

Getting Into Hot Water with Donald Duck
By Dave Bossert



(The cover to the Kelvinator Electric Water Heaters sales brochure, circa. 1947.)

Today, hot water in a home is commonplace across the country and in much of the developed world, so much so that we take it for granted. But in 1920, only 1% of U.S. homes had electricity and indoor plumbing. The idea of hot water on demand from the home faucet was still years away and was not conventional until the 1940s. That is when plumbing and electrical code standardization paved the way for widespread adaption of these conveniences inside the home.ⁱ

The Kelvinator company, named after Irish-Scottish physicist Lord Kelvin the discoverer of absolute zero, was founded in 1914 and became the dominant maker of home refrigerators.

By 1923, Kelvinator held 80% of the American market for electric refrigerators.ⁱⁱ The company grew and branched out from that foothold into electric ranges, home freezers, room air conditioners, kitchen cabinets, sinks, kitchen waste disposers, home laundry equipment, and water heaters.

In 1947, Kelvinator advertised an electric water heater for homes using an illustrated brochure. By no means were they the first to sell an electric water heater, but Kelvinator offered two different models under its brand name, the round-type and the table-top models. And who better to help the company sell their water heaters to consumers in that brochure than Donald Duck and his nephews—Huey, Dewey, and Louie.ⁱⁱⁱ After all, it's like a duck to water!

The brochure prominently features Donald Duck pointing to the words *HOT WATER* on the front cover with his nephews exclaiming, "all you want... when you... want it!" It is an eye-catching cover that would draw the attention of any consumer. The characters are well-drawn in reasonably dynamic poses, yet they could be more appealing, in my opinion. The cover image of Donald's pointing hand emphasizing the word *HOT*, created with red squiggly lines, while the nephews are enjoying a shower in this initial illustration. I find the cover very readable from an image and text standpoint, but I think the character drawings on the inside of the brochure have a bit more eye appeal.^{iv}

Opening the brochure vertically first, I am immediately struck with the fact that the characters are pitching "automatic water heating" and four reasons why you should get it for "your home, too?"^v The text gives more reasons than you ever need on why "heating water *Electrically* is best."^{vi}

WHY DON'T *You* **GET REALLY SAFE, CONVENIENT**

AUTOMATIC WATER HEATING *FOR Your home, too?*

Imagine the marvelous convenience of having *all* the hot water you want . . . ready and waiting . . . at just the right temperature . . . *any time you want it!*

Think of the time you can save—the new comfort you can enjoy by putting an end forever to your hot water problem! No more wasted time “waiting for the water to heat up” . . . no more worrying whether you “left the water heater on” when you’re away . . . no more tire-some trips up and down stairs to turn the water heater on and off!

Yes . . . there’s nothing like automatic electric water heating for modern comfort, convenience and dependability! Decide now to enjoy the new ease of living that a Kelvinator Electric Water Heater can bring into *your* home!



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GOOD START is the morning is assured when you have plenty of hot water at the turn of a faucet!



DISHES SPARKLE when they're washed with lots of hot water. Automatic hot water makes daily household routine so much easier!



NO WAITING for your bath or shower when there's instant, automatic hot water on tap!



NEW EASE is yours on laundry day when there's lots of hot water ready and waiting to serve you!

HEATING WATER *Electrically* **IS BEST**

because . . .

IT'S Automatic! Install it and forget it! No switches or controls to bother with . . . nothing to “remember.” Gives you years of trouble-free service, day and night. Water is heated *to* and stays *at* just the temperature you desire.

IT'S Safe! Heating water electrically means no flames, no fumes, no worrisome pilot light. Can be safely installed anywhere in your home! Heater is so completely insulated that its exterior is always cool to the touch.

IT'S Convenient! A turn of the tap, and presto—all the hot water you want for those dozens of daily household uses. Operates quietly, efficiently as only electricity can!

IT'S Clean! Heating water *automatically* and *electrically* is the cleanest method known . . . no dust, no soot. Water itself is *crystal-clear, rust-free* . . . always safe for cooking.

IT'S Adaptable! Install it anywhere in your home—even in a closet! No vents, no flues are necessary. Now you can eliminate those long hot water pipe runs that result in costly heat loss.

IT'S Dependable! Your hot water troubles are over when you have a Kelvinator Electric Water Heater! You can count on

Kelvinator . . . its trouble-free performance is time- and performance-*proved*.

IT'S Modern! Automatic electric water heating is rapidly replacing out-dated, inconvenient methods, as have electric refrigeration and electric cooking. It's an essential part of modern electrical living!

IT'S Economical! Moderate in price, the Kelvinator Electric Water Heater costs very little a day to operate because of its many money-saving features. *All* the heat goes *into the water*; none up chimney or flue.

IT'S Cool! Thick blanket of efficient Fiberglas insulation surrounds tank, keeps heat *locked in*. You get maximum water-heating effect from every watt of electricity.

NOW . . . HERE'S A HOT TIP ON YOUR BEST WATER HEATER BUY

(Vertically opening the brochure reveals a full page-2 with all the reasons why the consumer should get an electric "automatic" water heater for the home.)

As mentioned, I find the character drawings on page two to be more appealing due to some subtle design choices. If you look at Donald's eyes on the cover image, the eye further away on the right side of his head appears to be only slightly smaller, which flattens the image. Whereas the drawing of Donald on the left side of page two, with his finger up, has the right eye smaller adding perspective which in turn enhances dimensionality, roundness to Donald's head. Also, the brow line pinches in closer to the eye, making it, again, more appealing. The same is true for the image of Donald washing dishes with hot water.^{vii}

These are very subtle choices, but collectively along with how the beak, neck, and other parts of the character are drawn, they make the difference in the overall eye appeal of the drawings. It makes me think that perhaps two different Disney artists worked on this advertisement. The brochure illustrations were likely done through the Walt Disney Studios Publicity Production Department, which had created a tremendous amount of ancillary character artwork before, during, and after the WWII period. These brochure illustrations are precisely the type of work that group did and could have been knocked out in a day or even an afternoon by seasoned artists in that department.

Once the brochure is fully unfolded, it is evident that images on page three of Donald pointing along with the heads of Huey, Dewey, and Louie are re-used from the previous page. The only new illustration is of Donald on page four emphasizing, pitching, if you will, the "10-YEAR PRO-RATED WARRANTY." This pose of Donald has a solid silhouette, and the text is partially indented to tuck neatly between his splayed arms leading the viewer's eye to the warranty information.^{viii}

YOU GET MORE FOR YOUR MONEY WITH A KELVINATOR Automatic Electric WATER HEATER

ROUND-TYPE MODEL can be installed anywhere in your home!

This sturdy Kelvinator is built to give you maximum operating economy . . . years of extra-reliable service. You may locate this handsomely finished water heater anywhere in your home because flues or vents are unnecessary. Installed near point of greatest use, it saves unnecessary heat loss in long pipe runs. The Round-Type Model is made in a variety of sizes. There's one that *best fits* the needs of your family! See table (below, right).

TABLE-TOP MODEL adds to your kitchen's beauty

Here's a perfect combination of style and utility—a Kelvinator table-top electric water heater. No matter where you put it . . . kitchen, laundry room, recreation room . . . it serves double duty by providing an ever-abundant supply of hot water *plus* a convenient extra work surface. Smartly styled to harmonize with modern kitchen or laundry equipment, it utilizes fully every inch of space. Kelvinator's table-top models incorporate all of the economy, efficiency and longer life features of the round-type water heaters. Available in 30- and 40-gallon sizes. (See chart below for complete details.)

YOU GET ALL THESE ADVANTAGES WHEN YOU GET Kelvinator

Greater Economy! Thermostatic heat control reduces costs by eliminating overheating of water • Specially designed heat-trap keeps hot water from entering pipes until faucet is turned on . . . a big economy feature! Money-saving cold water huffs keeps incoming cold water from mixing with already-heated water. Your hot water *stays* hot . . . doesn't need continual, costly re-heating.

Top Efficiency! Thick Fiberglas insulation blankets tank, is wonderfully effective in conserving heat • An enclosed dead air chamber further reduces heat loss and adds to efficiency • High-efficiency heating elements project directly into the water, utilize every kilowatt of electricity for heating water.

Longer Life! Water tank is made of heavy gauge steel, protected by a revolutionary method of zinc-coating. This plus *Twin Magnesium Rods*, provides utmost protection against tank-damaging rust and corrosion and gives extra long life to water heater. Every Kelvinator tank is pressure tested at the factory as an added assurance of satisfactory operation. Lustrous baked white enamel finish is durable, easy to keep sparkling clean!

10-YEAR PRO-RATED WARRANTY

Kelvinator water heaters are warranted to be free from manufacturing defects under normal use. In event tank replacement is necessary within first five years for above reasons, tank will be replaced without charge (except transportation and installation charges). Replacement thereafter will be based on proportionate part of 10 years' service received.

ONE OF THESE KELVINATORS IS Right FOR YOUR HOT WATER REQUIREMENTS

ROUND-TOP MODELS

Model	Capacity U.S. Gal.	Approx. Shipping Weight Lbs.	WATS		Height (Inches)	Diameter (Inches)
			Single Element One Thermostat	Double Element Two Thermostats		
KR10-125	12	128	1000	—	—	36 1/2
KR10-205	20	169	1250	—	—	42 1/2
KR10-305	30	171	—	1000	600	42 1/2
KR10-305	30	190	1500	—	—	47 1/2
KR10-300	30	192	—	1000	600	47 1/2
KR10-405	40	227	2000	—	—	58 1/2
KR10-400	40	229	—	1250	750	58 1/2
KR10-525	52	280	2500	—	—	65
KR10-525	52	282	—	1500	1000	65
KR10-685	66	338	3000	—	—	61 1/2
KR10-680	66	340	—	2000	1250	61 1/2
KR10-825	82	389	4000	—	—	73 1/2
KR10-820	82	391	—	2500	1500	73 1/2

TABLE-TOP MODELS

Model	Capacity U.S. Gal.	Approx. Shipping Weight Lbs.	WATS		Height (Inches)	Width (Inches)	Depth (Inches)
			Single Element One Thermostat	Double Element Two Thermostats			
KRT10-305	30	225	1500	—	36	33	25
KRT10-300	30	227	—	1000	60	36	25
KRT10-405	40	287	2000	—	36	35	25
KRT10-400	40	290	—	1250	75	36	25

There IS a better WATER HEATER... It's KELVINATOR!

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Check with your Kelvinator dealer for information regarding power rates in your locality. You'll be pleasantly surprised at the low operating cost of a Kelvinator Electric Water Heater. Your Kelvinator dealer will help you select the size heater that will best fill your requirements.

All models listed above are designed to meet U.S.A. standards and are approved and listed by Underwriters Laboratories, Inc. Product specifications as described or illustrated are subject to change without notice.

DIVISION OF NASH-KELVINATOR CORP., DETROIT, MICHIGAN

(The fully opened brochure, pages-3 and -4, showing the two different Kelvinator Electric Water Heater models with re-use illustrations of Donald Duck, Hewey, Louie, and Dewey.)

10-YEAR PRO-RATED WARRANTY

Kelvinator water heaters are warranted to be free from manufacturing defects under normal use. In event tank replacement is necessary within first five years for above reason, tank will be replaced without charge (except transportation and installation charges). Replacement thereafter will be based on proportionate part of 10 years' service received.

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(A close-up detail of the character pose on page-4 of the Kelvinator brochure with Donald Duck showcasing, selling the "10-year pro-rated warranty.")

Finally, the back cover is designed for local Kelvinator dealers to print their contact information directly on the brochure. The illustration of Donald raising his cap next to the "At Your Service" text creates a visual link between the popular character, the Kelvinator brand, and the dealer, reinforcing a level of trust and likeability. That is the point of this type of advertising—to sell a product by instilling confidence so that consumers believe they are making a good choice. In this case, by co-branding well-known Disney characters with the Kelvinator brand and a specific dealer in their network to achieve that self-assurance.^{ix}

What struck me most during my research was how a company like Kelvinator, which at one time held 80% of the American market for electric refrigerators, disappeared from the consumer landscape so completely. At least in the United States. The Kelvinator brand is widely used for various appliances sold in Argentina, and Kelvinator refrigerators are still sold in the Philippines.^x There are also some commercial refrigeration products bearing the Kelvinator name in the U.S. foodservice industry.^{xi} But as for a household name brand, it is no more.



(The back cover of the brochure showing the large space where a local Kelvinator dealer could put their contact information.)

If you asked a college-age person if they recognize the Kelvinator brand, the likely answer would be—no. Yet, this was a company that was part of the American household so entirely that they sold all the necessary appliances for the then-modern kitchen. During the mid-twentieth century, Kelvinator was embedded in the domestic consumer lexicon.

Kelvinator was a leader in its industry like Ford, General Electric, and Coke-Cola, who survived and thrived since they were all founded. Even with a solid foothold in the American home and the help of the Disney characters, Kelvinator still vanished into obscurity like other once iconic brand names like Howard Johnsons, Pan American Airways, F.W. Woolworths, among many now vanquished to distant memory. It is a case study in brand destruction versus solid brand management and continuous brand reinvention. The demise of Kelvinator shows how a venerable brand can erode over time, no matter how popular they once were.

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ⁱ *How Americans Got Into Hot Water*, Sense, October 4, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Hubbert, Christopher J. (2006). *"The Kelvin Home: Cleveland Heights Leads the Way to: 'a New and Better Way of Living'"*. Cleveland Heights Historical Society.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kelvinator Electric Water Heater Brochure cover featuring Donald Duck, Huey, Dewey, and Louie.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Kelvinator Electric Water Heater Brochure featuring Donald Duck, Huey, Dewey, and Louie. Pg.2.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid, pg. 3 and 4.

^{ix} Kelvinator Electric Water Heater Brochure back cover featuring Donald Duck.

^x Morales, Neil Jerome C. (16 March 2012). *"Concepcion Industries eyes listing in 2 years"*. The Philippine Star.

^{xi} *"Kelvinator Commercial Products"*. www.kelvinator.com. 2012.