

Over the past few months I have been noticing an interesting series of commercials on some of the TV channels that I watch. I first started noticing them late last year on channels such as CNN and Fox News on their highly rated evening news slots and on ESPN during its highly rated college football Saturday GameDay broadcasts.

The commercials caught my eye because they feature a water treatment engineer walking along the banks of a large reservoir in Sao Paulo, talking about the importance of water, conservation and the best uses of treatment technologies.

Perhaps you, too, have seen these spots, but in case you haven't, the commercials are sponsored by Koch Membrane Systems and they feature Manny Singh, senior vice president of technology, walking along that reservoir talking about his work to help manage the severe drought and water shortage conditions in Brazil.

and friends and former colleagues have reached out to say congratulations. He mentioned that he even gets teased by current colleagues who say they wake up in the morning to have coffee while catching up on headlines on the morning news and they "have to see Manny" before they even get to the office. "Even at home I can't escape Manny" is what he often hears.

Singh said he never sought recognition for himself, but is pleased with the recognition he is getting for his work. One of the projects he is working on in Brazil is a plant that treats wastewater for use as industrial process water, conserving higher-quality water for potable uses. Another project is a high-efficiency treatment plant for water from the Cantareira Water System in Sao Paulo. With the drought in Brazil and the resultant low levels of water that have been available from the reservoir, treatment efficiency is paramount and he is working on optimizing the system for high recovery and limited reject water, with a goal of at least 95% efficiency.

One of the challenges that Singh mentioned being able to tackle with his work on membranes is the high variability in turbidity in local rivers due to the high variability in rainfall. One day the riverbed is dry, and the next, after sudden strong rains, the river is full of what he described as "chocolate-colored muddy water." Singh told me the systems often treat water with turbidity levels in the range of 7,000 ntu, rather than the water more typically found in rivers with turbidity an order of magnitude less. But his work has enabled them to treat and use this water as an additional resource in an extremely water-stressed area, rather than having it run unused into the sea.

For the record, I have no connection with Koch Membrane Systems or any other division of Koch Industries. But I congratulate Koch on its decision to feature Singh and his work with membranes and bring this type of work—our type of work—to a more mainstream audience. The focus on the worldwide scarcity of safe and affordable drinking water also is commendable. In the commercial, Singh points out that the number of children who die each day due to a lack of safe drinking water is equivalent to "a jumbo jet falling from the sky every 10 hours" and, while we have seen advancements in other everyday technologies, we still do not have universal access to something as basic and essential as water. This is a point similar to those I have made in this column before, but it is not typical fare for a TV commercial from a major U.S. company.

Koch is involved in many businesses and it could have chosen to focus on any one of them. I found it fascinating that it chose to focus on ours.

In my December column, I talked about the UN Sustainable Development Goals and in particular the goal to provide safe, affordable drinking water to everyone in the world. This will require resolve and focus from governments and inter-governmental agencies with cooperation and technological contributions from the private sector and industry. Attention to this issue—in any form—can only help. **w&wd**

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Good Publicity

By Bob Ferguson



Commercials about water treatment during top-rated TV programs are rare treat

Spotlight on Water Treatment

Now, it certainly is not unusual for companies like Koch to run TV commercials. This is not what I find interesting. What I find interesting is the focus on water treatment. In my experience, it is rare to see our industry highlighted—or even mentioned—in the mass media. The first of these ads, I am told, aired during the first Republican presidential debate on Fox—to an estimated 24 million viewers. Many times that number have seen the ads since that time. Consumer filtration products are, of course, routinely advertised—water pitchers and faucet filters, for example—but never have I seen one with a focus on large-scale water treatment and drinking water supply.

I had a chance to speak with Singh a few weeks ago and we discussed his background, his work and the impact of the commercials.

Singh was raised in Chandigahr, India. While he described the city as more developed than many in India at that time, he said it nevertheless faced significant water availability problems. He said it was not unusual for water to run out in the middle of taking a shower and he commonly set a timer as a reminder to fill buckets while the water was "still on" in the morning. He recalled areas outside Chandigahr with "far worse" conditions, where running water was unavailable and people carried what water they could get in buckets back to their homes. This experience made him want to do something about the situation and led him to study chemical engineering and dedicate himself to working with water and water treatment technologies.

Singh mentioned to me that the process of filming the commercials was interesting and the exposure he has received since they have been airing is unlike anything he has been part of before. As one might guess, Singh said he had never been in a TV commercial before. He said he spent three days shooting in Brazil, which also was a new and unique experience. Once the commercials began airing, he also had to get used to the exposure and his newfound celebrity. His children have said that their friends at school say, "I saw your dad on TV!"

While we have seen advancements in Internet, TV and other everyday technologies ... we still do not have universal access to something as basic and essential as water.