

Cultures and Advertising in Japan

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“Japan is an archipelago consisting of four main islands and over 6,000 small islands. Its main islands are Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu, along with the twelve major cities and main geographical regions. The main consumer markets are on the central Pacific coast. These areas dominate the social and economic life of Japan” (Larke, 1994).

Japanese cultures and values

Japan is considered as a collectivist society. Individuals belong to one or more groups. They protect the interests of the members of these groups and expect permanent loyalty from the groups. Hard working and proper behaviors mean the success of the group, the respect of the other members of the group and the preservation of harmony with the environment and national unity. As a result, its communication is “high-context.” This means less verbal, more ambiguous, and less emotional displays in publics. The non-verbal communication plays an important role in this society. It is

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implicit rather than explicit. The objectives of Japanese communication are directed toward achieving consensus and harmony in interpersonal relationships and social circumstances. They also focus on group advantages more than on the individual. (Hofstede 1984 cited in Hanes, 1995; Lin 1993). This is congruent with the interviews of the two Japanese advertising executives, Ishikawa and Naganuma, published in *Advertising Age* in 1995. Naganuma explained Japanese culture in the following statement:

"We Japanese view ourselves as one homogeneous family. Our shared history, traditions and national cultural identity give us a very strong sense of community. Consequently, the nature of communication within the Japanese culture reflects a commonality of thought, attitude and circumstance, in what is often an unspoken language understood by us."
(Naganuma cited in Ishikawa and Naganuma, 1995)

Nowadays, young Japanese tend to be exposed to Western cultures more than

ever before. Two values that are more important to young people than they are to the population at large are networking and individualism, which have increased "soft individualism," a movement away from the tradition of groups that do everything together toward looser networks (Herbig, 1995). Christ Beaumont, managing director of a Tokyo market research consultancy, stated that "It's not in about facing individualism in the Western sense. There's a balance between assertive self and a belonging self," (Brasor and Masako, 1995).

Japanese Consumers

In 1995, Herbig (1995) wrote the book, *Marketing Japanese Style*, and summarized the characteristics of Japanese consumers as follows;

- Be knowledgeable about products;
- Be careful about buying;
- Be eager to maintain close relationships with stores;
- Be unwilling to stand out, but rather wants to belong to a peer group;
- Be interested in new things;
- Be insensitive to price as an inducement to try a new product;
- Be sensitive to word-of mouth recommendations from peer;

- Be adverse to the hard sell, especially on the television, or through the mail or by phone;

- Be the king with the store owners;

- Be willing to try a foreign product that has been endorsed by peers;

- Expect quality to be emphasized, the product supported, and service prompt;

- Be not overly concerned with price as other factors;

- Be more concerned with convenience;

- Be poorly served by business and government; When they save, they receive little interest; when they spend, they have little choice among products; and,

- Be resigned to accept most of the status-quo: It has always been done this way and it can't be changed.

Japanese women play more important roles in buying products because women work outside the home more than in the past. Dentsu, a Japan's largest advertising firm, reported that young office ladies, whose income was 100% disposable because most lived with their parents and paid no rent, were Japan's most conspicuous consumers. The post-school, pre-marriage set of women like shopping and traveling.

After women married, their high spending continued, since Japanese men handed over their entire salaries to their wives, who ran the family budget. Clearly, women are the dominant consumers in Japan.

Japanese Advertising

As stated previously, Japan's culture is a "high context," less verbal, more ambiguous, and less emotional displays in public. Given that advertising is reflective of culture, Japanese advertising tends to place a premium on cultural images designed to convey the familiarity and trustworthiness of the producers. Its advertising is also emotional, suggestive, and indirect (Hanes, 1995; Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1990). In addition, the characteristic of Japanese language is a factor that exacerbates the differences in advertising expressions. Japanese language is more sensitive and emotive than directed toward logical exactness. It does not tend to express the various modes of being precisely and accurately. In Japanese consumers' opinion, presenting information, facts or evidence in advertisement sounds argumentative, garrulous, and annoying (Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkhan, 1987). Ramaprasad and Hasegawa (1990) stated that Japanese

advertisements tend to be more symbolic and emotional appeal more than the informational appeal, sometimes with very indirect product selling approach.

Advertising appeals

Advertising appeals are any messages or illustrations designed to persuade consumers to buy a product. To motivate the consumer's action, these appeals must be related to consumer's interests, wants, goals, and problems. The advertising appeals are different in each country because of differences in their cultures, values, norms and characteristics. In 1987, Mueller stated that the "Japanese values, norms, and characteristics have been operationalized to form both traditional and modern/Western appeals." Mueller's research shows that the three appeals most frequently used by Japanese magazines are "soft-sell," "veneration of the elderly and traditional appeal," and "status" appeals.

Mueller (1987) defined soft sell appeal in advertising as creating mood and atmosphere in advertising by using beautiful pictures and emotional developments. Her research results also revealed that Japanese advertising used this appeal more than American advertising. The veneration of

the elderly and traditional appeal uses the older person to give advice and recommendations to the younger generation. Also, the reverence of tradition is stressed. Her findings revealed that more than one out of ten Japanese advertisements stressed traditional or respect for the elder generation. Last, the definition of status appeal is expressed by statements that the use of a product will improve some inherent quality of the user in the eyes of others. Position and rank within the context of the group are stressed. This category also includes foreign status appeals, such as using foreign words, phrases, models, and foreign celebrity endorsed products. The research found that Japanese advertisers used this appeal more than American advertisers. If the impression was given that a product was imported or had the sanction of Western markets, it was seen by Japanese consumers as being a highly prestigious product and much more luxurious than a domestic product of comparable quality.

In addition, Japanese advertising presents the modern or westernized appeals as well through media. One of the most popular modern appeals is Individual and Independence appeal. This appeal is focused on the individual as being distinct and unlike

others. Individuals stand out from others and have the ability to be self-sufficient. According to Mueller's research in 1987, she found that Japanese advertising generally used this appeal more than American advertising. Besides, when the products are categorized by the involvement level, the following conclusions can be reached:

1. The high-involved products, such as automobiles, jewelry and appliances, were usually presented in "status," "product merit," "individual/independence," and "soft sell" appeals.
2. The medium/high-involved products, such as cameras, televisions and watches, were majority presented in "product merit," "soft-sell," "status," and "individual/independence" appeals.
3. The low-involved products, such as food, hair-care products and wine, were presented in terms of the "product merit," "elderly/traditional," "soft-sell," and "status" appeals.

Another research study was done by Cutler and Malhotra (1995) relates to the process of appeal in Japanese advertising. Their research

evidences showed Japan displayed a strong preference for the "status" appeal and somewhat greater preference for the "quality" appeal and "beauty" appeal. In terms of the process of visual appeal, Japanese advertising tended to be more symbolic and emotional than American advertising. In terms of the content, their findings stated that quality and status appeals were popular in Japanese advertising.

It can be concluded that Japanese advertisements' use of sensual, ego and social influence appeals in advertisement draws consumers' attention better than any other appeal. Most advertisements presented beautiful pictures and emotional development. The popularly used appeals are "product image" and "status" appeals. Interestingly, the Japanese advertising also blends oriental and western culture together as can be seen from the individualism.

Advertising creative strategies

Many researchers studying the use of creative strategies in Japan have done so in terms of content analysis in television and magazines. Their research was based on the creative strategies of American advertising. The results showed that Japanese advertising tended to use transformational rather than

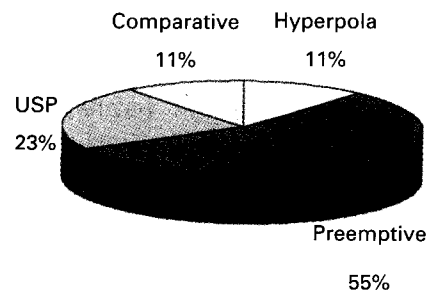
informational message strategies. They focused on persons, places or things more than on products (Javalgi, Cutler and Malhotra, 1995; Di Benedetto, Tamate and Chandran, 1992; Mueller, 1987; Mueller, 1992).

Some studies found that Japanese advertisements had a lot of informational cues. Having informational cues in the advertisements could suggest the use of informational message strategies (Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkhan, 1987; Madden, Caballero and Matsukubo, 1986; Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992). However, Lin and Salwen (1995) argued that the presence of more informational cues in a product category did not necessarily imply a higher degree of informativeness. It depended on which cues that they used and how they used them. Even though the Japanese presented a greater variety of informational cue than did the Americans, these informational cues did not necessarily reflect the most “logical” or “fitting” cues categories to highlight these products. In other words, there was a greater use of indirect or irrelevant informational cues and less frequent use of rational cues or direct selling approach in Japanese television. From their study, five informational cues that appeared in Japanese rather than American product categories were components, taste, packaging, company-

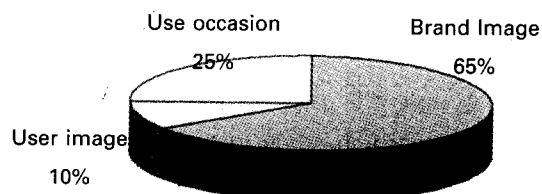
sponsored research and new ideas.

For creative strategies, the Ramaprasad and Hasegawa study (1992) showed that the transformational appeal was used about 64% (n=373) in television advertising. In contrast, only 36% (n=373) of television advertising used informational appeals. The results showed that “brand image” strategy was most popularly used (65%) and “use occasion” strategy was used as the second (25%).

Using Informational Message strategies in Japan



Using transformational Message strategies in Japan



They also investigated the involvement level of the products and found that not only low-involved products but also medium and high-involved products tended to be presented in terms of emotional appeals. Also, one or two cues were used in Japanese advertising. Their study in 1990 showed that low involvement products used the emotional appeal more than any other.

Lin's study in 1993 stated that within the high-context society, specific comparative or logically based appeals might not be needed or desired, as familiar symbols and icons could more effectively convey product images. Avoiding explicit references involving the more "sensitive" aspects of promotion, Japanese commercials clearly fell behind in the mentioning of product price, warranty/guarantees, safety, and research findings. This is because stating the prices was considered too direct and thus "rude"; claiming scientific proof, backed by company guarantees, is seen as contemptuous of the consumer's intellect and leads consumers to doubt the company's integrity (Di Benedetto, Tamate and Chandran, 1992).

In summary, the transformational message strategies are more popularly used than the informational message strategies. It implies that appeals related with sensual,

ego, and social influences are more used in Japanese advertising. Also, informational cues are presented in Japanese more than in American advertisements. However, the cues that are used are not described product information. In contrast, they tend to be indirect or irrelevant informational cues.

Advertising tactics

While advertising strategy means "what to say," advertising tactics refer to "how to say." Some research studies found some interesting tips. They are concluded as follows:

- Because Japanese communication is high context, the brand name was not mentioned in the Japanese advertising copy because the Japanese consumers were unhappy if an advertisement "didn't have atmosphere" (Ward, 1978 and Wagenaar 1978 cited in Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1990).

- Japanese advertisements were more likely to use female voices for a softer touch (Lin, 1993).

- Western celebrities were frequently used as endorsers because advertisers believe that Japanese consumers are strongly susceptible to peer's influence (Thomson, 1978 cited in Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1990). In addition, famous celebrities appear as close

acquaintances (Di Benedetto, Tamate and Chandran, 1992).

- 90% of commercials in Japan used

- music and 18% of this music was Western.

Also, English was spoken in 77.8% of commercials, and written English was used in 70.2% commercials. The product involvement level was also related to spoken English, with more high involvement product commercials using spoken English. Moreover, using of Western symbols appeals to such values as modernism and newness (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1990).

- Most commercials showed single people. This reflects the importance Japanese marketers are giving to the younger generation, who have a considerable and growing influence on the purchasing decisions made by their parents and who are not clinging to traditional Japanese consumer habits (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1990).

- Females were presented in advertisements more frequently than males (Javalgi, Cutler and Malhotra, 1995).

- As the Japanese use black or irreverent humor to reflect a common feeling shared by people in humorous

situations, their purpose is not to ridicule the trials and tribulations of life (Di Benedetto, Tamate and Chandran, 1992).

Summary

In conclusion, many previous research studies supported that Japanese advertising is a reflection of a culture. Japan is a “high context” culture. Consequently, the Japanese advertising stresses on transformational message strategies more than the informational message strategies. Using sensual, ego and product image and status appeals in advertisement can gain consumers’ attention better than hard sell appeal. However, in some aspects, Japanese advertising combines oriental and western culture. We can see that Japanese advertising highly used individual appeal as much as American advertising. Also, advertising for younger generation highly employ western symbols, languages and celebrities. Thus, in order to success in a marketing plan with Japanese consumers, the marketers and advertisers need to understand Japanese cultures, society and norms clearly.

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