

Brushing-up Market for Young Women

By Kei Uchimura

Down in Akihabara, near the center of Tokyo, scores of electronics stores lining the main thoroughfares, the back streets and the alleyways do a roaring trade in electrical and electronic equipment, which they sell at marked-down prices. Computers, facsimile machines, household appliances, lights, stereos—you name it, Akihabara is sure to have it. This electronics bazaar is one of Tokyo's tourist spots; visitors from around the world drop by while they are staying in the capital, and usually leave laden with purchases.

Being such a popular area, Akihabara tells a lot about consumer trends in Japan. I recently visited one of the large stores there to take a look at its high-class audio corner, opened in April 1989 and well stocked with both domestic and foreign brands. The person in charge there gave me an extremely interesting piece of information.

"The customers who purchase the very highest class of goods are those in their 50s and 60s," he said, "but most of those who buy high-class products are aged around 30. The latest trend is the rise in the number of female customers. We even had one working woman, not yet 30, come in and make purchases totaling ¥2 million (\$13,300 at the rate of ¥150/\$)."

Without a doubt, female office workers in their 20s and early 30s now constitute a powerful segment of consumers of high-class items in Japan. Such women don designer clothing and eat out at expensive restaurants after work. Occasionally they spend the weekend in one of Tokyo's posh hotels. And when the summer and New Year's vacations come round, they flock to far-off lands.

If you are interested in doing business in Japan today, you cannot afford to ignore these young women in their 20s and early 30s, who appear to have all the money and time in the world. More women in this age group are continuing to work and remaining single or, if they marry, putting off having children. The

lifestyle of these women contrasts sharply with that of middle-aged male salaried workers, who are under the thumb of their companies and balk at taking lengthy vacations.

Recently, however, a qualitative change appears to have surfaced in the needs of these women. Designer clothes, overseas trips, meals in expensive restaurants, weekends in posh hotels—these are luxuries that can be experienced easily as long as you have the money, but they are fleeting. So the latest market trend among young women is toward spiritual fulfillment rather than material satisfaction.

More refined

Mami Nyunoya is the director of a finishing school, John Robert Powers School, in Minami-Aoyama, Tokyo. "Until recently young women placed their values in material things," she commented. "There was a strong tendency to fall in with other people's ideas. They lacked self-confidence. But looking at our stu-

dents, I think more women are beginning to realize that they must place values in themselves and make judgments for themselves. Many women enter our school because they want to become more refined and to improve themselves internally. When they graduate, some students do say simply that they have become neater, but most students say they have gained confidence."

Originally finishing schools were private institutions in Europe where daughters of upper-class families went to study general education, elocution and social manners in preparation for marriage. Established in 1923, the John Robert Powers School in Boston was the first finishing school in the United States. Its graduates, dubbed the "Powers girls," now number about 1 million and include such celebrities as the late Princess Grace, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Diana Ross and Susan Strasberg.

The Tokyo school, the John Robert Powers School's first outlet in Japan, opened in January 1987. Since then the number of graduates has increased three-fold, from about 200 in the first year to about 600 in 1989. Especially noticeable has been the increase in the number of office workers enrolling in the school since last summer.

In the United States, students of the John Robert Powers School are mainly high-school and university students, followed by working women. At the Tokyo school, however, most of the students are aged from 25 to 35; about half of them are single, and 70% have jobs. In other words, while in the United States the school caters mainly to students, in Tokyo it attracts mainly young adults.

Nevertheless, the basic educational policy of the school is the same in both countries. Nyunoya said, "We don't teach just basic manners. If we're instructing students how to walk, for example, we don't simply teach them how to walk gracefully. We make them understand the frame of mind behind walking. After all,



Photo: John Robert Powers School

Observers of Japanese trends say young single women are turning their interest from sophisticated consumer goods and overseas travel in a quest for spiritual and mental fulfillment.



Proper etiquette and deportment have become a popular subject of study among young Japanese women in recent years.

manners are a manifestation of aesthetic sense."

Such totality represents one of the features of the school's curriculum. In the 60-hour basic course students follow eight subjects, including "Self-Development," in which they study self-rediscovery and character; "Communication," which covers elocution and self-expression; "Walking and Posture Control"; "Fitness"; and "Total Manners." Included in the course are lessons on controlling emotions, methods of breathing, gesturing, and interior design and coloring. The curriculum is a world apart from the lessons in flower arranging, the tea ceremony and sewing that young Japanese women traditionally take in preparation for becoming a good wife.

The cost of the 60-hour basic course, by the way, is ¥350,000 (\$2,330), or almost ¥6,000 (\$40) per hour, covering both admission and tuition fees—chicken feed for a well-to-do young working woman in search of refinement.

"In the past there was only one thing waiting for a woman after the age of 20—marriage," said Nyunoya. "But recently women have begun to choose for themselves how they want to live. I think from now on more women are going to act according to their own values. Rather than following the rest of the crowd to popular nightspots after work, they are going to begin enjoying life in their own individual way."

The increasing trend toward spiritual affluence among young women has caught the eye of private corporations. The owner of the John Robert Powers School in Tokyo, which plans to open a branch school in 1990, is a private company that sells furniture and utensils.

Another firm that has entered the so-called brushing-up market is Japan Airlines Co., which offers a package tour to Britain for women wishing to study manners. During the tour, participants experience a two-night stay in a historical mansion, where through an interpreter

they learn manners directly from its mistress, a woman of noble descent. The program features lessons in such skills as arranging flowers, setting the table and table manners. Two lessons are especially popular. One lets participants observe and then practice making scones and tarts; the other teaches them how to make English tea and how to prepare afternoon tea. Most participants in JAL's tour are office workers in their 20s, but university students also enjoy it, suggesting that the brushing-up market is already getting younger.

The Osaka Gas group opened a cooking school, named Apriti Sesamo, for the general public in 1989 offering eight courses, of which "Le Cordon Bleu Course" is the main attraction. The product of a first-ever tie-up with the world-famous Le Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris, this course offers instruction by a Japanese chef with teaching qualifications from Le Cordon Bleu and by chefs sent directly from the Paris school. Cooking classes appear to be changing with the times. Le Cordon Bleu Course provides instruction not only in the French school's cooking but also in social etiquette.

Broader outlook

Also last year, a course aimed at training Japanese women to become internationally minded opened in London. Sponsored by Temporary Center Corp., one of Japan's leading temporary staff dispatch firms, the Nichiei Cultural Exchange course accepts women aged 18 and over for one year's study. One of the attractions of the school is that students not only study in the classroom but also come into close contact with local cultural and artistic activities.

In the school's English conversation class, for example, the students study the language by learning from specialists in their respective fields about a wide range of topics, such as British current affairs, history, literature, cooking, fashion and party-giving. Extracurricular activities, meanwhile, include watching a play, ballet, musical or concert every other week, after studying about it in the English con-

versation class, and then sharing thoughts about it. Participants also have the chance to visit London's galleries and museums throughout the year—another of the school's sales points. One year's study at the course—tuition, accommodation, meals and extracurricular activities all thrown in—comes to a whopping ¥7 million (\$46,700).

What do Japanese women actually get out of these experiences? The above examples show that the brushing-up market is beginning to flourish, but they do not necessarily signify that young women are achieving spiritual affluence. In attending finishing schools, cooking schools, training schools and other programs, some women appear to have the main objective, predictably, of trying to be different from others.

Young women's purchases of expensive goods and services originally stemmed from their wish to have possessions and experiences that were slightly different from those of others. The boom in designer and character brand clothing of a decade or so ago was sparked by just such a desire. Once everybody began wearing such clothes, their popularity plummeted. The boom was nothing more than a consumer game.

Only time will tell if the brushing-up market goes the same way. People will not achieve spiritual affluence if they just want to be different from others. Attending a finishing school or taking part in JAL's package tour amounts to nothing more than a consumer game unless the participants succeed in applying the experience in their everyday lives afterward.

There are signs, however, that the young women's market in Japan is indeed entering a transitional period. They may still be a minority, but some women really are searching for spiritual affluence rather than just participating in a consumer game. The next step for such women will be to find ways of pursuing mental satisfaction without having to dish out huge sums of money for it.

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