

# C onsumer Pioneers

By Mariko Fujiwara



The 1980s was a decade in which observers of the Japanese scene saw major changes in the individual's orientations to life. Today, Japanese people place great emphasis on a wide range of experience. They try to make the most of life.

According to surveys conducted by Hakuho Institute of Life and Living (HILL) the desires of Japanese individuals to reshape their lives so that they reflect the self-image each holds of himself or herself have become stronger. *Hitonami* consciousness has diminished as a strong consumer force.

*Hitonami* literally means "aligning oneself with other people in society." A close English equivalent would be "keeping up with the Joneses." In the postwar context, *hitonami* consciousness was a very strong motivation for Japanese to keep up with others in their quest for a new middle-class standard of living. It encouraged consumption by spurring the Japanese to work for a better standard of living.

## Choosing lifestyles

Japan's new breed of consumers, *seikatsusha*, are no longer happy to just keep up with the others in their society. They are anxious to make active efforts to change their lives, shape their lives through consumption that suits their own tastes and based on their individual values. The desires of *seikatsusha* to cultivate the lifestyles of their choice are changing Japan's basic pattern of consumer behavior. Greater product choice offered by Japanese industries has strengthened the social trends toward self-realization and individuality.

Women, old people in urban areas and young adults are the segments of the Japanese population that are most influential in reshaping the consumption patterns in contemporary Japanese society. Women today have become the most active initiators of change in contemporary Japanese society. In their efforts to establish identities as individuals they

are entering the labor force, and more recently the world of politics, in ever-increasing numbers.

Today's better-educated women actively seek participation in the work force for a variety of reasons. They no longer derive satisfaction solely from the roles they perform in the home for the family and have come to seek new opportunities for self-expression in work outside the home. Being aware that they lack experience outside the home and family, they try to broaden their daily experiences and seek satisfaction by meeting new challenges at work. They are eager to establish their own independence for the first time economically and psychologically.

Today women comprise more than 40% of the total labor force. More than 70% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 work, as do 54.3% between the ages of 25 and 29, and 50.2% between the ages of 30 and 34. The group that is joining the labor force in ever-increasing numbers is women between the ages of 35 and 59. Today 60% of women between the ages of 35 and 59 go out to work. According to a report by the Economic Planning Agency, 68% of the women in this age group are expected to be in the work force by the year 2010.

Since many women work for reasons other than having to support themselves, they enjoy the opportunity to spend the extra income they bring to the family to "enjoy life more." Even though the majority of married women over 35 work at part-time jobs and the money they earn is a relatively small addition to the family budget, many women consider this money is all theirs to spend as they wish. In fact, this phenomenon is reshaping the pattern of consumption.

Working women spend actively on a variety of goods and services. These include precooked food, precooked meals and the latest time-saving devices in their home such as electronically controlled appliances, as well as time-saving services such as housecleaning services, shopping services, and services in child care and for the elderly and the sick. These goods and services allow women to spend more time at work and more time to enjoy life with the money they earn.

As busy as they are, working women are eager to find time to go out, eat out, and enjoy their weekends and long vacations. They think the extra income they bring in should be spent on improving the quality of their lives and those of their family members. They are happy to spend money on educational programs for their children and for themselves such as in foreign languages, in playing musical instruments, in the arts, and in word processing and computer skills that will help their children grow well-rounded and help them become better-qualified workers in the future.

The incomes wives and mothers bring in also affect the consumption behavior of other members of the family. HILL discovered in a 1988 survey that the more a woman in the family earns, the greater the degree of freedom each individual member feels about his own spending.

## Different values

Japan's young adults today are the first generation to have been born into and to have grown up in the affluence created by the rapid economic growth of the past two decades. They know little about either the poverty of the postwar years or the radicalism of the 1960s. Being brought up in a growing economy, today's Japanese have come to have an entirely different value system from that of their parents. Born in the era in which Japan entered its period of rapid economic growth, they expect more and consume more.

In 1968, 60.3% of families in Japan were home owners. For the first time the ordinary Japanese family could afford to live in a home where their children slept in separate rooms. Modern home appliances and facilities were something that they could now take for granted.

The parents of these young Japanese, who had little in the way of consumer goods when they were entering their adulthood during the war, were eager to provide their children with an abundance of material goods and felt pleased that they could afford to do so. Young adults who have grown up in this environment have come to expect abundance and variety in their daily lives. They hold a strong

belief that life is to be enjoyed, a belief that is foreign to older Japanese.

Words like "endure," "ardor" and "fighting spirit" belong to a dead language as far as they are concerned. They are untraditional, unimpressed by the social values and norms of traditional Japan; they are eager to cultivate lifestyles that are their own. They value diversity in their experiences, and spread their interests among a variety of leisure and sporting activities. These young men and women want to have their needs met and desires satisfied as quickly as possible. This is a generation that seeks almost instant gratification.

In order to finance their needs and wants they are not at all hesitant to purchase on credit. They can choose from half a dozen credit cards issued by major credit companies and by national and regional department stores to finance their trips abroad and purchase the latest gear and fashionable outfits for their sporting activities, make lunch and dinner dates in expensive restaurants, dress in fashionable clothes, and pay for audio equipment and cars that they think they cannot do without in order to enjoy life.

According to a study by the Japan Consumer Credit Industry Association, consumer credit customers had some ¥50 trillion outstanding in 1988. This is 20% of all private consumption, and the young adults who work and earn a salary of their own are the leaders in buying on credit. Many young adults choose to remain living with their parents, since their parents have a very comfortable life, the father's salary having reached the highest point in his career. Young adults would rather have more money (or the whole of their own salary) at their disposal by remaining in their parents' home than having to live on their own salaries.

Living at home does not mean these young adults all of a sudden have started to enjoy the time they spend with their parents, however. Friends are the most important people in their lives. In fact, most consumption of services is done in the context of socializing with their friends. Growing up in families with one or no sibling, they place great value on friends in their own age group. They feel



they must maintain their friendships at all costs. They do not mind at all if they have to spend a lot to be sociable, since it is often with their friends that they can best establish their identities and find a sense of security.

In socializing, young Japanese are faced with a dilemma. They want to feel a sense of belonging and yet they like to be noticed and recognized as individuals. In order to keep up with their friends, they try to remain "on top of things" at all costs. And this is why they are very active consumers of "information." They buy a large variety of magazines that show the latest in fashion, in technology, in automobiles and in resort spots. However untraditional the values and lifestyles of today's young adults are, they are strengthening the new trends toward individualistic consumption and consumption of information, goods and services in order to enhance the pleasure and variety of their daily lives.

Another segment of the population that is reshaping the Japanese consumption pattern is the elderly. Japan is aging much faster than any other country in the world. By 1995, 14% of the population in Japan will be over 65. It takes Japan only 25 years to double the percentage of the elderly in its population.

The aging of Japan has brought about changes in attitude toward the elderly and among the elderly themselves. The growing number of old people living in urban and suburban environments is changing the lifestyle of the elderly. Traditionally the elderly remained at home, lived a quiet life of retirement and accepted the passive role assigned to them by society. For this reason senior citizens were not taken very much into account in

the shaping and reshaping of patterns of consumption, and were not considered a growing market by industries other than those for goods and services related to medical and health care. Today, old people in urban areas who were pioneers in developing the postwar Japanese economy are assuming a new role once again in cultivating much more active and productive lifestyles.

### Role for elderly

Now, as the first generation to have a life expectancy as high as 80 years, they are trying to reestablish their identities as self-reliant members of society. Today's urban old people are more affluent because the growing economy of postwar Japan enabled them to build up sizable assets. They are better educated and feel they have accomplished a great deal, as they were instrumental in rebuilding and modernizing Japan's shattered economy. In their efforts to modernize Japan's economy, they had to adopt many Western customs and practices. This new breed of Japanese combine Western and Japanese elements in their daily lives and enjoy the best of both worlds.

They are not bound by traditional conventions as are some Japanese old people in rural areas. They have opportunities to experience new ideas and quick access to new information even after they retire. While they agree that the younger generation must play a leading role in society, they themselves wish to play an active supporting role and retain some social influence. Many remain active participants in society, and this is reflected in their consumption patterns. They seek greater individual fulfillment even in old age. To

make the most of their remaining years and achieve their full potential, they are very active in consumption of services that help them find a new purpose in life.

Having ample freedom with enough time and money at hand, they devote most of their time to leisure activities. These include joining an athletic club, participating in hobby circles, enrolling in culture courses, taking lessons in a foreign language, receiving training in microcomputer operations, and studying history, current events and culinary arts.

Another area where senior citizens find great enjoyment in is traveling. Everywhere you go today, you can expect to see elderly Japanese enjoying their trip at a leisurely pace. Vacations that take them to domestic tourist spots, to historical places, to major cities and leisure spots in the United States, Europe, Asia and Oceania have proven to be very popular among these old people. Trips to places with less moderate climates, such as India, Africa and other tropical places, are also gaining in popularity among those who want to be even more informed about the world they live in. They like to be free to do what they want and have the fun they feel they missed when they were younger.

Women, young adults and urban old people are the pioneers in Japanese consumption as a new generation of consumers who pursue individual fulfillment throughout their lives.

With greater wealth at their disposal, Japanese people feel free to consume services that will help them improve the quality of their life. And as they become more conscious of international concerns and environmental issues, a new trend in consumption that reflects this growing awareness is slowly emerging. The most recent study by HILL suggests this trend will continue. And it will not be long before we find a large number of Japanese preferring products and services that support conservation of energy and the world's finite resources, even at higher prices.

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