dispensers' control panels. Introduced

as a direct response to the pressing market needs regarding hands-free beverage dispensing due to Covid-19, the new Hover Select technology guarantees a "zero physical touchpoints" user experience. To make a drink selection, users simply hover a finger over the drink they want in order to select their choice. ●

