

Starting a Magazine in Japan

By Niclas ERICSSON

As a foreign resident of Japan, you often get the question “Why did you come here?” My story begins in the dark forests of Sweden, watching the television series “*Shogun*,” starring Richard Chamberlain and Yoko Shimada, in the lap of my mother. Years later, when a chance to visit the country appeared to me, I pounced on the opportunity to see the land where Chamberlain’s fictional character once had been shipwrecked.

My grandfather, Gunnar Ericsson, who is an honorary member of the International Olympic Committee and a board member of several companies, had invited me to accompany him to the 1998 Olympic Winter Games in Nagano. As we stepped off the plane in Narita for the first time, I was filled with excitement. Little did I know then that the beautiful Japanese assistant waiting at the gate to escort me and my grandfather to Nagano would become the love of my life and mother of my children. Three weeks later, however, on the last day of my visit, I turned down an invitation to a dinner with the Swedish king just to spend a few more hours with this girl. We have been together ever since and that is why I’m here today.



Photo: Yuriko Uehara

Author Niclas Ericsson

Entrepreneurial Background

Members of my family have always had an entrepreneurial spirit. Over half a decade ago my great-grandfather built a multi-national typewriter and calculator empire, called Facit. My father has been involved in starting everything from construction companies and computer businesses to airlines and magazines. The latter one meant that I, even before finishing high school, learned the craft of desktop publishing, just as computers became more prevalent in this field.

After studying international business in university, I returned to the family business as head of production of one of the business magazines my father was running. Not for long, however. In 2001, I married my wife and three years later we took the decision to move to Japan, much to the disappointment of my father.

My career in Japan started with the job as a freelance foreign correspondent, writing for several Swedish newspapers. I had always been good at writing, something being contributed by my family to my relation to Gustaf Fröding, who is considered one of Sweden’s greatest national poets. But that entrepreneurial flame is hard to extinguish. If you have it in you, the need to start something and be your own boss is always present. And I wanted to run my own magazine.

Risk-Avoiding Society

Analyzing the market conditions for magazines and newspapers in Japan was easy – it was going to be very tough. Advertisers were in very short supply, to put it mildly. In fact, most people I met at the time told me it was the worst climate to start any kind of business in. I ignored them because for many people, *any* time is the worst time and if you listen too much to “thinkers” and nay-sayers you will never get around to starting anything. Sometimes you just have to jump head-first into the water without worrying too much.

Here we start to touch on the subject of fear. It is not lack of

funds, time or skills that prevents most people from starting a company, but fear. Fear of the unknown and fear of failure. In one of my Editor’s Notes in *Ambassadeur Magazine* I once discussed the subject. In his best-selling book *Cultural Dimensions*, Dutch writer Geert Hofstede explores behavioral variances in different parts of the world. When it comes to uncertainty avoidance, Japan gets one of the highest scores. In a risk-avoiding society, rules and structure become very important. Employees tend to stick with one employer for a very long time. Choices are made out of fear of the unknown rather than the pursuit of happiness and success. No one wants to be the nail that gets hammered down.

Benefits of Early Start

In Sweden, entrepreneurship has long been a quality that is to be admired. Through a program called UF, which is short for Young Entrepreneurship in Swedish, thousands of high school students are each year given the opportunity to start rudimentary forms of companies as a part of their high school curriculum. They create a board of directors, come up with a business plan, find investors and then go out on the free market and sell their products and services. After one year of business, the company is dismantled and any profit is divided among the shareholders. In the almost 30 years that we have been doing this, the impact has been tremendous. Today 14% of all high school students in Sweden are involved in the running of a UF company. A recent study has shown that 15% of these will proceed to start a real company before the age of 30. Wouldn’t it be fantastic to see this in Japan?

In my case, I started my first company at the age of 16. It had long been a dream of mine to run an advertising business, and I realized this dream as soon as it became legally possible to do so. Since I did everything by myself, from accounting to creative work, I learned many valuable lessons that would benefit me in later life.



Ambassadeur Magazine

Ambassadeur Magazine was started because I felt that the free English magazines that were already here in Japan lacked a clearly defined target group. That is to say, they were trying to appeal to everyone who can read English. Since the majority of these magazines are financed purely by the selling of ads, this constitutes a problem. Does a seller of luxury sports cars want to target the less affluent? Does Burger King target Roppongi Hills residents?

Another observation I made was that the articles in these magazines primarily focused on entertainment, bar reviews and superficial reports from the social scene of the foreign community in Tokyo. Now, let me stress out that I do not disapprove of these topics at all. I am merely saying that until last year, there was still room for another magazine, with a more narrow focus.

What I wanted to do was to create a complimentary magazine (I prefer this term over the word *free*, which I think connotes a lack of value and quality) with articles that have real substance. Texts that cover more serious issues than where to find cheap beer in Shibuya or how to play *pachinko* (pinball). Topics like politics, business, technology and culture.

Now, less than one year into the running of our magazine, I feel we still have a long way to go, but the response we have gotten from our readers tells me we are on the right track. Speaking to foreign ambassadors and business leaders in Tokyo, I have gotten many positive comments, praising our journalists. Particularly, expatriates from the Arab world have expressed their appreciation for a magazine that they perceive as fair and balanced. Many also appreciate our policy not to allow ads for “gentlemen’s clubs” and similar establishments.

Current Business Climate in Japan

I will not pretend that selling advertisements for our magazine is an easy job. The whole industry is feeling the effect of decreased marketing budgets, which for some reason are the first to be affected when times go bad. Japanese companies, other than those in the restaurant industry, also tend to be reluctant to advertise in English publications. Looking through any English magazine you will see that advertisers mostly consist of Japanese branches of foreign companies.

In spite of these problems, I strongly believe, however, that if you hang in there and focus on making a publication that is interesting for readers, the advertisers will eventually come around. And anyone who thinks that the economic downturn is more than just a tempo-

rary slump is a fool. Everything moves in cycles; businesses just have to keep being innovative.

It’s Not All Gloom

Now, let me instead tell you some of the good things you have going for you, as a wannabe entrepreneur in the world’s second biggest economy.

1. A bad economy means that hiring is easy. There are many young people out there with real experience that are looking for a job and are willing to start on *your* terms.
2. Low start-up costs. In recent years the government has done a lot to make it more affordable to incorporate a business. And if you want to start really small, the so-called *kojin jigyo* (self proprietorship) is an ideal form which allows you to be up and running in one day by simply filling in a form at the tax office.
3. Good tax system. Your local tax officers are always extremely helpful, even if you don’t speak fluent Japanese. Visiting them has always been a positive experience for me.
4. The wheels are still rolling! Have you noticed all the people out shopping in Ginza on any given day? There is plenty of money to go around and with the right product at the right price you will succeed.

Running your own company in Japan is not for everyone. It requires hard work and, above all, discipline. I am, however, certain that if you have an idea you believe in, you will succeed. The Japanese must learn to be more entrepreneurial as they can no longer rely on the big giants to keep them under their wings for their entire lives. In my opinion, they should start learning the necessary skills while they are still young because as you grown older, you start to think. And sometimes, nothing kills an idea quicker than thinking. **JS**

Prior to founding Ambassadeur Magazine, Niclas Ericsson worked as a foreign correspondent for a Swedish newspaper. He holds a degree in international business and is a member of Mensa, the high IQ society.