

Japanese Culture & Small Business

— One Key to the Economy

By Traci Consoli



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Pulling Out of the Economic Doldrums?

As a long-term resident of Japan, having been here throughout the economic downturn and recession, I have heard many tales told and many theories expounded about fixes for the economy. As owner of *The Pink Cow* restaurant and bar located smack in the middle of one of the busiest parts of Tokyo, I have heard more than my share of economic war stories around the ole watering hole. Many of us expats who love Japan and see all of its yet untapped potential, despite its faults, are still here. Those who do not left some time ago. Ergo, the conversations being had at my place are inevitably leaning towards the positive, but for more reasons than simple optimism.

For a long time it has seemed like one hit after another, year after year, and that Japan just couldn't get a break. Despite many myopic government policies and occasionally shooting itself in the foot, Japan's economy has managed to continue to plug along. The Lehman Shock and ensuing mayhem, followed not long after by the three-pronged earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown that is still plaguing food exports and tourism has still not dampened the will to get things going again. If anything, it was the strength, courage and dignity Japan showed during such an epic disaster that gave it the edge in winning the 2020 Olympics bid. So many people I spoke to from all over the world felt Japan not only deserved it but that Japanese people showed how graciously they can handle any situation no matter how difficult and therefore proved Japan's ability

to again be a great Olympic host.

Even before the announcement Japan had won the bid there was excitement in the air. People are now feeling a fresh positive buzz and a renewed belief in economic recovery I have not seen in many years. "Abenomics" is certainly a part of this rose-colored view but winning the Olympics has given Japan both a psychological and fiscal boost. And psychological boosts should not be underestimated. Of course great, big, shiny new projects will be thrown into the GDP cement mixer in the years to come, and investment into Japan was on the rise the very day of the announcement. I personally know people who waited for the 5 a.m. news release to start investing in Japan.

All to the good, but the thing that excites me most is how this will translate into both growth and support for small businesses and kickstarting the long overdue promotion of Japanese culture and tourism that the Japan Tourist Bureau (JTB) has so far not managed to work out. Japan has vast expansion capability in this area and it amazes me that when even tiny, newly opened Myanmar has a television tourism campaign running that Japan is so far behind on this. With the world spotlight on Japan for 2020 it is the perfect opportunity to harness national resources and focus collective energy on building a great tourism industry. There is a multitude of possibilities not yet tapped.

Photo: Author



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The Pink Cow — relaxing, artsy interior



Tokyo street art with 281 Anti Nuke

Leveraging Japanese Culture & 2020

Japan has a unique culture, and there is truly nothing else like it anywhere. As manufacturing has moved offshore it makes perfect sense to start replacing that economic void by exporting Japanese culture, for which there is a growing appetite, and attracting tourists by building a strong and dynamic tourism industry. With six years to go until 2020 there is a healthy chunk of time that offers growth and development possibilities in these areas. The world's eyes were turned on Japan after the 3/11 disasters giving people around the world a glimpse of the country completely raw and stripped of any social pretenses or tourist pitches. Now it is time to show Japanese culture again in all its variety and vibrancy — from *anime*, music and fashion to art, cuisine and beautiful sculpted gardens.

The uniqueness of Japanese culture is also a goldmine of content for small businesses. All over the world people run the same kinds of small businesses with the same basic products, but the Japanese do them in their own way and often offer their own special take on typical businesses. When they do curry shops, cake shops, fruit stands, novelty goods or even supermarkets there is a ubiquitous Japanese flavor in the air and the production. Things that normally seem mundane are an exciting new experience for visitors. Just shopping is an adventure. That seems to be overlooked by the powers that be formulating plans for tourism and promotion.

Japan is an experience to be savored in so many ways. It is JTB's job to make it easy for tourists to find information, get here and get around. Once that is done well, small businesses will take the baton and run like crazy — that will be good for the economy and good for everyone. To do this they need both infrastructure and tax incentives/financial services support. There is no question of how much effort small business owners put into their dreams and business-building when given the opportunity, not just to sustain their businesses but to grow them, and no question of how much small businesses can contribute to an economy when encouraged to thrive.

Photo: Author



Ninja fighters

Small Businesses - Big Asset

Small businesses need to be nurtured by the government, not ignored. When Japan adopted many US business ideals after World War II it failed to recognize the importance small businesses play in the overall US economy. The focus has been on big businesses and manufacturing churning out masses of products and not on the people who are producing daily life. Small businesses in Japan struggle against laws and financing designed for big companies and are often left to fend for themselves against monopolistic practices and policies. There is no doubt that healthy support for small businesses would have a positive impact on the economy.

An article titled "How Small Business Drives US Economy" by Robert Longley posted on *About.com* states:

"Small business drives the American economy," said Dr. Chad Moutray, chief economist for the Office of Advocacy in a press release. "Main Street provides the jobs and spurs our economic growth. American entrepreneurs are creative and productive, and these numbers prove it."

Small businesses are job creators. Office of Advocacy funded data and research shows that small businesses represent 99.7% of all firms, they create more than half of the private non-farm gross domestic product, and they create 60-80% of the net new jobs. (<http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/smallbusiness/a/sbadrives.htm>)

Countries are comprised of people, not only big businesses. Japan needs its small businesses to be strong contributors to the economy. Keeping people enthusiastic that their country is working for them and their families and that they have the opportunity to live some of their dreams is of great importance to maintaining a healthy economy and growth dynamic.

The pride people take in their culture, if it also plays a part in achieving their dreams, is further motivation for business growth and development. We all want the economy to improve and grow, especially small business owners who already struggle to keep afloat amongst the big chains and corporates, often without a safety net. Somehow I can imagine them incarnated as little yellow rubber ducks bobbing up and down between two giant steam ships in the bay — hoping against hope the big ships won't knock together and crush them. With more policies geared to supporting small and new businesses and more focus on dynamic development of the tourism industry, the lead up to 2020 looks bright indeed to me as an opportunity to give a leg up to the long dragging Japanese economy.

Let's not miss the opportunity of the next six years and Olympic time as a platform to build these industries and structure support for small businesses. Getting the whole of Japan excited and involved in moving optimistically forward will in turn support the fundamentals of the economy over the long term better than almost anything else I can think of. I would not own a restaurant named *The Pink Cow* in Tokyo if I wasn't a big fan of rose-colored glasses. So go ahead, drink some Kool aid, a little optimism is good for the economy! **J.S**

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