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.

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 eyecatching 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?" The text gives more reasons than you ever need on why "heating water *Electrically* is best."

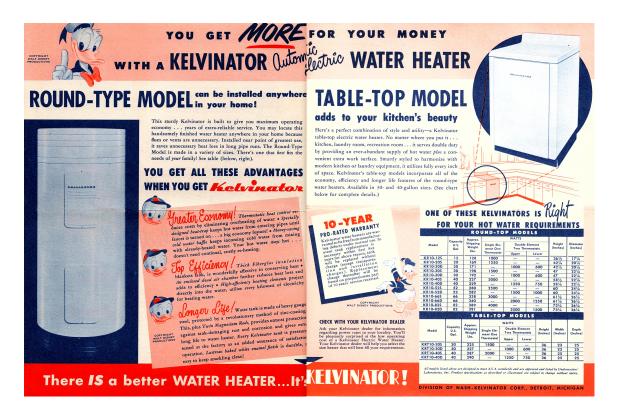


(Vertically opening the brochure reveals a full page-2 with all the reasons why the consumer should get an electric "automatic" water heater for the home.)

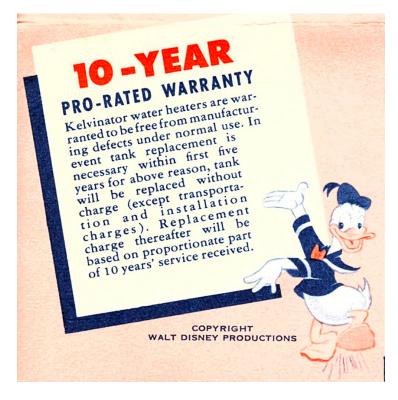
As mentioned, I find the character drawings on page two to be more appealing due to some subtle design choices. If you look at Donald's eyes on the cover image, the eye further away on the right side of his head appears to be only slightly smaller, which flattens the image. Whereas the drawing of Donald 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.

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.



(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.)



(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 Kalvinator 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.

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.* There are also some commercial refrigeration products bearing the Kelvinator name in the U.S. foodservice industry.* 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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¹ How Americans Got Into Hot Water, Sense, October4, 2019.

[&]quot;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.

^{*} 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.