

# Networking Japan

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

Linked to the concept of Lcomputer functioning, the buzz word “networking” has been around the U.S. for decades. Many such phrases have been co-opted into daily conversations as computer use increases. This case uses the Internet as a metaphor for multiple group contacts. It designates a system for instantaneous information, advice and contacts.

Many such words and phrases coined from new technology have become part of our everyday lingo. “Pushing the edge of the envelope” was originally an aviation phrase used in testing the aerodynamic limits of new fighter planes; the ubiquitous phrase “window of opportunity” is a derivative from the cosmic side of high-tech. Jargon taken from new equipment and technology sometimes crystallizes what we are saying with sparkling clarity.

The modern use of the word “networking” interests me because the Japanese had full-blown networking systems predating not only computer lingo, but media lingo as well. In fact, I look around at what has been going on in Japan and see that the whole concept of tapping into resources from various groups through connections has been solidly in practice here for centuries. The Japanese have been networking in a sophisticated manner long before the word, as it is used today, was coined and long before the Internet system was in place in the independent-United States.

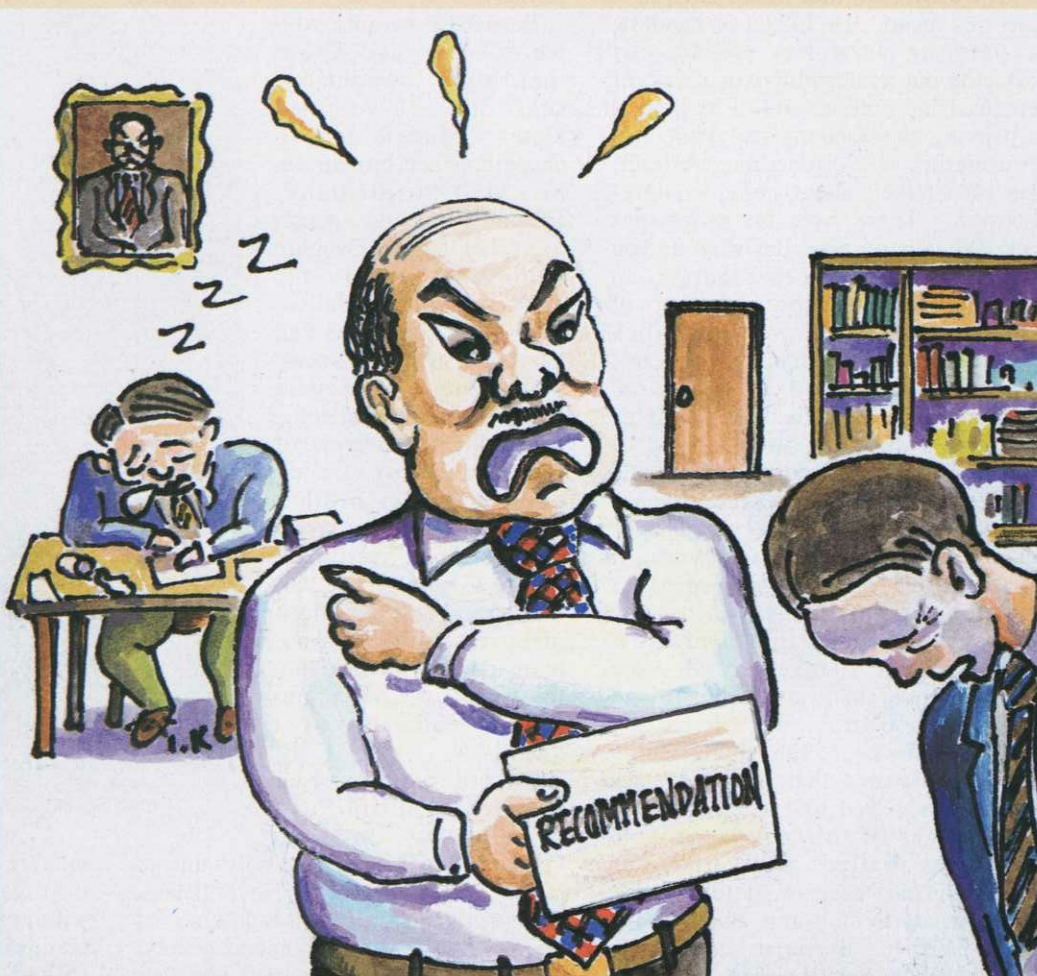
The Old Boy system is one example. Not only alumnae of universities, colleges and high schools, but even those of middle schools and elementary schools tend to keep up their ties. This provides access to a

wide range of people with differing occupations, knowledge and abilities. The Japanese I know rarely choose their friends in a judgmental manner; rather, they accept everyone in the groups they join. Having different ideas on various issues or even drastically differing ethical standards doesn't matter, as these topics will be avoided. And rarely is a friendship broken. When trouble arises between people, a typical response is to ignore it, to avoid confrontation until the issue blows over. My western friends and I think nothing of severing connections when an acquaintance behaves in a manner of which we

don't approve.

Hobby groups here in Japan also solidify relationships. In the country and older areas of large cities like Tokyo, local hairdressers often double as go-betweens for people looking for things and services. In the past they held a pivotal position in introductions for arranged marriages.

The traditional Japanese networking system is one that many young Japanese these days are trying to avoid. This is because the traditional system, although handy, is rife with obligation and responsibility. In the west, one can e-mail or ask for information, get it tapped to you and





have done with it. This type of obligation-free networking does not yet exist within Japan. Rather, a web of ritual thanks, a stream of follow-up information and future favors are expected in return.

For example, recommending someone in Japan obligates the person who recommends - hard and fast - even more than the person who was recommended. Should problems occur, a careless recommendation could ruin one's reputation and/or one's friendship and connections entirely. In Japan you stake your own reputation on the person you recommend. Should that person end up causing problems or inconvenience, it is the same thing as if you yourself committed the blunder. Furthermore, any problems boom-erang back to you; it is your responsibility to arbitrate a solution. The worker has to be talked to, then the employer, then the worker again, with the aim of solving the problem.

Likewise, if someone I recommended to a company quits his job, it is only good manners for him to discuss this with me before he makes his decision and for me to discuss it with the boss. We both end up feeling shamed and mortified. This type of situation has a beneficial side in that it tends to keep everyone in line.

In the United States, a recommendation is an end to the entire transaction. If things don't work out, if there are problems between employee and employer, it has nothing to do with the person who gave the introduction. So it is easy to connect all sorts of people together. If the employer hires the person, he assumes all responsibility. He may be annoyed by an inappropriate recommendation, but relatively little thought will be given to this. It will not affect the relationship between the person who made the recommendation and the employer. Thus, we can casually hook people together - introduce one friend to

another, connect a person with computer problems with someone we met only once who is supposed to be excellent at computer repairs, or hook up a homestay acquaintance to a family who is interested in speaking French. Anyone can be matched with anyone else and the result of the introductions is entirely the responsibility of the two parties introduced. They communicate with each other and make their own decisions on honesty, reliability and so forth.

Japan is different in this respect and, sadly, due to the lack of reliability, I have become loath to recommend or arrange much of anything for non-Japanese in Japan. Westerners quite casually change their plans, with no inkling of the problems they create. At the request of a friend I once arranged a year's subscription for seats at an elegant kabuki theater. Strings were pulled, a whole series of kabuki-related people were involved in arranging for a special *tatami* box on a yearly basis - this type of thing is all but impossible to arrange. After everything was painstakingly settled and in place, the American changed her mind, deciding suddenly that it was too expensive to attend on a regular basis.



I was left with two exorbitant kabuki seats every month for a whole year. My reliability, responsibility and entire worth as a person would have been destroyed if I had canceled out after the arrangements had been made.

Many friends as well as important business contacts were involved. So I ended up with well over \$3,500 worth of tickets, even though I was already receiving free tickets for the same productions in connection with my kabuki-related work.

The same kind of thing goes for something as simple as making hotel or airline reservations. Once made, a cancellation fee is involved. This is something that many travelers refuse to pay, leaving it to the kind-hearted (and usually bewildered) Japanese who made the reservations to pick up the tab. Even without cancellation charges, it is considered somewhat irresponsible to change one's plans spontaneously here. A casual change is apt to cause irritation or resentment.

Maintaining a networking system in Japan requires time-consuming work. Twice a year there is a massive exchange of post cards: New Year's cards on the first of January and summer greetings in June. This is how the network lines are kept open, and failure to send a card or at the very least return a card is a clear signal that ties are to be broken. One must be fastidious about keeping track of who should receive greetings. Recently this onerous task has been lessened with the use of address stickers, pre-printed cards and e-mail, but even using high-tech equipment, a good greeting requires a line or two of personal message.

Even though the casual style networking system largely derived from Internet use in the US is yet to develop, without a doubt Japan has hosted a maze of multi-income, multi-education, multi-age connections and information systems dating back to at least the Edo period. Once the present system is streamlined, there'll be no out-networking the Japanese. Especially with its high standards of detail and veracity because in Japan trust is placed by the individual toward every transaction and everyone involved. JJTI

*Elizabeth Kiritani is a newspaper columnist and an announcer for bilingual programs of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation).*

*Her husband, Kiritani Itsuo, is an artist who has held exhibitions in several countries.*