

Selling Japanese, I really think so

Tyler Brûlé The Fast Lane



6435

Most weeks I'm a big advocate of air travel, so long as it's on the right airline, connecting a pair of favourite airports and with perfect flying conditions in between.

A Sunday morning departure from Honolulu to Tokyo, however, is something of a mental and physical challenge. After three days of sunning, reading, swimming and scouting on Oahu, I woke early on Sunday morning to watch a friend start the Honolulu triathlon and, once he was out of sight, I made my way back to the Halekulani (my favourite hotel in the US) to grab breakfast, pack and attempt one last dip in the Pacific.

In the end, I didn't manage the splash in the surf off Waikiki and opted to depart for the airport early, where I overheard this wonderful exchange between two US servicemen and a saintly check-in agent from Hawaiian Airlines who was handling the ANA flight to Tokyo Narita:

Serviceman no 1: Is this the check-in for Japan Airlines?

Nice lady from Hawaiian: No, this is the check-in for ANA, operated by Air Japan.

Serviceman no 2: So we can check-in for JAL here?

Nice lady from Hawaiian: No, that's down the concourse. Just beyond those counters to the left.

Serviceman no 2: So why are there separate check-ins for the same flight?

Nice lady from Hawaiian: Ummm... there's not. This is for ANA, operated by Air Japan. Japan Airlines is the other national carrier.

Serviceman no 1: You mean there's an airline called Japan Airlines and another one called Air Japan? That's really f**ked-up.

Nice lady from Hawaiian: Hard to believe, I know, but it's true.

Serviceman no 2: But JAL and Japan Airlines are the same thing, right?

I didn't linger long enough to see if the pair made it beyond security, but it was one of those moments

when you question whether passport applicants should have to pass some type of exam.

On board the Boeing 767, it was like a replay of my flight from Los Angeles a few days earlier – only the aircraft was spotless, the crew perfectly coiffed, the seats comfier and the entertainment system considerably more advanced. Actually, the only similarity was the passenger profile – a cabin full of grannies and grandpas in jaunty sunhats and jumbo shades.

I tend to cope well with most time zones but the westbound jump across the dateline, combined with a short flying time, a Sunday morning take-off from lazy, breezy Hawaii and landing in Tokyo late afternoon on a

Japan's travel operators and retailers might all be missing an opportunity to reverse its export slump

busy, buzzy Monday is more than a bit jarring: one minute you're easing into part two of your weekend with the gentle trade winds rustling your paper, and the next you're dodging bicycles on the sidewalks of Shinjuku.

Fortunately Japan Inc. makes the combination of a lost day and change of time zone easy going. So much so that Japan's developers, healthcare brands, transport operators and retailers might all be missing an opportunity to expand and help reverse the country's export slump. As the government stimulus packages have yet to take hold, here are five Japanese brands, business ideas, products and innovations that need find their way into daily life in foreign markets:

1. The 'ice-type' facial wipe

As the mercury creeps upwards with the arrival of summer, the "ice-type" facial wipe starts to appear in convenience stores and pharmacies

across the country. Not to be confused with the basic face wipe, which simply cleanses, the menthol version is close to being an anaesthetic in tissue form and can instantly transform a sweaty, blushed complexion into a visage of chilly, collected calm. The best brand on the market is Osaka-based Mandom's Gatsby range.

2. Muji – the real version

The Japanese retailer needs to stop watering down its international offer and deliver the same experience to shoppers in London and Paris that it does in Osaka and Tokyo. The world is waiting for Muji houses, a bigger bicycle range, restaurants and its Labo fashion collection.

3. Clever collaborations

Japanese consumers love a clever tie-up between established brands and smart creative talent. Good examples are retailer Beams doing a customised Subaru in hot orange and chocolate brown, or bagmaker Porter doing a "man bag" exclusively for ANA.

4. Travel etiquette

Japan could educate other countries in the fine art of getting passengers on to large and small aircraft without ever creating a queue in the boarding bridge. This is a facet of daily life that continues to amaze me and could save billions in delayed departure times and lost hours of productivity.

5. Bathroom culture

The Washlet (the automated, all-spraying, all-blow-drying, all-sound cancelling, all-deodorising toilet) is finally making inroads into new markets, but the world needs to embrace this concept faster. If it's standard practice to wash your hands after going to bathroom, shouldn't it also be part of the routine to wash the parts of your body that performed the function? Japan's become so addicted that they'll even feature on the two national carriers' 787s when they eventually take to the skies.

*Tyler Brûlé is editor-in-chief of Monocle
tyler.brule@ft.com*

More columns at www.ft.com/brule