

Trend Toward Choosiness

By Marino Osami

Thanks to the rapid industrialization of Japan over the past few decades, Japanese consumers now enjoy an abundance of products. Mass-produced items need some new feature or new technology to be sure of selling well. People in the fashion industry wish that consumers would clear out their wardrobes more often; they know that Japanese homes, especially in urban areas, are so small that consumers can only make room for new clothes by casting away old ones.

In general, Japanese consumers now possess most of the material necessities of life, in contrast with, for example, the 1960s. New electrical appliances considered essential to modern life were appearing on the market one after another, and consumers were still not getting their fill of food and clothing. At that time, people were much more likely to scan supermarket advertisements to find the best bargains and snap up items such as shirts if they were on special offer.

Now the situation has changed, however. People already have a dozen shirts in the wardrobe, so they are no longer attracted by bargains for bargains' sake. Next time they buy a shirt, they may want one with blue stripes—and a certain shade of blue at that. They are also more choosy about the quality of the material and such things as the shape of the collar. So they put off buying a shirt until they find exactly the one they want. With a dozen shirts already in the wardrobe, they can afford to wait.

In 1986 the Prime Minister's Office carried out a survey on what consumers do when they go shopping for clothes but cannot find exactly what they want. Of the respondents to the survey, 54.4% said they would give up making a purchase, 24.3% that they would keep looking until they found what they wanted, 13.8% that they would make a choice from what was available, and 3.8% that they would place an order or make the article of clothing

themselves; 0.2% gave other replies, and 3.6% said they did not know what they would do (Fig. 1).

Replies categorized by sex and age are shown also in Fig. 1. While many people in their 30s and 40s said they would give up making a purchase, many in their teens and 20s replied that they would keep looking until they found what they wanted. The survey was undertaken four years ago, but it can be assumed that the trend toward choosiness is even stronger today.

In the past, consumers were happy to buy the same mass-produced products, but now they want goods that are as individualistic as possible. They want to be able to choose from a large number of possibilities. If they are going to purchase a shirt, they want to choose from among a variety of shirts made of different materials, with different colors and designs, and different price tags, both cheap and expensive.

Paying for quality

Companies can no longer rake in money easily by producing and selling large numbers of the same item. They must make a large variety of items in small quantities, and retail stores must stock an extensive range of quality goods.

The above-mentioned survey by the Prime Minister's Office also asked about prices. About 80% of the respondents said they were willing to spend a little bit more money on something if the quality was good (Fig. 2).

Japanese consumers are quite fastidious when it comes to the quality and performance of products, and manufacturers have to compete with one another to meet these demands. For 29 years the Japan Consumers' Association has carried out comparative tests on products, grading them with an A, B or C and announcing the results. The association's testing methods and standards have become stricter by the year; since a decade



Evaluation of appliances by members of the Japan Consumers' Association



Fig. 1 What Consumers Do When They Cannot Find the Clothing They Want

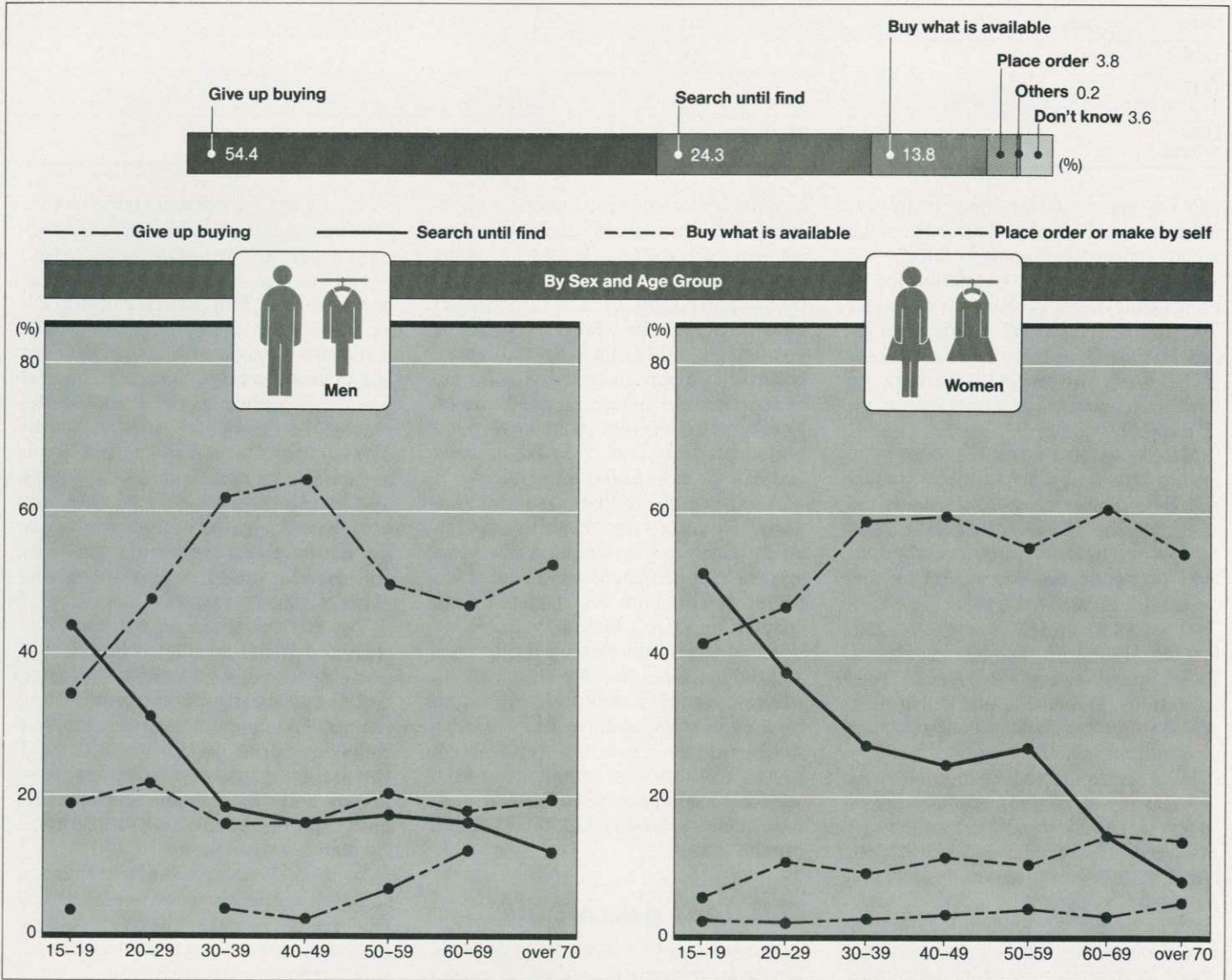


Fig. 2 Prices and Purchases

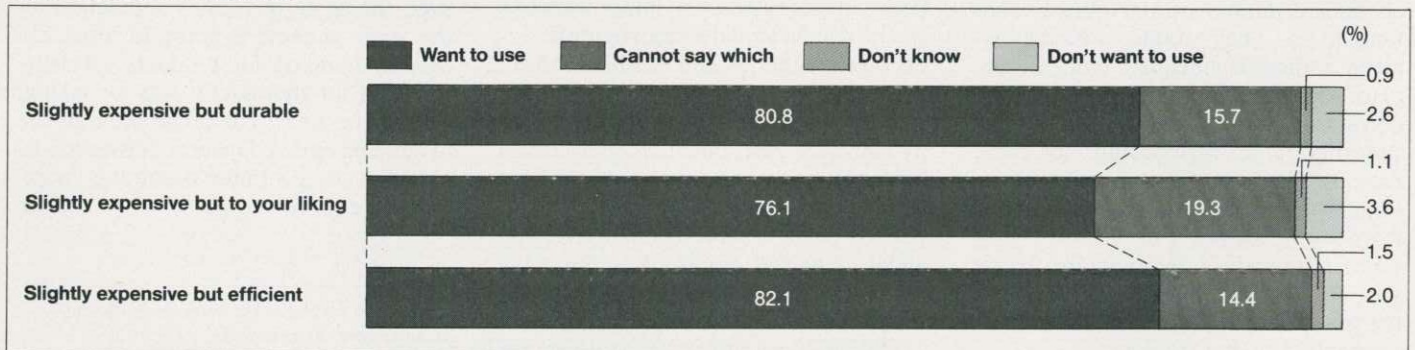


Fig. 3 Change in the Shares of Consumer Spending on Goods and Services

(%)

	Food, drink, cigarettes	Clothing, shoes	Rent, utilities	Furniture, household goods, miscellaneous household items	Medical treatment, health	Transportation, communications	Leisure, education, culture	Eating out, overnight accommodation, hairdressing, etc.
1975	28.4	8.1	15.6	6.3	9.0	9.6	8.8	14.2
1985	22.6	6.4	18.9	5.6	10.4	9.5	9.4	17.2
1993 (forecast)	17.4	5.4	18.9	5.3	11.6	9.5	11.3	20.6
2000 (forecast)	13.7	4.6	18.9	5.1	12.3	9.9	12.4	23.1

ago the standards for some of its test items have been higher than those of the Japan Industrial Standard, which has achieved a worldwide reputation for its thoroughness. It is possible for a product that has cleared the JIS standards to receive only a C on the association's comparative test. It also includes a strict rating of the cost performance and convenience of the products.

If a purchased product turns out to be even a little faulty, Japanese consumers will complain to the retail store and the manufacturer. If a product breaks down or does not function properly only a short time after purchase, they will return it or demand a replacement. And if an accident occurs as a result of careless manufacture, they will seek compensation. Retail stores and manufacturers must take steps to prevent and solve such problems, or they will lose both customers and prestige.

With regard to foreign goods, Japanese consumers do not think products are either good or bad simply because they are imported. What they are concerned about with imported goods is safety and after-sales service.

Since imported foodstuffs are produced a long way away, consumers worry about their safety, especially concerning such things as additives, agricultural chemicals, antibiotics and nuclear contamination. They wonder whether hygiene control is adequate both at the place of production and en route to Japan. Some consumer groups actually oppose the importation of foodstuffs for these reasons. The Japan Consumers' Association, however, believes that consumers' fears can be allayed if the Japanese government operates a thorough inspection system, and it has been strongly urging the government to take steps toward implementing such a system.

With imported cars, electrical appliances and other durable goods, consumers worry about after-sales service. Many consumers have experienced the frustration of purchasing an imported product for which after-sales service is supposedly guaranteed, only to find that the service is limited to certain districts, parts are in short supply, and delays are frequent. Consumers complain about buying imported products that often break down and cannot be repaired properly.

Another problem that occurs with imported products is that they are not adapted to conditions in Japan. A few years ago, for example, there was a case of imported refrigerators that had not been adapted to Japan's climate, with the result that frost soon clogged the freezers and the machines became extremely inefficient. On this occasion, consumers were up in arms, because it took so long to import the necessary replacement parts. This concern about after-sales service makes Japanese consumers hesitate before splashing out on imported durable goods.

Need for guarantees

It is difficult to sell imported goods to Japanese consumers unless a proper guarantee system has been established between retail stores and import agencies on the one hand and foreign manufacturers on the other. And it is difficult to get retail stores to handle imported goods unless the manufacturer operates a quality control system that guarantees that a product's quality and functions conform with conditions and methods of use in Japan. After all, when consumers complain about imported goods, it is the retail stores and import agencies that bear the brunt of the blame.

Despite these problems, however, im-

ported foodstuffs, durable goods, clothes and miscellaneous items are fast becoming part and parcel of life in Japan.

The interest of Japanese consumers now is shifting from merchandise to leisure and culture. Figure 3 shows how consumer trends have changed over the last 15 years and will change in the next decade, according to the Planning Bureau of the Economic Planning Agency. The number of facilities for playing tennis and swimming have increased, and more and more people spend their free time golfing or skiing. Concert-going and eating out have become popular pastimes, and overseas travel is now within the reach of almost everyone.

The services boom brings with it increased demand for related products. If you play tennis, for example, you need rackets and sneakers. If you enjoy eating out, you end up wanting to use attractive cutlery and drink good wine at home. If you like going to concerts, you also want to buy audio equipment and compact discs—and maybe even an instrument—for home entertainment.

So even though consumer trends are shifting from goods to services, demand for goods is far from falling off. People are purchasing more items related to their leisure activities, and they replace their household goods every few years. Moreover, the aging of Japan's population in the years to come is going to bring increased demand for products specially designed for the elderly and for taking care of the aged. The range of products in demand among Japanese consumers is expected to continue becoming more and more diverse.

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