

Doing Business in Japan



By Kenji Yano, PhD
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The Japanese market is the second largest economy in the world, driven by the world's third largest per capita consumption.

The market provides ample opportunities for the sale of U.S. products. However, the biggest obstacle for U.S. businesses in Japan is business customs. Even though information technologies would appear to bring people together from across the world, there are still substantial language and cultural barriers that technologies cannot transcend.

When you search the Internet, you might get a feeling that you're accessing the world's information, but in reality you're accessing only the information published in the language you use. If you seek information on the Japanese market, you should be pre-

pared to Google using Japanese characters. Otherwise, it's a matter of luck whether or not the author published in English as well. The same also applies to the materials you publish to reach out to the Japanese market. The Internet has already connected the world. Now it's your own language and cultural upbringing that limits your access.

In Japanese business culture, knowing who you are is just as important as what you do or sell. Building rapport may require some extra effort and personal time. For example, important conversations may take place after work at a tavern. Don't be surprised if you are asked a lot of personal questions. It's part of the "getting to know you" process essential for doing business in Asia.

Subtle misunderstanding in a strange culture could easily lead to mistrust. When you meet a prospective customer for the first time, he may not appear to be interested in your presentation. He might even close his eyes while you are speaking. But don't despair. He's just lis-

tening carefully. Also, don't assume that you can call your prospect's office and leave a quick voice message. Answering machines and voice mail are still relatively uncommon in Japan.

If you can't get information online and can't easily communicate person-to-person, then exactly how do you venture into this unfamiliar market? In Afghanistan, the U.S. military recently launched an experimental program called Human Terrain Team where a team of anthropologists are assigned to combat units. Early results show that U.S. officers lavishly praised the anthropology team because it's helping them see the situation from an Afghan perspective and allowing them to cut back on combat operations. In global business, too, cultural/language liaisons can help build successful relationships and streamline the process of entering a new market. Technologies are not yet reliable. You need to trust in human skills to transcend cross-cultural barriers.

So, how does the everyday business-

person venture into this uncharted territory? There are always language and cultural courses at the local community college. This is a great way to begin to open doors. You could also hire a translator to create a Japanese section on your website. Ideally you will find one who has experience in your field. You might find, however, that you need more expertise for promoting the site, presenting customer education seminars online as well as in Japan, and directly contacting prospects. In this case, a business liaison consultant can be invaluable. Of course...you could always try the time-honored custom of sharing a bottle of sake. Kanpai!

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