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Japanization and Globalization: Can they fit together?

The secret to succeeding on both fronts

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I recently tore my hair out hearing about LAMÈCHE's story in Japan. This fictitious name hides a real rather high-end French professional hair care brand who had just signed a distribution contract with a Japanese wholesaler in the Japanese market. LAMÈCHE's usual presentation material, company history, philosophy and product portfolio, including the latest item launched ("a real killer") was provided to the partner's operational marketing team. In return, LAMÈCHE was eager to receive their sales strategy and detailed sales plan. A week later, the interface (madoguchi) within the distributor sent the following email:

Thank you for your presentation material. You refer to head massage while applying the treatment as one of the key element of your philosophy. Does it refer to a specific head massage technique? By whom was it developed and when? Do you have any proof of the difference in results compared to a typical head massage? On the other hand, if it is not a specific massage technique, we will not mention it. Concerning the new product launch, can you please share with us the details of a success story in other markets?

These lines were followed by a list of 10 other questions about the origins of raw material, whether tests had been conducted on animals or not... Finally, LAMÈCHE was informed that a shipment of products had been rejected because the labels were not stuck properly on the containers. When they enquired further, LAMÈCHE learnt that the labels were slightly off-center on the bottle (about a 1 mm variation on a 5 cm label).

With 13 years of practice as an interface between European companies and local Japanese operational teams, I can say that LAMÈCHE's story is a pretty common one. Most international companies introducing new products in Japan face three unsettling reactions:

- 1- "Japan is different and things here have to be done differently"
- 2- An absence of enthusiasm along with an awfully long list of questions about (what is perceived by the French as) insignificant details
- 3- Highly diverging perceptions and expectations about quality

Those topics shouldn't however cause too much concern about the motivation and skills of local sales teams or business partners. So how should they be addressed or understood? And why are they usually "worth the pain"?

1- You are global and Japan is still specific!

With the ever-growing availability of global products, services and affordable travel across the globe, the [digital age](#) has further developed the concept of global markets and global consistency as a key requirement in branding strategy and operational efficiency. However, it is true that Japan remains very specific in many ways, at least as a very mature and discerning consumer market. In that sense, some effort is required to check the relevance of your product/service and its differential positioning and advantage. If we go back to LAMÈCHE's case, any hair salon would provide head massage during usual care in Japan. Consequently, LAMÈCHE's underlining of that philosophy is completely irrelevant in terms of service differentiation. Does this imply that local adjustment is incompatible with a global strategy? Well, it depends: do you perform this differentiation analysis from your own point of view (an unconscious bias I commonly meet) or from the actual perspective of your customer? In the era of customer experience, it is worthwhile, if not mandatory, to consider the second option. In other words, you shouldn't change your global strategy, but you do need to tune it so that the client perceptions in different markets are consistent.

The Japanese have always expected exceptional interpersonal service and their expertise in that field is a worldwide benchmark. Succeeding in Japan will lead you to improve your products & services and the efforts you have deployed for the Japanese market should be capitalized on for other regions. As a matter of fact, because of the sophistication of its customers, Japan is widely considered as a test market for multinationals in many industries as well as a benchmark across Asia.

Tadashi Yanai, Chairman, president and CEO of UNIQLO, a remarkable success story about global branding, provides an excellent illustration of that strategy: “Globalization means to go local. If we, an originally Japanese company, are to develop stores in the US, we must create products that American people would like. Furthermore, these products must sell well not only in the US, but all over the world. The same principle applies for all region”.

2- Japanese rationale is pragmatic

On one particular aspect, Japanese culture differs greatly from many Western cultures and especially France: it is much more practical than conceptual. Ideas are developed progressively and in detail rather than with an initial overall picture. Details about the **what’s, the how’s and the why’s** are essential to the thinking process. If a business partner does not provide them, it is usually considered as negligence or a lack of professionalism. In that sense, being able to provide the details beforehand or on demand is crucial for establishing a trusting relationship with your local teams and business partners. This initial effort will actually enable them to carefully plan the implementation phase. Furthermore, their questioning is more a sign of involvement and motivation rather than the opposite. Unfortunately, this key aspect of the relationship is often misunderstood and results in frustration and loss of motivation on both sides.

3- The Japanese are perfecting perfectionism ☺

Defects, even those having no influence on the usage or quality of the product itself, bring the Japanese to question the overall reliability of the product or service. The impact on the image of the brand or of the company is often judged more costly than rejecting the defective items. Moreover, the Japanese are “optimization-process minded” (kaizen) and this is deeply rooted in their working behavior: imperfections are systematically analyzed and corrective measures are taken to avoid recurrences. Japanese manufacturers have themselves a differentiating approach towards domestic and international markets. In the automotive field, a major Japanese automotive maker would operate the sewing finish of the car steering wheel manually while it is automated for all other markets. All manufacturers operate a 5-layer root cause analysis (why?why?why?why?why?) when a defect occurs in order to solve the problem at the source. International companies who succeed in Japan have also implemented measures in order to satisfy the Japanese requirements in terms of Quality. For example, a famous French luxury brand has implemented an airport-like security metal detector check in its Japanese warehouse in order to avoid a needle being left on clothes before they are shipped to stores. These requirements seem pretty extreme, but in an era where an increasing number of customers value quality rather than consumer bulimia, Japan is also the place to be and learn.

As a conclusion, next time you face those reactions from your Japanese local teams or partners, consider it as a great opportunity to strengthen your relationship leading to mutual understanding and your product/service offering, potentially leading to worldwide excellence.

Mini bio: Nousha Saint-Martin

Based in Japan for more than 13 years, Nousha has built a strong professional expertise in operational management and strategic marketing in various industries in the Japanese market. Her hands-on experience at Carl Zeiss, Chanel Japan and Pierre Fabre Japan gives her an intimate knowledge of industries such as FMCG, luxury watches & fine jewelry and medical & research devices. Nousha now helps multinational customers develop their brands, their markets and build harmonious partnerships between Europe and Asia (with a special focus on Japan) both from business and cultural perspectives.

