

Interview with Yuri Konno, President, Dial Service Co.

# Pioneer of Women Entrepreneurs Never Ceasing to Challenge

Interviewer: Shigemi KOHTAKA



Yuri Konno

As a woman entrepreneur pioneer, Yuri Konno founded Dial Service Co. in Tokyo about 40 years ago when women's social status in Japan was considerably low. In those days, women were expected to quit their jobs upon marriage and women's "mandatory retirement age" was said to be 25. Konno challenged this male-dominated society and has been opening a frontier ever since. She started Japan's first private telephone consulting service for new mothers, "Dial 110 for Babies" (110 is the emergency phone number in Japan), and then launched other new services, while maintaining the viewpoint of ordinary citizens. She also supports young entrepreneurs as a person who has accumulated experience in cultivating new business. She is sometimes called "the mother of venture businesses." Konno sat with *Japan SPOTLIGHT* one day and talked about the past, present and future of venture businesses as a seasoned woman entrepreneur.



## All Begin with Love

When Japan was entering the age of high economic growth, many young people who had been brought up in large families moved from their home in the countryside to large cities to work. In this circumstance, a rapidly increasing number of young mothers were suddenly driven into the situation where they had to care for their children as a member of a small nuclear family in an urbanized environment. The growing number of children killed by their mothers was heartbreaking. Konno and her associates launched "Dial 110 for Babies," hoping to save as many children as possible by answering childcare questions annoying young mothers. In the beginning, her idea and wish were ahead of actualities. When asked, "How are you going to pay your people?" she realized she had to consider how to generate earnings. She planned to rely on money from sponsors, but was unable to find any. She proposed to Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Public Corporation (now privatized as Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corp.) a dual fee system, which requires people receiving consultation service to pay information fees in addition to telephone charges. Her proposal was ultimately accepted by the telecommunications giant after a long battle.

Her savings were used up before her business was stabilized. Her employees, although not being paid, said to her, "We'll work without pay," wishing to help mothers suffering at the other end of the line and save their babies. In this sense, Konno says, "Our business all began with love."

## Promise Unforgotten Since Age 9

Her entrepreneurial spirit has its root in her terrifying experience in surviving war disaster. She was born in 1936 to very ordinary

parents as the second of six daughters in a country town called Kuwana in Mie Prefecture, central Japan. When she was 9 years old, the war was becoming more and more bitter. One day, an air raid hit the town. She fled with her family, but got lost and separated from her parents, was left alone in a fire, and fainted. As her consciousness was fading away, she promised to God, "If You help me, I will do all so that unreasonable misery like this will not happen to children." She thinks now that she was then so eager to live. Like a miracle, she survived the rain of bombs. She thought that as God had answered her prayer so soon, she would not be allowed to break her promise. She feels that all her life and work since then are what God, or "Something Great," plans for her.

## A Gift from the Age

When she was growing up, it was common for women to stay in local areas, marry, and raise children there. When she said she wanted to go to a four-year college in Tokyo – the first in the town to say so, she felt that she was being encouraged by "Something Great" in order to keep her promise with God. Her parents and everyone else around her tried to persuade her not to by saying, "It's ridiculous for a girl to want to go to Tokyo." She was able to exert energy enough to release herself from traditional bonds probably because her experience in surviving war disaster gave her such energy. She became one of the first women entrepreneurs in Japan because, when she graduated from college, Japanese society did not accept female four-year college graduates as working force. No company hired her because an ambitious woman was not wanted. Since society did not give her an opportunity to put her talent to work, she decided to give herself such an opportunity and started a business. She now feels that, in a sense, this was a gift from the age.

## Win-Win Relationship

Her business started as an all-women company. Four decades ago, however, there was no societal support for working women such as nursing facilities. Her employees had to quit jobs against their will upon marriage or childbirth. This seriously hurt her business. After wondering what to do, she asked her employees to design a system that would enable employees to continue working. They came up with a lot of wonderful ideas that could only be conceived by those who had personally experienced the hardship of continuing to work while raising children. Their suggestions included what are now called “time sharing” and “job sharing.”

According to their suggestions, she started various services different in themes and service time zones in succession, such as childcare, elderly care, dietary life and healthcare, and allowed individual staff members to choose services based on themes and time zones appropriate or convenient to them. This system was so designed that women who had to take care of children or elderly relatives could continue to work. Once this system was implemented, female employees have not had to quit. The company at present includes employees with a seniority of three decades or longer. The system was introduced in the early 1970s when women’s mandatory retirement age was said to be 25. During this period of time, she also set the company’s retirement age at as high as 65 in response to requests from her employees in order to fulfill female employees’ desire to work long, although modestly rewarded.

One advantage of this system enabling employees to work in different ways was that the employees acquired a variety of wisdom and information by accumulating valuable experience while not staying in office but taking care of their children or elderly parents at home, although the company did not pay training fees. Since the employees were able to make use of accumulated skills for telephone consulting services, this system proved to build a win-win relationship between the company and the employees.

## Social Entrepreneurship

When starting her business, Konno held a strong belief that society, or the country, should accept telephone consulting and other socially beneficial services as profitable business and that if it does not, it should be rebuilt. If such business is profitable, it means that society admits the service provided by the business as valuable and payable. She wanted her company to be such a socially accepted business, not a volunteer. In the same line of thought, she says to venture business owners she supports, “Be sure to succeed as business.”

The present time is said to be the age of symbiosis and social entrepreneurs are in the limelight. Konno says she may have been the first social entrepreneur in Japan when seen from the current viewpoint. She definitely says her company was the first to spread the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities in business society. She made continued efforts to find sponsors for her telephone consulting services and ask them to sponsor the services as part of their activities for fulfilling CSR. She has enlarged her business sphere in this way. People often misunderstand a social entrepreneur as someone lenient or soft-hearted. “Upon meeting me, people are often stunned to find that I am so tough,” she says.

## “Face of the Hell”

Konno advises you to leave your comfortable chair and take a chance now. It is said that a chance comes as it is showing the face of the hell. Take a chance right now when many businesses are



*A scene of Japan's first 24-hour telephone secretary service launched by the author*

losing money. Business executives are desperate to find ways of getting profit in this business period. It goes without saying for executives to cut their own pay. When a business is making such strenuous efforts, it is approaching a major turning point. Some businesses notice this turning point and make further efforts to advance across the turning point, whereas others give up. Some businesses consider it a good idea to fire as many employees as possible, whereas others emphasize concerted efforts of all people. That is to say, you are at a fork in the business road.

It is important right now to put forth all of your strength and wisdom by making tremendous efforts. Ordinary efforts will not help your business survive. You could only encounter a chance by bearing extreme hardship that would bring you to the verge of death. Konno, who is supporting many venture businesses, says individual entrepreneurs are doing their best by extracting all of their power and wisdom. Some ran out of steam. She has some words to convey to these unsuccessful business owners: “Don’t be afraid of exposing yourself to ridicule.” Some lost self-confidence and pride, and failed to recover themselves because they had to drive their business into bankruptcy or to fire many of their employees. The parental teaching, “Don’t be ridiculed,” is something of the past. Today, we should say, “Make all your efforts to live through any difficulties even though such efforts look dishonorable or embarrassing.” Because you can only encounter a next chance and contribute to society by surviving the current difficulty.

“Top executives are lonely,” Konno says. She wants to create a place where mental and physical healthcare will be offered to top executives – a means for listening to executives who are annoyed by some problems that should not be known to irrelevant people. She says she supports young people as “the mother of venture businesses” because she was driven to the hell’s cauldron of assaults from all sides when she was young and knows how it is encouraging and pleasing to be watched by somebody and have words, such as “You’ve had a worthwhile experience,” said by somebody else.

## Liberation of Men

Many men are obsessed with so strong a sense of belonging to their organizations that they are confined within the barrier considered as set by the organization, according to Konno. She feels sorry for them. On the other hand, women have been less confined because they have been prevented from participating in the mainstream of society for a long time. Women have often been



Participants in a party for international exchange among women entrepreneurs pose for a commemorative shot. This exchange project was undertaken from 1993 to 2001.

poor, frustrated, and unable to use their talent to the full. To the extent of their relatively loose confinement, however, they are free when they face society in which they live and work. Konno feels that men who are so tightly bound to their organizations are pitiable in a sense different from the sense in which women were said to be pitiable a long time ago, but she believes that men will also be liberated when more women come to live freely.

Today, there are a large number of people who have to quit from leading enterprises due to restructuring. When interviewing job seekers, Konno are often surprised to meet those who she feels are so excellent that they would not be job seekers if the economy were different. Ever since she founded her company, she has not discriminated against people due to their nationality, academic background, gender, age or any other factor. When she placed newspaper advertisements for people "aged 50 or older," newspaper companies asked, "Isn't that a typo, is it?" She notices that people who have accumulated experience at leading enterprises are excellent and expects that they will develop new capabilities at venture businesses although they are paid less than they used to.

## Labels

Some people boast that they graduated from certain particular universities, studied at Harvard, or obtained an MBA. Every time she hears these remarks, she would like to say, "So what?" These credentials are fine, but people should be assessed based on what they have achieved, rather than their academic records, which have little bearing on their assessment.

In postwar Japan, the view that children who obtain higher marks are more excellent is spread too widely. Konno does not agree with this view. A person who is good at sewing should sew. A person who is good at cooking should cook. Konno would like to work hard in order to buy the outcome of these people's work. She believes that schools should give higher respect to the view that individual people are respectively talented and can play respective roles.

## Emphasis on Happiness

Konno hopes to build a society in which people who have made surrounding people happier are rated higher and are recognized as winners. She believes that Japan has gone wrong as it has entered an era in which people who have earned much money are recognized as winners. During the period of Japan's high economic growth, all energy was invested to achieve economic development, or to earn money and produce things, at the expense of significant



Yuri Konno (far right) says she positively supports venture businesses of late. Among recent examples brought to her attention is a low-cost Internet communications service capable of transmitting high-resolution images of ultrafine quality.

sacrifices incurred on children, elderly people, women, foreigners, and many others. As the 21st century rolled in, the Japanese learned with much pain that such an era could not last long.

Today, people are beginning to accept that businesses, services and technologies are only economically viable if they are considered as beneficial to society and/or able to make someone happy. This trend is on the proper course. We have only returned from an era of insanity to an era of normalcy. We are no longer in an era when only people who are good at earning money can succeed. Konno envisions about people who look at lonely senior citizens and want them to spend happy time at the end of their life and about people who look at children having been mentally and physically weakened due to their daily time-controlled lessons and studies at cram schools or somewhere else and want to give them opportunities to grow up in a more relaxed natural environment. She believes that the true role of venture businesses is to consider how these people can achieve their wishes, while maintaining a natural attitude, and to lead these wishes to business as carried out by warm-hearted people.

## Play Full Out

"In every country, there was a glacial age women had to pass through in order to establish their social status," a US businesswoman told Konno about 50 years ago. "If you give up, however, the thick ice will turn into permafrost. Women venture entrepreneurs must break it up." Konno was heartily encouraged. Konno feels that the national and other support measures available at present seem to be so meticulous, when compared with the past situation symbolized by the thick ice, and that women might lose opportunities to draw their own energy. She believes that women should continue to make desperate efforts by concentrating all of their potential energy, wisdom and enthusiasm to break the ice.

She sometimes feels that young people's can-do spirit today is weak from the beginning. Konno's motto is "play full out" meaning "make full use of your energy and enthusiasm." She believes that what is important is to work for somebody else by unstintingly spending all the power and wisdom you can use. Once you have used up all energy, you will have new energy twice as large as the spent energy. If your energy is incompletely used, the energy that is left unused decays and begins to smell bad. She says, "Let's play full out to lead an active, courageous and happy life." **JS**

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