

UZU

Monthly
Review

Be The Center Of The Whirlpool



**All The Right
Notes, In The
Wrong Order**

**Every Lie We Tell
Incurs A Debt To
The Truth.
Sooner Or Later
That Debt Must
Be Paid.**

**Inside The
Whirlpool with
Gaspard Dessy**

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Kuroshio with
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FROM THE EDITOR



Paul Ashton
Founder
ULPA

Welcome to the December issue of UZU, where the whirlpool continues to spin with insights, stories, and reflections on the world of branding, marketing, and innovation.

This month, we're thrilled to spotlight Gaspard Dessy, CEO of Portcities, in our Inside the Whirlpool feature. Gaspard shares his journey of building a global ERP powerhouse and navigating the unique challenges of Japan's business landscape. His insights into patience, cultural adaptation, and strategic thinking offer valuable lessons for anyone considering Japan as a market.

We're also excited to welcome back Gordon McLean, Founder of Fear No Truth. In his guest article, Gordon delves into the enduring importance of authenticity in branding—a timely

reminder in an era where short-term gains often tempt businesses to compromise their values.

This month, *Riding the Kuroshio*, takes an in-depth look at TOTO, a Japanese innovator transforming the bathroom experience globally.

I'm especially excited about "Who the Hell Is Hiroshi Yamauchi?"—a vibrant profile of the visionary who transformed Nintendo into a cultural juggernaut. Yamauchi's bold, sometimes controversial decisions remind us that leadership often requires audacity and an unshakable belief in one's vision.

As always, we've included your favourite sections: Japanese Business Etiquette 101 and Business Japanese for People in a Rush, providing practical tips for navigating Japan's unique professional environment.

And last but not least, don't miss our latest "Read This Now" feature, containing a review of Byron Sharp's *How Brands Grow*, a marketing classic that strips away the fluff and focuses on what truly drives brand success.

As we close the year, I want to thank each of you for your engagement and support. Your feedback continues to shape UZU, and I'm excited about what's to come as we dive into another year of storytelling and exploration.

Let's keep that whirlpool spinning!

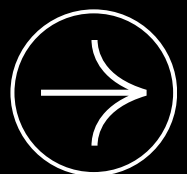




Image: BBC

ALL THE RIGHT NOTES, IN THE WRONG ORDER

BY PAUL ASHTON



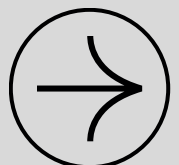
As a Brit, Christmas has certain smells, tastes and memories attached, which, even with my years out of the UK, are indelibly embossed into what I believe Christmas is all about. Inevitably, for many Brits in their 40s and above, one of the classic UK Christmas tropes is Morecambe & Wise, a staple of British TV during the Christmas season. There's that unforgettable sketch with André Previn, a renowned conductor, where Eric Morecambe is supposed to perform Grieg's Piano Concerto with the orchestra. But as Morecambe's chaotic rendition unfolds, Previn stops everything, walks over, and protests, "You're playing all the wrong notes." Morecambe, entirely unfazed, grabs him by the collar, gives him a steady look, and declares, "I'm playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order."

This timeless bit from Morecambe and Wise perfectly captures Japanese Christmas for me. It has all the right notes of the season, the sparkle, the decorations, the spirit of togetherness, but they're not arranged as most of us might expect. Christmas in Japan is festive and beautiful yet intriguingly out of order compared to the holiday traditions familiar in the West.

But how did Japan's Christmas tradition come to play all the right notes, albeit in a different tune? The history of Christmas in Japan has a somewhat storied and complex past, with its first introduction as early as the 16th century when Jesuit missionaries arrived on Japanese shores. Back then, Christianity made brief inroads among Japanese converts before being banned outright in the early 1600s. The Tokugawa shogunate, wary of foreign influence,



"I'M PLAYING ALL THE RIGHT NOTES, BUT NOT NECESSARILY IN THE RIGHT ORDER."





cracked down on Christianity, forcing believers underground and relegating Christmas celebrations to whispered hidden rituals. For over two hundred years, Christmas in Japan essentially vanished.

It wasn't until the late 19th century that the holiday resurfaced, and even then, it did so in a largely muted, commercial form. During the Meiji period (1868–1912), Japan reopened to the West, eager to modernise and absorb new ideas. With this cultural exchange came a resurgence in interest in Western holidays and customs, Christmas among them. By 1900, Tokyo's Meiji-ya department store set up one of the country's first public Christmas trees, sparking a trend among other retailers who began using Christmas imagery and decor to promote winter sales. However, it wasn't until after WWII, during the American occupation, that Christmas truly started to bloom into a cultural phenomenon.

With American soldiers and their families celebrating the holiday openly, Christmas decorations, carols, and Santa Claus began to feel like part of the season. Japanese society, already known for its skill in adopting and adapting foreign practices, took to Christmas in a way that quickly eclipsed its Western roots. In just a few decades, Christmas had gone from a foreign curiosity to a full-blown cultural season, but with its own distinct character, one that almost abandoned any overt religious connotations in favour of lighthearted romance, family gatherings, and commercial excitement.

“IN JUST A FEW DECADES, CHRISTMAS HAD GONE FROM A FOREIGN CURIOSITY TO A FULL-BLOWN CULTURAL SEASON.”



One of the most striking differences between Christmas in Japan and the West is that it has become not a family holiday but a romantic one. This shift began in earnest in the 1980s, during Japan's economic "bubble" era, when consumer culture was at its peak. Wealthy young urbanites adopted Christmas as a special night to splurge on lavish gifts, fine dining, and romantic experiences. Christmas Eve in Japan transformed into a night of candlelit dinners and gift exchanges, with restaurant reservations booked months in advance and luxury hotels bustling with couples. It became a date night almost on par with Valentine's Day, infused with an air of exclusivity and extravagance. The Christmas romance tradition even led to a term, *kuribocchi*—a play on "Christmas" and "lonely"—to describe the social awkwardness some feel if they're alone on Christmas Eve.

Beyond the romance, perhaps the most surprising tradition in Japanese Christmas is the holiday meal. Instead of a feast of roast turkey, stuffing, and mulled wine, the table centerpiece is often... fried chicken from Kentucky Fried Chicken. This unlikely custom traces back to a brilliant marketing strategy in the 1970s when KFC Japan launched its "Kentucky for Christmas" campaign. In post-war Japan, turkey was hard to find, but KFC saw an opportunity, pitching fried chicken as a Western-style alternative. Japanese families bought in—literally—and today, the tradition has grown, so many families pre-order their KFC Christmas meals months in advance. The holiday bucket meal includes chicken, a



“WEALTHY YOUNG URBANITES ADOPTED CHRISTMAS AS A SPECIAL NIGHT TO SPLURGE ON LAVISH GIFTS, FINE DINING, AND ROMANTIC EXPERIENCES.”





cake, sometimes wine, and even toys wrapped in Christmas-themed packaging, creating an experience that is uniquely Japanese but resonant with holiday warmth.

Then there's the iconic Japanese Christmas cake, "kurisumasu keeki". But unlike the fruit-laden, dense cakes found in the UK, Japan's Christmas cake is a light, fluffy sponge layered with whipped cream and topped with fresh strawberries. This cake is a sight to behold, decked in red and white to symbolise joy and good fortune. Its prominence during Christmas is also tied to New Year's festivities, where the same colours mark celebration and prosperity. Bakeries across Japan take the Christmas cake to an art form, crafting decadent, lavishly decorated versions that people queue for hours to collect. It's another perfect blend of Western imagery and Japanese aesthetics, with simple and elaborate cakes perfectly suited to the Japanese palate and love for understated beauty.

For families, especially those with children, Christmas in Japan is a chance to make small but memorable gestures. Unlike the West's tradition of loading a tree with presents, Japanese children usually receive one carefully chosen gift, often selected by parents and grandparents. This pragmatic approach to gift-giving echoes Japanese culture's restrained and practical aspects. The excitement of gift-giving remains, but it's balanced with a sense of moderation. Many Japanese children also enjoy a candy-filled Christmas boot, a playful

"THE EXCITEMENT OF GIFT-GIVING REMAINS, BUT IT'S BALANCED WITH A SENSE OF MODERATION."

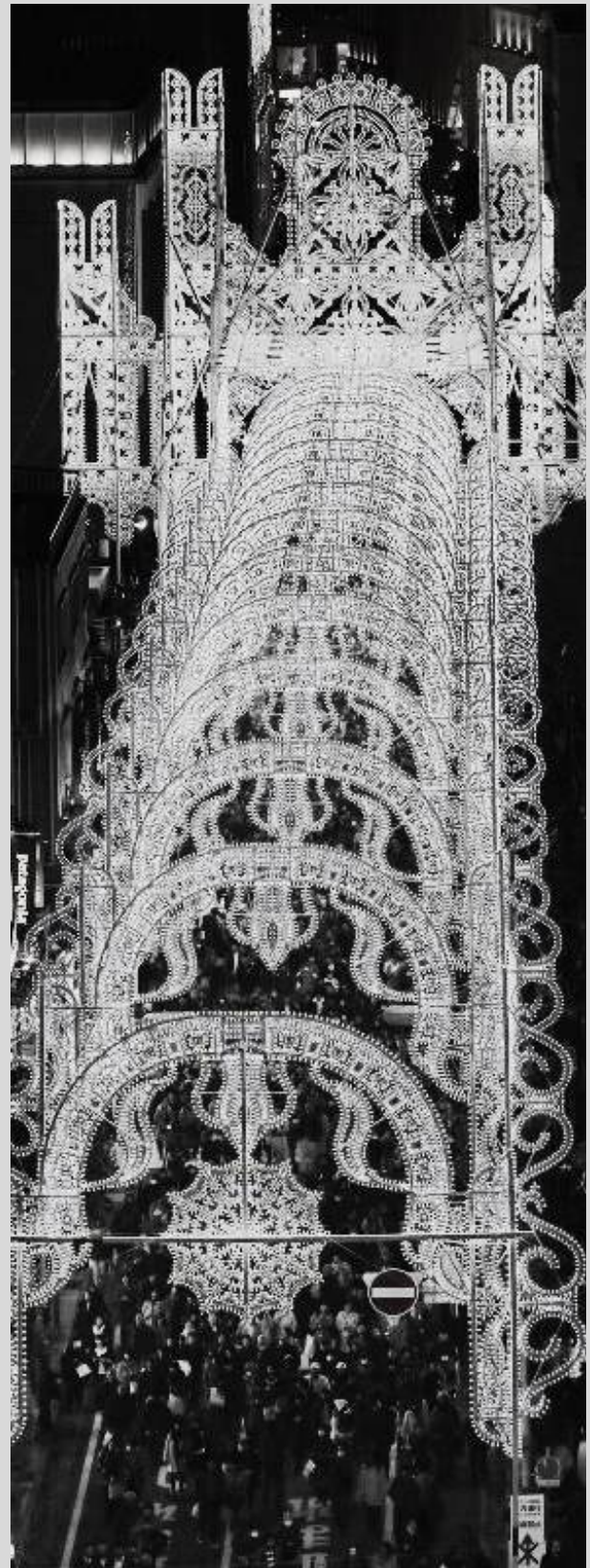


alternative to the Western stocking.

Perhaps the most visible part of Japan's Christmas is the breathtaking illuminations. Japanese cities turn into winter wonderlands, with streets and parks adorned in light displays that transform entire neighbourhoods into sparkling canvases. The "Kobe Luminarie" is one of the most famous, drawing thousands of people to experience the intricate light patterns that stretch over city blocks. Traditionally, Christmas decorations in Japan would vanish by Boxing Day, quickly replaced by the more sombre displays for New Year's, a time of family, reverence, and reflection. When I first arrived in Japan in the early 2000s, this transition was swift, often happening overnight on December 25th, to make way for the quiet, ritualistic mood of O-shogatsu.

In recent years, cities have recognised the economic appeal of extending the festive season. Christmas lights often linger through the final days of December, creating a vibrant winter atmosphere that attracts residents and tourists. This small shift highlights Japan's knack for adapting customs to fit local tastes and practical benefits, blending seasonal cheer with a bit of strategic warmth stretching longer into the winter nights.

While Christmas illuminations and lights create a festive atmosphere, it's important to note that December 25th is not a public holiday in Japan. If Christmas doesn't land on the weekend (In the next decade, this will



“TRADITIONALLY, CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS IN JAPAN WOULD VANISH BY BOXING DAY, QUICKLY REPLACED BY THE MORE SOMBRE DISPLAYS FOR NEW YEAR”





happen in 2027, 2032, and 2033), then people go to work, students go to school, and the day unfolds as any other. The absence of religious significance allows Christmas in Japan to fit into the broader winter calendar, leading up to New Year's, a much more prominent and traditional holiday. New Year's in Japan is reserved for family gatherings, traditional food, and religious ceremonies, giving it a gravitas that Christmas does not carry. Instead, Christmas is a warm-up for the real celebration, a moment to indulge in festivity, romance, and the beauty of winter without the pressures of solemn observance.

Japanese Christmas stands out precisely because it embraces the aesthetic of the holiday season, casting aside its more formal or religious roots to make something fresh. The colours, the lights, the desserts, and the music all evoke the essence of Christmas but in an arrangement that feels entirely Japanese. By skipping over the religious and familial obligations, Christmas becomes lighter, a time to enjoy with friends or loved ones, stroll under glittering lights and indulge in quirky, unexpected traditions.

In Japan, Christmas is not a traditional or sacred day but an experience, an arrangement of familiar notes that play out unexpectedly. And in that reordering, Japan has created a seasonal celebration that is bright, warm, and entirely its own.

“CHRISTMAS IS A WARM-UP FOR THE REAL CELEBRATION, A MOMENT TO INDULGE IN FESTIVITY, ROMANCE, AND THE BEAUTY OF WINTER.”





Image: HBO

EVERY LIE WE TELL INCURS A DEBT TO THE TRUTH. SOONER OR LATER THAT DEBT MUST BE PAID.

BY GORDON MCLEAN





A brand is essentially a promise, a commitment to deliver certain values, experiences, and quality consistently. When a brand lies, whether through false advertising, misleading claims, or by creating a façade that doesn't match reality, it undermines this trust. The lie might bring short-term gains, boosted sales, increased market share, or positive publicity, but these gains are built on shaky ground. The debt to the truth accumulates with every deception, and eventually, the brand will have to pay the price.

This payment often comes in the form of damaged reputation, loss of customer loyalty, and in severe cases, the complete collapse of the brand. Consumers today are more informed and connected than ever before. Social media, review platforms, and the ease of information sharing mean that the truth has a way of coming out sooner rather than later. When it does, the backlash can be swift and unforgiving. The public feels betrayed, and the trust that took years or even decades to build can be shattered in an instant.

Consider the numerous cases where brands have faced public outrage after being caught in a lie. The automotive industry, for instance, has seen several high-profile scandals where companies have lied about emissions data or safety standards. In these cases, the immediate fallout included plummeting stock prices, massive fines, and loss of customer trust. But the long-term damage was even more significant. The brands involved found themselves with the daunting task of rebuilding their reputation, a task that is infinitely harder than maintaining it in the first place.

“THE DEBT TO THE TRUTH ACCUMULATES WITH EVERY DECEPTION, AND EVENTUALLY, THE BRAND WILL HAVE TO PAY THE PRICE.”



For smaller brands or startups, the implications of lying are even more severe. These brands often rely heavily on the trust and goodwill of early adopters to build momentum. A single lie, if uncovered, can stall their growth and make it difficult to gain traction in the market. Even if the lie is never exposed, the underlying tension remains, knowing that their success is built on something false can lead to a lack of confidence, both internally among employees and externally among consumers.

The idea that a lie incurs a debt to the truth also highlights the importance of authenticity in brand marketing. In an era where consumers are bombarded with choices, they gravitate towards brands that are genuine, transparent, and consistent in their messaging and actions. Authenticity is not just a buzzword; it is a crucial factor in building a loyal customer base. When a brand is authentic, it doesn't need to lie to gain trust, it earns it through consistent, honest engagement with its audience.

What's more, the concept of debt to the truth suggests that brands should adopt a long-term perspective rather than focusing on short-term gains. Marketing strategies that rely on manipulation, deception, or half-truths might work in the immediate term, but they are unsustainable. As the debt to the truth grows, the brand becomes increasingly vulnerable to exposure, criticism, and ultimately, failure. In contrast, brands that prioritize honesty and transparency may experience slower initial growth but build a solid foundation that supports long-term success.



“AUTHENTICITY IS NOT JUST A BUZZWORD; IT IS A CRUCIAL FACTOR IN BUILDING A LOYAL CUSTOMER BASE.”



Another critical aspect of this idea is the role of accountability in brand marketing. Brands that lie are essentially gambling with their future. When the truth comes to light, as it inevitably does, the consequences are often more severe than anticipated. However, brands that hold themselves accountable, admit to mistakes, and take steps to rectify them can mitigate the damage. This doesn't mean that mistakes won't happen, every brand is susceptible to errors, but how a brand responds to these mistakes is what ultimately defines its relationship with consumers.

The notion of a debt to the truth also has implications for the internal culture of a brand. A culture that tolerates or even encourages dishonesty in its marketing practices is likely to see this behavior manifest in other areas as well, leading to a broader ethical decline within the organization. This can result in poor decision-making, low employee morale, and a toxic work environment, all of which contribute to the eventual downfall of the brand. In contrast, a culture that values honesty and integrity will not only avoid the pitfalls of deceitful marketing but will also foster a positive, productive, and innovative environment.

And the idea that lies incur a debt to the truth aligns with the increasing demand for corporate social responsibility. Consumers today expect brands to be more than just profit-driven entities; they want them to contribute positively to society and operate ethically. Brands that are caught lying or deceiving the public face not only consumer backlash but also pressure from investors, regulators, and the broader community. The debt to the truth, in this case, extends beyond just the consumer relationship to include all stakeholders, making the cost of dishonesty even higher.



“CONSUMERS TODAY EXPECT BRANDS TO BE MORE THAN JUST PROFIT-DRIVEN ENTITIES; THEY WANT THEM TO CONTRIBUTE POSITIVELY TO SOCIETY AND OPERATE ETHICALLY.”





Finally, a resilient brand is one that can withstand challenges, including the uncovering of inconvenient truths, because it is built on a foundation of honesty, trust, and strong values. Such a brand doesn't need to lie because it has the confidence that its products, services, and actions speak for themselves. When challenges arise, a resilient brand can address them head-on, maintaining the trust and loyalty of its customers even in difficult times.

In short, the idea that every lie incurs a debt to the truth, and that this debt must eventually be paid, serves as a powerful reminder for brand marketers. It emphasizes the importance of honesty, authenticity, and long-term thinking in building and maintaining a successful brand. While the temptation to achieve short-term gains through deception may be strong, the long-term consequences are often disastrous. Brands that prioritize truth and transparency not only avoid the heavy costs of dishonesty but also build stronger, more resilient relationships with their consumers, ensuring their success in the long run.



Gordon McLean
Founder
Fear No Truth
www.fearnotruth.com

Gordon is the Founder of Fear No Truth, a partner company of Ulpa.

In his career he has launched, built and reinvented some of the world's best brands; including Apple, Bacardi, Bank of Scotland, Bing, Bombay Sapphire, EA Games, GE, Gillette, Grey Goose, Guinness, Halifax, Hilton, Holiday Inn Express, HSBC, Perfect Day, Radisson, Sandy Hook Promise, SAP, ServiceNow, Vodafone, and Wells Fargo.

He has a body of work that's been recognised for its commercial impact by the IPA and Effies, for its strategic thinking by the Jay Chiats and ARF, for its cultural impact by the MoMA, Emmys and TED, and for its creative excellence by The Clios, One Show, Cannes Lions, D&AD, and others.

“WHILE THE TEMPTATION TO ACHIEVE SHORT-TERM GAINS THROUGH DECEPTION MAY BE STRONG, THE LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES ARE OFTEN DISASTROUS.”





Image: Unknown

THE JAPANESE ECONOMIC MIRACLE MYTH

BY PAUL ASHTON



Japan's post-war economic transformation is the textbook darling of progress porn—a glistening narrative polished so hard it blinds you to the mess underneath. The story we're spoon-fed is one of a feudal, rice-farming backwater hustling its way into industrial elite status with a cocktail of hard work, cultural grit, and a dash of government wizardry. It's the stuff of think-tank wet dreams and motivational seminars. But let's drop the rose-tinted glasses for a second. What if Japan's so-called economic "miracle" wasn't a fairytale of discipline and bootstrap-pulling but a calculated mix of political manoeuvring, economic strategy, and good old-fashioned psychological propaganda? Spoiler: it probably is.

The traditional tale insists that post-war land reforms catalysed Japan's productivity explosion, the spark that lifted the country from rural poverty into the gleaming heart of the global economy. According to this view, redistributing land from big landlords to tenant farmers gave them a stake in their work, supposedly leading to efficiency gains that freed Japan to focus on rapid industrialisation. It's a neat theory, but research from economists like Oliver Kim, who recently studied Taiwan's parallel story, suggests the link between land reform and productivity might be wildly overstated. Kim's findings challenge Taiwan's story and the broader East Asian "miracle" mythology, including the version we've come to associate with Japan.

If you look closer, breaking up large estates and giving plots to tenant farmers was as much a political manoeuvre as an economic one. For post-war Japan, emerging battered and occupied by American forces, land reform was less an economic masterstroke and more a strategic move aimed at controlling Japan's rural political landscape. Kim's research shows that in Taiwan, similar land reforms led to tiny farms that weren't exactly paragons of efficiency.



“THE STORY WE’RE SPOON-FED IS ONE OF A FEUDAL, RICE-FARMING BACKWATER HUSTLING ITS WAY INTO INDUSTRIAL ELITE STATUS.”



Sure, farmers had more autonomy on paper, but the new farms were often so small that farmers were barely able to make a living. This pressure actually forced many to abandon their plots and head to the cities, effectively laying the groundwork for urban industrial growth—but not because rural productivity was thriving. And there’s a strong reason to believe Japan’s “reforms” worked in much the same roundabout way.

In Japan’s case, the land reforms were administered by the American occupiers, and while they may look like economic policy, they were as much about political control. By breaking the landlord class, who historically resisted democratic and economic change, the reforms replaced the elite landowners with a base of smallholders who might be a little more pliable politically. This wasn’t just about farm yields; it was about creating a stable, compliant Japan aligned firmly with U.S. interests in a region teetering toward communism. After all, land reform was one of those initiatives that seemed to pop up in every non-communist stronghold in East Asia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, like clockwork, just as communist movements started to sweep through China, North Korea, and Vietnam.

Taiwan’s version of this reform was just as politically charged. There, land redistribution was part of the government-in-exile’s strategy to establish legitimacy among an unfamiliar local population, a situation that echoed Japan’s own American-administered land reforms. For Japan’s occupiers, a stable,



“THIS WASN’T JUST ABOUT FARM YIELDS; IT WAS ABOUT CREATING A STABLE, COMPLIANT JAPAN.”





democratic Japan wasn't just a vision; it was a Cold War necessity. Stripping powerful local elites of their grip and giving symbolic ownership to the average person wasn't primarily about productivity; it was about silencing potential resistance and aligning the rural population with the central government, all while sending a clear political signal of loyalty to the U.S. And while farm productivity might have bumped up slightly, this psychological and political effect, building a base of loyal, non-threatening landholders, was likely the real prize.

But stories like clean conclusions, and so the complex political calculus is smoothed over, replaced with a neat narrative of democratic reform and market-driven growth. It's easier to celebrate Japan's economic miracle as a "free-market success," but that's not quite how it played out. Japan's path to prosperity was no straight line to free-market capitalism. It was a highly managed process involving heavy government intervention, strategic planning, and yes, extensive U.S. support. Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) wasn't in the business of "letting the market decide"; it was actively picking and nurturing winners, directing resources to key sectors like steel, automotive, and electronics. This wasn't the free-market playground that the textbooks make it out to be; it was more like an experiment in state-led capitalism, with government-backed industries and strategic protections to shape Japan's industrial powerhouse status by the 1970s and 1980s.

And let's not skip over the myth that Japan's rise was powered by an extraordinary work ethic

"IT WAS ABOUT SILENCING POTENTIAL RESISTANCE AND ALIGNING THE RURAL POPULATION WITH THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT."



rooted in Confucian values. The narrative goes that Japanese workers, following Confucian principles of respect, discipline, and hierarchy, embodied the industrious spirit that made Japan an economic marvel. But cultural explanations often reduce complex social systems to feel-good clichés. In reality, Japan's work ethic was less about Confucianism and more about an engineered social system: the government and corporations created a labor structure that demanded absolute loyalty, with workers pledging themselves to the company in exchange for stability. This system, which turned workers into "corporate soldiers," didn't just happen; it was shaped by state policies, structured wage systems, and social expectations that valued conformity and sacrifice over personal freedom. If anything, Japan's industrial miracle was built not on Confucian ideals, but on a labor market that turned companies into surrogate families and individual success into a cog in the corporate machine.

So, what are we really talking about when we tell countries to "follow Japan's path to prosperity"? Maybe it's time to drop the overly simplistic success templates. Japan's "miracle" is regularly held up as an example for other nations to emulate, but it was a unique product of its specific historical, political, and social context. U.S. support wasn't just helpful; it was absolutely directive, positioning Japan as a capitalist counterweight to communism in Asia. This wasn't an experiment that any country could replicate, but rather a controlled transformation shaped by geopolitical necessity.



"IF ANYTHING, JAPAN'S INDUSTRIAL MIRACLE WAS BUILT NOT ON CONFUCIAN IDEALS, BUT ON A LABOR MARKET THAT TURNED COMPANIES INTO SURROGATE FAMILIES."





And this brings us back to Oliver Kim's research, which raises some hard truths about the East Asian "miracle" more broadly. While land reforms in places like Taiwan and Japan may have had political benefits, their economic impact was secondary at best. True productivity gains came more from post-war advancements in agriculture, think high-yield crops, fertilizers, and mechanization, than from who actually owned the land. Taiwan's rice yields didn't rise because the farmers suddenly owned their plots; they rose because of better seeds and smarter farming practices. Japan's industrial miracle, too, wasn't simply a product of land reform or some ingrained cultural work ethic; it was a complex, calculated combination of government intervention, foreign aid, and a historical moment that aligned perfectly with Japan's strategic interests.

Fast forward to today, and Japan's economic landscape looks very different from its post-war boom. Once an innovation leader, Japan now faces a demographic crisis, with one of the world's oldest populations and a shrinking labour force. Productivity growth has stalled, and Japan's loyalty-driven workforce model may not be enough to sustain the old ways. This moment demands a new narrative, one that goes beyond the ideals of hard work and national sacrifice and instead tackles the very real challenges of an economy that needs to innovate in areas like AI, robotics, and green technology if it wants to remain relevant.

"ONCE AN INNOVATION LEADER, JAPAN NOW FACES A DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS, WITH ONE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST POPULATIONS."



In the end, Japan's rise isn't some holy grail of economic wisdom; it's a reminder that success stories are messy, one-off experiments dressed up to sell the dream. The so-called "miracle" was less about universal truths and more about Cold War politics, U.S. dollars, and state planning hitting just the right notes at just the right time. The reality? Japan's growth wasn't a formula you can slap on a PowerPoint slide; it was a high-stakes gamble that worked in its unique historical moment. For those looking to save struggling economies by following Japan's lead, here's the uncomfortable reality check: there's no universal blueprint, just a thousand variables you'll never control.

Japan's story isn't a template; it's a cautionary tale wrapped in a success myth, tied with the ribbon of hindsight bias, and served as a seductive but misleading blueprint for progress. Proof that even the best-laid plans are just one move away from being obsolete.



“THERE’S NO UNIVERSAL BLUEPRINT, JUST A THOUSAND VARIABLES YOU’LL NEVER CONTROL.”





Image: UZU

INSIDE THE WHIRLPOOL with GASPARD DESSY





I was first made aware of Gaspard and his company Portcities a few months ago, when, via LinkedIn, Gaspard reached out to make contact as part of his regular sales outreach to potential clients. I had never heard of “Portcities” or “Odoo vendors” prior to this interaction (perhaps more an indication of my siloed existence in the corporate world than a lack of marketing chops on their part!).

For those readers of UZU who don’t know, Portcities is a global leader in Odoo ERP implementations, serving over 500 businesses across various industries. Established in Indonesia in 2015, the company has expanded its presence to Asia, Oceania, the Americas, and Europe, with offices in countries including Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, the UK, France, and Slovakia.

They have a team of around 200 Odoo experts and offer comprehensive services such as ERP implementation, customization, cloud hosting, and ongoing support. The company caters to diverse sectors, including retail, manufacturing, services, and distribution, providing tailored solutions to meet specific business needs. Portcities emphasizes a client-centric approach, focusing on delivering efficient, scalable, and user-friendly ERP systems to enhance operational efficiency and drive business growth.

To be honest with you all, I have been sitting on this interview for two months now, so I am super happy to finally share Gaspard’s Inside the Whirlpool interview with you all.

“PORTCITIES EMPHASIZES A CLIENT-CENTRIC APPROACH, FOCUSING ON DELIVERING EFFICIENT, SCALABLE, AND USER-FRIENDLY ERP SYSTEMS.”



#1 IT Consulting in Odoo Solution

We help companies optimize their business operations and facilitate informed decision-making, by delivering tailored, cost-effective and scalable integrated ERP solutions. That drives efficiency and revenue growth for our clients.



Talk to our consultant

What inspired you to start your business in Japan?

The story of why we started in Japan is more opportunistic. We had a large Japanese client overseas who asked us to do a big project in Japan, so it was a cheaper way to launch a new branch. Why do we stay and invest to grow our Japanese branch?

Japan is a large market with large businesses and SMEs. The work ethic is high, and the legal framework is good enough. In my specific industry (enterprise software and ERP), Japan needs to catch up to other developed markets, so it was an opportunity to bring new offers to the market.

How does Japan's business culture shape your approach?

We needed to be patient and follow local business customs to avoid disqualification. We also revised our marketing material to be more descriptive and complete, as Japanese love details.

Our go-to-market strategy in Japan is also more focus on partnerships than other countries, as it is an easier way to reach to new connections and build trust.

What was a key moment that helped you succeed in Japan?

Short answer: to hire Japanese nationals.

Slightly longer answer: there is no key moment as success happens over time when doing the right things. Like in other countries, we need to be patient, deliver quality, and build trust, but each step is much longer here, and we need to be ready for that.

“JAPAN NEEDS TO CATCH UP TO OTHER DEVELOPED MARKETS, SO IT WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BRING NEW OFFERS TO THE MARKET.”



How do you build strong relationships with clients and partners here?

Deliver quality and always communicate in advance what you will deliver or discuss during a meeting. Even if you miss an intermediary deadline by one day, apologize and inform your client on time.

How do you handle Japan's regulatory requirements?

Compared to most countries, those are simple. The only challenge is the language, and I would advise you to have a personal assistant as soon as possible.

For our specific business of installing ERP (business software including accounting and taxes management), we also needed to localize our software with the local accounting practices and law. We worked with Mazars Japan to improve the software, and it also helped us to give more confidence to our clients.

What role does innovation play in your strategy?

Like most people, the Japanese like innovation but then push back when we need to change their processes or organization. Standard change management techniques can be used, but we need to be more patient.

Can you share a marketing tactic that worked well in Japan?

The way we sold our first project was to work successfully for the same Japanese company overseas first. This is a technique advised by many people when possible.



“JAPANESE LIKE INNOVATION BUT THEN PUSH BACK WHEN WE NEED TO CHANGE THEIR PROCESSES OR ORGANIZATION.”





What skills are crucial for success in Japan?

Japanese language. Otherwise, I would say that you need a passion for quality work and great services and enough patience.

How do you balance respecting tradition with introducing new ideas?

We follow the protocols for selling or communicating during a project, but we try to impose our own methodology for project management or ERP implementation.

What one piece of advice would you give to newcomers entering Japan?

Make it clear to your HQ that Japan's go-to-market strategy won't be a copy-cat from other markets and you would need a higher initial budget and more time.

I would advise to take enough time to build a business case showing the long term revenue potential so allocate enough budget for the venture.



Are you a founder or CEO in Japan? [Get in touch](#) and be featured in the next edition of Inside The Whirlpool! [Say Hello!](#)

Gaspard Dessy
CEO
Portcities
<https://portcities.net/>

“JAPAN'S GO-TO-MARKET STRATEGY WON'T BE A COPY-CAT FROM OTHER MARKETS AND YOU WOULD NEED A HIGHER INITIAL BUDGET AND MORE TIME.”





Image: UZU

RIDING THE KUROSHIO with TOTO

BY PAUL ASHTON



This month's "Riding the Kuroshio" dives head first into the murkiest of murky waters, that of the toilet, specifically those of the washlet type. We'll be looking at TOTO, inspired partly by an [article I wrote on LinkedIn](#) a few weeks back. In this edition, I hope we don't get bogged down but rather plunge deeper into the bowels of everything TOTO. Right, this intro is already flush with enough puns. It's time for the article.

Let's be honest: when you hear "Toto," your mind probably drifts to that band belting out Africa, dripping with nostalgic '70s rock energy. But what if I told you there's another Toto, a quiet yet revolutionary force transforming everyday life, one flush at a time? That's right, we're talking about TOTO, the Japanese company that turned the lowly bathroom into a high-tech sanctuary. And while they've dominated the Japanese market, their journey to conquer America has been more like a slow trickle than a tidal wave.

To understand TOTO's struggle and potential, let's rewind to the early 1900s when Kazuchika Okura founded the company. Inspired by the pristine porcelain toilets he encountered in Europe, Okura set out to modernise Japan's sanitation culture. TOTO was born in 1917, with a commitment to combining luxury and hygiene, and to this day, the company remains rooted in its principles of environmental stewardship and innovation. The turning point came in the 1980s with the launch of the Washlet, a toilet that not only flushed but also offered heated seats, water jets, and even deodorising features. In a country like Japan, where cleanliness is a near-spiritual practice, the Washlet became ubiquitous in homes and public spaces.



"WHEN YOU HEAR "TOTO," YOUR MIND PROBABLY DRIFTS TO THAT BAND BELTING OUT AFRICA."



However, despite its resounding success in Japan, TOTO's expansion into the U.S. market, which began in 1989, has proven challenging. The American bathroom remains a purely utilitarian space, where spending over \$5,000 on a high-tech toilet seems extravagant to most consumers. This cultural resistance is compounded by logistical barriers, American homes often lack the necessary electrical outlets for installing Washlets, requiring costly retrofits that can deter potential buyers.

Yet, there's more driving TOTO's aggressive pivot to the American market than cultural ambition. China was a golden goose for TOTO for years, with its booming real estate market fueling demand for luxury bathroom products. However, since 2021, China's property sector has slowed dramatically due to economic tightening and stricter regulations on developers. TOTO's sales in China have shrunk for two consecutive years after peaking with a 33% increase in 2021, forcing the company to rethink its global strategy. "China slumped unexpectedly," admitted Satoshi Shirakawa, TOTO's Executive Vice President. As new construction projects stalled, TOTO shifted focus to retrofitting older buildings, an approach that worked in Japan but remains uncertain in China's volatile market.

Faced with this downturn, TOTO has redirected its efforts toward North America, viewing it as a new growth frontier. The U.S. market initially showed tepid interest and received a surprising boost during the COVID-19 pandemic. As toilet paper shortages drove consumers to explore alternatives, interest in bidets surged. TOTO cleverly positioned its Washlets as not just luxurious but practical, leading to a spike in sales



“CHINA WAS A GOLDEN GOOSE FOR TOTO FOR YEARS, WITH ITS BOOMING REAL ESTATE MARKET FUELING DEMAND FOR LUXURY BATHROOM PRODUCTS.”





during the holiday season of 2020. Shirakawa noted that "Washlets have enjoyed explosive growth in the U.S. since the beginning of the pandemic," with American unit sales tripling over five years.

However, this newfound momentum is not enough. TOTO is investing over 20 billion yen (approximately \$128 million) to establish itself as a household name in the U.S. The company plans to double its U.S. sales by 2026 by targeting luxury consumers and middle-class homeowners. This strategy includes opening hubs in 63 major U.S. cities, partnering with retailers like Home Depot and Lowe's, and expanding online sales to appeal to the growing DIY renovation market.

But shifting TOTO's focus from niche luxury to broader appeal requires a careful balancing act. Historically, TOTO has positioned itself as a premium brand known for high-end models like the top-end NEOREST NX2, which can retail for over \$12,000. The Kennesaw case study highlights that TOTO's focus on luxury and innovation has limited its market penetration in the U.S. By emphasizing exclusivity and pricing its products for top-tier consumers, TOTO has failed to tap into the broader market, which remains wary of high-tech bathroom products.

To address this, TOTO is working on democratizing its product line. The company is introducing more affordable models, such as entry-level Washlets priced under \$500,

"TOTO HAS FAILED TO TAP INTO THE BROADER MARKET, WHICH REMAINS WARY OF HIGH-TECH BATHROOM PRODUCTS."





to reach a wider audience. But this isn't just about slashing prices, it's about reframing the conversation. In Japan, TOTO leveraged its brand's association with wellness and sustainability, which resonate deeply with consumers. In the U.S., however, those values haven't been effectively communicated.

A significant part of TOTO's strategy is to educate Americans about the benefits of bidets over toilet paper. The average American uses 57 sheets of toilet paper daily, contributing to the consumption of 36.5 billion rolls annually, which translates to 15 million trees. Convincing Americans to adopt a more sustainable bathroom practice, like using water for cleansing, remains an uphill battle. Despite growing sustainability awareness, cultural habits are deeply entrenched, and Americans still hesitate to change bathroom routines.

A study by Kennesaw State University in the U.S. suggests that one way to break through this resistance is to target younger, tech-savvy consumers, particularly Millennials, who are more likely to prioritise health, wellness, and environmental impact in their purchasing decisions. Millennials, who control a growing share of buying power, are more open to trying new technologies if positioned correctly. TOTO could leverage a campaign like "The Last Roll", which humorously challenges consumers to rethink their dependence on toilet paper while promoting the Washlet as a cleaner, greener alternative.

TOTO's commitment to sustainability aligns with shifting consumer values. Yet, it hasn't fully capitalised on this in the U.S. Despite the popularity of eco-friendly products in other

"THE AVERAGE AMERICAN USES 57 SHEETS OF TOILET PAPER DAILY, CONTRIBUTING TO THE CONSUMPTION OF 36.5 BILLION ROLLS ANNUALLY."



categories, sustainable bathroom products have lagged. This is partly because the conversation about bathroom habits remains awkward and taboo. The Kennesaw study found that TOTO's previous marketing campaigns, which focused on luxury rather than functionality, failed to convey the practical benefits of its technology to American consumers.

Ultimately, TOTO's journey into the American market is a lesson in patience and adaptation. The best technology is not enough; success requires a deep understanding of consumer behaviour, cultural nuances, and market conditions. TOTO needs to sell a product and a vision that redefines the bathroom as a space of health, comfort, and sustainability. If they can shift the American mindset from seeing the bathroom as merely functional to a place that deserves investment, TOTO might just turn curiosity into a lasting commitment.

So, think beyond the catchy melody the next time you're humming along to Africa. TOTO isn't just a name from the past, it's a relentless innovator quietly working to elevate the most overlooked corner of our homes. As they aim to redefine what "clean" truly means and challenge deeply ingrained habits, TOTO's journey is a testament to the power of persistence and adaptation.

Because sometimes, the biggest transformations don't come with a bang or a flash but with a simple, elegant flush, ushering in a future where even the most private moments reflect the best of technology, wellness, and sustainability.



“THE BEST TECHNOLOGY IS NOT ENOUGH; SUCCESS REQUIRES A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR, CULTURAL NUANCES, AND MARKET CONDITIONS.”





Image: Jaguar

REBRANDING FOR THE SAKE OF IT

BY PAUL ASHTON



Inspired by the recent Jaguar rebrand, which has been publicly hammered online, with some parts of the British press going so far as to have shamefully blamed the rebrand on the sexual orientation of the creative head of the project itself, I thought I'd take a look at what rebranding means through the lens of Japanese companies. Maybe you don't agree with me here, but I think this is an interesting story to tell and might need more investigation than just one article...(perhaps we have a new series brewing?).

In the West, a rebrand is often a loud, neon-lit event with fanfare about "fresh starts" and "future-forward thinking." And then comes the inevitable social media backlash from customers feeling abandoned by the brand they loved yesterday. Japan? It's not here for that chaos. Japanese brands have managed to do what Western ones seem incapable of, evolving gracefully. Here, change is subtle, nearly invisible, and sometimes barely feels like change. But it resonates deeply precisely because it honours continuity and cultural heritage.

Take Japan Airlines' recent rebrand: it didn't erase its identity but quietly polished it. JAL preserved its core identity by keeping the iconic Tsurumaru logo, a red crane symbol representing good fortune, and updating its design just enough to appeal to domestic and global audiences. This isn't a brash attempt to look trendy; it's more like putting on a well-tailored suit instead of switching to something overly "on-trend" and inevitably fleeting. This restrained transformation is a cultural imperative in Japan, a carefully orchestrated evolution that strengthens a brand's familiarity and emotional appeal. It's not about grabbing attention with flashy designs but about reassuring customers that the brand they trust is still theirs, just a little more refined.



“JAPANESE BRANDS HAVE MANAGED TO DO WHAT WESTERN ONES SEEM INCAPABLE OF, EVOLVING GRACEFULLY.”



Meanwhile, Western brands see rebranding as a chance to reinvent themselves. The moment the boardroom starts grumbling about relevance, there's a logo refresh, a new slogan, and maybe a radical colour change, all to announce a pivot or reboot. Pepsi has rebranded so many times in the last few decades that customers could make a calendar out of its logos, each update aiming to make a loud statement. Burger King recently went retro, resurrecting its 1970s logo and flat colours to capture the nostalgia wave. Most recently and notoriously, Jaguar has thrown 100 years of brand investment out with the bathwater when they signed off on a plan to reinvent itself as a high-end electric car manufacturer. But in the West, these changes are almost mandatory, with brands embracing trends so quickly that customers barely recognise the companies they once loved. Western brands tend to prize immediacy, digital friendliness, and trend alignment over stability, pushing aesthetics that are bold and accessible, often without any thought for continuity or cultural roots.

Yet Japanese brands also feel the pull to adopt “universal” design elements, which lean into flatter, digital-friendly aesthetics. This international pressure to streamline and homogenise is real, especially as Japanese companies push for global reach. Japan Airlines' rebrand perfectly studies this tension, balancing sleek, global-friendly updates with distinctly Japanese elements like the dot pattern inspired by traditional motifs. While these updates are subtle, they carry significant weight, acknowledging Japan's rich visual heritage while adjusting just enough to align with global standards. Japanese brands walk a fine line, wary of diluting what makes them unique even as they explore an international future. MUJI, the beloved brand of serene minimalism, is a case in point: it carefully introduced simpler, more universally appealing designs while holding on to its roots in Japanese “shibui” (subtle and unobtrusive beauty) and the value of “mottainai” (respect for resources). If MUJI leaned too far into global aesthetics, it would risk alienating its core audience, who value its practicality and Japanese calm blend.



“WESTERN BRANDS TEND TO PRIZE IMMEDIACY, DIGITAL FRIENDLINESS, AND TREND ALIGNMENT OVER STABILITY.”



Japanese rebranding reflects a loyalty to identity beyond profits and product lines; it's about protecting cultural roots while adjusting to contemporary tastes. Loyalty to the brand's history and customers' expectations comes first. On the other hand, some Western brands have recently started to see branding as inherently disposable.

To them, change is a necessary cycle, an opportunity to realign with the latest social values or tech trends, even if it means disrupting their heritage. That can work in industries where rapid change is the norm, but for legacy brands, it can feel unmoored and restless. In Japan, brands don't view rebranding as a disposable tool but as an evolution. They build trust through consistency, reinforcing a shared memory rather than trying to create entirely new perceptions.

Western brands could learn a lot from the Japanese approach. Japanese brands embody a respect for the past, treating it as an asset rather than a burden to shed. They find ways to build upon their legacy without discarding it, layering in new elements that deepen a brand's meaning. While Japanese companies may be tempted to align with global trends, they know the cost of change for the sake of it. Japan has a long tradition of merging old and new, and in a rapidly globalising world, it's clear that Japanese companies aren't looking to make a loud statement, they're looking to make a lasting one.

The quietest rebrands are the ones that resonate the most deeply, echoing a truth that Western brands recently are missing: sometimes, evolution is most powerful when it doesn't need to be announced.



“JAPANESE BRANDS EMBODY A RESPECT FOR THE PAST, TREATING IT AS AN ASSET RATHER THAN A BURDEN TO SHED.”





Image: Nintendo

WHO THE HELL IS HIROSHI YAMAUCHI?

BY PAUL ASHTON



When it comes to legendary business figures, Hiroshi Yamauchi might not be the first name that springs to mind, yet his impact is undeniable. The man was a visionary but not the kind with a soft smile and lofty slogans. He was a gambler who placed colossal bets on his company, culture, and his own brash instincts. From a struggling card company in Kyoto, Yamauchi took Nintendo and reshaped it into a global powerhouse, an empire of characters and pixels. His spirit is infused into every game and every console, not just as a legacy but as a reminder that Yamauchi didn't just do business, he treated it as a battlefield. For him, Nintendo's journey was about survival, victory, and staking everything on his convictions.

When Yamauchi took over Nintendo in 1949, he was a 22-year-old dropout with no experience and no one backing him. The company, then a "hanafuda" card maker, was an obscure player in a niche market, selling playing cards to Japan's gambling dens. But Yamauchi didn't merely aim to keep the doors open; he had a vision to change Nintendo's future. Over the next few decades, he steered the company into countless ventures with reckless abandon. From instant rice to taxis to love hotels, Nintendo tried almost everything. Hardly any of it panned out, but Yamauchi didn't care; he was testing the waters and shaking Nintendo out of its narrow role. To him, Nintendo wasn't just a business but a canvas waiting for its real purpose.



**“NINTENDO’S JOURNEY WAS ABOUT SURVIVAL, VICTORY,
AND STAKING EVERYTHING ON HIS CONVICTIONS.”**





The company's real future clicked into place when Yamauchi noticed the arcade boom in the United States during the 1960s. He saw the allure of these machines, and soon, Nintendo shifted into electronic games, pivoting to capture the attention of younger audiences. His leap of faith into gaming wasn't just daring but colossal. By the late 1970s, Nintendo had started to build a niche name in the arcade scene with games like Wild Gunman, Space Launcher, and Sheriff. Yamauchi didn't know much about the ins and outs of game development, but he understood that Nintendo had the potential to own this new industry. Unlike most executives, he didn't need to be in control of every detail; he simply knew how to direct people with the right talents.

In the early 1980s, he hired Shigeru Miyamoto, a young designer with no technical background but the wild imagination Yamauchi knew he needed. Miyamoto was given room to experiment, which resulted in the creation of huge fan hits Donkey Kong in 1981, followed by Mario Bros. in 1983 and The Legend of Zelda in 1986. Yamauchi didn't interfere in the details, but his genius lay in trusting the unproven and then stepping back to let them shine. By the time Super Mario Bros. hit shelves in 1985, Nintendo was already on the fast track to world dominance, its success fueled by Yamauchi's uncanny sense of who to trust and when to stay out of the way.

Inside Nintendo, Yamauchi ruled with the rigidity of a samurai. Employees weren't simply workers; they were loyal soldiers in a relentless push toward greatness. Yamauchi demanded utter dedication, and the atmosphere at Nintendo was as intense as it was disciplined. Mediocrity wasn't

“BY THE TIME SUPER MARIO BROS. HIT SHELVES IN 1985, NINTENDO WAS ALREADY ON THE FAST TRACK TO WORLD DOMINANCE.”





tolerated, and he fostered a culture where the weak couldn't keep up, and the strong were stretched to their limits. He drove his people hard but offered them a place in something bigger than themselves. For him, success wasn't a matter of luck but the byproduct of iron discipline and absolute loyalty.

Then came one of Yamauchi's most famous confrontations, the day Microsoft's Steve Ballmer flew to Kyoto to try and buy Nintendo. In the early 2000s, Nintendo was facing unprecedented pressure. Sony's PlayStation dominated, and the GameCube was struggling to keep up. Microsoft wanted Nintendo to solidify its growing gaming empire, and Ballmer made the pitch to Yamauchi. Yamauchi's response became the stuff of Nintendo fan legend: His response to Ballmer was a terse, "Hey, Ballmer, why don't you suck my tiny yellow balls?" This one reply summed up Yamauchi's thinking in a nutshell (excuse the pun). In a move more suited to a poker tournament, he was proudly sticking his middle finger up at the corporate giant Microsoft and going all in on the love of his life, Nintendo. He knew what the company could become under his leadership, fuelled by his vision, and for Yamauchi, this wasn't about the money but about Nintendo's soul. He couldn't stomach the idea of selling the company to an American tech giant and ensured Ballmer understood exactly how he felt. To Yamauchi, no amount of cash could justify what he saw as cultural subjugation, and rejecting Microsoft's offer wasn't just about business, it was about pride.

"HEY, BALLMER, WHY DON'T YOU SUCK MY TINY YELLOW BALLS?"





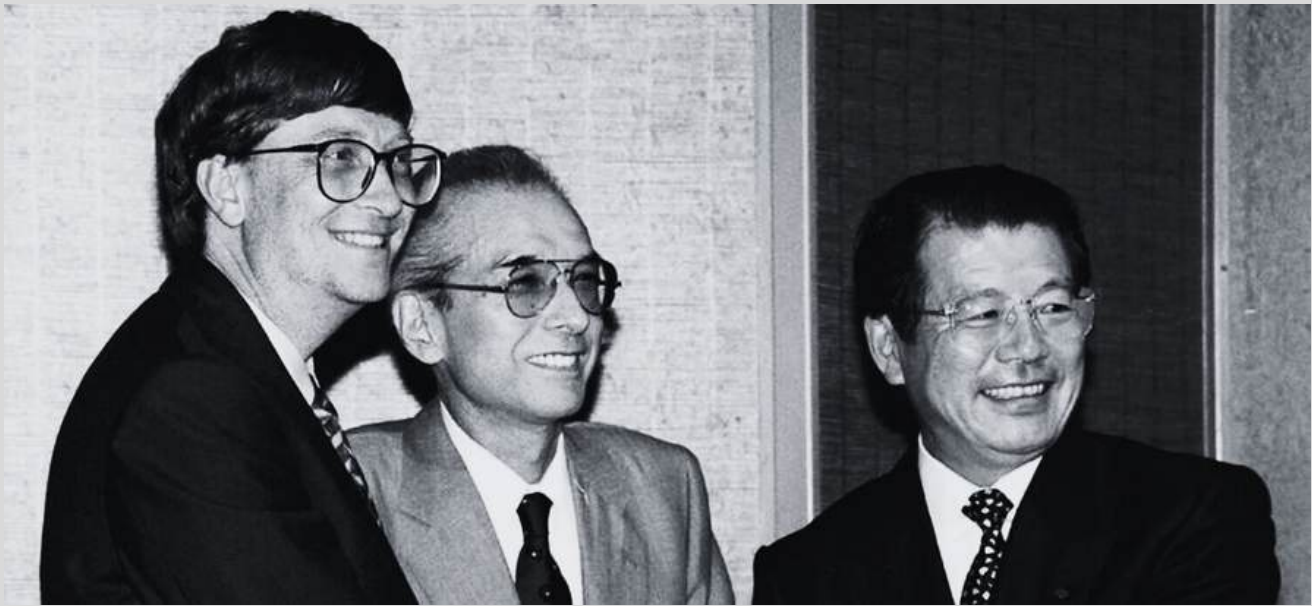
Pride drove many of Yamauchi's decisions. He was equally unforgiving of Japanese rivals like Sony, whose Westernized approach to gaming he openly criticised. When Sony entered the handheld market with the PSP, Yamauchi dismissed it as "probably the worst concept for a handheld device I've ever seen." He saw the PSP's flashy, disc-based design as evidence of Sony's obsession with aesthetics over genuine playability, a stark contrast to Nintendo's DS. While the PSP was built to impress, the DS was "built to be played". Yamauchi saw the DS as Nintendo's philosophy in hardware form: social, simple, and uniquely fun. Sony was another Japanese powerhouse, but Yamauchi considered it corrupted by Western ideals, valuing profit over creativity, loyalty, and playfulness.

You can see from the company's history that Yamauchi took betrayal personally, and no act stung more than when Capcom, a longtime ally, shifted its support to Sony. Capcom's move wasn't just a business decision to him; it was an outright act of disloyalty. In his mind, Nintendo's relationships weren't merely transactional, they were rooted in honour, and breaking that bond was a slap in the face. He saw this betrayal as symbolic of the industry's shift toward self-interest, which he despised. In Yamauchi's world, true allies must be loyal, and their allegiance matters as much as the products they created.

Of course, not all of his gambles paid off. The Virtual Boy, for example, was a legendary flop that failed to gain traction in the market. Yamauchi called it "a bold mistake," rather than seeing it as a failure, he saw it as proof of

"YOU CAN SEE FROM THE COMPANY'S HISTORY THAT YAMAUCHI TOOK BETRAYAL PERSONALLY."





Nintendo's audacity. In Yamauchi's eyes, a bold failure was preferable to a timid success, and the Virtual Boy was a reminder that he'd rather see Nintendo aim high and miss than play it safe.

When he retired in 2002, Yamauchi passed Nintendo's reins to Satoru Iwata, a talented and likeable executive with a very different style. Yamauchi reportedly viewed Iwata as "a bright kid" but thought he lacked the edge Yamauchi had at his age. Yet he respected Iwata's vision and drive, admiring his work on titles like Kirby. In rare interviews, Yamauchi joked about Iwata's "softness" but acknowledged that Iwata was carrying Nintendo forward. Yamauchi remained involved from afar, sometimes joking that he still "told young Shigeru to make a game about gardening", half in jest but wholly serious about Nintendo's power to make anything into play.

Hiroshi Yamauchi left behind more than a successful company; he left behind a culture. His years at Nintendo transformed it from a niche family-owned business into a global icon. His bold risks and fierce pride made Nintendo what it is today: a brand that prioritises creativity, fun, and a refusal to conform. Each Mario game, each new console, every boundary Nintendo has pushed, it all reflects Yamauchi's relentless spirit, the same spirit that wouldn't let him bow to Microsoft, wouldn't let him sell out to quick profits, and wouldn't let him stop experimenting, even at the risk of failure. He showed that a company could be more than products and profits; it could be a movement, and games could be more than diversions. Under his leadership, Nintendo became a legacy. Hiroshi Yamauchi didn't just play the game of business; he made sure his game changed the world.

"EACH MARIO GAME, EACH NEW CONSOLE, EVERY BOUNDARY NINTENDO HAS PUSHED, IT ALL REFLECTS YAMAUCHI'S RELENTLESS SPIRIT"





Image: UZU

SPEAK SOFTLY AND CARRY A POKÉ BALL

BY PAUL ASHTON



Living in Japan for over 20 years as a foreigner has been nothing short of a revelation, a daily exercise in navigating a society that exists simultaneously in the past and the future. Japan reveres its traditions while pushing the boundaries of modernity. This balance isn't just a quaint national quirk; it's a deliberate stance that propelled the country from feudal isolation to becoming an iconic exporter of "cool." The West didn't just stumble upon a love for miso soup or a craving for moral ambiguity in storytelling. Japan struck a cultural nerve we didn't even know we had.

Back in the '70s and '80s, in smoky northern UK pubs, old men nursed pints, gnawed on pork scratchings, and dismissed Japanese cars as "Japan crap" and sushi as "foreign muck." This intolerance reflected a generation's lack of exposure to the "other" and their refusal to see beyond their plates of meat and two veg. While dreams faded with those pints of tepid bitter, Japan quietly reshaped global perspectives, seeping into the cultural consciousness like a slow-moving tide. This wasn't a flashy takeover but soft power in its purest form. Japan didn't shout for attention; it became indispensable.

Take Japan's pop culture, for instance. What was once quirky and niche, like anime and manga, has become a multi-billion dollar industry. Japan didn't adapt to Western tastes; it filled a gap, offering escapism with substance, emotional depth, and a willingness to explore themes that mainstream media sidesteps. Living here, I've seen firsthand how Japan doesn't conform to the world; instead, it draws the world toward itself.



“THIS WASN'T A FLASHY TAKEOVER, BUT AN ELEGANT DISPLAY OF SOFT POWER AT ITS FINEST.”





Streaming platforms have recognized this, investing in Japanese productions and opening the doors to global audiences. But it's not just about content. It's about how Japan tells its stories. Japanese storytelling thrives on ambiguity, on the tension between action and reflection. Take the recent live-action adaptation of *Shogun*, for instance. It didn't merely replicate Western-style historical drama but introduced a deeply nuanced portrayal of Japan's feudal era, blending intense action with a strong focus on cultural and philosophical introspection. The story explored the complex relationships between characters, the clash of Eastern and Western perspectives, and the delicate balance between honour and survival.

Japan's design and technology also make functionality beautiful. Minimalist architecture and innovative gadgets have become global icons. Brands like Muji have built empires on simplicity, and Japanese streetwear, with its playful blend of traditional and modern aesthetics, has dominated urban fashion. This cultural export isn't about shouting innovation from the rooftops; it's about letting thoughtful design speak for itself.

Japanese literature has also found global resonance. Authors like Mieko Kawakami unapologetically explore emotional complexities and societal expectations, themes that transcend cultural boundaries. Alienation, conformity, and the tension between personal desire and public duty resonate deeply across cultures. Japan, through its storytelling, holds up a mirror to global anxieties, becoming an unexpected therapist for the world.

“THIS CULTURAL EXPORT ISN'T ABOUT SHOUTING INNOVATION FROM THE ROOFTOPS; IT'S ABOUT ALLOWING THOUGHTFUL DESIGN TO SILENTLY COMMAND ATTENTION.”





And let's talk about food. Missing out on the simple joy of street food like takoyaki or a perfectly crafted bowl of odon would be a travesty. What's everyday fare here becomes high-end dining abroad. The yakitori you buy in a backstreet izakaya in Osaka transforms into a delicacy in New York gourmet kitchens. This reveals a deeper truth: Japan's simplicity feels like a revelation in a world obsessed with excess. With its fixation on over-the-top food trends, the West fell in love with Japan's unassuming elegance, where each ingredient is honoured and less is genuinely more.

The irony doesn't end there. Japanese hospitality "omotenashi" has become the global gold standard for luxury. The quiet anticipation of a guest's needs and the subtle gestures that make service seamless in Japan are rebranded as high-end experiences from London to New York. The same attentiveness that guides a humble tea ceremony is now repackaged as the pinnacle of opulence. The world woke up to realize that true luxury isn't about flashy displays of wealth but about attentiveness, patience, and respect.

Anthony Bourdain captured this cultural shift perfectly when he said, "When I first went to Japan, it was an explosive event for me. I went to Tokyo the first time and my head kind of exploded. I compared it to taking my first acid trip: Nothing was ever the same for me. I just wanted more of it." His words resonate deeply with anyone who has experienced Japan firsthand. It's not just about the food or the sights. It's about how Japan rewires the way you see the world. The mundane becomes art, and even small moments, like creating a simple bowl of ramen, are imbued with respect for craftsmanship. Bourdain's experience reflects a larger global shift: Japan doesn't just export products or culture; it changes perspectives.

"I WENT TO TOKYO THE FIRST TIME AND MY HEAD KIND OF EXPLODED. I COMPARED IT TO TAKING MY FIRST ACID TRIP: NOTHING WAS EVER THE SAME FOR ME."



Living here, I see how Japan acts as a funhouse mirror for the West. Outsiders gaze into it and see adventure, minimalism, depth, the things they crave, reflected back at them. But that's only part of the story. For those of us on the inside, the global fascination often feels surreal, like watching everyday life turn into a spectacle for international audiences. It's authentic, yes, but also distant, romanticized in a way that feels oddly detached from reality.

Yet Japan isn't just sitting back and letting the world project its fantasies onto it. It's actively curating the show. The subtlety of omotenashi is repackaged as luxury; anime's explosive creativity is tailored to global audiences craving emotional complexity. Japan isn't just being consumed; it's feeding the world a carefully crafted, palatable version of itself while preserving its core essence. This is Japan's genius. As global audiences fawn over its cultural exports, Japan remains both an enigma and the orchestrator, controlling the narrative while preserving its authenticity. It's not just playing the soft power game; it's redefining the rules entirely.

This balance between authenticity and global appeal, tradition and innovation, is the secret to Japan's allure. Japan stands apart in a world obsessed with homogenization, where everything eventually blends into one. It hasn't chased the world's attention; it's been here all along, perfecting its art, its storytelling, its food, patiently waiting for the world to catch up.



“JAPAN ISN'T JUST BEING CONSUMED; IT'S FEEDING THE WORLD A CAREFULLY CRAFTED, PALATABLE VERSION OF ITSELF, ALL WHILE PRESERVING ITS CORE ESSENCE.”





So the next time you binge-watch a Japanese drama, savour sushi, or admire the minimalist elegance of Japanese design, take a moment to appreciate the subtle genius at play. Japan didn't conquer the world with grand gestures or aggressive marketing. It did it by staying true to itself, crafting a story so compelling that the rest of the world couldn't help but take notice. And as someone lucky enough to experience it from the inside, I can tell you this: the journey is well worth it. Japan's cultural exports are a funhouse mirror, but they're also a window, offering a glimpse into a world that balances the complexity of modernity with the grace of tradition. There's magic in that, magic you can't ignore.

“JAPAN DIDN'T CONQUER THE WORLD WITH GRAND GESTURES OR AGGRESSIVE MARKETING; IT DID SO BY STAYING TRUE TO ITSELF.”





Image: WFA

NOW READ THIS! HOW BRANDS GROW

BY PAUL ASHTON



When I first cracked open *How Brands Grow* by Byron Sharp, I wasn't expecting it to obliterate some of the most cherished beliefs in marketing. But here we are. This book doesn't just nudge you to rethink how brands work; it steamrolls over a lot of sentimental nonsense the industry clings to. If you've spent time in marketing, you've probably been spoon-fed the usual clichés: emotional bonds drive consumer loyalty, differentiation is king, and your brand's personality is its secret sauce. Sharp takes that playbook, rips it in half, and calmly tells you to get real.

Sharp and the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute don't have time for your fantasies about lifelong customer loyalty. Instead, they deliver the cold, hard truth: most consumers don't care much about your brand. And no, they're not looking for a "meaningful connection" with it either. What actually drives brand growth is simple: availability and recognizability. Be there, be visible, and people will buy your stuff. That's the whole game. Forget the emotional rollercoaster; Sharp shows that people buy brands not because they love them but because they're easy to find and familiar. Convenient, huh?

Brand loyalty? Yeah, Sharp crushes that idea with a singularly memorable soundbite, "If you want Loyalty, get a dog". The deeper meaning for brands here is that the loyalty we like to fantasise about isn't loyalty; it's habit. And habits can be broken the second a competitor is easier to grab. Sharp's research makes it painfully clear: consumers aren't picking you out of some deep emotional allegiance. They're just playing the field, switching between a handful of brands whenever it suits them. Your slick emotional campaigns and clever storytelling? Cute. But they won't stop a shopper



"IF YOU WANT LOYALTY, GET A DOG."





from grabbing a rival product on a whim if it's closer on the shelf.

The beauty of Sharp's message is that it's backed by actual data, not some fluffy marketing theory. This book is a breath of fresh air, especially if you're sick of hearing the same vague buzzwords about brand love, differentiation, and identity. Sharp's findings hit like a splash of cold water: most of the stuff marketers obsess over is pointless. Growth doesn't come from niche strategies or intricate messaging; it comes from being distinct and easy to spot. Want to win? Focus less on creating the next masterpiece campaign and more on getting your product where people can see it and pick it up without overthinking.

Sharp makes a subtle but game-changing distinction between differentiation and distinctiveness. Differentiation says, "We need to be special, unlike anyone else." However, Sharp's research shows that consumers don't care about that. What they care about is whether your brand stands out. Distinctiveness is the real key. It's not about inventing a whole new identity; it's about using visual cues, colours, logos, and packaging so your brand sticks in people's brains. Think Coca-Cola. No one's buying Coke because of its lofty "values." They buy it because it's everywhere, easy to recognise, and hard to ignore.

The brilliance of Sharp's perspective is that it cuts through the marketing clutter. While everyone else is crafting complex brand personalities and trying to win micro-segments, Sharp's message is brutally clear: stop wasting time on over-engineered nonsense. If you want to grow, reach more buyers with straightforward messages and ensure your brand is always easy to find. Mass marketing, yeah,

"GROWTH DOESN'T COME FROM NICHE STRATEGIES OR INTRICATE MESSAGING; IT COMES FROM BEING DISTINCT AND EASY TO SPOT."



that old dinosaur, turns out to be more effective than chasing niches or obsessing over loyalty. The more people who know you exist, the better your chances. It's that simple.

Sharp's take on customer loyalty will probably sting if you've spent years romanticising the idea. It turns out most customers are what he calls "promiscuous loyals." They flirt with several brands and switch based on what's convenient. Take Coke and Pepsi. In the UK, Coke fans often buy Pepsi if it's easier to get. That's the reality. Your loyalty programs aren't locking in customers; they're just giving discounts to people who'll cheat on you the second it makes sense. So, instead of pouring cash into retention schemes, the smarter play broadens your reach. Hit more buyers, even if they only buy occasionally; that's where real growth happens.

This book forces you to confront some uncomfortable truths. All those intricate strategies to craft a brand story or foster emotional loyalty? They don't matter as much as you think. Growth isn't about who "loves" you; it's about being at the top of your mind when someone needs what you're selling. Sharp introduces the concept of "market-based assets," which sounds fancy but means two things: make your brand easy to notice and access. You're ahead of the game if your product is always available and instantly recognisable. And in a world overloaded with choices, that makes the difference between buying and being ignored.

The genius of *How Brands Grow* is how it slices through wishful thinking and gets down to what works. Sharp's advice isn't to stop being creative, just to focus creativity where it counts. Make your brand distinctive through visuals, packaging, and repetition. Focus on broad marketing efforts to attract light buyers who might only buy from you once in a while but collectively drive most of your growth. Instead of obsessing over loyal customers or niche targeting, your energy should go toward building mass awareness. That's the stuff that scales.



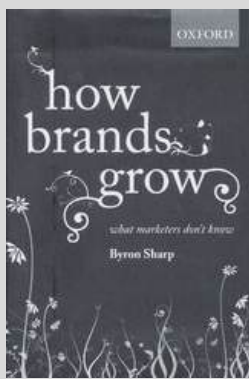
“YOU'RE AHEAD OF THE GAME IF YOUR PRODUCT IS ALWAYS AVAILABLE AND INSTANTLY RECOGNISABLE.”



This book doesn't just offer marketing tips; it's a manifesto for ditching the unnecessary complexity of the industry. Sharp's message is simple but profound: the brands that win aren't the ones people love; they're the ones people remember and can grab without thinking. Forget about trying to forge some emotional connection with your audience; they're not looking for one. What they want is a brand they can recall when they need it. And when that moment comes, you'd better be the one staring back at them from the shelf.

How Brands Grow is the kind of book that slaps you awake. It strips away the fluff and reminds you that marketing isn't about clever taglines or perfectly crafted personas. It's about staying visible, and available and reaching as many people as possible. Sharp's conclusions are a much-needed reality check in an industry addicted to over-complication. He's not saying creativity is dead; he's just pointing out that we've been aiming it in the wrong direction.

Sharp's insights are a wake-up call for anyone serious about building sustainable brand growth. Forget the trendy buzzwords; forget the endless search for differentiation. Just focus on making your brand visible, recognisable, and easy to buy. Because, in the end, the brands that grow are the ones that get noticed. Everything else? Noise.



- Title: How Brands Grow: What Marketers Don't Know
- Author: Byron Sharp
- Genre: Non-fiction
- Subject: Marketing, Consumer Behaviour
- Publisher: Oxford University Press
- Publication Date: March 2010
- Summary: Sharp's best seller highlights evidence-based marketing principles, emphasizing reach, consistency, and availability to attract buyers, reinforce loyalty, and sustain brand growth.

“SHARP’S CONCLUSIONS ARE A MUCH-NEEDED REALITY CHECK IN AN INDUSTRY ADDICTED TO OVER-COMPLICATION.”





JAPAN BUSINESS ETIQUETTE 101 NEGOTIATING

BY PAUL ASHTON



Navigating negotiations in Japan demands more than just sharp business acumen; it requires a deep understanding of cultural nuances and respect for tradition. While the opportunities are vast, so are the challenges, and success depends on aligning with Japanese expectations and behaviors. Here's how to approach negotiations effectively in Japan.

Emotional Sensitivity

The Japanese highly value emotional awareness and subtlety. Small gestures, like a thoughtful gift or showing appreciation for their culture, can foster goodwill. Respecting traditions—such as punctuality and formal greetings—shows your sincerity. These emotional connections often carry more weight than the content of your pitch. Foreigners who recognize and reciprocate this sensitivity are seen as more trustworthy and considerate partners.

Hiding of Emotions

Although emotions deeply influence Japanese behavior, they are rarely expressed openly. Politeness often masks true feelings, making it challenging to gauge their stance. For instance, your counterpart may appear neutral or agreeable even if they harbor doubts about your proposal. Pay attention to non-verbal cues, such as body language, pauses, or indirect phrasing, to uncover their true perspective.



“FOREIGNERS WHO RECOGNIZE AND RECIPROCATE THIS SENSITIVITY ARE SEEN AS MORE TRUSTWORTHY AND CONSIDERATE PARTNERS.”



Power Plays

Direct displays of power or authority are considered inappropriate and can harm negotiations. The Japanese prefer consensus and mutual respect over dominance. For example, even in leadership, it's common to avoid unilateral decisions. Instead, frame your pitch as a collaborative effort, showing how your solution benefits both sides equally. Aggressive tactics will likely backfire and erode trust.

Amaeru and Paternalism

The concept of amaeru, or the desire to be nurtured and supported, shapes much of Japan's workplace culture. Employees are highly loyal to their organizations, which they often consider lifelong commitments. Negotiations that disrupt this stability, such as mass layoffs or short-term partnerships, may be met with resistance. Highlighting long-term benefits for employees and the organization is essential to gaining trust and approval.

Group Spirit

Japan's emphasis on teamwork means decisions are rarely made individually. The proverb "The nail that sticks out is hammered down" illustrates this collective mindset. Convincing one person isn't enough; you need to win the approval of the entire group. Engage with team members at all levels, listen to their concerns, and demonstrate how your proposal aligns with the group's goals.

Ringi Process

The ringi process is a hallmark of Japanese decision-making. Proposals are circulated within the organization for review, with each person adding their seal of approval. This approach ensures that decisions are collaborative and minimizes individual risk. However, it's time-consuming. Patience and persistence are crucial—pressuring for a quick decision can undermine trust and derail the process.



“AGGRESSIVE TACTICS WILL LIKELY BACKFIRE AND ERODE TRUST.”



Delays in Decisions

Japanese decision-making is methodical, often requiring extended deliberations. This is especially true when government approvals are involved. Delays don't necessarily indicate disinterest; they reflect the thoroughness of the process. Stay engaged without appearing impatient—periodic follow-ups can demonstrate your commitment while respecting their pace.

Bureaucratic Problem

Japan's government decision-making is often influenced by domestic lobbying groups and trade associations, leading to delays. Unlike Western bureaucracies, Japanese officials prioritize domestic interests, which can complicate negotiations for foreign companies. Building relationships with local partners who understand these dynamics can help you navigate bureaucratic hurdles effectively.

Avoidance of 'No'

The Japanese rarely say “No” outright, preferring to use indirect phrases like “That may be difficult” or “We will consider it.” These are polite rejections rather than genuine interest. Learn to read between the lines and identify subtle cues, such as hesitation or drawn-out pauses. Misinterpreting politeness as agreement can lead to wasted time and effort.

Value of Friendship

Personal relationships are a cornerstone of Japanese business. Long-term friendships often lead to stronger professional ties. Time spent building rapport—through shared meals, informal gatherings, or even small acts of kindness—can help break down barriers and create goodwill. These relationships are particularly important during challenging negotiations, where mutual respect can smooth over potential conflicts.



“LEARN TO READ BETWEEN THE LINES AND IDENTIFY SUBTLE CUES, SUCH AS HESITATION OR DRAWN-OUT PAUSES.”





Jigokudani Onsen, Nagano

BUSINESS JAPANESE FOR PEOPLE IN A RUSH

BY PAUL ASHTON



Phrase:

手伝ってくださって大変助かりました。
(Tetsudatte kudasatte taihen tasukarimashita.)

Meaning:

The phrase "手伝ってくださって大変助かりました。" translates to "Thank you very much for helping me; it was a great help." This polite expression is used to sincerely convey gratitude to someone who has assisted you, emphasizing how much their help was appreciated.

Usage in Context:

In Japanese culture, expressing gratitude is deeply ingrained; this phrase is a respectful way to acknowledge someone's assistance. The inclusion of "くださって" (kudasatte) adds humility by recognizing the effort made by the person helping, while "大変助かりました" (taihen tasukarimashita) highlights the significant value of their help. This phrase is often used in both professional and personal settings, such as after colleagues assist with a task or someone offers you support during a challenging moment.

Example:

Context: After a coworker stays late to help you complete an important report.

Phrase:

手伝ってくださって大変助かりました。

Translation:

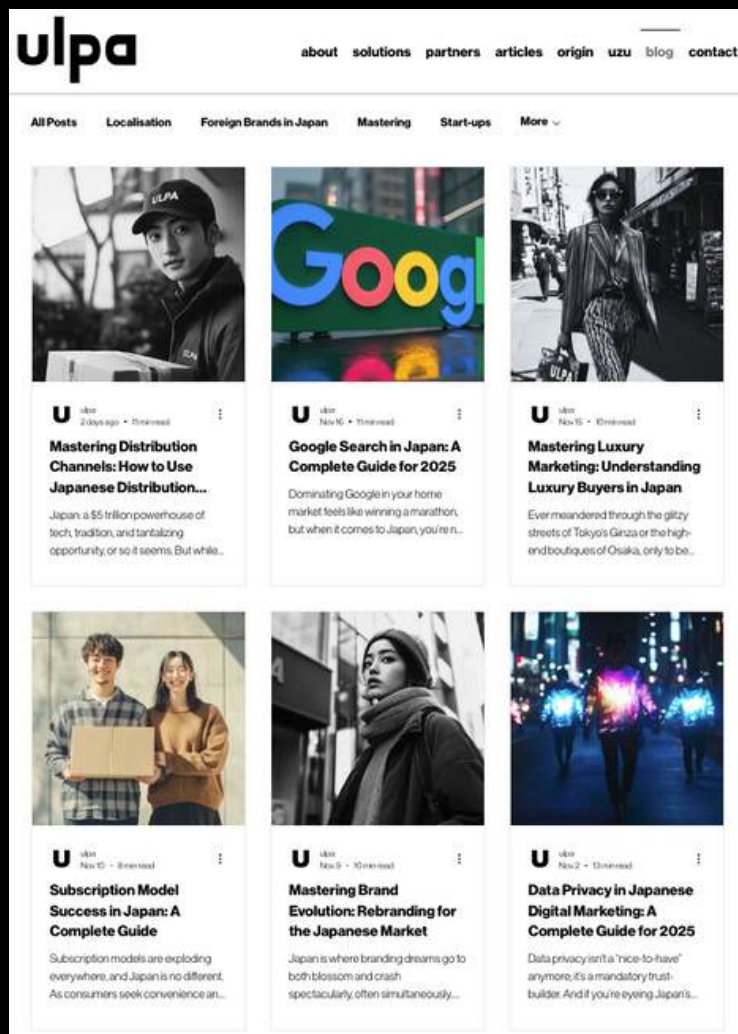
"Thank you very much for helping me; it was a great help."

Cultural Note:

In Japan, gratitude goes beyond mere words; it reflects a deeper acknowledgement of interpersonal harmony and mutual respect. Using this phrase demonstrates your appreciation and awareness of the effort others put in to assist you. In professional settings, adding a slight bow when saying this phrase can further convey your sincerity and respect. It's an excellent way to maintain positive relationships and foster goodwill.



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