

## **How Japanese communication strategies differ to the west**

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Kentaro Okuda, 35, who works in advertising in Tokyo, believes the Japanese aesthetic means reading between the lines. "Of course we can express things clearly, but the Japanese also express and understand things without verbal communication. This was stronger in the past, but it still lives in us today. It's more like telepathy."

The homogenous nature of Japanese society means these subtle communication cues can imply a world of cultural meaning. The references are lost on foreigners who visit the country and it's the reason Japanese communication strategies struggle abroad as the nuances only work in Japan and are virtually impossible to translate.

As Yusuke Mitsumoto, 29, CEO of Bracket Inc., a strategic communication planning company in Tokyo adds, "This is why many Western companies like eBay, PayPal and Facebook struggle in Japan, but do well in their own countries. They don't understand the lifestyle and value differences of the Japanese people."

These value differences also play out in social media usage.

Okuda says social networking is used in the West to expand one's world and know more people globally, but in Japan it's used to maintain your community. "The objective behind using social networking sites in Japan is to develop relations, but in the West it's to continuously expand your network. Now it's starting to change. Younger Japanese are breaking out of their shells and beginning to go out to the world but there's still the English language barrier." People use these social networking sites differently too. In the West the blog is used to express opinions, but in Japan it's more like a diary as the Japanese are long accustomed to journaling life - no detail is ever too small to capture with their mobile phones. As Mitsumoto adds, "Mobiles are part of Japanese people's lives and what we can do via our phones expands everyday, like taking trains and taxis, exchanging digital name cards, watching TV etc."

A common complaint from tourists visiting Japan is the lack of free Wi-Fi spots making mobiles the more convenient choice for residents. While iPhones are popular, the majority of locals stick with domestic models, which have been 'smart' for a long time. Remo Camerota, 44, the Director of Whitewall Studios and Raven Books who has worked in Japan for the past three years explains why. "It's because the local models have the ability to send emails and read QR codes for free while the rest of the world only has these options if you have a smart phone."

Availability of information has grown exponentially this last decade leading people to feel overwhelmed and confused by the plethora of data available. Both Japanese and Westerners have shut down their antennas learning to pick up information only when needed making it a huge challenge for advertisers to reach them.

Consumer generated media is prevalent in both countries as people create their own media on Twitter, YouTube and blogs. Okuda says, "The behaviour model totally changed after these sites became common. It's now Attention >

Interest > Search > Action > Share. Today when people see a new product they first check the influencer's comments to see if the product suits them.” Brands are slowly learning to select the appropriate media to efficiently reach the right target market whether through traditional, mobile or viral means. The tradition of paper and print (calligraphy art, hanging scrolls, origami, woodblock printing) still rules in Japan and most media experts don't expect this tradition to change, only for print media to become more expensive. On the other hand, social media has shortened the distance between brands and consumers and new rules are in play. Most Western companies have made the switch to acting like friends with consumers (not arrogant companies), but Japan's hierarchical culture makes this more difficult. “Although we have many new media options, TV is still the most strongest and influential media in Japan. Most of the big companies can't ignore TV in their advertising campaigns. Having said that, Uniqlo created many unique online campaigns that cemented their fashionable brand image and Softbank's CEO is a heavy user of Twitter and actually responds to customer requests,” Mitsumoto states.

Camerota adds, “Brands here are starting to incorporate better design through creativity. My company is creating QR codes for clients like Adidas Japan and MTV and media companies are asking for graffiti artists like myself to create designs for their brands in a more modern style.”

In the future, both Japanese and Western brands will need to give more power to consumers as the next step in equalising their relationship. The changing inter-personal dynamics can already be felt. Camerota sums it perfectly, “Apple are doing it by giving the user the power to become the developer. I own an iPad and am an iPhone developer. My applications are available worldwide in an instant! I have a product across the globe as soon as it's released with minimum cost and it's all digital, saveable and carryable and serves as a huge library. Apple has put the power back into the hands of the creator and designer. We don't need agents, publishers, representatives or printing costs for books anymore. No middlemen - this is the future. Apple have made it possible for the common person to control the medium and the message.”