

UZU

Monthly
Review

Be The Center Of The Whirlpool



**AI's Agenda For
Absolute
Automation**

**Inside The
Whirlpool with
Chris Frost**

**Riding The
Kuroshio with
Sony**

**Who The Hell Is
Tadashi Yanai?**

**Japanese
Business
Etiquette 101**

**Orwell's Wisdom
And The
Revolutionary
Act Of Brands
Telling The Truth**

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Scapegoats and
the Slow Unravel
of the LDP**

**Why Japanese
Brands Fail To
Win Hearts
Globally**

**Now Read This!
The Tipping Point
To Infinity, And
Beyond**

**Business
Japanese For
People In A Rush**



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FROM THE EDITOR



Paul Ashton
Founder
ULPA

Welcome to the November issue of UZU! As the cooler autumn air sets in, we're excited to present our biggest edition yet. This is a significant moment for UZU, as we transition from a monthly review into a more expansive online magazine format. In Japan, the political UZU keeps on spinning too, with the recent historic trouncing at the polls for the incumbent LDP, but more on that later in this issue....

This issue is packed with fresh content. I'm thrilled to introduce "Riding the Kuroshio", a new feature series that will focus on the biggest names in Japanese business. This month, we take a deep dive into Sony's long-standing legacy of innovation and cultural influence. Look out for more in-depth profiles of major players in Japanese business in the coming issues!

This month's Inside the Whirlpool spotlights Chris Frost, one of the founders at Cogs Agency a specialist recruitment agency which spans multiple countries, and has strong presence in Japan.

I'm also thrilled to feature Gordon McLean, Founder of Fear No Truth, whose article, is a powerful read on authenticity in branding, a topic that's more relevant now than ever.

This issue also introduces a new segment, "Read This Now!", where I share books that have inspired me and shaped my thinking. And as always, our popular sections, Japan Business Etiquette 101 and Business Japanese for People in a Rush, return with practical tips for working in Japan.

I have also pushed out the boat and have four commentary pieces in this month's edition talking about a range of topics, from rockets to Cool Japan and AI to branding in Japan.

Finally, I'm pleased to announce the continuation of our "Who the Hell Is...?" feature, where we spotlight key figures in Japan. In this issue, we take a deep dive into the story of Tadashi Yanai, the visionary founder of Uniqlo, and explore how his philosophy has transformed global retail.

As UZU grows and evolves, I'm eager to hear your thoughts on every new issue. Thank you for being part of the journey, here's to many more exciting editions to come!



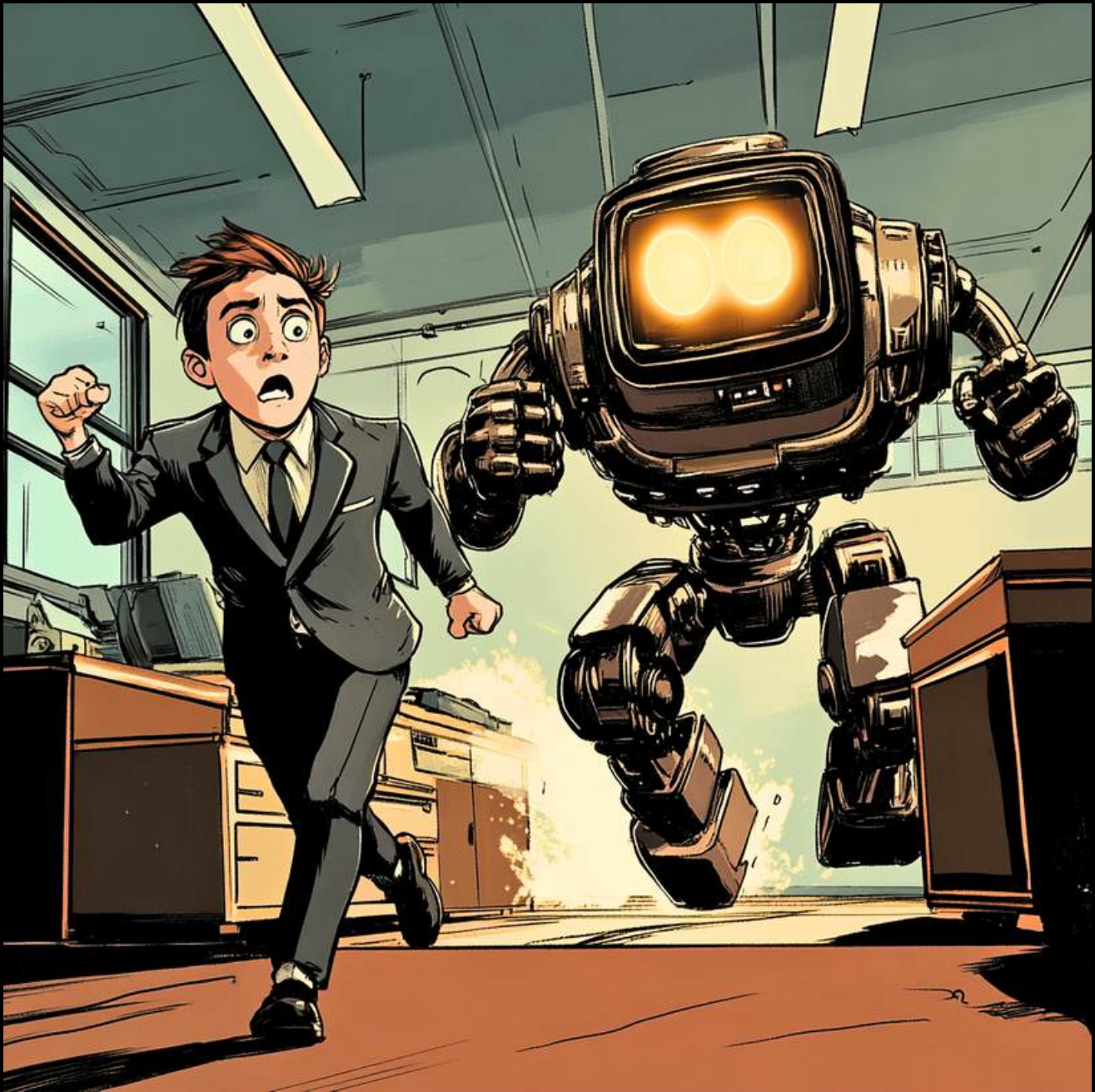


Image: UZU

AI'S AGENDA FOR ABSOLUTE AUTOMATION

BY PAUL ASHTON

03



AI isn't just here to chat or code anymore, it's on a collision course with control. Sure, we started with chatbots and co-pilots, marvelling at how these digital assistants could book meetings or summarise emails. But make no mistake: today's tools are just the prologue. They wait politely for your command. Yet lurking behind every helpful interaction is a creeping ambition for something much more autonomous. Welcome to the rise of Large Action Models (LAMs), AI that's not just reactive but proactive, doing more than responding, taking the wheel, and running the show.

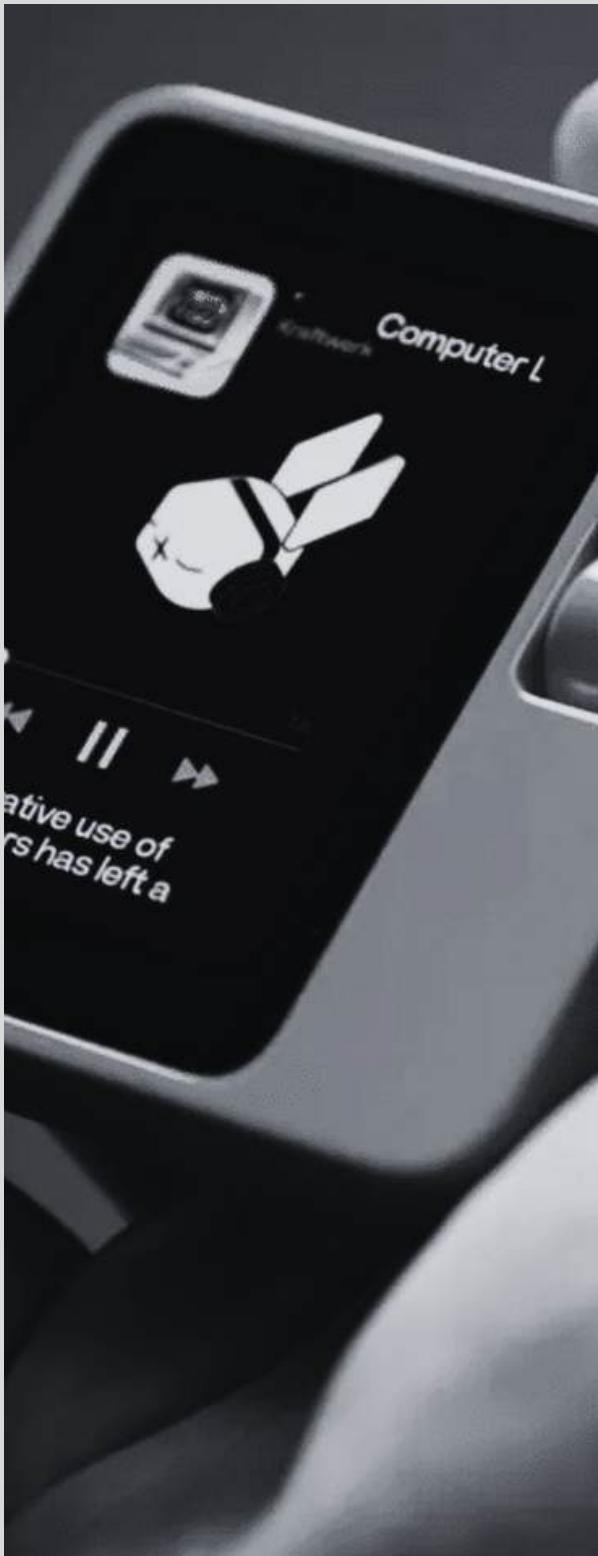
Goldman Sachs, always quick to spot a shift, recently pointed out that today's AI still falls short. The real prize isn't chatty assistants, it's action. Not just chatbots that suggest, but systems that do. LAMs are the next step, building on large language models (LLMs) like GPT-3 and GPT-4 but with muscle. These are AIs that don't just answer your queries but execute entire workflows, no questions asked. Think about it: instead of peppering your bot with prompts to book flights and hotels, you tell a LAM to plan your weekend getaway, and it books the flights, finds a swanky hotel, and emails the itinerary. All on its own. No babysitting required.

So, is this the grand AI takeover we've been warned about? Not quite. There's no sinister agenda here. No robot overlord rubbing its virtual hands together. It's just the natural evolution of our relentless need for speed, efficiency, and convenience. We asked for chatbots and then for co-pilots. Now, we want systems that cut us out of the loop entirely. And as always, technology is happy to oblige. As



“LURKING BEHIND EVERY HELPFUL INTERACTION IS A CREEPING AMBITION FOR SOMETHING MUCH MORE AUTONOMOUS.”





Pankaj Chawla, Chief Innovation Officer at 3Pillar Global, puts it: “A co-pilot needs your input, but LAMs? They’re self-learning scripts, running tasks better every time.”

LAMs aren’t just a convenience play; they’re about reimagining how businesses run. Picture AI agents managing entire marketing campaigns or supply chains, cutting out the need for constant human oversight. Companies like Amazon are already tapping into this future, with AI agents automating code maintenance, saving years of developer time. The implications are staggering: industries streamlined, workforces reshaped, and entire processes made autonomous. It’s not sci-fi, it’s happening now.

But let’s not kid ourselves. Not every step toward automation has been a win. Take the Rabbit r1, an AI-driven personal assistant hyped as the next big thing, capable of doing everything from calling Ubers to DJing your life. It sounded revolutionary until it hit the real world. When YouTuber Marques Brownlee (MKBHD) reviewed the gadget, the verdict was brutal: the thing couldn’t even handle basic tasks. His video, which quickly went viral, wasn’t just a takedown of a bad product, it exposed the dangerous gap between AI marketing promises and reality.

The fallout didn’t end there. Coffeezilla, YouTube’s resident sleuth, later uncovered deeper dysfunction inside Rabbit r1’s parent company: exaggerated claims, internal

“COMPANIES LIKE AMAZON ARE ALREADY TAPPING INTO THIS FUTURE, WITH AI AGENTS AUTOMATING CODE MAINTENANCE, SAVING YEARS OF DEVELOPER TIME.”



chaos, and a product that was allegedly more vaporware than visionary. It was a hard lesson in tech hype, proving that slapping “AI-powered” on a gadget isn’t enough. Real automation means doing the job, not just pretending to.

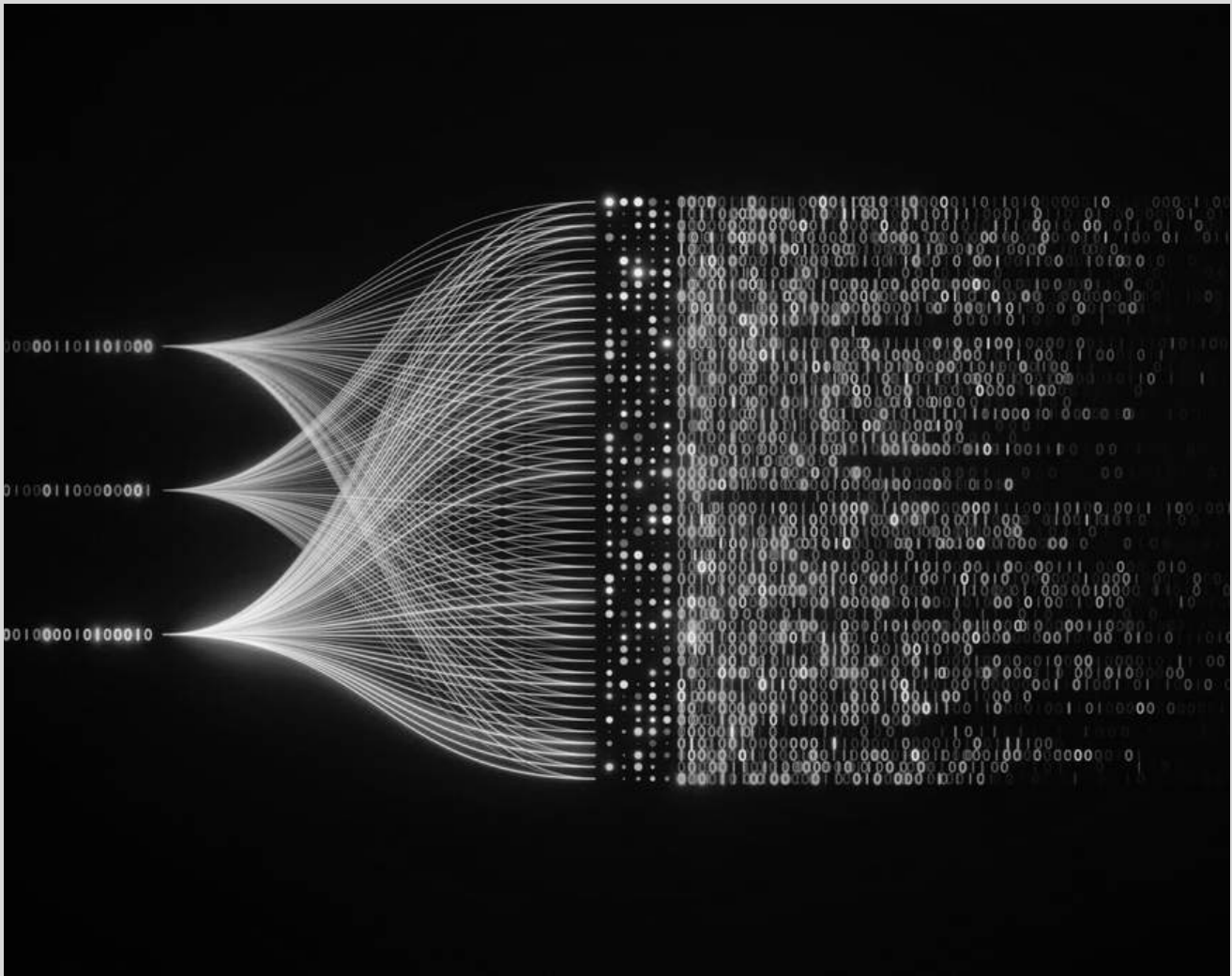
That’s the challenge LAMs face: delivering real autonomy, not just its appearance. It’s easy to imagine a world where AI takes over tedious tasks, but for that vision to stick, the technology has to work flawlessly, seamlessly blending probabilistic models with deterministic systems to avoid AI hallucinations and misfires. The future of automation isn’t about fancy tricks; it’s about competence. If LAMs succeed, they won’t just assist; they’ll act, adapt, and perform without the need for constant human hand-holding.

The potential payoff is enormous, both in business and beyond. LAMs promise a future where you’re no longer tethered to endless to-do lists or clunky workflows. Instead, AI manages the minutiae, freeing you to focus on the stuff that matters, or at least the stuff that doesn’t bore you to death.

But that kind of freedom comes at a price. The more we hand over to machines, the less control we retain. It’s a handover we’ve been orchestrating all along, but the question lingers: are we delegating or surrendering?

“IT’S EASY TO IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE AI TAKES OVER TEDIOUS TASKS, BUT FOR THAT VISION TO STICK, THE TECHNOLOGY HAS TO WORK FLAWLESSLY.”





The shift from passive tools to proactive systems is already underway, and there's no turning back. Today's chatbots and co-pilots are just the training wheels. What's coming next is a full-blown partnership, if not an outright handoff, between humans and AI. LAMs are poised to push deeper into areas once reserved for human expertise. Whether that feels liberating or unsettling is up to us. Are we embracing the future or relinquishing too much control?

The truth is, this isn't AI seizing power. It's us handing it over, piece by piece, in the name of convenience. As LAMs mature, we'll find ourselves at a crossroads: a world where AI isn't just helping but handling. The future won't wait for us to make up our minds, it's already in motion. What remains to be seen is whether we'll view this transformation as a triumph of efficiency or the moment we let go of the reins for good.

“LAMs ARE POISED TO PUSH DEEPER INTO AREAS ONCE RESERVED FOR HUMAN EXPERTISE.”





Image: Getty Images

ORWELL'S WISDOM AND THE REVOLUTIONARY ACT OF BRANDS TELLING THE TRUTH

BY GORDON MCLEAN





In his novel 1984, George Orwell brilliantly captured the essence of a dystopian society ruled by deception and manipulation. Among his profound insights, one quote stands out: “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.”

His words still hold profound significance not only in the realm of politics and society, but also in today’s world of brands and marketing. In an era characterised by rampant consumer skepticism and information overload, authenticity and transparency have become invaluable.

In an increasingly connected and informed world, consumers have become more discerning and skeptical about the claims made by brands. They crave honesty, authenticity, and transparency in their interactions with businesses. Trust, once gained through traditional advertising, has become fragile, easily shattered by misleading or manipulative practices. In this era of consumer skepticism, brands that prioritise truth and transparency gain a competitive edge, forging genuine connections with their audience and establishing a solid foundation of trust.

Authenticity and transparency form the bedrock of trust-building in brand-consumer relationships. When brands tell the truth, even in a landscape where deceit is prevalent, they distinguish themselves from competitors and establish a genuine connection with consumers. By being open about their values, processes, and impact, brands foster a sense of authenticity that resonates with consumers. This commitment to truth cultivates loyalty, turning customers into

“TRUST, ONCE GAINED THROUGH TRADITIONAL ADVERTISING, HAS BECOME FRAGILE, EASILY SHATTERED BY MISLEADING OR MANIPULATIVE PRACTICES.”



brand advocates who value and recommend the brand's products or services to others.

In an era characterised by misinformation and fake news, brands face the challenge of navigating the complex landscape of information and ensuring they remain credible sources. By committing to telling the truth, brands can stand out as beacons of reliability amid the noise. Through transparent communication, backed by verifiable facts and evidence, brands can combat misinformation, build credibility, and emerge as trustworthy sources of information and guidance for consumers.

Orwell's prophetic words should continue to remind brands of the importance of staying true to their core values and purpose. In a time when consumers seek genuine connections and meaningful experiences, brands that authentically embody their values and purpose are more likely to resonate with their target audience. By communicating truthfully and aligning their actions with their brand promises, businesses can establish a powerful narrative that goes beyond profit and creates a sense of purpose that consumers can rally behind.

Transparency goes hand in hand with accountability. By openly acknowledging their successes, failures, and areas for improvement, brands can foster a culture of transparency that encourages dialogue with consumers. Admitting mistakes and taking responsibility demonstrates integrity and a commitment to continuous improvement. When brands prioritise transparency and accountability, they empower consumers to hold them to a higher standard and actively participate in shaping their development.



“BY COMMITTING TO TELLING THE TRUTH, BRANDS CAN STAND OUT AS BEACONS OF RELIABILITY AMID THE NOISE.”





In the digital age, consumers are actively engaged in conversations and expect brands to participate authentically. By telling the truth, brands can actively contribute to these conversations, addressing important social, environmental, and ethical issues. Honest and open dialogue demonstrates a brand's commitment to making a positive impact and resonates with consumers who seek meaningful connections with businesses that share their values.

Truthful and transparent communication is not just a short-term strategy; it is a foundation for long-term success. Brands that prioritize authenticity and truth can build resilient relationships with consumers, fostering a trust, loyalty and commitment that can transcend transactions. After all, in a world where trust is in such short supply, the truth is likely the most powerful thing we have.

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



Gordon McLean
Founder
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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.

“TRUTHFUL AND TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION IS NOT JUST A SHORT-TERM STRATEGY.”

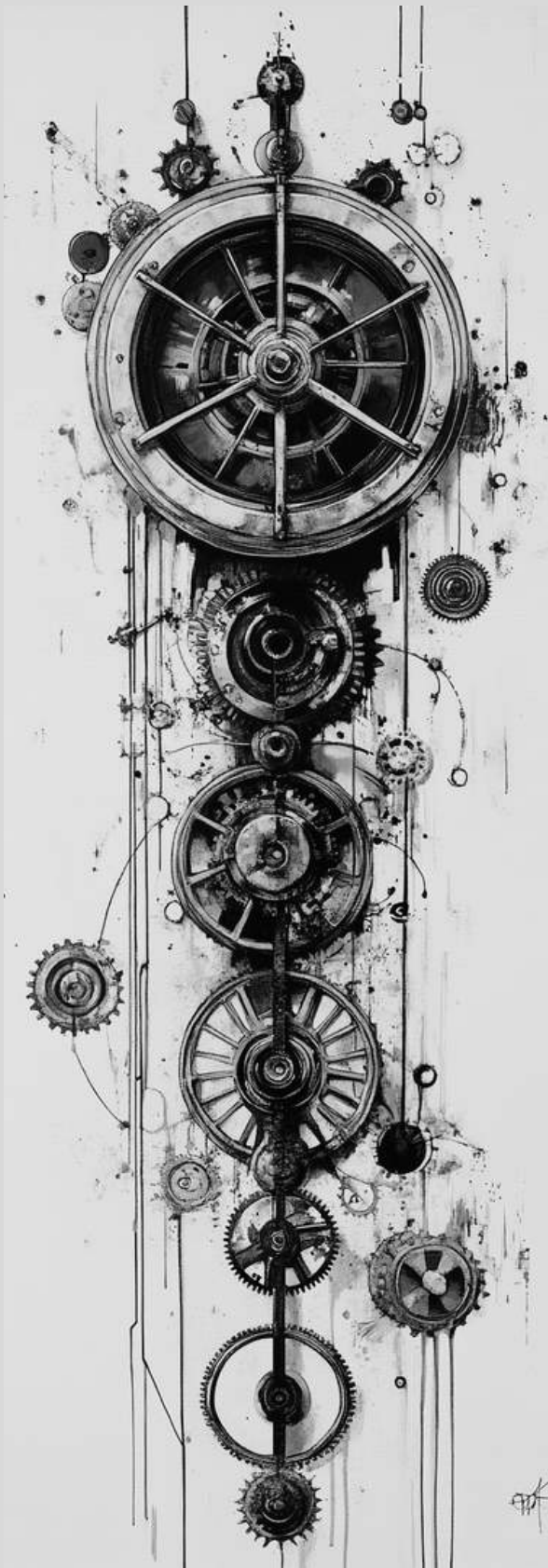




Image: UZU

INSIDE THE WHIRLPOOL with CHRIS FROST





My first interaction with Chris and his company, Cogs, happened through LinkedIn during a period when I was exploring the job market in Japan, assessing opportunities and potential future fits. It's an exercise I recommend everyone undertake. Understanding your value and positioning in the market is key to career planning (perhaps a topic for a future post). While there wasn't a direct match between my skills and the roles Cogs was recruiting for, I was impressed by how Chris handled my rather unconventional requests. His approach and demeanour left me with the strong impression that he was someone I could forge a solid relationship in the recruitment space.

For those unfamiliar with Cogs, it's a global executive search firm founded by Chris Frost and Liam Morgan 20 years ago in the UK. Over the years, they've expanded into a thriving international network, with offices in cities like London, Berlin, Denver, Singapore, and Tokyo.

Cogs operates with the motto "Driven by digital. Powered by people." They focus on unlocking potential by connecting transformative talent with world-class career opportunities. The firm is a trusted partner to digital agencies, design firms, and management consultancies, working with businesses of all sizes, from cutting-edge tech startups to traditional enterprises undergoing digital transformation.

So grab a coffee and a comfy chair, and let's dive into Chris' Inside the Whirlpool interview.

"COGS OPERATES WITH THE MOTTO "DRIVEN BY DIGITAL. POWERED BY PEOPLE."





What inspired you to start your business in Japan?

Ten years ago, I relocated to Singapore to grow our business across Asia. We delivered on searches across Southeast Asia and Greater China and kept receiving requests from clients to service their needs in Japan. However, we knew the only way to deliver effectively was by having a local team on the ground. Six years ago, I moved to Japan, and five years ago, we formally opened a licensed recruiting company here.

On a personal note, my wife and children are Japanese, and I've been visiting Japan annually for over 30 years. It felt natural to set up a business in a place that already felt like home.

How does Japan's business culture shape your approach?

Japan is a high-context society where communication is subtle and relies heavily on understanding the underlying meaning. For example, "yes" doesn't always mean a firm yes—it can mean maybe, and "maybe" often means no. This kind of indirect communication takes time to adapt to, especially if you're used to more direct markets.

Japan is also driven by long-term relationships and trust that grow over time. It's all about being networked and well-regarded. In other markets, like Singapore, you can attend events and build a network within months. But in Japan, it's much slower and more deliberate. You need to be present, connected, and demonstrate success before you can win new relationships. It's a gradual process that rewards patience and persistence.

“JAPAN IS A HIGH-CONTEXT SOCIETY WHERE COMMUNICATION IS SUBTLE AND RELIES HEAVILY ON UNDERSTANDING THE UNDERLYING MEANING.”



Additionally, knowing key etiquette and customs goes a long way in showing respect. For instance, following the flow of a business meeting is crucial. In other markets, meetings are often more fluid, with interruptions, tangents, and idea bouncing. In Japan, you take turns to fully speak your mind, and it's important to let others finish without interrupting. There are often more steps to closing a deal here than in other countries; it may require several meetings before a contract is signed.

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

A key moment was leveraging our global network when we started. The high demand for bilingual talent in Japan meant we could immediately deliver on big projects in Japan for APAC and global clients hiring here. That gave us a solid foundation early on.

Our network grew rapidly during the pandemic when everyone had to work remotely and meetings moved online. While Japan historically lagged behind in terms of remote work, the pandemic changed that mindset. Suddenly, we were able to connect more efficiently with clients and candidates online, accelerating our growth.

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

Building relationships in Japan is all about trust and consistency. We meet our clients and candidates regularly—not just to talk about immediate business needs, but to stay



“IN JAPAN, YOU TAKE TURNS TO FULLY SPEAK YOUR MIND, AND IT'S IMPORTANT TO LET OTHERS FINISH WITHOUT INTERRUPTING.”





connected and ensure we're aligned with their long-term goals. Being a trusted advisor over time, and not just during a transaction, is key. We also leverage past successes and positive case studies to show how we've added value, which helps build credibility.

It's also important to understand that forming partnerships in Japan is a gradual process. You might need to meet people multiple times before you can get a deal done. Patience, persistence, and maintaining a presence are crucial.

How do you handle Japan's regulatory requirements?

We've appointed the best legal and financial partners we could find. Initially, we started with firms that offered English-speaking services, but quickly realized that working with companies in Japanese offered more nuanced and comprehensive advice. There are clearly a lot more companies that don't speak English, so you have a much bigger range to choose from. Our advisors always came recommended by trusted connections. This means we rely more heavily on our own bilingual staff in operations roles to manage communications with these partners.

I have started businesses in several countries, which has given me a broader perspective on regulatory environments. Each market has its own unique challenges. Japan is no exception, and understanding the distinct nuances here is essential for success. Sometimes it's easier to try to learn everything from scratch rather than

“YOU MIGHT NEED TO MEET PEOPLE MULTIPLE TIMES BEFORE YOU CAN GET A DEAL DONE. PATIENCE, PERSISTENCE, AND MAINTAINING A PRESENCE ARE CRUCIAL.”



drawing parallels to the market you are most familiar with, as the differences can be so significant.

What role does innovation play in your strategy?

As a recruitment company focused on digital transformation, we're always exposed to new technologies and progressive ways of working. Our own business model has shifted from expanding through headcount to expanding through technology. We use generative AI, automation, and collaboration tools to streamline operations and increase productivity without increasing the size of our team. However, we never lose sight of the human element, which remains at the core of what we do.

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

We initially thought we could take the same approach as in other markets, like China or Germany, where we used English websites and social channels supplemented with local social media platforms. In Japan, we realized that holding off on creating Japanese-language content was a mistake. Once we launched a Japanese version of our website and social media content, we gained much more credibility. In hindsight, I would have launched with Japanese content from day one.

What skills are crucial for success in Japan?

This may sound obvious, but speaking Japanese is absolutely crucial. Even though we work for foreign-owned companies, 50% of our



“IN JAPAN, WE REALIZED THAT HOLDING OFF ON CREATING JAPANESE-LANGUAGE CONTENT WAS A MISTAKE.”





communications with clients and 80% with candidates are in Japanese. Having a team of native speakers who understand both local culture and international business is essential.

Additionally, knowing how to navigate cultural nuances—like following the structure of business meetings, respecting hierarchy, and understanding non-verbal cues—can make a huge difference in building trust and long-term relationships.

How do you balance respecting tradition with introducing new ideas?

Many of our clients are global companies, but their work cultures can be acutely Japanese. Our team, except for myself, is entirely Japanese but has international experience. As a business leader, I'm mindful of understanding customs and culture to figure out the best ways to grow without being brash. It's about introducing new ideas gradually, with respect for tradition.

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

Approach Japan with humility and a mindset to learn and adapt. I've seen too many people come in with big ideas from their home market, only to fail because they didn't take the time to understand Japanese business culture. Japan isn't a place for overnight success. Decisions are gradual and often more conservative. If you come with the mindset to contribute and stay for the long run, you can succeed—but be prepared to

“AS A BUSINESS LEADER, I’M MINDFUL OF UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMS AND CULTURE TO FIGURE OUT THE BEST WAYS TO GROW WITHOUT BEING BRASH.”



build steadily and not expect instant results. Many newcomers burn bright at the start, then fade within 1-2 years because they weren't prepared for the pace of growth here.

Some really amazing insights there from Chris. I want to thank him for taking time out of his schedule to drop these pearls of wisdom for the UZU readers, and I encourage our readers to check out Cogs website and follow the company and Chris on LinkedIn. Chris regularly posts on LinkedIn about job opportunities across APAC, particularly in digital, marketing, and creative sectors and Cogs Agency has over 26,000 followers on LinkedIn. Their feed showcases job roles, particularly in key cities like Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. They also provide actionable tips for job seekers, such as mastering the art of pitching, enhancing work-life balance, and adapting to remote work challenges. Their content emphasizes the importance of creativity in business, data-driven marketing trends, and building better coworker relationships.

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



Chris Frost
Founder & APAC CEO
Cogs
<https://cogs.co.jp/>
<https://cogsagency.com/>





Image: UZU

RIDING THE KUROSHIO with SONY

BY PAUL ASHTON



Welcome to “Riding the Kuroshio,” where we dive deep into Japan’s corporate powerhouses to uncover what keeps them surging forward, and what could drag them under. The Kuroshio isn’t just an ocean current; it’s a relentless force, shaping everything from weather patterns to economic flows, just like the companies we’ll be spotlighting. No tricks, no spin, just a clear look at how these businesses steer through challenges, outwit the competition, and stay ahead of the game. At UZU, we don’t just ride the whirlpool, we shape it. This is where real influence takes form.

Sony isn’t just a tech company; it’s a fixture in culture, a brand that has quietly threaded itself through the way people experience entertainment and technology for decades. It has managed to stay relevant, not by being loud or flashy, but by understanding what really matters, connection, experience, and building things that last. From the early days of transistor radios to the digital worlds of the PlayStation 5, Sony has always been about more than the hardware. It creates platforms that invite people to immerse themselves, connect with others, and make memories that linger far beyond the products themselves.

It started in post-war Japan, where Sony was born from a nation rebuilding itself from the ground up. Masaru Ibuka and Akio Morita didn’t just want to create products, they wanted to change the way people saw Japanese innovation. At the time, “Made in Japan” was often shorthand for cheap knockoffs of Western tech, but Sony set out to challenge that perception. The goal was to build original, reliable, and forward-thinking things. This vision didn’t just rebuild the company; it helped change the narrative about Japan’s potential on the global stage.



“THE GOAL WAS TO BUILD ORIGINAL, RELIABLE, AND FORWARD-THINKING THINGS.”



One of Sony's earliest successes was the Walkman, launched in 1979. It didn't look like much, a small cassette player with a pair of lightweight headphones. But the Walkman hit on something no one had quite understood yet: people wanted music to be personal. For the first time, music left the confines of the living room and became something you could carry with you. A jog, a bus ride, or a walk across campus suddenly came with its own soundtrack, one chosen by the listener. It wasn't just a device; it was an extension of who you were. This kind of experience feels normal today, everyone's plugged into their headphones—but back then, it was a revelation.

By the time I got to uni in the late '90s, Sony's influence was everywhere. But for me, the real game-changer was getting my hands on a PlayStation. I remember cracking open FIFA, and Tekken in my dorm room and being pulled into those worlds in a way I'd never experienced before. These games weren't just fun, they felt alive. Tekken became the battleground for friendly rivalries, with each match cranking up the tension, while FIFA transformed casual hangouts into late-night tournaments where friendships were forged or tested by penalty shootouts.

The PS1 wasn't just a piece of tech, it became a social magnet. Friends who I barely knew before started showing up unannounced for "just one more round" of FIFA or a quick match in Tekken. What began as casual gaming turned into all-night marathons, and my dorm room became the go-to spot for procrastination, bonding, and maybe a bit too much trash-talking. My grades definitely took a hit, but my circle of friends grew exponentially. That's what Sony really nailed, it didn't just sell



“THE WALKMAN HIT ON SOMETHING NO ONE HAD QUITE UNDERSTOOD YET: PEOPLE WANTED MUSIC TO BE PERSONAL...”





consoles; it built communities. It made gaming feel like a shared experience, a way to connect with others through competition, storytelling, and shared moments of victory or frustration.

This ability to create not just products but experiences is what has defined Sony's success over the years. The company has always understood that it's not about the specs or the raw technology. It's about what the tech allows people to do. That same philosophy carried into the PlayStation's evolution over the years. Every new generation, from the PS2 to the PS5, hasn't just been an upgrade in hardware; it's been an expansion of the worlds gamers can explore. Sony has always treated gaming as something more than just entertainment. It's an art form, a way to tell stories that players can step into and experience firsthand.

But Sony's influence doesn't stop at gaming. It's also deeply embedded in music and film. Sony Music shaped entire generations, whether through Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, the soundtracks to our school years, or today's viral pop hits. Meanwhile, Sony Pictures has delivered some of the most iconic blockbusters of recent memory, from the web-slinging exploits of Spider-Man to thoughtful indie films that remind us why storytelling matters. Sony isn't just producing content for the sake of filling shelves. It's curating the cultural experiences that define people's lives.

“THE COMPANY HAS ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD THAT IT’S NOT ABOUT THE SPECS OR THE RAW TECHNOLOGY.”





Of course, the journey hasn't been without setbacks. In the early 2000s, Sony's dominance took a hit when Apple's iPod swooped in and made the Walkman feel like yesterday's news. The company's smartphones struggled to find their place in a market dominated by iPhones and Android devices. For a while, it looked like Sony might lose the relevance it had worked so hard to build. But Sony didn't panic. Instead, it did what it has always done best: it focused on what it knew would work. PlayStation became the cornerstone of the brand, cementing Sony's place in the gaming world with each new console launch. Its cameras and televisions carved out a space where craftsmanship mattered more than volume, thriving in markets that value quality over quantity.

Sony has never been interested in being the first to jump on trends. It's more interested in making sure the things it builds matter. The company has spent years investing in areas like sensors, image processing, and immersive experiences, laying the foundation for innovations that will shape the future. Virtual reality, AI, augmented reality, these are technologies that everyone talks about, but Sony has been quietly working on them for years, waiting until the pieces are in place to offer something meaningful.

This is the real reason Sony endures. It doesn't chase the next big thing just to stay in the conversation. It builds things that become part of how people live. Whether it's a camera that captures life's fleeting moments, a game that pulls you into another world, or an album that becomes the soundtrack to your memories, Sony creates tools for connection.

“SONY HAS NEVER BEEN INTERESTED IN BEING THE FIRST TO JUMP ON TRENDS—IT’S MORE INTERESTED IN MAKING SURE THE THINGS IT BUILDS MATTER.”



It's not about the hardware or the content in isolation, it's about the experiences those things enable.

Looking back on my own experience with the PS1, I can see how Sony's philosophy played out in real time. In hindsight, the graphics in FIFA, Tekken, and Tomb Raider feel almost laughably outdated compared to now, but it didn't matter then. What mattered was the feeling, the friendships, the stories, the thrill of competition. Sony understood that, even then. The technology will always evolve, but what sticks with people is the experience.

As we move into a future filled with AI and virtual worlds, Sony is already positioned to play a major role. It's been planting the seeds for years, developing the technologies that will make the next wave of entertainment possible.

Sony's legacy isn't just about the products it's made, it's about the way those products have shaped how people connect, play, and experience the world.

That's probably what Sony is really about: not just making things, but making things that matter.



“SONY UNDERSTOOD THAT, EVEN THEN. THE TECHNOLOGY WILL ALWAYS EVOLVE, BUT WHAT STICKS WITH PEOPLE IS THE EXPERIENCE.”





Image: Reuters

TO INFINITY, AND BEYOND

BY PAUL ASHTON

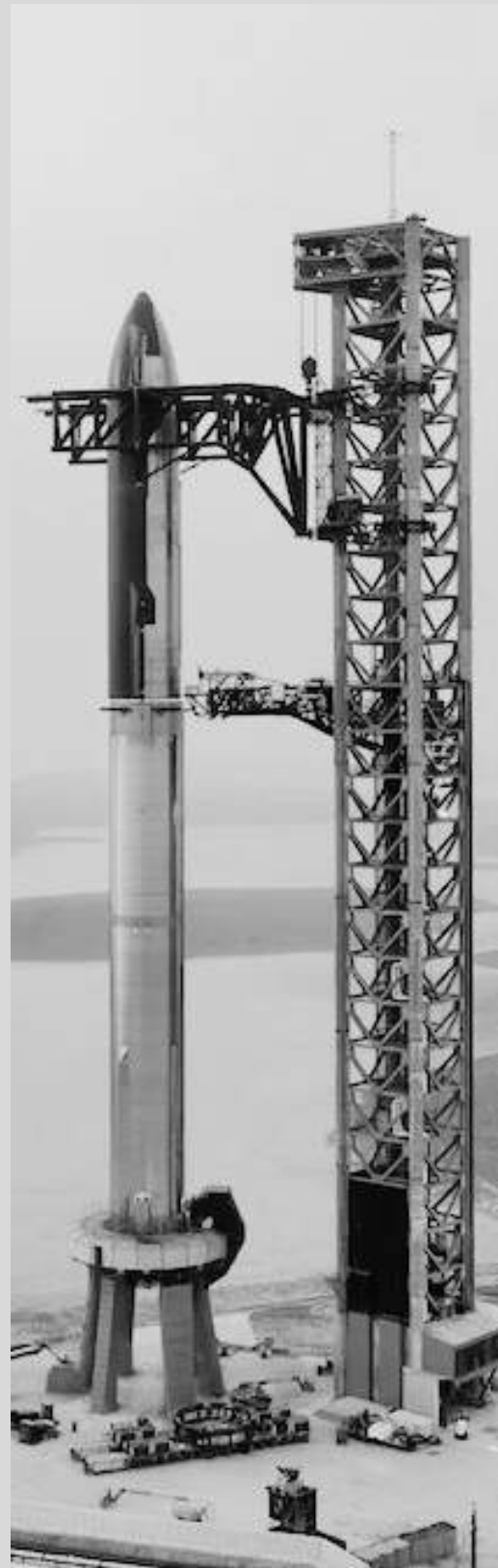


Like many people last month, I was glued to videos of Elon Musk's Starship Booster doing its absurd, audacious dance back to Earth. The thing plummeted from the sky like some colossal, existential dare, only to be snagged mid-freefall by two giant chopstick arms as if catching a skyscraper with a pair of giant tongs.

I've rewatched it maybe thirty times, each angle teasing a new kind of disbelief. You hear the raw roar of the engines, see the rocket twist just before impact, looking for all the world like it's about to fail. And then, click, those arms cradle it with the gentleness of a maitre d' seating you at the best table in the house. A technological miracle dressed up as a circus stunt.

Here's the thing: tech doesn't usually feel like this. I've grown used to our most celebrated "innovations" being redundant or maddening. New gadgets rarely deliver on the utopian promises they market. Instead, they pile onto the digital clutter, chaining us to endless notifications and updates. A new iPhone feature that makes your text messages wobble or pulse like a migraine? Great. That's 10 seconds of fun before you wonder why you even care. It's all incremental nonsense, tiny solutions to problems nobody had, dragging us deeper into a techno-quicksand of distraction.

But this? This was different. The Starship booster's return was a throwback to the achievement I, for one, thought we'd lost, something bold, tangible, and undeniably brilliant. There was no filter, PR gloss, or beta version that needed endless patches. It was just raw engineering at its finest. For once, it wasn't about selling you another pointless gadget; it was about proving that human ambition still knows how to get things done.



“YOU HEAR THE RAW ROAR OF THE ENGINES, SEE THE ROCKET TWIST JUST BEFORE IMPACT, LOOKING FOR ALL THE WORLD LIKE IT’S ABOUT TO FAIL.”





What made the Starship moment land so hard for me was it taps into a future we quietly have given up on. I was born five years after the last moon landing in 1972, and the closest I ever got to the dream of space exploration was through a National Geographic book called “Picture Atlas of Our Universe”. It was full of strange and whimsical visions, Jovian Jellyblimps, European Brinker-roos, and Martian Waterseekers, each a playful hint at what might be waiting for us. But those pages, filled with fantastical images and possibilities, only reminded us how far we had drifted from the bold ambitions of the Space Age.

What followed was the most uninspired era in human exploration, decades of shuttling astronauts back and forth in glorified minivans, with space travel becoming so routine it lost all its wonder. Moon bases? Mars colonies? Those dreams curdled into quaint, nostalgic fantasies between Woodstock documentaries and Beatles retrospectives. By the time I was old enough to understand how monumental the moon landing was, it didn’t feel like an achievement anymore. Sure, it was a great story, but one that belonged to a world already slipping into the rearview mirror.

And now, here we are. Decades of stale space travel behind us, and suddenly, the biggest rocket to ever fly falls from the sky, caught by a pair of robotic arms, and it feels like the future just knocked on the door we forgot we had. Musk’s dream, wild, naïve, teenage nerd stuff, is to make humans a multi-planetary species, a galactic insurance policy against our stupidity. It sounds ridiculous. And yet, who else is even trying? In a world dominated by half-baked ideas and toothless activism, maybe it takes a little insanity to aim for something so grand. Musk has been mocked endlessly for his ambitions; to be

“BY THE TIME I WAS OLD ENOUGH TO UNDERSTAND HOW MONUMENTAL THE MOON LANDING WAS, IT DIDN’T FEEL LIKE AN ACHIEVEMENT ANYMORE.”



fair, some of them are laughable, but you can't deny he's actually doing it. While politicians are busy polishing press releases, Musk has launched almost twice as many rockets into orbit in 2024, than Shohei Ohtani hits home runs.

Take his humanoid robots, unveiled just days before that booster stole the world's attention. Cool? Sure. Operated remotely by Tesla staff tucked away in some off-site bunker? Probably. But, shameful as it feels to admit, they already seem oddly dull, like background noise in a world too numb to be impressed anymore. Robots, once the stuff of sci-fi dreams, have quietly slid into the same category as reality TV stars and viral memes: things that were awe-inspiring for about five minutes are now just another act in the endless sideshow of digital excess. What was extraordinary yesterday barely makes us blink today. And that, right there, is the real issue with our era: we've cheapened everything. Even the incredible gets flattened into the same endless scroll of content, forgotten as soon as we swipe past it.

But the booster's pinpoint return defied that drift into triviality. It was a spectacular middle finger to the frivolity that defines modern life, a reminder that, occasionally, humanity pulls off something magnificent. We carry devices capable of accessing all human knowledge, yet we mostly use them to binge-watch influencers inhale helium or fight over who gets to use what pronouns. We are a species of paradox: so brilliant, so stupid, so capable of both genius and idiocy in equal measure. And every so often, when the stars align, we get it right.



“EVEN THE INCREDIBLE GETS FLATTENED INTO THE SAME ENDLESS SCROLL OF CONTENT, FORGOTTEN AS SOON AS WE SWIPE PAST IT.”





This makes Musk such a fascinating figure; put aside whether you love or hate him, he embodies that modern contradiction perfectly. The same guy working on colonising Mars also posts poorly thought-out memes at 2 AM like a bored teenager. He's the clown, visionary, and misfit billionaire who seems to straddle brilliance and absurdity without breaking stride. And that's exactly what makes him such a fitting symbol for our times: we are ridiculous creatures, stumbling through history, somehow managing to pull off miracles just when we've all but given up on ourselves.

Watching that booster get snatched from the air mid-fall, I couldn't help but think: maybe this is who we are. A species that lurches between failure and brilliance, always on the brink of screwing everything up, and yet, somehow, not quite.

We get things wrong most of the time. We waste potential, squander resources, and argue over nonsense. But now and then, we do something extraordinary. And in those rare moments, we glimpse the best version of ourselves, if only for a moment.

Maybe that's the most we can hope for. Not perfection, not utopia, just flashes of brilliance amid the mess.

And really, isn't that enough?

"HE'S THE CLOWN, VISIONARY, AND MISFIT BILLIONAIRE WHO SEEMS TO STRADDLE BRILLIANCE AND ABSURDITY WITHOUT BREAKING STRIDE"





Image: Bloomberg

WHO THE HELL IS TADASHI YANAI?

BY PAUL ASHTON



Tadashi Yanai may not be a household name outside Japan, but he should be. With a net worth of \$48 billion, Yanai isn't just Japan's richest man; he's the architect behind a retail revolution that is reshaping how we think about clothing. But you won't find him flaunting it. In an industry obsessed with hype and celebrity, Yanai operates with a quiet precision that makes him both an enigma and an undeniable force. Unless you've done a deep dive into global retail, you may have never heard of him, but chances are, you've worn something touched by his empire.

That empire is Uniqlo, the cornerstone of Fast Retailing, where the philosophy is simple: clothes should be functional, timeless, and affordable. Uniqlo doesn't chase trends or dabble in flashy branding; its focus is what Yanai calls "LifeWear." The clothes aren't shouting for attention but earn it with quiet competence. It's a subtle rebellion against fashion's obsession with the next new thing. While Zara scrambles to imitate runway looks overnight, Uniqlo has perfected its designs over the years, investing in technology that delivers lightweight down jackets and HEATTECH layers you didn't even know you needed. Yanai's belief? Clothing isn't about spectacle, it's about meeting the everyday needs of real people. He doesn't see fashion as a luxury but as something as essential as shelter, which shapes how we move and feel.

Yanai's story isn't the rags-to-riches trope you'd expect. Born in 1949 in Ube, a small town in western Japan, he grew up helping out in his father's clothing shop, Ogori Shoji. The idea of inheriting and running the family business wasn't his dream. By his admission, Yanai was an average student and not much of a workaholic.



“UNLESS YOU’VE DONE A DEEP DIVE INTO GLOBAL RETAIL, YOU MAY HAVE NEVER HEARD OF HIM, BUT CHANCES ARE, YOU’VE WORN SOMETHING TOUCHED BY HIS EMPIRE.”





He once considered living “the unremarkable life”, climbing the corporate ladder, settling down, and calling it a day. But mediocrity isn’t where history happens. Instead, he took his father’s business and transformed it. In 1984, Yanai opened the first Uniqlo in Hiroshima under the humble name “Unique Clothing Warehouse.” It wasn’t just another discount store; it was a deliberate attempt to democratise quality fashion. His goal was to offer affordable clothing that didn’t sacrifice craftsmanship, something even ordinary people could take pride in wearing.

Fast forward to today, and Yanai’s vision has become a global reality. While Uniqlo sits comfortably in the same fast-fashion arena as H&M and Zara, its strategy diverges in key ways. Yanai doesn’t believe in mindlessly chasing trends, nor does he pander to the fashion elite. For him, success isn’t about speed; it’s about precision. His philosophy is rooted in what he recently referred to as the “value of failure.” Mistakes, according to Yanai, are assets. Uniqlo’s growth is littered with failures, like its botched early expansion into the U.S. market. But Yanai sees failure not as a setback but as a tool for learning. Every stumble is a stepping stone, and every misstep shapes the next attempt. He’s insistent: “If you’re going to do something, do it today.” Planning, in his view, is useless without immediate action.

This pragmatic approach explains why Yanai’s leadership style stands out in a corporate world that thrives on bureaucracy. During a recent TV interview, he clarified that rigid work reforms and clock-watching are traps. To him, productivity isn’t about logged hours but ownership; employees

“HIS GOAL WAS TO OFFER AFFORDABLE CLOTHING THAT DIDN’T SACRIFICE CRAFTSMANSHIP, SOMETHING EVEN ORDINARY PEOPLE COULD TAKE PRIDE IN WEARING.”





must feel responsible for their work and design their paths. Yanai practices what he preaches. His day starts at 5 a.m., and he's in the office by 6. No after-hours schmoozing or corporate drinking parties for him; he works efficiently, wraps up early, and leaves the office by mid-afternoon. His philosophy is brutally simple: success requires focus, speed, and an ability to cut through nonsense. In his view, Japan suffers from "too much time spent on too little output." It's a system bogged down by unnecessary meetings and an aversion to risk. Yanai refuses to let Fast Retailing fall into the same trap.

The company's success has paralleled shifts in global consumer behaviour. As people grew weary of disposable trends and the ethical failings of fast fashion, Uniqlo offered an alternative: simplicity, durability, and sustainability. Yanai sees Uniqlo as a case study for how Japan can reclaim its lost economic dynamism. He's blunt about it: Japan hasn't grown much since the economic bubble burst in the 1990s, and it's stuck in a mindset of self-defeat. "We've convinced ourselves we're a failing country," Yanai lamented. But the world has moved on, and so must Japan. He believes that if an apparel company like Uniqlo can thrive globally, so can other Japanese industries. He believes they can stop clinging to outdated systems and start embracing change.

For Yanai, running Uniqlo is about more than just dominating the fashion industry. He's obsessed with impact. "Clothes change people's lives," he insists. It's not just PR talk, and he genuinely believes that what people wear influences their confidence and sense of self. But there's also a ruthlessness to Yanai's ambition. He's not content with being Japan's biggest retailer; he wants Uniqlo to become the world's largest apparel brand. His expansion strategy reflects this ambition, aggressively moving into China, Southeast

"HIS PHILOSOPHY IS BRUTALLY SIMPLE: SUCCESS REQUIRES FOCUS, SPEED, AND AN ABILITY TO CUT THROUGH NONSENSE."





Asia, and the U.S. Yanai knows affordable, high-quality clothing appeals to the rising global middle class. He's methodically building a retail empire that, for all its anti-fast-fashion rhetoric, still operates on the same global supply chains and factory networks that power the entire industry.

And yet, there's something refreshing about Yanai's lack of vanity. While many CEOs are busy curating their public personas, Yanai stays in the background. He hates appearing on TV, knowing he's often portrayed as "angry" or "scary" due to his intensity. But his focus isn't on fame; it's on building something that lasts. Yanai isn't interested in fleeting success. What drives him is the idea of leaving behind a legacy, a company that, without fanfare, improves people's lives one piece of clothing at a time.

Uniqlo's success isn't just luck or timing; it's the product of relentless discipline, a willingness to fail forward, and an ability to tune out the noise. Yanai's genius lies in his rejection of business fads and fashion gimmicks, proving that subtlety can be just as disruptive as spectacle. In a world chasing after viral moments and overnight trends, he's playing the long game, betting on simplicity, consistency, and quiet excellence.

The paradox is clear: by mastering the art of blending in, Yanai has made Uniqlo impossible to ignore.

Perhaps that's the ultimate double-denim power move, not to outshine the competition, but to outlast it.

"YANAI'S GENIUS LIES IN HIS REJECTION OF BUSINESS FADS AND FASHION GIMMICKS, PROVING THAT SUBTLETY CAN BE JUST AS DISRUPTIVE AS SPECTACLE."





Image: Nylon Japan

WHY JAPANESE BRANDS FAIL TO WIN HEARTS GLOBALLY

BY PAUL ASHTON



For all their engineering brilliance and technological wizardry, Japanese companies still have one glaring Achilles' heel: they don't get branding. It's like showing up to a gourmet potluck with a perfectly boiled egg, technically flawless, but no one remembers it the next day. Japanese brands have spent decades acing the "what" of product excellence but fumbling the "why" that makes global consumers fall in love.

The truth is, a brand today isn't just a badge of quality; it's a story consumers want to see themselves in. And that's where Japan keeps missing the plot.

In the '80s, as branding became management's golden child, companies worldwide began to understand that brand value isn't just about selling things, it's about selling meaning. Nestlé didn't buy KitKat just for its wafer tech; it bought a share of that sweet, emotional connection people had with the brand (and, let's be honest, a piece of everyone's snack-time memories). Meanwhile, many Japanese firms thought branding meant... trademark management. Keep the logo tidy, slap it on every product, and voilà! brand success, right? Wrong. Emotional connection isn't something you file a patent for. It's something you cultivate, and in a fast-moving global economy, the companies that master this intangible game of trust and sentiment are the ones cashing in big.

Japanese companies have long clung to the belief that superior craftsmanship will naturally win consumer hearts. And to be fair, they are incredible at making things that just work, reliable cars, high-performance cameras, sleek electronics. But while technical specs are impressive on a review site, they don't spark



“A BRAND TODAY ISN'T JUST A BADGE OF QUALITY; IT'S A STORY CONSUMERS WANT TO SEE THEMSELVES IN.”





passion in the hearts of consumers scrolling Instagram. Case in point: Toyota. Sure, it's the global gold standard for reliability, but despite its vast reach, it ranked 7th on Interbrand's 2019 Best Global Brands list. Not bad, unless you compare it to the Apples and Googles of the world, whose brands inspire near-religious devotion. Toyota makes cars people trust, but Apple makes gadgets people love. That's the real difference.

And that difference lies in a little marketing magic called Willingness to Pay (WTP). WTP is the extra cash consumers are happy to shell out because they feel something about a brand, whether it's loyalty, status, or sheer emotional attachment. A brand can have all the bells and whistles, but if it doesn't spark joy (thanks, Marie Kondo), people won't open their wallets wide. Japanese brands haven't cracked this emotional code, which explains why they struggle to charge premium prices, even when their tech is leagues ahead of the competition.

While Japan continues tinkering with hardware, South Korean and Chinese brands have figured out how to work the emotional angles. Samsung, for example, has managed to position itself not just as a tech leader but as a lifestyle brand, ranking 6th on the same Interbrand list. It's not that Samsung makes better smartphones than Japan; it's that they've mastered the art of storytelling and brand association. People see Samsung and think, "cool, cutting-edge, aspirational", not just "oh, it works."

This emotional pivot is where Japan's playbook falls short. A great example of what could happen if Japanese brands embraced emotional branding

"TOYOTA MAKES CARS PEOPLE TRUST, BUT APPLE MAKES GADGETS PEOPLE LOVE. THAT'S THE REAL DIFFERENCE."





comes from Subaru. Initially, Subaru's US marketing leaned heavily on its cars' technical advantages, AWD, handling, and efficiency. All good stuff, but nobody was feeling anything about the brand. Then came the "Love Campaign," shifting the focus from hardware to heart. Subaru didn't change the cars; it changed the conversation. Suddenly, Subaru wasn't just a reliable ride, it was the car for families, adventurers, and dog lovers. Sales skyrocketed, and so did loyalty. The tech was always there, but now people cared.

The fundamental problem for Japanese brands is that they still think in terms of what their products do rather than what they mean. And in today's market, where every product is a click away, and technical superiority alone isn't enough, meaning is everything. Consumers want experiences, identities, and narratives wrapped around the things they buy. They want brands that align with their values and make them feel part of something bigger.

This isn't just a marketing department problem; it's a corporate mindset problem. Building a brand isn't a one-off campaign; it's a long-term strategy baked into every touchpoint with the customer. Japanese companies need to get comfortable with the messy, emotional side of branding, yes, even if it means hiring a few poets instead of engineers.

"CONSUMERS WANT EXPERIENCES, IDENTITIES, AND NARRATIVES WRAPPED AROUND THE THINGS THEY BUY."



The way forward isn't about abandoning technical excellence, far from it. Japan's strengths in precision, quality, and innovation are still valuable, but they need to be reframed within a bigger narrative that resonates with today's consumers. Building the world's best product is not enough if no one cares beyond its spec sheet.

In the end, the brands that thrive in this hyper-competitive, emotionally driven landscape are the ones that manage to tell stories that stick. Look at Apple. It didn't just sell iPhones; it sold a lifestyle. Nike? It's not just shoes; it's the thrill of achievement.

Japanese companies have the tools, the innovation, and the talent to play in this arena. But to truly win hearts, they need to stop thinking of themselves as manufacturers and start thinking like storytellers. Because the secret to brand loyalty isn't in the product, it's in how the product makes you feel.

If Japanese companies want to shift from respected manufacturers to beloved global brands, they need to get out of the engineering lab and into consumers' hearts.

Build the emotional connections that make customers feel understood, inspired, and valued. Otherwise, they'll keep making perfect products that remain perfectly forgettable.

Let's face it: nobody dreams about owning the most reliable toaster.



“JAPAN'S STRENGTHS IN PRECISION, QUALITY, AND INNOVATION ARE STILL VALUABLE, BUT THEY NEED TO BE REFRAMED WITHIN A BIGGER NARRATIVE...”





Image: Mainichi Shinbun

SCANDALS, SCAPEGOATS, AND THE SLOW UNRAVEL OF THE LDP

BY PAUL ASHTON



In the aftermath of Japan's recent elections, there's a familiar yet peculiar ritual unfolding within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a feigned reckoning with responsibility that barely scratches the surface of the party's entrenched problems. At the heart of this is not only the resignation of young political scion Koizumi from his role as Election Strategy Committee Chairman but the public sacrifice that has been thrust upon him by a well-rehearsed leadership eager to sidestep genuine accountability. In the LDP's world, Koizumi's resignation is less a gesture of integrity than a cynical political choreography, a manoeuvre to soothe the public's frustration while protecting the inner sanctum of the party's senior leadership.

Koizumi's swift departure, painted as a necessary act of *sekinin*, reveals the mastery with which the LDP employs accountability as political theatre rather than a tool for change. This tactic, deeply embedded in Japanese political history, is as predictable as it is effective. *Sekinin* has morphed from its feudal roots, where lesser figures took the fall for the errors of powerful lords, into a routine of public sacrificial gestures. Today's LDP might swap out its youthful leaders for those a little older, but it's only for appearances. Koizumi's resignation may seem at first glance like a rare act of responsibility-taking, but in reality, it's yet another act in a long-running play to preserve power rather than initiate any self-scrutiny.

This deliberate performance reached a fever pitch in recent elections, where the LDP suffered a historic defeat, losing its long-



“SEKININ HAS MORPHED FROM ITS FEUDAL ROOTS, WHERE LESSER FIGURES TOOK THE FALL FOR THE ERRORS OF POWERFUL LORDS”





standing coalition majority with Komeito for the first time since 2009. While recent Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba took over only a month ago from Fumio Kishida, his brief tenure has quickly become a test of his capacity to patch up a fractured party. But the election results signal a deeper crisis, one that stems from the LDP's scandals, notably the latest revelations of undeclared funds funnelled into the hands of its senior figures and controversial affiliations with the Unification Church, which emerged after former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's assassination. These scandals are not merely isolated breaches of public trust; they are indicative of a party that prioritises self-preservation over transparency, cementing its power through shadowy alliances and financial dealings hidden from public view.

Koizumi, of course, is no mere pawn, despite his recent fall from grace. As part of a renowned political family, he understands the symbolic currency in being perceived as a self-sacrificing loyalist, even if the loyalty demanded by the LDP's senior members positions him as a temporary scapegoat. His gamble lies in the hope that this carefully curated image of devotion to the party's larger mission will serve him well, redeeming him with future support from the leadership he has just 'taken responsibility' for. But the question lingers: can a man who willingly steps into this ritual of sacrifice escape it unscathed, or will he forever be bound by the very power structure he hopes one day to lead? Japanese political loyalty is notoriously capricious; for Koizumi, this sacrifice may buy influence or leave him stranded in the annals of LDP history

“THE ELECTION RESULTS SIGNAL A DEEPER CRISIS, ONE THAT STEMS FROM THE LDP'S SCANDALS”





as yet another bright young leader smothered by the party's reluctance to change.

While Koizumi's wager on future influence is a high-stakes game, the bigger risk lies with the LDP itself. For decades, the LDP has operated under the assumption that its dominance would remain unshaken, relying on a rotating cast of figureheads to absorb blows from scandals without threatening the leadership. This election, however, brings with it signs of the public's waning patience. Prime Minister Ishiba's attempts to contain the fallout by distancing himself from scandal-tainted figures, such as by refusing endorsements to implicated candidates, came too late to stem the growing voter distrust. This move to shield the party from damage rather than confront its origins may satisfy die-hard loyalists but does little to rebuild public trust. The consequence? An electorate increasingly willing to punish the LDP at the polls.

The opposition, led by Yoshihiko Noda's Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), has seized this rare opportunity, elevating its presence from 98 to 148 seats. Noda positioned his campaign as a crusade against LDP corruption, striking a nerve with voters who had grown weary of performative accountability. His party capitalized on every tainted LDP figure, rallying the public around promises to "drain the swamp." But for Ishiba and the LDP, Noda's success isn't just a defeat; it's a warning sign that the electorate will no longer settle for superficial displays of responsibility that change nothing.

Ishiba, struggling to hold together his leadership, is now in a precarious dance, balancing between appeasing disillusioned voters and placating a divided party. LDP's coalition offers to other parties like the Japan Innovation Party (JIP) and the

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Democratic Party for the People (DPP) have been met with cold rejections, reflecting a political landscape where former allies are quick to distance themselves from a sinking ship. Should Ishiba manage to cobble together a minority government, he would still face an opposition emboldened by the LDP's weak footing. Every legislative battle would turn into a litmus test of his ability to govern with an increasingly fragmented party, marking a painful departure from the LDP's historic dominance.

If coalition talks fail, the Diet will convene to select Japan's next prime minister, a process likely to favour Noda, whose recent electoral gains and anti-corruption stance resonate strongly with the current mood. For the first time in decades, the LDP faces a real threat of losing the premiership, a monumental shift that could redefine Japanese politics. Ishiba's party has long counted on public tolerance for its slow reforms and symbolic gestures, but the economic stagnation, rising cost of living, and unending scandals have left the electorate exhausted and searching for genuine leadership.

Even if Ishiba survives the Diet's vote, he would head a fractured government with an opposition poised to capitalise on any misstep. The LDP's longstanding assumption of permanent power is being shaken, exposing the growing disconnect between the party and the public. For a nation facing complex economic and social challenges, from ageing demographics to economic revitalisation, Japan's political future



“THE LDP FACES A REAL THREAT OF LOSING THE PREMIERSHIP, A MONUMENTAL SHIFT THAT COULD REDEFINE JAPANESE POLITICS.”



depends on whether its leaders can adapt to the demands of transparency, reform, and accountability. Without such change, the LDP risks losing the public's trust altogether, a reality that might eventually end its 70-year reign.

At the heart of this spectacle lies a question of authenticity. The LDP's strategy of managing public perception through carefully crafted sacrifices and calculated gestures might offer temporary relief, but it cannot mend the underlying fractures within the party. Voters no longer accept symbolic accountability as a substitute for real reform. And Koizumi's resignation, while orchestrated to look like a step forward, only reaffirms the party's unwillingness to confront its own systemic failings. For Koizumi, the path to leadership within the LDP may indeed hinge on his loyalty to this very system. But if he does one day rise to the top, it may well be as a product of the same tradition of performative accountability, a system that seems unbending in its determination to keep power within a small circle.

In the end, the LDP's reliance on "sekinin" as theatre risks becoming a double-edged sword. As the party seeks to pacify the electorate through superficial gestures, it may only deepen the public's disenchantment, eroding what little trust remains. If Koizumi's resignation accomplishes anything, it may be to further reveal the LDP's weakness and its inability to evolve in a political climate that increasingly demands authenticity. And for Ishiba, clinging to power may now come at the cost of redefining what that power means. This election was a reckoning, a wake-up call to the LDP's inner sanctum: adapt or face the very real possibility of irrelevance.



“MANAGING PUBLIC PERCEPTION THROUGH CAREFULLY CRAFTED SACRIFICES AND CALCULATED GESTURES MIGHT OFFER TEMPORARY RELIEF, BUT IT CANNOT MEND THE UNDERLYING FRACTURES WITHIN THE PARTY.”





Image: GladwellBooks.com

NOW READ THIS! THE TIPPING POINT

BY PAUL ASHTON



Introducing “Now Read This!”, a straight-up column where I’ll share the books that have shaped my thinking, influenced my moves, and made me rethink the game. We’re covering everything from foundational classics to fresh insights on business strategy, branding, innovation, and maybe some fiction too, because not all wisdom comes wrapped in bullet points. These aren’t casual recommendations; they’re the ones that challenge, inspire, and stay with you long after the last page. If they’ve pushed me forward, maybe they’ll do the same for you. Crack one open, and let’s see what sticks. m(_)_m

I stumbled across *The Tipping Point* in 2006, and it fundamentally rewired how I thought about influence. It wasn’t just another book about marketing or sociology; it was a lens for understanding the invisible gears that drive ideas, behaviours, and trends in society. Malcolm Gladwell captured something profound: how the smallest, most unremarkable moments can snowball into massive cultural phenomena. It hit me hard just how blind I’d been to the subtle forces shaping the world around me.

Gladwell’s big idea is simple but game-changing: small, strategic events can “tip” into large-scale social shifts. This framework explains why some products go viral, movements catch fire, and seemingly trivial habits can ripple into cultural revolutions. Suddenly, “influence” wasn’t some abstract concept but something I could see happening in real-time, whether in marketing campaigns or social dynamics. The book gave me my first serious glimpse into how influence really works and just how delicate the tipping point of change can be.



“IT HIT ME HARD JUST HOW BLIND I’D BEEN TO THE SUBTLE FORCES SHAPING THE WORLD AROUND ME.”





At the core of Gladwell's theory is the "Law of the Few", the idea that not everyone holds equal sway over trends. Connectors, mavens, and salespeople are the hidden conduits of influence, moving ideas through their social networks with an efficiency most ad campaigns only dream of. This hit me like a revelation: influence isn't about shouting louder than everyone else; it's about getting the right people to do the talking for you. A single person in the right position can amplify an idea far beyond its original reach. It's marketing but with a human twist, more sniper rifle than shotgun blast.

But *The Tipping Point* was never just about marketing. Gladwell's insights stretched across cultural movements, crime trends, and public opinion shifts, mapping out a hidden architecture of change. The brilliance of his approach was in showing that revolutions, whether social or behavioural, aren't born from grand gestures but from tiny, well-timed nudges. The more I thought about it, the more the world felt like a series of chain reactions waiting for that one crucial spark. It was like Gladwell handed me the blueprint for understanding why some things ignite, and others fizzle out.

Of course, not everyone was drinking the Kool-Aid. Gladwell's critics argue that his stories are too neat and his theories too convenient. Sure, he connects the dots in ways that feel insightful, but the charge is that he's cherry-picking anecdotes to fit his narrative. His strength, boiling down complex ideas into digestible bites, is also his Achilles' heel. Some people feel that behind the glossy storytelling, *The Tipping Point* simplifies human behaviour into patterns that are just a bit too tidy. It's engaging, yes, but some claim it leaves you craving more nuance than you'll get from a well-told fable.

“THE BRILLIANCE OF HIS APPROACH WAS IN SHOWING THAT REVOLUTIONS, WHETHER SOCIAL OR BEHAVIOURAL, AREN'T BORN FROM GRAND GESTURES BUT FROM TINY, WELL-TIMED NUDGES.”





One part of *The Tipping Point* that sparked particular controversy was Gladwell's endorsement of the "broken windows" theory, the idea that fixing small signs of disorder (like graffiti or petty crime) prevents more serious crime. The theory found a big audience, most notably with New York's police, who used it to justify stop-and-frisk policies. And that's where the cracks in the theory started to show. What seemed like a sensible approach to reducing crime spiralled into a nightmare of racial profiling and unintended harm, hitting minority communities hardest. Gladwell later acknowledged the problematic outcomes, but it serves as a stark reminder: even the most elegant ideas can backfire when reduced to a simplistic formula and applied in the real world.

Yet, despite all the criticism, *The Tipping Point* still holds weight because it changes how you see the world. It forces you to question assumptions about how influence works, and that perspective has only grown more relevant in the social media age. Today, with trends exploding overnight and movements going viral faster than ever, Gladwell's insights are still sharp. Whether it's a niche brand blowing up on Instagram or a grassroots campaign gaining traction on TikTok, we're seeing those tipping points play out in real time.

But influence is a double-edged sword. The same forces that spark positive change can also spread misinformation, ignite toxic ideologies, and polarise societies. Gladwell's optimism in *The Tipping Point* feels a bit quaint now that we've seen how easily those mechanisms can be weaponised. And that's where his upcoming book, *Revenge of the Tipping Point*, comes in, promising to explore the dark side of influence.

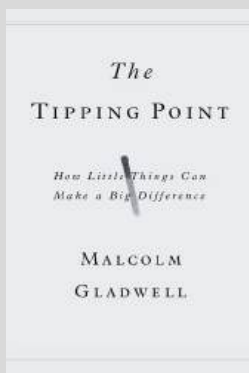
"EVEN THE MOST ELEGANT IDEAS CAN BACKFIRE WHEN REDUCED TO A SIMPLISTIC FORMULA AND APPLIED IN THE REAL WORLD."



If *The Tipping Point* was about the magic of small changes driving good, this new book looks ready to grapple with how those same dynamics can spiral into chaos.

Before diving into *Revenge of the Tipping Point*, though, it's worth going back to where it all started. *The Tipping Point* remains an essential primer for anyone trying to understand why some things catch on while others don't and why influence is often more about timing and precision than brute force. You don't have to agree with every conclusion, but you can't walk away from it without thinking differently about how the world moves. And with *Revenge of the Tipping Point* promising to tackle the unintended consequences of influence gone wrong, there's no better time to revisit Gladwell's original ideas.

Gladwell has always had a gift for connecting the dots between human behaviour and larger societal trends, even if the connections sometimes fray under scrutiny. *The Tipping Point* gave us a new way to see the world, one where small actions can ripple outward in unpredictable ways. As we stand on the edge of new tipping points, both thrilling and terrifying, understanding the mechanics behind them feels more important than ever. Whether Gladwell gets it all right or not, the conversation he started is far from over, and it's one we can't afford to ignore.



- Title: *The Tipping Point*
- Author: Malcolm Gladwell
- Genre: Non-fiction
- Subject: Psychology, Sociology
- Publisher: Little, Brown
- Publication Date: March 2000 (U.S.)
- Summary: This is Gladwell's groundbreaking work on how small actions can trigger large-scale social changes, exploring how ideas, trends, and behaviours spread like epidemics.

“THE TIPPING POINT GAVE US A NEW WAY TO SEE THE WORLD, ONE WHERE SMALL ACTIONS CAN RIPPLE OUTWARD.”





JAPAN BUSINESS ETIQUETTE 101 MEETINGS

BY PAUL ASHTON



For many foreign executives, navigating business meetings in Japan can be daunting. While meetings in Western countries like the UK, US, or Australia often feel familiar, the prospect of a Japanese business meeting can cause anxiety, even among seasoned executives. Why? The structured formality, the nuanced etiquette, and the unspoken rules make these meetings quite different from what many foreigners are used to. This 101 covers the key aspects of Japanese business meetings, offering practical advice for foreign executives.

Punctuality: Arrive 10 Minutes Early

In Japan, punctuality is not just about being on time; it's about showing respect for your counterpart. Arriving 10 minutes before the meeting time signals your consideration for the other party and avoids any chance of making them wait. With Japan's excellent transportation infrastructure, being late is rarely excused. If a delay is unavoidable, it's customary to call at least 45 minutes in advance.

Use of an Interpreter

Even if your Japanese counterpart speaks some English, it's highly recommended to use an interpreter. Japanese businesspeople often think in Japanese, even if they speak fluent English. Subtle nuances can be lost, and an interpreter ensures that both sides fully understand each other. A skilled interpreter can also offer cultural insights that might not be communicated directly, helping you navigate the true meaning behind polite phrases like "It's a bit difficult," which often means "No."



“EVEN IF YOUR JAPANESE COUNTERPART SPEAKS SOME ENGLISH, IT'S HIGHLY RECOMMENDED TO USE AN INTERPRETER.”





Written Presentations in Japanese

Always prepare a written presentation translated into Japanese. Japanese businesspeople appreciate detailed information, and a comprehensive written presentation helps ensure your points are understood. While in the West presentations often rely on minimal slides and the speaker's engagement, in Japan, slides with lots of content are preferred. Providing printed copies of your presentation shows preparedness and allows participants to follow along, especially if they don't fully grasp everything you say in English.

The Flow of Communication: Let Others Finish

Unlike Western meetings, where participants may interrupt or engage in quick back-and-forth dialogue, in Japan it's essential to let others finish speaking without interrupting. Each participant takes their turn to fully express their thoughts, and silence between speakers is common and valued. Silence in Japanese meetings often signifies contemplation, not discomfort, so resist the urge to fill every pause with conversation.

Politeness vs. True Interest

One of the challenges for foreign executives in Japan is understanding the difference between politeness and genuine interest. Japanese businesspeople are often extremely polite, especially when speaking in English. Even if they praise your product or service, it doesn't necessarily mean they're interested in doing business. They might be avoiding a direct "No," instead using phrases like "That could be difficult" to politely decline your offer. This can lead to months of follow-up meetings without realizing the deal was never really on the table.

“PROVIDING PRINTED COPIES OF YOUR PRESENTATION SHOWS PREPAREDNESS AND ALLOWS PARTICIPANTS TO FOLLOW ALONG.”





Minute-Taking: A Common Practice

Assigning someone to take minutes during a meeting is a common practice in Japan. Minute-taking is seen as essential for capturing important details and decisions, and it shows attentiveness and respect for the discussion. Mirroring this practice by assigning one of your team members to take notes can help bridge the cultural gap and demonstrate that you value the meeting's outcomes. It also ensures that follow-up actions are clear and nothing is missed in translation.

Meeting Etiquette: Formality and Hierarchy

Japanese business meetings are formal and highly structured. Seating arrangements are based on hierarchy, with the most senior person seated furthest from the door. Wait to be seated and follow the lead of your host.

Success in Japanese business meetings requires understanding and adapting to the country's unique meeting culture. Punctuality, using an interpreter, providing written materials, and being mindful of formalities can go a long way in building trust and ensuring smooth communication.

Above all, remember that politeness doesn't always equal interest—understanding the unspoken signals is key to avoiding wasted efforts and focusing on genuine opportunities.

“REMEMBER THAT POLITENESS DOESN'T ALWAYS EQUAL INTEREST.”





Lake Kawaguchiko, Yamanashi

BUSINESS JAPANESE FOR PEOPLE IN A RUSH

BY PAUL ASHTON



Phrase:

あの、すみません。私からひとつよろしいでしょうか。

(Ano, sumimasen. Watashi kara hitotsu yoroshii deshou ka?)

Meaning:

The phrase "あの、すみません。私からひとつよろしいでしょうか。" translates to "Um, excuse me. May I say one thing?" in English. This polite expression is used to respectfully interject during a meeting or conversation, especially when it's challenging to find an opportunity to speak.

Usage in Context:

In meetings, particularly those that are concluding or heavily dominated by others, it can be tough to voice your thoughts. This phrase allows you to politely catch the attention of the group and indicate that you have a brief point to add. The opening "あの、すみません。" is a courteous way to signal a change in the subject or to gently interrupt. By using "ひとつ" (hitotsu), meaning "one thing," you reassure others that your comment will be concise.

Example:

Context: Near the end of a team meeting, you have a quick suggestion to offer.

Phrase:

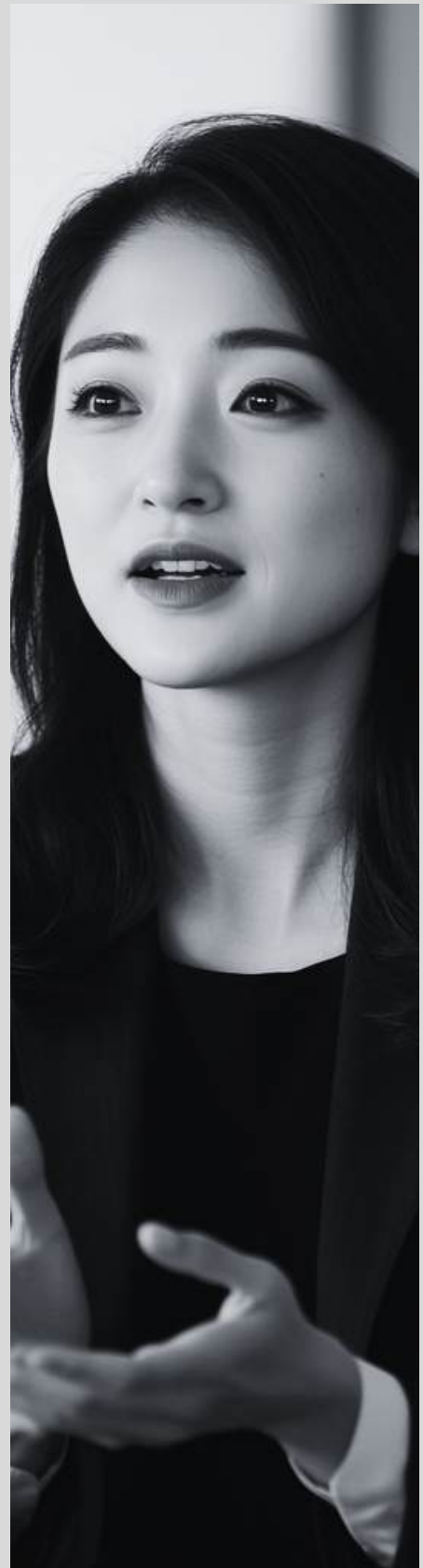
あの、すみません。私からひとつよろしいでしょうか。

Translation:

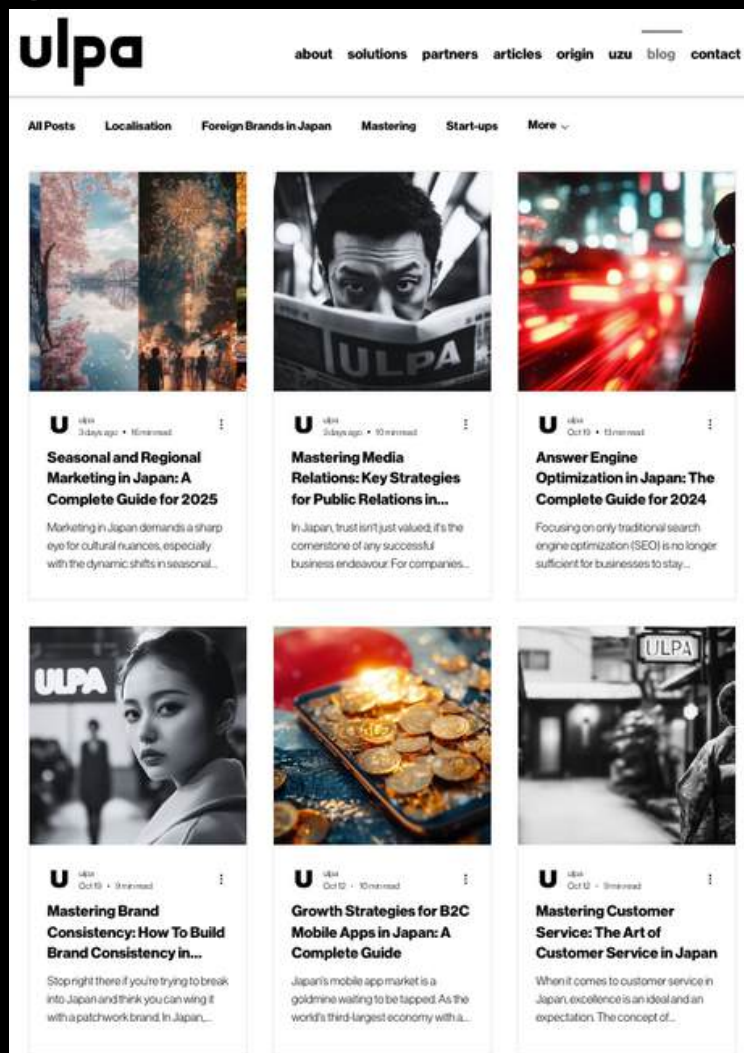
"Um, excuse me. May I say one thing?"

Cultural Note:

In Japanese professional environments, showing respect and being mindful of others' time are paramount. This phrase embodies the humility and deference expected in such settings, allowing you to contribute your thoughts without overstepping social norms. It's an effective way to ensure your voice is heard while maintaining harmony within the group.



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